

**FOREST HUNTER-GATHERERS AND THEIR WORLD:  
A Study of the Mbendjele Yaka Pygmies of Congo-Brazzaville and  
Their Secular and Religious Activities and Representations**

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## Abstract

This thesis is about a forest hunter-gatherer people, the Mbendjele Yaka Pygmies of northern Congo-Brazzaville. The thesis is based on field research carried out between 1994 and 2001.

I begin by examining certain key terms used in the thesis and by situating my research within the existing literature. Research methodologies are presented and the fieldwork experience described. I provide an overview of the historical, political and economic context of the research including an outline assessment of the main historical reconstructions of regional history.

Conservationist and loggers' models of the forest are juxtaposed with Mbendjele ways of representing landscape and the forest environment. I discuss the significance of the forest in Mbendjele social experience and its role as the ideal environment for social life. I examine the way the Mbendjele classify animals and the cosmological significance of hunting and killing. This theme is continued with a presentation of *ekila*, a complex set of practices and beliefs that regulate the interactions of people with animals and express a complex relationship between human fertility and the correct handling of prey animals.

I continue the analysis of Mbendjele collective representations with a presentation of the activity of *massana*. The link between children's play and adult rituals implicit in the use of this term is analysed. I then build on this understanding to present an analysis of aspects of two ritual associations, *Ejengi* and *Ngoku*, central to men's and women's power in society.

The thesis is brought to a close by moving beyond the forest to examine Mbendjele relations with and conceptualisations of outsiders and property rights. New technological developments and financial incentives are increasingly transforming the Mbendjele forest into faunal and floral assets for distribution to international organizations.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Table of Contents .....	3
Table of Figures .....	6
Acknowledgements .....	7
Declaration .....	10
Glossary of key terms used in the text .....	11
CHAPTER ONE .....	12
INTRODUCTION .....	12
The research experience, techniques and practice .....	12
Pygmy studies in the Mbendjele region .....	23
Some general historical contextualisation.....	31
Prehistory and the Bantu expansion.....	31
The late Atlantic Trade era and the Colonial Period.....	35
Contemporary political history and economic context .....	38
Northern Congo-Brazzaville .....	41
CHAPTER TWO .....	46
SOME KEY TERMS AND AN INTRODUCTION TO MBENDJELE	
SOCIAL ORGANISATION .....	46
Pygmy .....	46
Yaka .....	49
Bilo – village people, <i>bisi mboka</i> .....	51
Yaka - forest people, <i>bisi ndima</i> .....	54
The Ngombe Yaka .....	57
The Luma Yaka.....	58
The Mikaya Yaka.....	60
The Ngabo Yaka .....	61
The Tua Yaka.....	63
An Mbendjele perspective on Yaka forest people .....	64
Hunter-gatherers.....	68
An introduction to Mbendjele social organisation.....	70
<i>Mosambo</i> – public speaking.....	76
CHAPTER THREE .....	81
THE FOREST ENVIRONMENT .....	81
The Mbendjele and their environment .....	81
Some expatriate perceptions of the forest .....	82
The forest from an Mbendjele perspective.....	89
The forest animals - <i>banyama ua ndima</i> .....	91
Aspects of the Mbendjele’s supernatural landscape .....	94
Forest animals as transformed persons .....	97
Discussion .....	101
CHAPTER FOUR.....	103

<i>EKILA</i> .....	103
<i>Ekila</i> and the sexual division of labour .....	110
<i>Ekila</i> and the developmental cycle .....	116
Discussion .....	120
CHAPTER FIVE .....	124
<i>MASSANA</i> .....	124
Children's <i>massana</i> .....	128
<i>Bolu</i> – the children's <i>mokondi</i> .....	132
Adult <i>Massana</i> .....	136
Mokondi <i>Massana</i> .....	138
Mokondi .....	141
The <i>njanga</i> – the sacred path .....	147
The <i>bangonja</i> – initiates and <i>mboni</i> - neophytes .....	148
<i>Eboka</i> – commemoration ceremonies .....	151
Fighting - <i>itumba</i> .....	156
Songs and song journeys .....	158
A brief case study of a recently captured <i>mokondi</i> called <i>Monano</i> .....	160
<i>Mokondi</i> economies .....	162
Elephant hunting and <i>massana</i> .....	169
Discussion .....	170
CHAPTER SIX .....	173
HOW MEN AND WOMEN CAME TOGETHER, AND STAY TOGETHER – THE <i>MOKONDI MASSANA</i> OF <i>EJENGI</i> and <i>NGOKU</i> .....	173
<i>Ejengi</i> .....	173
The men's version of the creation myth .....	175
The women's version of the creation myth .....	176
The <i>njanga</i> path .....	177
<i>Ejengi</i> initiation .....	179
<i>Ejengi massana</i> .....	183
<i>Ejengi</i> - Some conclusions .....	189
<i>Ngoku</i> – a women's <i>mokondi</i> .....	191
Discussion .....	195
CHAPTER SEVEN .....	198
GORILLAS, PIGS AND PEOPLE: MBENDJELE CONCEPTIONS OF OUTSIDERS. ....	198
Models of Pygmy – Farmer interactions .....	199
The situation in Northern Congo .....	207
How Yaka classify outsiders .....	208
Mbendjele talk about Bilo .....	211
The Bilo point of view .....	217
Konza .....	221
New markets .....	223
How Bilo obtain Mbendjele labour .....	224
The Mbendjele ideal of their relations with Bilo .....	227

Mbendjele strategies for obtaining goods from outsiders .....	229
Directions of contemporary change .....	232
Yaka representations of their relations with outsiders .....	234
CHAPTER EIGHT .....	238
WHOSE FOREST IS IT ANYWAY? THE FOREST AS A VALUABLE RESOURCE .....	238
Demand - sharing .....	239
Money economies and demand-sharing .....	242
Sharing the forest .....	245
From French colonial structures to Bilo colonial structures .....	253
Loggers and conservationists .....	255
The problem of discrimination against Mbendjele .....	258
Conclusion .....	265
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	268
Discography .....	294
Film .....	295
APPENDIX ONE .....	296
Ngombe <i>mokidwa</i> elephant-men in the forest .....	296
APPENDIX TWO .....	311
Sandjima demonstrates Mbendjele sign language .....	311

## Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1. Map of the total research area between 1994 - 2001 .....</i>	12
<i>Figure 2. Map of the main research areas.....</i>	14
<i>Table 1. Timber production in Congo-Brazzaville 1995-2000.....</i>	42
<i>Figure 3. Map of the population living in the research area, 1997.....</i>	43
<i>Table 2. The subsistence activities of the rural population in the research area. ....</i>	44
<i>Figure 4. Map showing the forest hunter-gatherers of Central Africa.....</i>	48
<i>Figure 5. Map showing Yaka groups in Northern Congo-Brazzaville .....</i>	50
<i>Figure 6. Map of Bilo groups living in the Mbendjele area .....</i>	52
<i>Plate 1. Yaka faces .....</i>	67
<i>Figure 7. Map of Traditional Land Boundaries in Mbendjele Forest.....</i>	72
<i>Plate 2. Environments .....</i>	83
<i>Plate 3. Non-Yaka spaces.....</i>	87
<i>Plate 4. Mbendjele spaces.....</i>	88
<i>Figure 8. Ekonjo (cigarette in mouth) sells a special string to protect the other man from repeated attacks by gorillas. ....</i>	98
<i>Table 3: The sexual division of labour.....</i>	114
<i>Plate 5. Children's massana .....</i>	129
<i>Plate 6. Bolu.....</i>	134
<i>Table 4. Mokondi organised according to context of use .....</i>	139
<i>Plate 7. Some women's mokondi massana.....</i>	145
<i>Plate 8. Some men's mokondi massana .....</i>	146
<i>Plate 9. Dressing up for eboka.....</i>	153
<i>Plate 10. Preparing food for eboka .....</i>	154
<i>Figure 9. Mokaba, Indongo 1997.....</i>	160
<i>Figure 10. Mokondi journeys.....</i>	165
<i>Plate 11. Enyomo .....</i>	167
<i>Plate 12. Ejengi is called to a Bilo commemoration ceremony.....</i>	184
<i>Plate 13. Ngoku.....</i>	192
<i>Plate 14. Some of Mongemba's paintings to illustrate Mbendjele – Bilo difference.....</i>	209
<i>Figure 11. Moanja paying bridewealth to Minganga.....</i>	244
<i>Plate 15. Sandjima demonstrates Yaka sign language .....</i>	311

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#### **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own research work except where I have given due acknowledgement to the work of others. Copyright in text of this thesis rests with the author. Photographs are acknowledged in the following way: JL is Jerome Lewis; NL is Nico Lewis; IPL is Ingrid Lewis; AL is Ariane Lewis; and GPK is Gelli Pfrang-Kempf and copyright rests with the photographer.

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## Glossary of key terms used in the text

All of the following are Yaka forest spirits and spirit performances: *Ejengi, Sho, Yele, Ngoku, Djenguma, Malobe, Eya, Bibana, Monano, Longa, Djoboko, Niabula, Mabonga, Bonganga, Malimbe, Yolo, Minyango, Moshunde, Mombembo, Enyomo* and *Bolu*.

<i>bakanga</i>	friends	<i>mbindo</i>	dirt
<i>bakoko</i>	grandparents, forefathers	<i>mboka</i>	Bilo village
<i>bandi</i>	family	<i>mboni</i>	neophyte
<i>bangonja</i>	the initiates	<i>mindele</i>	white people
<i>bangwia</i>	red river hogs	<i>mobulu</i>	commotion and disorder
<i>banyodi</i>	birds	<i>mobeke</i>	refers to an incident (like a nose bleed) that, if not properly handled, can result in danger and suffering to humans, or is taken as a sign that <i>ekila</i> has been ruined.
<i>baswi</i>	fish		in-law
<i>bato</i>	people	<i>mogio</i>	Ngombe elephant-men
<i>bebobo</i>	gorillas	<i>mokidwa</i>	forest spirits
<i>bisi boso</i>	'the people of before'	<i>mokondi</i>	forest spirit performance.
<i>bisi mboka</i>	village people	<i>mokondi massana</i>	spirit
<i>bisi ndima</i>	Yaka forest people	<i>molimo</i>	a long forest journey
<i>bita</i>	conflict	<i>molongo</i>	<i>Ejengi</i> 's clothing,
<i>boka</i>	adolescent boys	<i>mondimba</i>	red paste
<i>bolonga</i>	marriage	<i>mongole</i>	hut
<i>bomboti</i>	warriors	<i>mopindu</i>	black or dark
<i>boyebe</i>	awareness	<i>mosambo</i>	public speaking
<i>bwanga</i>	medicine	<i>mossoso</i>	herbal bath
<i>ebende ya benda</i>	resource centres	<i>motamba</i>	captives
<i>eboka</i>	commemoration ceremonies	<i>motele</i>	red
<i>edio</i>	ancestral spirits	<i>motoko</i>	unpleasant noise or racket
<i>ekila</i>	a complex system of proscriptions, practices and beliefs intended to ensure success for, and avoid danger to, the hunters, their wives and children.	<i>muanda</i>	blood
	exogamous, patrilineal and named clan	<i>musenge</i>	camp clearing
<i>ganda</i>	fables	<i>mwaka</i>	a men's hunting trip
<i>gano</i>	mystically powerful, but ambivalent, substance that resides in the stomach	<i>ndima</i>	forest
<i>gundu</i>	fighting	<i>ndenga</i>	single men
	God	<i>nganga</i>	healer
<i>itumba</i>	elder	<i>ngondo</i>	young unmarried women
<i>Komba</i>	a great singer	<i>njanga</i>	sacred area for initiates
<i>kombeti</i>	forest spirit-controller	<i>njo</i>	body
<i>kombo</i>	a Bantu claiming exclusive rights over something	<i>noko</i>	cousin
<i>konja wa mokondi</i>	farmers' fields	<i>nyama</i>	animals
<i>konza</i>	widows	<i>nyama ua mai</i>	water animals
<i>kuba</i>	camp	<i>nyama ua mboka</i>	village or domestic animals
<i>kuso</i>	speaker	<i>nyama ua ndima</i>	forest animals
<i>lango</i>	evil sorcery	<i>nyama-nyama</i>	creepy-crawlies
<i>lipwete</i>	wild calabash-like fruit	<i>piko</i>	meat for immediate roasting
<i>maloki</i>	forest spirit performances	<i>pumbu</i>	white or light
<i>mapombe</i>	men's meeting area	<i>tuma</i>	elephant hunter
<i>massana</i>		<i>vuli</i>	open space
<i>mbanjo</i>		<i>yombo</i>	world
		<i>zimo</i>	abandoned Bilo villages

Notes on pronunciation of phonetic letters:  $\eta$  as in the ng sound of 'fishing'.  $\epsilon$  as in the first e of elephant.  $\sigma$  as in the o of orange.

# CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

## The research experience, techniques and practice

The Republic of Congo is often referred to as Congo-Brazzaville in order to distinguish it from its neighbour, the former Zaire, now renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo. Of the Congo-Brazzaville's 342,000 square kilometre area, 60% is covered by forest, mostly located in the north and over half the 2.7 million inhabitants live in the cities of the south (Forests Monitor 2001: 27). Fieldwork took place in the heavily forested and sparsely populated Likouala and Sangha regions of northern Congo, in an area that is sometimes referred to as the Ndoki Forest.

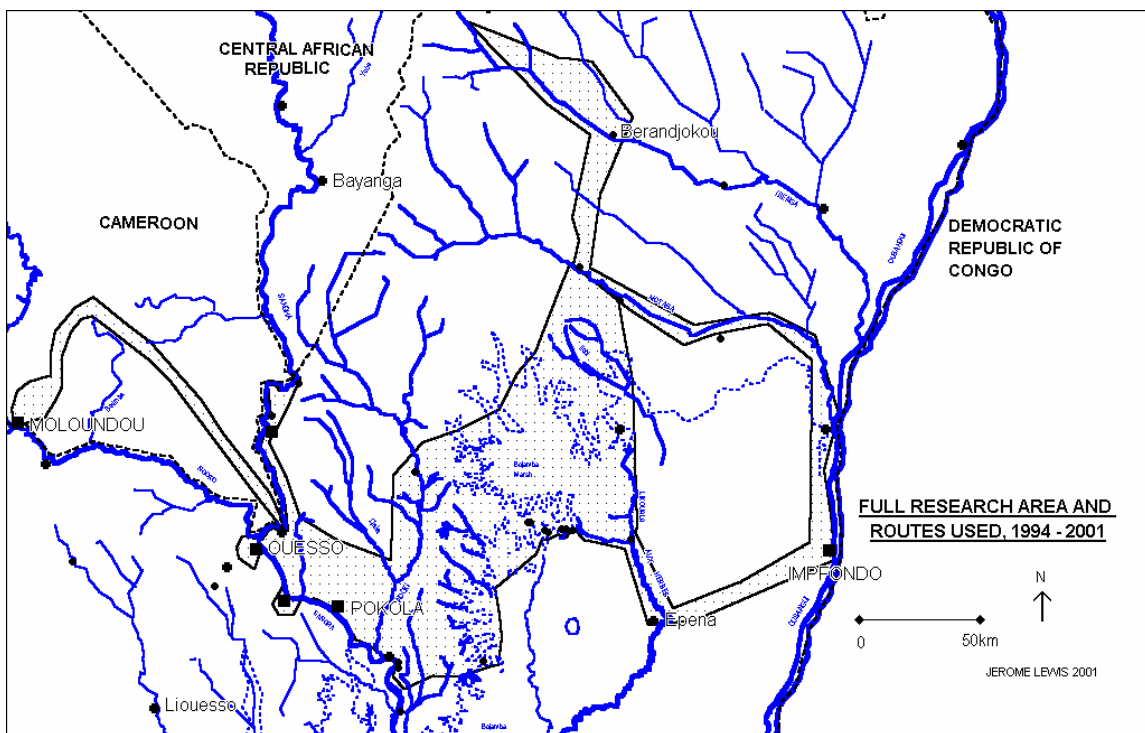


Figure 1. Map of the total research area between 1994 - 2001

After one and half years of preparation in London reading all I could about the people and the region certain issues had attracted my interest. Traditional religion, in contrast to most other aspects of the way of life of Pygmy peoples in the region, was conspicuous by its absence from the literature at the time of departure. My interest in Mbendjele religion and religious ideologies pervades the thesis. I contend that to understand the Mbendjele and their way of life, a focus on religion, broadly defined, is essential. In order to try and

capture something of the Mbendjele perspective I have structured the thesis around certain key concepts, activities and collective representations that Mbendjele consider central to their way of life.

Given the widely reported discrimination hunter-gatherers face in the region I wanted to conduct my research without being dependent on non-Pygmy interpreters. Following the advice of my supervisor, James Woodburn, I realised that fluency in the language would be a key to obtaining a clearer understanding of Pygmy relations with their farmer neighbours and the questions of dependency and domination so frequently debated in the literature. From previous work in Rwanda with Batwa Pygmies I had experienced the intense discrimination Pygmy people can face and wished to examine discrimination in the Mbendjele context.

Implicit in much writing on the Mbendjele region, from the works of early explorers to those of modern ethno-scientists, are perceptions of Pygmies as degenerate, as lacking proper culture supposedly shown by their use of their neighbours' languages and customs, and as only able to exist as dependent servants of powerful sedentary groups. Yet despite these perceptions observers have recognised something distinctive, unique and shared by a number of different Pygmy groups across a wide area. I was intrigued to try to understand what this elusive distinctive element, this distinctive culture or lifestyle, might be. And if they do have a distinctive culture, how do they manage to maintain it despite apparently living as servants of their neighbours?

The present thesis aims to show how the Mbendjele see themselves in relation to other peoples around them, and to demonstrate how certain cultural institutions play a key role in creating a distinctly Yaka way of being. The thesis starts in the forest and moves outwards, to the periphery of the forest world where regional, national and international forces are at work

The thesis attempts to fill an ethnographic gap created by an over-emphasis on environment and subsistence in previous research. The thesis aims to supplement the available detailed knowledge about Yaka ecology with an in-depth examination of certain central notions in

Yaka culture<sup>1</sup>. The thesis takes an actor-focused approach using direct quotations from informants whenever possible and seeks to frame events, ideas and institutions within Yaka cultural logic. The aim is to show how the Mbendjele Yaka conceptualise their world.

I left for Congo in June 1994. After I had obtained the required research authorisations, my wife Ingrid and our three-year-old son Nando joined me in Brazzaville. We discussed our plans with people with experience of the North and were kindly hosted by Philip Hecketsweiler working for a GTZ project (Congolese-German Technical Cooperation Project for the Protection of the Nature of Nouabale-Ndoki) in Ouesso while we prepared supplies and followed up other local contacts.

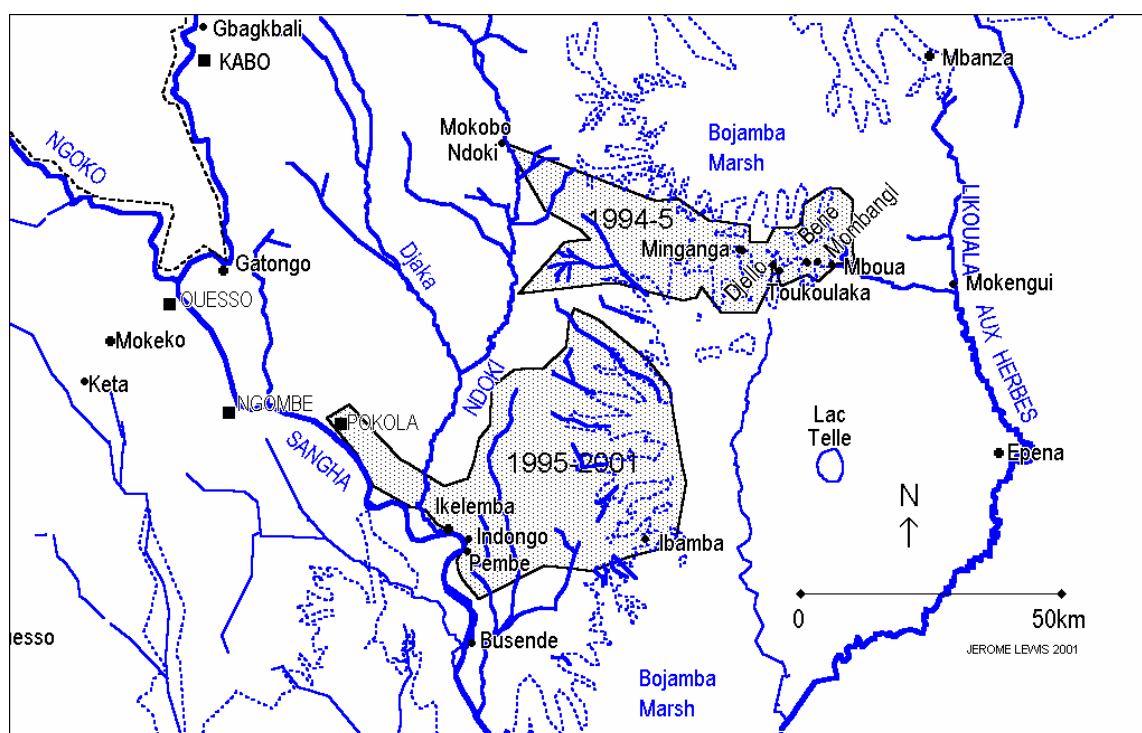


Figure 2. Map of the main research areas

A French adventurer, Michel Courtois<sup>2</sup>, had spent the last twelve years living in the forest with a group of Mbendjele and was a very valuable mentor. He had earned his living in various ways, but notably as an independent elephant hunter and later as a forest prospector

<sup>1</sup> The Yaka are called Aka or Baka in much of the published literature, see for example Bahuchet 1985, 1992b; Joiris 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Michel became a close friend but sadly died in 1999 while in the forest and is buried under an elephant path close to the spot where he shot his last elephant at Mokobo-Ndoki.

for logging companies. His knowledge of the forest was exceptional and marvelled at even by the Mbendjele who had given him the name *Mokobo* (dominant male black buffalo) in recognition of his strength in the forest and his fierce temper. Although initially antagonistic to us, Michel directed us to Ikelemba where some villager former employees of his lived. They could act as our translators and research assistants he told us. We would find lots of Pygmies there, he mockingly assured us. We also contacted the management of the logging company, the CIB<sup>3</sup> (Congolaise Industrie de Bois), active in the area we were going to and were warmly received by the small expatriate community working there. Taking a boat down the Sangha River to Ikelemba, 90 kilometres downstream from Ouessou, we put up our tent in front of Chief Yaya's house and made contact with Michel's friends. Ikelemba is a Sangha-Sangha Lino village<sup>4</sup>, shared with some Bongili<sup>5</sup>. The population of the village was around 160 people at the beginning of fieldwork with fluctuating numbers of Mbendjele hunter-gatherers (around 300 people) living in the neighbouring forest. That hunter-gatherers considerably outnumber rural farmers is common in rural villages in the Mbendjele region.

Although we were unaware of this at the time, local people expected us to have similar intentions to other recent European visitors. Michel used to employ large numbers of people to assist him in prospecting areas of forest for valuable trees and cutting narrow grid channels in order to locate them again. Other recent European visitors included two dozen Scandinavian tourists several years previously who had stayed for two weeks in a boat on the Sangha and visited the Mbendjele and the neighbouring forest. In the mid-eighties an (American?) expedition had left from Ikelemba in search of a dinosaur reputedly living in the marshes around Lac Telle. In the early eighties a couple of French visitors had stayed and commissioned many bark cloths from the Mbendjele, which they then transported to France and exhibited.

All these expatriate visitors had employed large numbers of both village and Mbendjele people and directed them to perform specific tasks. This was the expectation held of us too,

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<sup>3</sup>CIB is based in Pokola, Sangha Region, Northern Congo. The staff of CIB always welcomed us warmly and kindly and offered us every support they could. This included evacuating us during the civil war.

<sup>4</sup> The Sangha-Sangha Lino are Bantu A80 language group speakers. This is inferred from Sangha-Sangha Bomwali being A87 language group speakers, Rossel (1999: 109).

<sup>5</sup> The Bongili are Bantu C15 language speakers, Rossel (1999: 109).

and in spite of our resistance, we were only able to go into the forest with Mbendjele if we employed some villagers to accompany us, and some Mbendjele to carry our luggage and supplies. We reluctantly accepted this far from ideal situation until our language skills developed.

Such expectations proved to be an enduring, though diminishing, problem for our research. The Mbendjele demanded to know where we wanted to go or what we wanted them to do, whereas we just hoped to stay with them and to join them in their ordinary daily activities following the anthropological practice of participant-observation. The Mbendjele certainly wanted us to participate, though not in their ordinary activities but instead as their employers. They tried to manoeuvre us into the position of *patrons* so that we would employ them and pay regular wages. We doggedly resisted, only agreeing to pay people when they carried our luggage (tent, kitchen supplies and food) when we moved camp. Eventually we resolved the situation by employing two Mbendjele widows, Kombea and Njimbo, to help by collecting and preparing food for us<sup>6</sup>.

During the first six weeks in the forest we used a villager interpreter to help us to begin to learn the Mbendjele language. However having a villager in camp caused certain tensions because of the changing relations and recent conflict between the two communities<sup>7</sup>. I was obliged to make my loyalty clear by continuing without any outside help when living in Mbendjele camps. There are no French speaking Mbendjele in my research area. Working without villager interpreters greatly strengthened our relationship with the Mbendjele but meant that language learning was perhaps slower than it might otherwise have been in those early stages of our research. In addition to language learning, we had to learn about living in the forest, and this also required much effort.

After three months Michel Courtois invited us to stay in his base camp deep in the forest, Mokobo-Ndoki, on the Ndoki River. From this base Michel would leave with his teams of Mbendjele and a small number of villagers to prospect areas of forest for valuable trees and to mark out routes for logging roads. One of his employees was a semi-literate Mikaya

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<sup>6</sup> We had tried obtaining food and cooking for ourselves but this took us so long that little time was left for research. Employing the two widows helped to resolve our problem and theirs.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Seven for more details.



Yaka Pygmy man, Citoyen, married to an Mbendjele woman and fluent in Mbendjele. He worked as Michel's camp gardener. Since he was the only literate Yaka man East of the Sangha River, Michel agreed to let him work with me for several hours a day. I began language learning in earnest. I focused on recording traditional and contemporary stories, I conducted semi-structured interviews on specific topics of interest and oral histories.

With Citoyen's patient help I transcribed and translated these recordings. This work served as the basis for learning Mbendjele, and competence began to follow<sup>8</sup>. Over time as I became more able to follow conversations as they occurred, I began to record conversations opportunistically to try to capture the ways in which people were talking about issues without my questions framing responses. Additionally I continued to record the more formal aspects of Mbendjele oral repertoire.

Mbendjele traditional stories come from a vast oral heritage in which many cultural values are explained in both metaphorical and literal ways. Contemporary stories and semi-structured interviews reveal facets of an Mbendjele worldview and illuminate their perceptions of various current issues. This material has been particularly valuable for exploring their perception of the Bilo<sup>9</sup> and the Mbendjele-Bilo relationship. It has provided insight into how Mbendjele experience modern changes such as the development of the logging industry. I have also carried out many semi-structured interviews with Bilo from a number of different ethnic groups on their perception of the Mbendjele and the Mbendjele-Bilo relationship<sup>10</sup>. Oral historical accounts from the Mbendjele have helped to reveal how people perceive the past, the major changes over past 80 years, their past relationships with the various other Pygmy groups and neighbouring peoples, the origins of these relations, in addition to numerous insights into my informants' worldview.

Learning Mbendjele was a difficult task. Even being sure I was learning Mbendjele, rather than some other language, was sometimes hard. People would frequently tell me two or more words for the same thing. Sometimes these were simply several ways of saying the

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<sup>8</sup> As I obtained new vocabulary I would rote learn ten new words each day.

<sup>9</sup> Bilo is an Mbendjele term encompassing all the non-Pygmy Africans that they encounter. I discuss the application of the term more fully in Chapter Two.

<sup>10</sup> I organized essay competitions among literate Bilo asking them to describe the Yaka and their way of life. I commissioned written material from two gifted Bilo – one piece from Moise Taito of the Kabounga, and several pieces from Bienvenue Kimbembe (Kibino), a Sangha-Sangha Lino and Bongili from Ikelemba.

same thing. At other times they were regional variants between Mbendjele groups. But sometimes people used words from languages other than their own – such as Lingala, Bongili or Kabounga. Quite widely Mbendjele incorporate material from other peoples' languages into speech if it is appropriate, for instance, in recounting an argument with a Bilo. This has parallels with the men's oratorical style used in hunting stories in which perfect mimicry of the noises made by an animal accompany the tale.

Additionally Mbendjele borrow words with enthusiasm when they like the sound of them. This contributes to strong regional accents and peculiarities. For instance, young Mbendjele men staying at Kabo, a logging town, during the late 1980s and early 1990s heard the addition of Russian-sounding endings in Lingala – the addition of suffixes such as *-ski* and *-itch* to words. They copied this in Mbendjele which gave their local accent a very distinctive twist. Different groups within Mbendjele society also have different speech styles and vocabulary. For example women often use a particularly melodic speech style. A woman's speech may be amplified by the women listeners' extensive use of idiophones, creating a distinctive song-like quality. Most ritual associations<sup>11</sup> have an associated specialist, and sometimes secret, vocabulary. Children's vocabulary is replete with many invented terms for objects and activities particular to children's interests.

A pattern developed in which we spent periods of three or four weeks at Mokobo-Ndoki for language work with Citoyen while organising supplies of food for journeys. Obtaining such supplies was a difficult and time-consuming procedure, sometimes taking up to two weeks. These periods were then followed by journeys of several months eastwards into the forest to visit other Mbendjele camps and villages and neighbouring Bilo villages. We were always accompanied by the same core group of Mbendjele families we had first met in Ikelemba. In this manner our research during this period took us through many hundreds of kilometres of marshy equatorial forest, while we gained an increasing understanding of the situations the Mbendjele find themselves in.

During this period we made several visits to the Terres des Kaboungas where the Mbendjele live near Kabounga fishermen and Yasua farmers. While continuing with my

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<sup>11</sup> I follow Joiris (1996: 249) in her definition of ritual association as a group of initiates who organize public ceremonies and who share a link with certain spirits.

interviewing and recording, I also mapped mobility patterns and popular migration routes using global positioning system technology and standard orientation methods. The Mbendjele in this area spend a great deal of time in the marshes of the headwaters of the Likouala aux Herbes hunting, fishing and collecting honey for sale and exchange with the villagers and for their own consumption. These Mbendjele provided an interesting comparison with the Mbendjele living around Ikelemba who are more dependent on hunting than fishing and who specialise in big game hunting. In total we spent four months living in the Terres des Kaboungas.

Spending extended periods in the forest meant that my family and I had to learn the survival skills necessary for travelling in the difficult conditions of this area. Guided by our Mbendjele companions, this involved activities in five main areas: orienteering through the forest; collecting wild vegetable foods; trapping, fishing and hunting; craft activities; and entering into a spiritual relationship with the forest through being initiated into ritual associations and learning magical practices. The value and central importance of the forest for the Mbendjele became clear as my skills and understanding of the forest improved. Excellence in forest activities and knowledge are central to the Yaka sense of identity and respect for each other.

Their religious life often creates contexts, through a system of sacred spaces, where people discuss many issues not talked about in other places. Since initiates are forbidden from talking to non-initiates, I made many blunders by asking inappropriate questions. Unfortunately Mbendjele consider asking questions extremely impolite. One is expected to wait for other people to volunteer information, not to demand it. This poses many challenges for the keen anthropologist. Whereas objects and goods can be demanded very aggressively without causing offence, information about religious issues or people's thoughts and feelings cannot be demanded without risking offending them<sup>12</sup>.

In January 1995 I was accepted for initiation into the ritual association of *Ejengi*, the central men's cult celebrating the most powerful forest spirit and which strongly asserts male values. In addition to dramatically changing my relationship with the forest and the

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<sup>12</sup> The only appropriate places for such questioning are 'between four eyes' – i.e. between two people alone in the forest or in the sacred spaces that only initiates have access to.

Mbendjele, my initiation opened up new possibilities for research. As I participated in the secret world of the men and continued the initiation process I became aware of the fundamental importance of this rather complex religious system for values and social perception. Ingrid, my wife, was also taken by the women and initiated into *Ngoku* and *Yele*, the two most important women's ritual associations in our area.

Being together with my family in the field was of enormous benefit to my research. My young son's participation in the children's world allowed me to observe it in much greater detail than I might otherwise have been able to. Indeed on numerous occasions he acted as a research assistant reporting back to me about what the children had been doing or explaining how a particular game worked. As he grew, his changing interests and activities, and the new ways in which the Mbendjele treated him, the comments they made about him and about my relationship with him, all alerted me to important aspects of Mbendjele child socialisation. Nando's language ability was superb and his pronunciation a boon when I was trying to clarify the tonal pattern of words. As he and his group of friends came of age, and displayed the necessary qualities, they did their initiations together.

Ingrid was a wonderful companion and support. Being with her and our son humanised us to the Mbendjele and made our incorporation into society natural and spontaneous. During fieldwork she studied Mbendjele healing with two well-known healers whilst maintaining a travelling pharmacy and administering treatments as the need arose<sup>13</sup>. I was very grateful that she was able to make this concrete and useful contribution to our community and other people we stayed near, since so much of my own work yielded no immediate benefit for those with whom we lived. Ingrid's entrance into the women's world also provided a powerful corrective to my own male-biased experience and gave me an understanding of women's concerns, interests and points of view that might not have been easy otherwise. In March 1995 we returned to London<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Ingrid is a trained physiotherapist and alternative medical practitioner. She also has a certificate in tropical nursing. Since our return from Congo she has obtained an MSc in Public Health in Developing Countries. She trained two Mbendjele men to run the pharmacy after we left. When revisiting in 2001 we discovered that the pharmacy had lasted for three years before collapsing due to lack of funds. The men in charge were very proud that no-one had died from any of the illnesses they could treat during the period of our absence.

<sup>14</sup> The period between March and October 1995 was taken up with a post-war assessment study of the situation of Rwandan Twa communities I had visited before the Rwandan Genocide in 1993. The results are published as Lewis and Knight 1995.

Our second period of fieldwork took place between October 1995 and June 1997. We returned to the area around Ikelemba rather than to Mokobo-Ndoki. Now that my language competence had greatly improved, I no longer had a regular research assistant but would employ different people as the need arose. I worked with both Mbendjele and Bilo informants. My main research assistant among the Bilo was Kibino, a Lino-Bongili from Ikelemba. He was a commercial bushmeat trader at the time and was occasionally present at forest camps where he would organise hunting and buy meat. These occasions provided valuable opportunities for discussions on issues from a Bilo point of view. Kibino even gave us advanced lessons on Mbendjele and his version of local cultural practices. The very large amount of time I invested in language learning has enabled me to speak Mbendjele fluently.

At the same time I worked hard at deepening my incorporation into the men's religious life as some important subjects of my research could only be properly discussed in the context of ritual and in the privacy of sacred spaces. In January 1996 my cycle of initiation required that I spent several weeks in the forest with a small group of men. As we were expected to travel far, I used this opportunity to suggest that we follow some of the ancient long-distance routes linking up different Mbendjele communities North-South across the forest. Going from village to village, we used local Mbendjele guides whenever the need arose. In six weeks we covered approximately 900 kilometres in a round trip to the border of Central African Republic.

This journey was very helpful for understanding the relations within and between the different Mbendjele communities: traditional territories, marriage patterns and relationships, the distribution of the various ritual associations, the different types of relations between the Mbendjele and the Bilo ethnic groups of the area. By making these and other related comparisons I have been able to make an assessment of the representativeness of my data from our community as compared with what occurs more generally among the wider Yaka population of northern Congo. Joiris (1996: 245-8) has rightly pointed out the ethnographic dangers of extrapolating results from the study of small local groups of a few hundred Yaka people to that of the whole ethnic population. My long journey allowed me to gain a sense of how my data relates to Mbendjele across a wide area.

Following this journey we settled in a new area South of Ikelemba, at a semi-permanent campsite called Indongo, still with the same clans of Mbendjele. My research continued and I deepened my understanding of key issues using the same recording, transcribing and translating methods I have already described. I also carried out small-scale censuses and surveys of the camps and communities in our area. By this stage I had become a competent Yaka speaker and could follow disputes and conversations. This, combined with a much more intimate knowledge of the individuals in our community, allowed me to focus more on making detailed case studies of particular events as they occurred, analysing arguments and disputes, watching relationships develop, and following particular individuals as they underwent important life changes, or preparations for a ceremony, ritual or initiation.

Between June 1996 and January 1997 Ingrid and I accepted employment as research coordinators for a joint Congolese government and German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) natural resource management project called PROECO (Protection et Conservation des Eco-systèmes dans le Nord-Congo), based in Ouesso and concerned with the populations living around the Nouabali-Ndoki National Park. My work involved establishing a base-line socio-economic survey of the rural population, including both Yaka and Bilo communities who were living in the project area. Four months were spent visiting and surveying all the villages and camps in the region and three months were spent writing up the results of this research in Brazzaville. These reports are listed in the bibliography (Lewis 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d, and 1997e). The project area was part of the Mbendjele area and so this extended journey throughout the region and up to the North of the area was very useful for extending my knowledge of the differences between Mbendjele in the different areas as well as significantly supplementing the demographic, social and economic data I had previously collected.

My last period of extended fieldwork with the Mbendjele was between January and June 1997. This period was spent largely in forest camps. At that time we began to use a video camera to record everyday life and specific events like rituals, hunting trips etc. Our relationship with the Mbendjele reached a new level as the elders insisted that my wife and I become guardians of *mokondi* (forest spirits or genies) by undergoing the final initiations

in the respective women's and men's ritual associations. After two months deep in the forest we underwent the final rites and became *konja wa mokondi* (forest spirit controllers). To our great honour we now had to initiate young Mbendjele and organise rituals as spirit controllers. In effect, my family is incorporated into Mbendjele society because we have all followed our respective initiation cycles. This has helped to give us an insider perspective on religious and other issues that would have been impossible had we not all become fluent Mbendjele speakers, able to work without outside assistance.

On June 5th 1997 civil war broke out in the Congo. We were still in the forest. As the situation worsened all foreigners were being evacuated. Fieldwork was brought to an abrupt end. We left the forest for the logging town of Pokola and became evacuees. The logging company kindly flew us to Douala in Cameroon as they evacuated their own personnel. We managed to get to England three weeks later. Because we were unable to go to Brazzaville we were forced to abandon personal belongings, documents, artefacts, and around 800 pages of original field notes<sup>15</sup>.

The rather long period between completing my field research and submitting my thesis has been due to my recruitment to undertake a number of consultancies. These have included the preparation of a major new report (including fieldwork) on the situation of the Twa Pygmies throughout the Great Lakes Region (Lewis 2000), and some work with Baka Pygmies in Southeastern Cameroon that allowed me to spend a further six weeks with the Mbendjele between November 2000 and January 2001.

### **Pygmy studies in the Mbendjele region**

Of the numerous early published accounts of Pygmies, few were based on first-hand experience. Within this body of literature there are some important exceptions among early authors concerned with the Mbendjele area: Gaillard (1891), Billoué (1892-3), Lenfant (1908), Bruel (1910), Regnault (1911), Ouzilleau (1911) and Doucet (1914) all gave careful and detailed accounts of their generally brief encounters with Yaka peoples. These writers, that included doctors, explorers, colonial administrators and missionaries, addressed a variety of topics mostly centred on Pygmy demography, physical

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<sup>15</sup> After the end of hostilities these notes were recovered from the looted apartment where they had been left and sent back to me in the UK eight months later.

characteristics and language with some accompanying observations on customs and practices. The context created by conflict during the colonial penetration contributed to make in-depth research more or less impossible at that time. Additionally Bruel (1910: 112) recounts that it was then difficult for Europeans to meet Pygmies because the villagers were worried the Europeans might break their monopoly by buying ivory direct from the Pygmies<sup>16</sup>. Regnault (1911: 264) describes the shyness of the Babinga (his name for the Yaka) and the difficulty a foreigner encounters if he seeks to contact them. Such problems may partially explain some authors' reliance on reported anecdotes rather than on their own experience.

As Köhler (1998:42-5) observes, it was the colonial concerns of Germany and France to know something about the people and places they had divided among themselves at the Congo Conference in Berlin in 1884, that stimulated much of the early research into the region. For example the Gaillard-Husson Mission in 1890 (Gaillard 1891) and the Mission Cottés (Cottés 1911) collected mostly linguistic and demographic information in an effort to provide the data necessary for the pacification and exploitation of people in the Mbendjele and wider Yaka area. This research initiated themes that were the subject of most subsequent investigations right up until the 1970s<sup>17</sup>: geography, history and migrations, demography, linguistics, ethnography and physical anthropology.

It is curious to note how often observers conclude that the Mbendjele and their Yaka Pygmy neighbours are somehow in decline or corrupted. Whether they were physical anthropologists interested in identifying a distinctive Pygmy physical type (Poutrin 1911a, 1912, Vallois 1940, Lalouel 1950a), or linguists searching for authentic Pygmy languages (Ouzilleau 1911, Jaquot 1959), or ethnoecologists searching for the authentic hunter-gatherers (Demesse 1958), the Yaka seem to fail them all, only, as they see it, providing degenerate or impure versions of the ideal. Some have perceived the situation of the Pygmies in the Yaka area as one of severe crisis (Demesse 1969: 254-302)<sup>18</sup>, and that Yaka culture is in the process of disappearing (Hauser 1953: 164; Bahuchet 1985:577-9).

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<sup>16</sup> Regnault 1911:286 makes a similar point.

<sup>17</sup> Faure 1935; Pales 1938; Lalouel 1949, 1950a and 1950b; Hauser 1953; Jaquot 1959; Grangeon 1965; Demesse 1969, 1978; are the authors who wrote about the Mbendjele during this period.

<sup>18</sup> 'Whatever happens, when the current processes in action arrive at their conclusion, the Babinga civilization will have gone ... and will extend the list of extinct civilizations' Demesse 1969: 302, (my translation).



The early pioneers of the study of the religious beliefs and practices of Western Congo Pygmies were missionaries. The usefulness of this work is variable. For instance Tastevin (1935), discussing the Bagyeli, relies too much on the accounts of others and makes some very surprising claims. For instance, he describes ancestral skulls being consulted to know where animals can be found, or which plants to use to treat an ill person (1935: 289-91). Trilles (1935) and Verhille (1948a, 1948b, 1948c, 1949) reported on the religious practices of the Ngombe Yaka (Baka) in North-western Congo, South-eastern Cameroon and Gabon<sup>19</sup>. Although written for a popular audience, Verhille provides a brief but interesting account of the Ngombe Baka during the 1930s and 1940s. Trilles (1935), in a more academic paper, compared Yaka religious beliefs, practices and moral values with Christianity and neighbouring Bantu people. He remarked upon Pygmies' reluctance to spill human blood and their disgust for cannibalism despite this being common in the region, and noted that the Yaka were regularly hunted and eaten by their neighbours (1935: 800-11). This, and other observations relating to sharing, led him to conclude that Yaka moral values are so different from those of their neighbours that they must represent the remnants of an ancient Pygmy culture whose language is gone, leaving only its dance and song styles.

This work was contemporary with that of Schebesta working in the Western Congo basin among the Mbuti of the Ituri Forest, (1933, 1936a, 1936b). Schebesta, also a missionary, was interested in demonstrating that monotheism was primordial and natural, and sought to investigate whether it was present among peoples he regarded as the most primitive in the world – the Pygmies or Negrilles of Africa and Asia. Although very popular during his time, Schebesta's concern to prove a particular version of Christian doctrine makes his work of doubtful reliability. It has been strongly criticised by Sawada (2001) for imposing Christian dualisms and concepts onto data that seemed to fit his hypotheses, and ignoring important aspects that were inconsistent with them. Turnbull (1966: 246-7) additionally argues that Schebesta wrongly tried to systematise what is actually contradictory and idiosyncratic. For this reason his efforts to present a religion for all Mbuti were doomed from the beginning. Turnbull's (1966) account is interesting, though not without its own

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<sup>19</sup> The notion of a unified Pygmy culture underpins much of this work and authors quote observations from widely geographically separated and linguistically diverse Pygmy groups.

problems, notably in inferring categories (such as Godhead) and beliefs that the Mbuti are not themselves explicit about<sup>20</sup>.

In the Western Congo basin serious ethnographic research on Yaka Pygmies began with Lucien Demesse's pioneering research during the late 1950s and 1960s. Using theories elaborated by Leroi-Gourhan (1949, 1950, 1964, 1965) and Balandier (1971) Demesse analysed techno-economic and social change among Mbendjele (whom he refers to as Babinga) living around 150 kilometres upriver from Ikelemba and my main research area. This led him to write two major studies, one that presented the techniques of production and economic activity (1969), and a second volume examining techno-economic and social change (1978). These important and detailed works drew attention to the complex relations that Yaka people maintain with their environment, including their farmer neighbours. This research interest was then elaborated and developed in the work of Serge Bahuchet, whose work (notably 1985) has provided a model example of the ethnoscientific approach developed by Haudricourt (1968).

Serge Bahuchet is by far the most influential and prolific contemporary anthropologist working among Yaka people. His contribution to our knowledge about the Aka Pygmies (called Ngabo by the Mbendjele) in the Lobaye forest of CAR has been very great. His research began in the 1970s. Since then he has published a wide range of books and articles that began with a detailed documentation of the Aka's environmental relations, technology, economy, ethnobotany, ethnobiology, mobility, territoriality, and have also covered inter-ethnic relations, colonial history, linguistics and most recently historical reconstructions that present evidence for the emergence of the contemporary Aka and Baka from a proto-Pygmy society he has labelled the *\*baakaa* (1992b).

Bahuchet (1992b, 1993a) has made a detailed linguistic comparison of the Aka and Baka languages. Supported by genetic research results (Cavalli-Sforza 1986), his findings clearly show that the Aka Pygmies are historically related to the Baka Pygmies and once formed a

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<sup>20</sup> An interesting contrast that emerges when comparing this work on the religious beliefs and activities of Eastern Congo basin groups with those of the Western Congo basin (Yaka groups) concerns ritual relations with their neighbours. Whereas the Mbuti, Twa and others in the East appear to be incorporated into their neighbours' rituals, the Yaka in the West have tended to incorporate their neighbours into their ritual structures. The *beka* circumcision rite that Baka Pygmies now participate in is an important exception to this.

single society, speaking proto-*\*baakaa*. According to his dating of vocabulary changes *\*baakaa* society divided at some point before the fifteenth century. Around 1600 two independent groups had formed. One group maintained relations with Oubangian language speaking farmers (today the Baka), and the other group with Bantu C10 language speaking farmers (today the Aka). Between 1620 and 1650 these groups probably lived as neighbours in the forest between the Congo, Oubangui and Sangha Rivers. At the end of the seventeenth century the two groups separated and the ancestors of today's Baka moved eastwards. They arrived in their contemporary areas in Western CAR, Western Congo-Brazzaville and Southeastern Cameroon during the later half of the nineteenth century (1993a: 126-8). The events Bahuchet has reconstructed are supported by my own research into local oral histories discussed in Chapter Two and Appendix One.

Working alongside Simha Arom and Jaqueline Thomas at the CNRS, Bahuchet and his colleagues have generated a new wave of academic interest and enthusiasm for the study of Yaka people and the region<sup>21</sup>. Within the scope of largely linguistic, ecological, technological and historical investigations, reliable data about religious practices and beliefs is now available<sup>22</sup>. However, within the framework of 'ethnoscience' and the multi-disciplinary teams of researchers cooperating in what has now become an encyclopaedic documentation of the Aka in the Lobaye<sup>23</sup>, religion, and religious representations, have not been studied as intensively or thoroughly as other areas of Aka practice.

Michelle Kuislik (1991) explores aspects of Aka Pygmies' singing and dancing practices in the Lobaye – Ibenga area. Her study, written from an ethnomusicological perspective, presents interesting data on certain women's cults in that area, some of which, such as Dingboku (Ngoku among Mbendjele in our research area) are common to the Mbendjele. But her interests are focused rather specifically on the women's cults, their distribution and regional musical variations, rather than on a more holistic presentation of religious practices and representations from local perspectives.

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<sup>21</sup> See publications by Arom, Bahuchet, Clorec-Heiss, Delobea, Demesse, Guillaume, Motte, Sénéchal, Thomas and Thuret. In addition Barry Hewlett (1988, 1989, 1991) working in the same region has carried out detailed research into father-child relations among the Aka.

<sup>22</sup> Among the CNRS researchers the best sources on religion are Motte (1980, 1982), Bahuchet (1985: 77-9, 375-8, 428-66, 524-31), Thomas and Bahuchet (1991a: 122-32, 169-225).

<sup>23</sup> The 'Encyclopédie des Pygmées Aka' (Thomas and Bahuchet 1981, 1983, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1993a, 1993b) is planned to be published in 17 volumes.

Daou Joiris, working with Baka Pygmies in South-eastern Cameroon has done the most detailed studies of religion among a Western Pygmy group (1993a, 1993b, 1996, 1998). Her fascinating analyses, notably 1998, provide an excellent basis for comparison with aspects of Mbendjele practice. However, systematically making such a comparison is premature at this stage of writing up my research results, but could be the object of future work. For now I will simply indicate some of the most pertinent points that emerge.

One major difference between the Yaka groups appears to concern the significance attributed to *.dio* or *.zio*. These *.zio* spirits are central in Bahuchet's (1985: 77 and elsewhere) analysis of Aka religion and are translated as ancestor spirits. Similarly Joiris (1996: 256-8, 1998) presents Baka ritual performances as principally concerned with enlisting ancestral spirits' support and that *mε* are ancestral spirits<sup>24</sup>. Sawada (2001) has used these interpretations, with his own research in the Ituri forest, to argue that the worldviews of African Pygmies are dominated by ancestor spirits. In the Baka case, Dodd describes such a view as the consequence of Bantu villagers' influencing traditional Baka belief. Dodd, in Woodburn (1982b: 194-6), explains that 'Baka do not traditionally believe in life after death; nor do they have any concept of ancestors, ghosts or human spirits.' There seems to be an interesting topic for future research in these different findings.

The Mbendjele use a similar term for ancestor spirit - *edio*, but claim that such spirits are a Bilo problem and do not like to discuss them. For this reason my fieldnotes are not as detailed as they maybe should have been on the subject of *edio*. What was clear is that Mbendjele do not like *edio* because they cause people so much suffering and misfortune and can even kill people. Ekwese, like other Mbendjele, makes a clear distinction between *edio* and *molimo* (the Mbendjele generic term for spirit):

*E*: ...There are many spirits (*molimo*) in the forest. Lots and lots.

*JL*: Are they *edio*?

*E*: They are not *edio*, that is a problem of the Bilo. When sorcerers die they do it in their own way. When other people die it is nothing. They just go and leave for always. They leave

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<sup>24</sup> Tsuru makes a different analysis in his presentation of his data on Baka *mε* (1998: 52). He takes the position that the *mε* ritual associations are a form of ancestor worship, but that the *mε* figures are nature spirits.

joyfully. *Komba* (God) he keeps their spirits (*molimo*). People's spirits can fly. Many people (i.e. as spirits) are outside in the open, at dawn they go back into the forest. They give [living] people great happiness, just great happiness, only joy.”

*Ekwese, 50 year old Mbendjele elder man living in Ibamba, March 1997.*

Mbendjele ritual associations call *mokondi* (forest spirits) not *edio* (ancestral spirits)<sup>25</sup>. When Mbendjele refer to those people that lived before them they use the terms *bakoko* (the grandparents), *bisi boso* (the people of before), *batata* (the forefathers), or *bangwei* (the foremothers). These terms refer to the dead in an undifferentiated way. They are used when people talk about how Yaka did things before. The *bisi boso* bequeathed to the *bana bambusa* (the children of afterwards) a huge wealth of cultural practices, of wise and useful knowledge about the ways of the world, and they love people dearly enough to come from time to time to offer advice and guidance in times of crisis. Mbendjele theories of death and the afterlife are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

On certain issues, such as *edio*, Mbendjele religious notions differ from similar Aka and Baka notions as reported by Bahuchet and Joiris. In this case Mbendjele attitudes are comparable to those reported among the Khoisan groups mentioned by Barnard (1992). I summarise Barnard's words (1992:252): [Khoisan people] do not worship ancestors, (mentioning the dead by name is very bad taste); Ancestors are only mentioned collectively apart from mythical figures or secular folk heroes, that can be reborn many times; Ancestors are involved in helping the living (through curing rituals in the Khoisan case, dreams for the Yaka); Some Khoisan groups (pre-Christian Damara, !Kung, and Khoe Bushmen) say the 'high-God' lives in the sky (in Mbendjele *kombakomba* means sky, *Komba* God) and that the souls of dead people travel to his village after death (see Chapter Three). Other similarities include the belief that the moon is a supernatural being, that spirits and animals can transform themselves into human beings and a mythology underlying such beliefs.

It seems likely that Barnard's (1988) observation that Khoisan religious notions assimilate new ideas easily without significantly affecting the overall religious system is relevant for

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<sup>25</sup> The Bongili Bilo dance called *bedio* (the ancestors) was described by some Mbendjele as similar to a *mokondi massana*. I think this was because the dance is structured similarly to *mokondi massana*.

understanding differences between Yaka groups too. Following Barnard, the religious systems of large hunter-gatherer groups such as the Khoisan, and maybe also the Yaka, seem to be characterised by a certain structural uniformity existing in conjunction with interesting intra-cultural diversity.

Recently researchers from Kyoto University in Japan<sup>26</sup> have produced a series of important papers about Baka religious ideas and practices that contribute greatly to bringing us closer to a clearer understanding of Yaka religious structures. Tsuru (1998 and 2001) provides comparative data about the variety, distribution and processes of transaction and creation of different spirit performances among Baka along the Mouloundou – Yokadouma road in southeastern Cameroon that has many parallels with the Mbendjele material I present in Chapters Six and Seven. Bundo (2001) in an interesting study of Baka singing and dancing is the only other author to note the equivalence between children’s playing and adult rituals that forms the basis of my analysis in Chapter Six.

These recent papers, Joiris’s work and my own would seem to indicate that in the Yaka region structural uniformity is evident in the organisation of ritual associations (*mε* in Baka and *mokondi massana* in Mbendjele). Their similarities lie in the ritual associations being based around a group of initiates, *mboni* in Baka and *bangonja* in Mbendjele (in Mbendjele neophytes are called *mboni*), who are able to call the *mε* or *mokondi* from the *njanga* (in Baka and Mbendjele) with special songs and dances. The *njanga* are sacred places in the forest that are exclusive to initiates of the ritual association. Depending on the particular ritual association these forest spirits may or may not be given clothes (costumes or masks), and they may or may not come and dance among the wider community. Certain of these forest spirit ritual associations are common to Baka, Aka and Mbendjele, notably *Ejengi*, (*jengi* in Baka, *zengi* in Aka), *Niabula* (*Nabula* in Baka), *Yele* (*Yeli* in Baka) and *Zoboko* or *Joboko*.

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<sup>26</sup> The Center for African Area Studies at Kyoto University has coordinated the production of high quality research on societies in the Congo Basin since the 1970s. Although initially focused on subsistence (slash-and-burn agriculture; hunting and gathering), on diet and on demography, research topics have been extended to the social aspects of non-verbal communication and interactive behaviour. Other important recent papers include Sato (1998) who provides an interesting analysis of Baka folk aetiology, and in the Ituri forest (DRC) Ichikawa (1998) and Terashima (2001) are increasingly focusing on the symbolic worlds of the Mbuti.

Another interesting similarity exists at a personal level. Among Baka, Aka and Mbendjele there exists a mystically powerful, but ambivalent substance that resides in the stomach or intestines of an individual and is the source of mystical abilities and hereditary powers. The Baka call it *mbu* (Köhler 2000: 18) or *ndambu* (Joiris 1998: 179). Joiris (ibid) describes this as the ability to see the spirit world. Bahuchet (1985: 341, 440-2) describes it as a patrilineally inherited mystical power the Aka call *kulu*. The Mbendjele refer to this substance as *gundu* and say it is passed from mother to daughter or father to son. Not everybody has *gundu*, but it is relatively straightforward to begin to acquire *gundu*, or increase one's *gundu*, through initiation and being able to enter the appropriate sacred spaces.

The present thesis seeks to contribute to this growing body of research into symbolic representations and categories, and religious structures and ritual practice among hunter-gatherers in the Congo Basin. In addition to my own observations and experience, I present Mbendjele explanations and ideas as fully as possible. Since Mbendjele categories differ in some interesting ways from our own, I have attempted to give them primacy and in so doing get access to their unique worldview.

### **Some general historical contextualisation**

Most academic reconstructions of the history of this area concentrate on the evidence for interaction between different groups, essentially between Pygmy peoples treated as hunter-gatherer autochthons, Bantu or Oubangian language-speaking fisher-farmer peoples and white colonial officials and representatives of overseas companies. Most authors implicitly divide the history of Central Africa into five periods: prehistory, the period of Bantu expansion, the Atlantic trade era, colonialism and post-independence<sup>27</sup>.

### **Prehistory and the Bantu expansion**

Vansina's *Paths in the Rainforest* (1990) took the study of central African pre-colonial history into the modern era with a sophisticated analysis based on archaeology, oral history, comparative linguistics and glottochronology. His multi-faceted approach was the first to make sense persuasively of Central African pasts. His success has spurred on a number of

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<sup>27</sup> In Kohler and Lewis (forthcoming 2002) a more comprehensive analysis of the history of the region is offered. Here I summarise the major debates to contextualise the Mbendjele in history.

subsequent studies using versions of his methodology that have dramatically enlarged this field of study in the 1990s (Bahuchet 1992b and 1993a, Klieman 1995, 1997, 1999, n.d. and forthcoming, Rossel 1999, and Schadeberg 1999).

Methods of comparative historical linguistics endeavour to reconstruct regional histories by proposing locations for earlier language communities. This is done by from examining the distribution and pronunciation shifts of vocabulary, especially loanwords. By examining the transfer of words between ethnic groups and changes in vocabulary over time, hypotheses are proposed about the time-depth of such transfers and estimations of when these language communities existed. When combined with oral histories, archaeology and any historical or ethnographic documentation this method can be used to reconstruct the history of migrations and contacts between people. The methodology emphasises interaction rather than periods of isolation and has focused on the migrations of Bantu language speakers across Central Africa, and their later incorporation into Atlantic trade networks. The distribution of words for iron, for various introduced crops such as banana or peanuts, or for introduced technologies such as crossbows and guns have provided a focus for comparisons.

These studies have shown that Pygmies and farmers have been engaged in exchange relationships for thousands of years in some areas. The conventional view is that groups of Bantu, Adamawa-Ubangian and Central Sudanic language speaking cultivators expanded southwards into the forest from about 5000 - 4000 BP onwards, and had settled most areas by 1000 BP. The archaeological evidence suggests a continuous presence of hunter-gatherers for 100,000 years in at least some parts of the forest (Clist 1999). However it is not clear if these people were related to contemporary Pygmy groups since no relevant skeletal remains have yet been found.

A 'revisionist' debate on the historical origins of tropical forest hunter-gatherers began simultaneously with regard to the Mbuti Pygmies (Hart and Hart 1986) and the Penan hunter-gatherers of Borneo (Headland 1987). Bailey *et al.* (1989) elaborated the argument that humans are unable to live in tropical rainforests without agriculture, and therefore hunter-gatherer groups could not have been in the forest prior to the arrival of farmers.



However it is now clear that these ecological studies were selective and misleading<sup>28</sup> and that all the wild foods necessary for survival can be found in Congo forests but that Pygmy people choose also to eat farm produce.

Despite these problems, Blench (1999) has made a radical attempt to revive this debate. He compared different types of evidence: subsistence and other technology, linguistic, archaeological, ecological and cultural data but commented on certain crucial absences of information. His main argument is that African Pygmies are simply the same people as their farmer neighbours. Blench supports his argument with claims that there is no ancient Pygmy language, that no archaeological traces have been proven to have been left by Pygmy ancestors, that existing genetic data are problematic, that there are insufficient wild carbohydrates in the forest, that Pygmies have no exclusive hunting technology, and that no musical style or features are common to all Pygmy groups.

According to Blench's hypothesis, since the forest cannot support hunter-gatherers all year round, new arrivals must have settled in ecozones on the edge of forest and other environments like swamp or river. A specialized group of hunters developed who periodically went into the forest. Eventually they became endogamous and were regarded as another ethnic group. Their small stature was achieved through natural selection and by marrying out the taller women to their farmer neighbours (1999:51). The basis of Blench's argument is, I believe, very weak<sup>29</sup> and I have pointed out the difficulties with it elsewhere (Köhler and Lewis forthcoming 2002). In that article we present an alternative understanding that Axel Köhler and I developed together. Here, I wish to emphasise that the focus of the present thesis is more concerned with the social constructions informing the way Mbendjele make choices rather than viewing their chosen life as a reaction to environmental forces.

Unlike Blench, most researchers subscribe to the idea that the contemporary Pygmy groups are the direct descendants of independent indigenous Central African rainforest hunter-gatherers. As farming groups arrived at the edges of the forest, Pygmies guided their migrations across the forest and showed them how to live in their new environment. In

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<sup>28</sup> See for instance Ichikawa (1983, 1991a:135); Bahuchet *et al.* (1991: 208); Sato (2001).

<sup>29</sup> Blench (1999) himself acknowledges the precarious nature of his evidence.

return farmers are believed to have provided cultivated food, iron and salt. Thus most authors, like Vansina (1990:56-65), understand contemporary Pygmy-farmer relations as resulting from a long-standing symbiosis or interdependency which seems invariably to have led to the Pygmies' dependent and despised status, to the extent that they lost their indigenous languages and were eliminated from large areas of Central Africa long before 1900.

Vansina proposed that these developments occurred with the diffusion of iron-working technologies and, most decisively, with the spread of the banana from circa 200 BC to around AD 500 which allowed farmers to live in forest areas. According to Vansina the diffusion of iron led to clashes between hunter-gatherers and immigrating farmers and the cultivation of the banana to hunter-gatherer nutritional dependence and their increasing marginalisation. A popular model to explain hunter-gatherers' language assimilation is that small bilingual hunter-gatherer groups lost or gave up their own languages during intense and durable socio-economic relationships with farmers whose villages became the focus of sustained daily interaction (for example, Bahuchet 1993a: 16-20; Vansina 1986: 435-36). According to this model, linguistic assimilation was not accompanied by either physical or cultural assimilation, and social interaction must therefore have developed in such a way that ethnic distinctions and economic specializations were maintained.

Using linguistic data, Klieman (1999, n.d.)<sup>30</sup> contributes to these reconstructions by outlining distinct 'histories' for some of these hunter-gatherer groups over the last five millennia. She argues that a number of hunter-gatherer groups – the linguistic ancestors of the Aka and Mbendjele among them – first had contacts with Bantu agriculturalists before the introduction of bananas or iron and had actually severed close contacts with Bantu agriculturalists speaking similar languages to them between 500BC and 500AD. In contrast to Vansina's assertion that Pygmies were exclusively dependants or serfs after the introduction of the banana and iron, Klieman has suggested that neither the knowledge of metallurgy nor of banana cultivation, necessarily led to the development of hierarchical social systems in which agricultural societies wielded economic and social power over hunter-gatherers (1995:20). Rather it was the increasing importance of forest products to

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<sup>30</sup> Rossell 1999 contributes to this regional approach with her analysis of crop names in northern Congo.

non-Pygmy people created by the expanding trade networks linking up the ports and markets used by European traders on the West African coast that encouraged non-Pygmies to seek to control the production of Pygmy people.

Thus Klieman argues, autochthonous communities became specialist procurers of forest products such as African red wood, ivory, skins, meat, etc. The outcome of this was varied. Just as for their agriculturalist neighbours, it simply cannot be argued that the different Pygmy or hunter-gatherer groups have the same history, or that it was a linear or static history. Instead different groups experienced shifting periods of greater and lesser contact with agriculturalists over time and in different areas (Klieman 1995:20). This accords with the oral histories of the Mbendjele and neighbouring groups. In Ikelemba for instance, the Sangha-Sangha Lino and the Mbendjele first made contact some seventy years ago. Other Mbendjele, from the same clans, have maintained relations with Bongili Bilo for five generations. This suggests they began establishing their relations around 125 years ago, just prior to the colonial penetration.

### **The late Atlantic Trade era and the Colonial Period**

The history of the Aka-Mbendjele region (particularly in the Central African Republic) during the late Atlantic Trade era and the colonial period is extensively documented in the works of Bahuchet, Guillaume, and Delobeau. Using linguistic evidence, oral histories from Bilo groups, explorers' notebooks, colonial and contemporary government archives, these works have significantly contributed to the explanation of the complex historical interactions of the 23 ethnic groups in the region and of the impact of external influences on them.

Mbendjele oral historians and most authors writing about the region as a whole describe the late pre-colonial period in the Yaka region as a time of intense inter- and intra-ethnic violence. The evidence suggests that this violence was largely a product of the slave-based economies maintained by many agricultural groups. A large labour force was necessary in order to participate in long-distance trade networks through prestations and alliances with groups closer to the markets where goods and slaves were exchanged.

Europeans were heavily involved in this traffic and created a massive demand for slaves. Between 1640 and 1868 more than 600,000 slaves left the Cabinda coast on European ships (Bahuchet 1985:143<sup>31</sup>). The threat of slave-raiding by horse-mounted groups using firearms<sup>32</sup> prompted large migrations out of the savannahs and into the forests during this period (Faure 1935: 100) and led to a high population density in the north of the Yaka region, and hence to an increase in the number of farmers requiring meat and services from the Aka in that area (Hewlett 1991:15).

By the beginning of the colonial period (c.1900), and following the abolition of slavery, ivory became the major export from the region. The Yaka were the principal producers and the villagers acted as intermediaries in selling the ivory to traders. The colonial period marked a time of dramatic change in the region. The early colonial economy was based on the allocation of large areas of land to European companies who violently coerced the local sedentary populations to provide them with the products they required for international trade; especially ivory, rubber, copal and palm oil.

In 1910 the companies in the Yaka region merged to form the CFSO (Compagnie Forestière Sangha-Oubangui) with a concession of 17 million hectares, which corresponded to the Aka-Mbendjele region (Bahuchet and Guillaume 1979: 124-125). As elephants had become rare from over-hunting, the CFSO concentrated on exporting rubber, copal and palm nuts and used forced labour to coerce the sedentary populations into collecting these products<sup>33</sup>.

Local people deeply resented this regime that required the men to remain for long periods in the forest tapping wild rubber trees and collecting copal while women tended the farms and cared for the family. Many groups built secret villages and plantations in the forest in order to avoid the exactions of the company agents. Some, such as the inhabitants of Berandjokou during 1904-8, violently rebelled and killed many colonial soldiers that were

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<sup>31</sup> See also Bahuchet (1979); Bahuchet and Guillaume (1979).

<sup>32</sup> Faure (1935:108) describes the common pattern of local forest based 'bigmen' making treaties with the slaver groups by which they were given firearms by the slavers in return for regular supplies of slaves. The strength they gained by being armed attracted other groups to them seeking to make alliances and thus safety. In this way slaving moved further out into the regions and away from the centres.

<sup>33</sup> Gide (1927), Bahuchet and Guillaume (1979:126) and Delobea (1989:230) describe forced labour in the area.

sent against them. Many similar rebellions occurred during the early colonial period and all were violently repressed.

The newly posted colonial administrators were shocked by the practices of the concessionaire companies. In a letter to the Ministry of the Colonies in Paris, the Commissaire Général Gentil explains the recent spate of insurrections by local people that included attacking and burning rubber factories, massacring African militia men employed by the concessionaire companies, and the flight of entire villages into the forest.

“... The concessionaires’ agents’ cupidity and desire for self-enrichment at any price has led them to become the champions of methods that ... rest on legal assassination and armed robbery.” (Letter of 11.11.1904, Débat à la Chambre, cited in Bahuchet 1979:59, my translation).

A second period of inter-ethnic violence and rejection of colonial rule occurred between 1928 and 1931 and was followed by a severe colonial repression (pacification) that became known locally as ‘Congowala’. The Mbendjele remember this period as one of extreme and arbitrary violence during which they rarely visited Bilo villages. Elderly Mbendjele recount how they were brought up in abandoned Bilo villages (*zimo*) and only adult men went to inhabited Bilo villages. If visiting a Bilo village, Mbendjele men would post sentries at either end of the village. If a red hat appeared (the colonial soldiers wore red hats), the alarm would be immediately sounded and the Mbendjele would flee. When camping near Bilo villages Mbendjele say that they would camp without fire in order to avoid attracting attention to themselves.

The forced labour, military rule, wars, murders, rapes and new diseases<sup>34</sup> of the colonial period led to population movements that depopulated communities and affected their productive capacity. Slaves had been a vital labour source and the colonially imposed ban on inter-ethnic slavery in 1916 created a situation in which association with Yaka people became a fundamental element of the labour-intensive colonial economy of taxation and tropical horticulture (Delobea 1989: 234). The Yaka never carried out forced labour but

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<sup>34</sup> Demesse (1978:60) recounts that 50% of the population north of Impfondo was wiped out by trypanosomiasis at the turn of the century.

their farming neighbours were compelled to do so. Since Bilo men spent so much time carrying out forced labour, demands for meat and help from the Yaka increased.

By 1925 a market for duiker skins developed in France. At its peak in the 1950s, 27,000 duiker skins per year were exported from some forest areas in the north of the Yaka region (Dongier 1953, cited in Bahuchet and Guillaume 1979: 128). This new market and the greater demand for meat in villages encouraged Yaka to use net hunting more than traditional spear hunting. However evidence suggests that even in the 1940s relations between Bilo and Mbendjele were very varied. Lalouel (1950: 209) describes the diversity of relations he came across during his tours of the Mbendjele region as a colonial doctor, from relations resembling slavery, to patron-client relations, symbiosis, exchange (free-contract) and even 'silent trade'.

According to Delobea (1989:241) the general impact of the colonial era on the Yaka was negative and in reality contrary to the official objective of "liberation" (Hauser 1951:25-8). The villagers saw official incentives (material bribes) to attract Yaka to roadside camps and a farming economy as favouritism and were hostile to attempts to end their position as intermediaries between the Yaka and the outside world. Colonial attempts to sedentarise the Yaka increased socio-economic contact between the Yaka and the villagers who were now more dependent than ever on the Yaka to help support their economy. Delobea (1989) argues that this stabilised associations and they took on new characteristics. Yaka stayed longer near villages, would move with the villagers when they did so, and village 'masters' would declare 'their' Yaka servants to the administration. Colonialism had a destructive impact on the villagers' economies and social structures that led to a marked individualism emerging among villagers. The obligatory cultivation of cash crops - notably coffee, also contributed to this process.

### **Contemporary political history and economic context**

The approach to independence in the Congo was heralded by the limited devolution of French power in which Jean-Félix Tchicaya became the first deputy representing the Congo at the Assemblée Nationale in Paris. Tchicaya remained the Congo's representative in Paris for a decade after 1945, though other political figures such as Jacques Opangault and the Abbé Youlou challenged him. On August 15<sup>th</sup> 1960 Congo was given its

independence from France and Abbé Youlou briefly presided over the country before being ousted after two years (1961-3) due to extensive financial irregularities and personal misconduct (Ballif 1993: 98-100). In 1963 Massamba-Debat, an austere Protestant schoolteacher, was put in power by the military, and then in 1967, was deposed again by the military.

During this time an increasingly socialist political ideology became common in national debates. Marien Ngouabi, a parachutist captain in the army, became president of the Conseil National de la Revolution. In 1970, with the adoption of a new constitution, Ngouabi became leader of the only political party – le Parti Congolais du Travail - PCT. Ngouabi was the only post-independence head of state to take a direct interest in the situation of Pygmy peoples and to address specific policies to them. These included their sedentarisation in permanent villages, free access to transport, education and healthcare and the obligation on non-Pygmies to pay Pygmies for their labour. Although these policies notionally remain in place today they are rarely enforced.

During Ngouabi's period in office the Congolese military had established itself as the main power broker in the country. In 1977 Ngouabi was mysteriously assassinated<sup>35</sup> and replaced by Colonel Yhombi-Opango, a military appointee. Yhombi-Opango immediately proclaimed himself a general and proceeded to shock his colleagues with his excessive desire for luxury. After two years, in 1979, the military committee of the party elected Colonel Denis Sassou-Nguesso head of the party and head of State for a period of five years. He was re-elected after this period and ruled until 1990 when he declared the PCT was no longer to be the only party. This introduced the country to multi-party democratic elections in 1992 and Pascal Lissouba was elected president.

Recent Congolese political history has been very troubled with political leaders employing militias and using violence to achieve their goals. Amnesty International (1999) documented grave human rights abuses perpetrated by government forces and armed opposition groups. Between 1992 and 1999 'thousands of unarmed civilians have been extrajudicially executed by the security forces and arbitrarily killed by armed groups loyal

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<sup>35</sup> One reason given to me for his assassination was that Ngouabi supposedly had Pygmy ancestry. It was claimed that this was seen as unacceptable by certain members of the establishment.

or opposed to the government... Other abuses include “disappearances” and abductions, torture ... arbitrary arrests and unlawful detentions. In most cases, those who have ordered, perpetrated or condoned these abuses have never been brought to justice, thus perpetuating a cycle of impunity.’ (1999:1). During the 1990s Congo suffered three major political conflicts. The first, between November 1993 and January 1994, occurred shortly after Pascal Lissouba was elected to power, the second, between June 5<sup>th</sup> and October 15<sup>th</sup> 1997, just before elections were due, and the third, from September 1998 until early 1999. Fieldwork (1994-1997) was undertaken during Pascal Lissouba’s period in office and the civil war that ousted him brought fieldwork to a decisive end.

The present government of President Denis Sassou-Nguesso came to power, critically supported by the Angolan Army, by defeating Pascal Lissouba’s forces in the most important of these conflicts – the civil war of 1997. Since then his government has produced formal accounts of the civil war (notably in the ‘Documents for History’ volumes published by the Ministry for Justice) that have heavily blamed the ousted ex-President Lissouba for the ethnicisation and militarisation of politics and civil society, and for dismantling the ‘Law-Abiding State’. They blame Lissouba for promoting a socialist ideology that saw the ‘tribe’ as equivalent to Marx’s notion of ‘class’, and therefore instituted a form of tribalism that favoured southern ethnic groups over northern ones. Lissouba originated in the south of the country and Sassou-Nguesso from the north. However it seems likely that Bayart, Ellis and Hibou’s observation (1999: 18) that these conflicts ‘can be better understood as stemming from the economic logic of predation rather than any political, ethnic or regional calculus’ is also relevant for understanding such conflicts in the Congo.

Due to the ease with which Congo was able to build up huge international debts on the basis of future oil revenues, the petrol crisis of the 1980s plunged the country into an economic crisis and series of political crises that led to the temporary but total breakdown of the state, and whose consequences are still not over. At the end of 1999, in addition to a heavily war-damaged national infrastructure and capital city, Congo’s external debt amounted to US\$ 4.36 billion, equivalent to 246% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and with repayment arrears of US\$ 1.66 billion (Forests Monitor 2001: 27). Multilateral creditors therefore exert considerable influence on the Congolese administration and have



imposed structural adjustment policies that encourage the development of the non-oil sectors of the economy – mainly forestry, and the privatisation of state-controlled institutions. Timber exports are the country's second major source of foreign revenue after oil and forestry's contribution to GDP rose from 1% in 1982 to 5% in 1996 and it continues to increase (ibid).

### **Northern Congo-Brazzaville**

My fieldwork area was in the heavily forested and rather neglected north of the country. Even the most basic public institutions like hospitals, although manned, were without basic necessities like medicines, adequate sleeping facilities, functional sanitation or clean water supplies. School buildings were often without benches, let alone textbooks and other teaching aids. The regional prison had no gates and prisoners had to be allowed out during the day to try to obtain their food. Policemen, soldiers, customs officers, health workers, schoolteachers and other government employees were rarely paid and it was common for them to have wage arrears of between 18 and 24 months. Given that state institutions (inherited from the socialist period) were the biggest employers in Congo, the consequences of these wage arrears for the national economy were devastating. In many areas government employees were obliged to obtain their income through corrupt practices or by the downright plundering of the resources they were expected to manage. The gendarmerie (police) in many parts of Congo, including the north, became the scourge of ordinary people as they imaginatively found novel ways to obtain an income.

Bayard (1993) has characterised such political economies by the Cameroonian expression '*la politique du ventre*' (literally, 'the politics of the belly'). This denotes a complex method of governing based on the expectation that those with administrative or political power will use it to accumulate wealth. The expression also symbolically refers to family lineage and witchcraft power and the physical corpulence expected of powerful men and women. This type of predatory administration tends to be very weak at providing public services unless they generate immediate wealth. So for the majority of people living rurally in northern Congo the state administration has little impact on their daily lives. Only in times of war when long-distance trade routes are disrupted do rural people really experience their dependency on national structures.

The government policies that have most impact on rural people, such as the Mbendjele, are forest policy and practice. As mentioned above, this is an expanding area of government, business and NGO interest. During my fieldwork the forests of the Mbendjele were almost all allocated to multinational logging companies or wildlife conservation NGOs. Due to the political instability since my fieldwork ended, not all these concessions have been taken up as intended. But since the end of open hostilities all the forest concessions of the north that are commercially viable have been allocated to international institutions. Recent timber export figures show that apart from 1997 and 1998, timber exports have been steadily increasing.

Year	Timber production (cubic metres)
1995	441,000
1996	560,000
1997	300,000
1998	550,000
1999	800,000
2000	2,000,000 (planned production)
Source: Forests Monitor 2001: 29	

*Table 1. Timber production in Congo-Brazzaville 1995-2000.*

The Congolese government in general lacks the capacity to undertake major infrastructural and social development activities in the remote north. They may instead make a ‘*cahier des charges*’ as part of their contract with locally active logging companies to maintain roads, build schools, hospitals and other activities normally undertaken by the state.

This has meant that the activities of privately owned logging companies and some conservation agencies have more direct impact on local peoples’ lives than do the institutions of state. The logging industry and related services now dominate the regional economy. This has tended to create small islands of relative prosperity and lively business activity surrounded by neglected rural communities that lead fairly politically autonomous lives as subsistence farmers, fisher folk, hunter-gatherers and small-time traders in farm and forest produce.

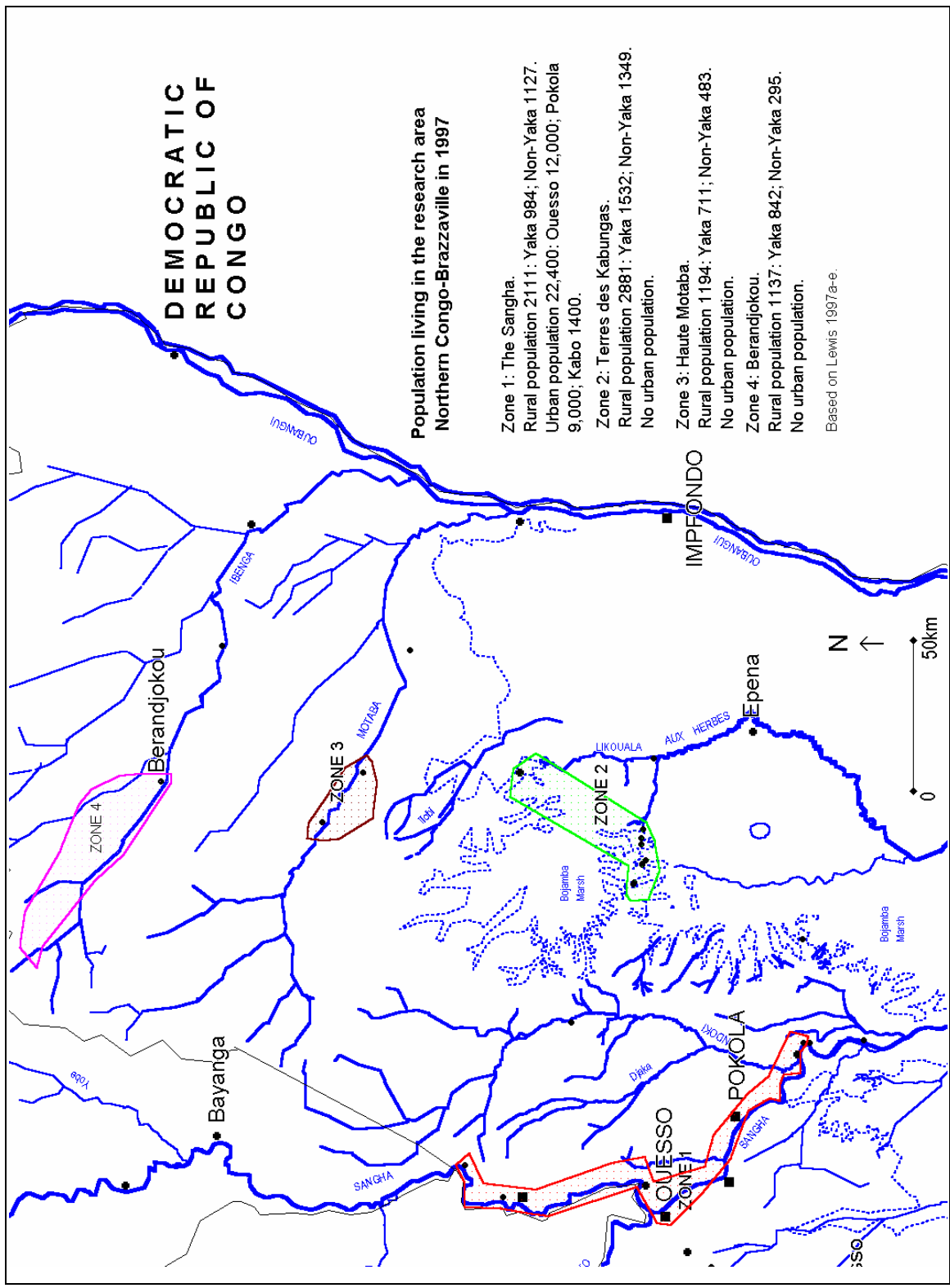


Figure 3. Map of the population living in the research area, 1997.

The rural population in my research area lives at a very low population density of 0.23 persons per square kilometre (7323 people in 32,000km<sup>2</sup>). However if urban populations

are included population density increases to just under one person per square kilometre (29,723 people in 32,000km<sup>2</sup>)<sup>36</sup>. In 1997 Yaka people made up 58.35% of the rural population in my research area. 55.1% were Mbendjele (4035 people) and 7.25% were composed of other Yaka groups: Ngombe (166 people); Mikaya (63 people); Luma (9 people). The remaining 41.65% (3050 people) belonged to over 48 different Bilo ethnic groups. This is a rare case of hunter-gatherers outnumbering non-hunter-gatherers<sup>37</sup>.

Most rural people employ a number of subsistence activities simultaneously in order to make a living. During the survey work I did for PROECO we classified activities into 11 types and asked rural people about their participation in these activities, in addition to land use, access to resources and other issues (Lewis 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d, 1997e).

Type of activity regularly undertaken (numbers of people involved, total population 7323)	Yaka Total rural population of 4273	Bilo Total rural population of 3050
Hunting	1115	420
Fishing	1847	1043
Gathering wild foods regularly	2120	431
Farming	1525	1140
Animal husbandry	12	98
Craftsperson	1306	161
Salaried employee	85	100
Hunter or trader participating in the regional bushmeat trade	749	805
Regional trader in non-meat products	374	1002
Village trader in small goods	1061	666
Regular brewer of local alcoholic beverages	528	807

*Table 2. The subsistence activities of the rural population in the research area.* Most people recorded more than one activity. Source Lewis (1997e: 29).

<sup>36</sup> Figure 3 provides details of the population in my research area.

<sup>37</sup> Joiris (1994: 94, endnote 2) reports that in a 1976 census the Bagyeli numbered 3098 people. This represented 6.1 % of the rural population and they lived at a density of 12 persons per square kilometre. The Batwa Pygmies of the Great Lakes region number between 70,000 and 87,000 people but only make up between 0.02% and 0.7% of the total population in the various countries they occupy today (Lewis 2000: 5).

Table 2 shows the importance of Yaka production to the regional rural economy. Yaka people are the majority of participants in every productive activity apart from brewing alcohol. While Yaka people are the main primary producers of goods, Bilo are the principal traders with urban centres. The category 'village trader in small goods' represents the moment of transfer of goods from Yaka producers to Bilo traders. The degree of dependency on Yaka production, and the extent to which Yaka people are already integrated into the regional economy is often underestimated by government officials and development planners.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SOME KEY TERMS AND AN INTRODUCTION TO MBENDJELE SOCIAL ORGANISATION

#### Pygmy

The term 'Pygmy' is contentious<sup>38</sup> and has been well discussed by Bahuchet (1993b), Köhler (1998:26-38) and in particular detail by Klieman (n.d., chapter 2) in its historical and later African context. These authors trace the use of the term 'Pygmy' from Homer's 'Iliad' (Song III, lines 1-6), through the works of medieval writers, seventeenth-century naturalists and philosophers and into the literature produced by the early explorers of Central Africa. The Greek term Pygmy designated people a 'cubit' tall, and as Klieman (ibid: 5) points out, probably originated in popular cults based upon the ancient Egyptian dwarf Gods *Ptah* and *Bes*. Both Klieman and Köhler deconstruct the racial overtones of the term and critically examine the role of the idea of dwarfs and Pygmies as primordial humanity in academic and popular writings.

Authors agree<sup>39</sup> that it was the explorer, botanist and doctor Schweinfurth who transformed the mostly mythological interest in Pygmies into its more concrete and modern form by redefining the term 'Pygmy'. Rather than referring to men literally 'a span long', he suggested that it should be used to refer to 'the dwarf races of Central Africa' (1878, Vol. II: 66-7). He continued, 'Scarcely a doubt can exist but that all these people, like the Bushmen of South Africa, may be considered as the scattered remains of an aboriginal population now becoming extinct; and their isolated and sporadic existence bears out the hypothesis' (ibid: 78). Schweinfurth captured the imagination of his contemporaries, and many that came after him, by hypothesising that 'all the tribes of Africa whose proper characteristic is an abnormally low stature belong to one and the self-same race' (ibid: 79). In this way the modern concept of 'Pygmies' was created based on the notion of an

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<sup>38</sup> The term occasionally appears in public discourse with a distinctly derogatory meaning. For example in the Guardian, on March 15 1999 (page 8) the headline ran "'Pygmies' jibe spurs Hague to ease euro stance". Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former senior member of John Major's cabinet, criticized William Hague for his opposition to pro-European Conservative Party members in an interview by saying 'The calls for Clarke and Heseltine's expulsion were from pygmies'.

<sup>39</sup> Bahuchet (1993b: 163), Köhler (1998: 29) and Klieman (n.d. chapter 2: 30-1).

aboriginal, short-statured people representing the earliest forms of society but supposedly in decline due to their inability to evolve.

Early authors were fascinated by the issue of the height and the other physical attributes of Pygmies and by their hunter – gatherer lifestyle, believing they might be the remnants of a primordial human race<sup>40</sup>. This fascination led to a great deal of activity by physical anthropologists and medical doctors measuring and examining the physical attributes of Pygmies, including the Mbendjele (for instance Lalouel 1950). There is also recent, more elaborate work such as that of Cavalli – Sforza (1986). Usage of the term ‘Pygmy’ in both western countries and many African ones continues to express the notion that such people are much more distinctive than in fact they are. There is also a continuing emphasis on their contemporary (or former) hunter-gatherer culture and nomadic existence which is often perceived by outsiders to be in the process of disappearing or degenerating under the negative impact of contact with modernity and pressures from the ‘outside’.

Despite its somewhat dubious history the label ‘Pygmy’ continues to be used widely. There are many reasons for this but among the most salient is its continued use by many local people in the post-independence states of Central Africa, as well as its use in popular writing about the region (see for instance O’Hanlon 1993 or Sarno 1993) and in many academic works. It is a paradoxical term because it combines a derogatory aspect, implying primitiveness, infantilism, and diminutive characteristics, with a positively valued one of aboriginality, spiritual authenticity and harmony with nature.

In spite of this ambivalence Baka in Congo and Cameroon, like many other groups, pride themselves in belonging to this ethnic category and may, for instance, proudly declare in French “We are Pygmies!” (Köhler 1998: 36). Pygmy human rights activists, including some Batwa of the Great Lakes Region (Lewis 2000: 5) and some Bagyeli of Cameroon<sup>41</sup>, also approve of the term and use it themselves. They see advantage in being identified with the original inhabitants of Central Africa and wish to show their solidarity with other

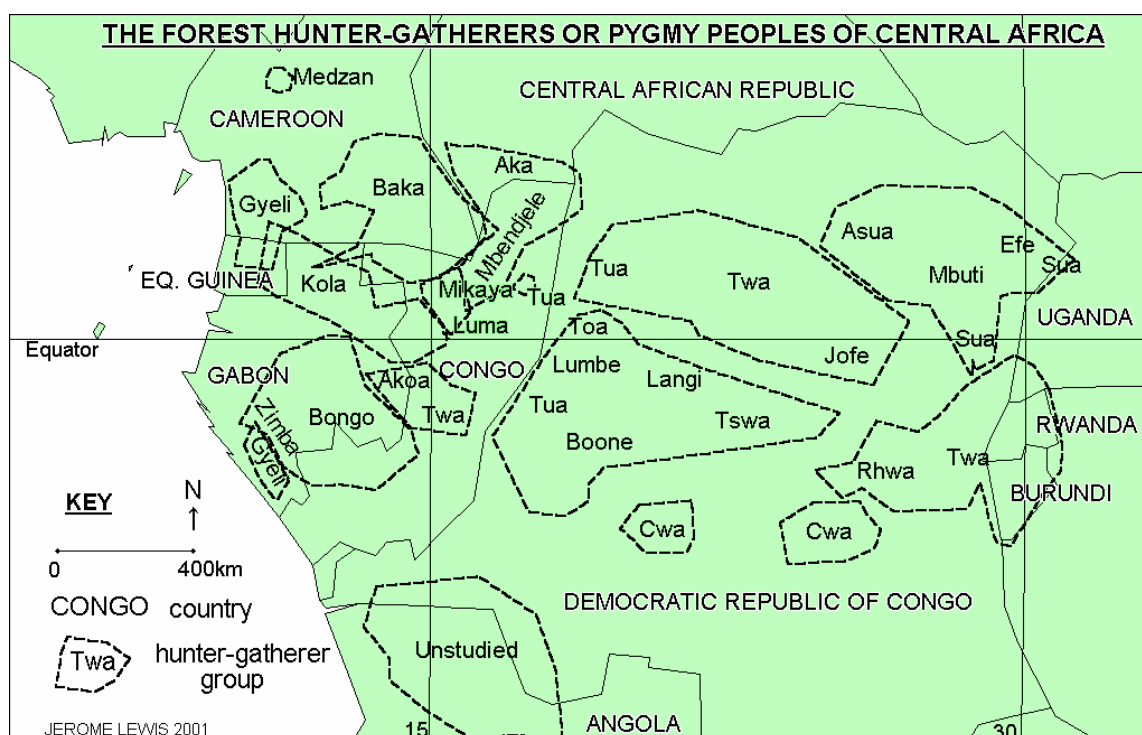
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<sup>40</sup> Bahuchet (1993b: 169 fn 43-4) and Köhler (1998: 31) refer to the early racial theorists Kollmann 1894, 1905; Schwalbe 1904, 1905; Schmidt, E. 1905; Schmidt, P. W. 1910; Poutrin 1910a, 1910b, 1911a, 1912; Kuhn 1914; von Luschan 1914.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Ngoun, a Bagyeli activist, gave a paper at the ‘Africa’s Indigenous Peoples: First Peoples or Marginalized Minorities?’ Conference at the Centre for African Studies, University of Edinburgh (2000) entitled ‘La Situation des Pygmées au Cameroun’.

aboriginal people in the region whom they see as experiencing many similar problems to themselves.

All Pygmy peoples additionally have self-ascribed local names. These relate to defined groups inhabiting specific areas of land, usually forest land. Significant natural features like mountains, rivers, lakes, marshes and savannah commonly demarcate the boundaries between groups. As can be seen on the map there are hunter-gatherer ethnic groups in many areas of the equatorial forest<sup>42</sup>. Most remain heavily focused on forest life and activities.



*Figure 4. Map showing the forest hunter-gatherers of Central Africa.*  
Sources: Thomas 1979: 144; Bahuchet 1985: 16; Schultz 1991: 9; Joiris 1998: 19; Köhler 1998: 58, Barume 2000: 55, Lewis 2000: 4.

In academic writing it is the utility of the term ‘Pygmy’ for grouping together a series of different, geographically separated aboriginal peoples in equatorial Africa who share (or shared) certain cultural and economic practices, such as hunting and gathering, that has perpetuated its use into the third millennium. For these reasons it is used in the present text

<sup>42</sup> Pygmy peoples live in at least ten Central African countries: Angola, Gabon, Republic of Congo – Brazzaville, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.



but not without some qualification. As Köhler (1998: 36-8) points out, and my own experience confirms, labelling as a Pygmy can have negative consequences since it may encourage other people to act in extremely discriminatory ways towards those assigned such a label. This has many similarities to the situations of other hunter-gathering people in Africa and around the world. Woodburn (1997) offers a detailed analysis of such ethnic discrimination against hunter-gatherers in Africa that I shall return to in later chapters.

The Mbendjele I stayed with tended to disapprove of the term 'Pygmy' since they do not speak French and too often heard it when villagers were insulting them in French. The Mbendjele understood that 'Pygmy' is used to refer to themselves as well as other forest hunter-gatherers they know of such as the Baka, Mikaya or Bakola, but prefer their own ethnonym that also encompasses such people - Yaka.

### **Yaka**

There is a great confusion of different ethnonyms assigned to the Mbendjele and similar groups in the western Congo basin. The Mbendjele are usually referred to in the literature as either Babinga (particularly during the colonial period) or more commonly today as the Aka. The name 'Babandjélé' was first mentioned by Bruel (1910: 111) and he also calls them the 'Bayaka' although he uses 'Babinga' more frequently. Other names mentioned include Bambenga, Babenga, Yandenga, Biaka, Bayaca and Bayaga, (see for instance Ouzilleau 1911:75, fn 2, or Bahuchet 1985: 28-31). In my fieldwork area each villager group living near Pygmies had a slightly different name for them and many of the names stated above are villager appellations. Thus the Kouele and Njem farmers call Pygmies 'bakola', the Sangha-Sangha Bomuali say 'bagielli', the Sangha-Sangha Lino say 'badjeli', and the Bongili and Bomitaba say 'bambenga'.

The name Babinga is a colonial corruption of Bambenga. Bambenga, or similar terms such as Yandenga, are widely used by non-Pygmies to designate a number of different Pygmy groups speaking a number of different languages in the western Congo Basin: the Baka and the Bagyeli of Cameroon, and the Baka, Mikaya, Luma, Mbendjele and Tua in the Congo.

While the Mbendjele, the Luma and Mikaya speak a C10 Bantu language (Thomas 1977, 1979; Klieman 1997, 1999:90-1; Rossel 1999:109), the Baka in Cameroon and northwestern Congo speak an Ubangian language of the Gbanzili-Sere group (Brisson et

Boursier 1979), and the Gyeli (Bagyeli) speak a Bantu language in the A 80 group (Renaud 1976). Although they speak different languages their similarities are considered sufficient for outsiders (some of whom speak an identical language to that spoken by one of the Pygmy groups) to call them all by the same name. Interestingly the Mbendjele and members of other Pygmy groups I met also classify these different language communities together under a single ethnonym.

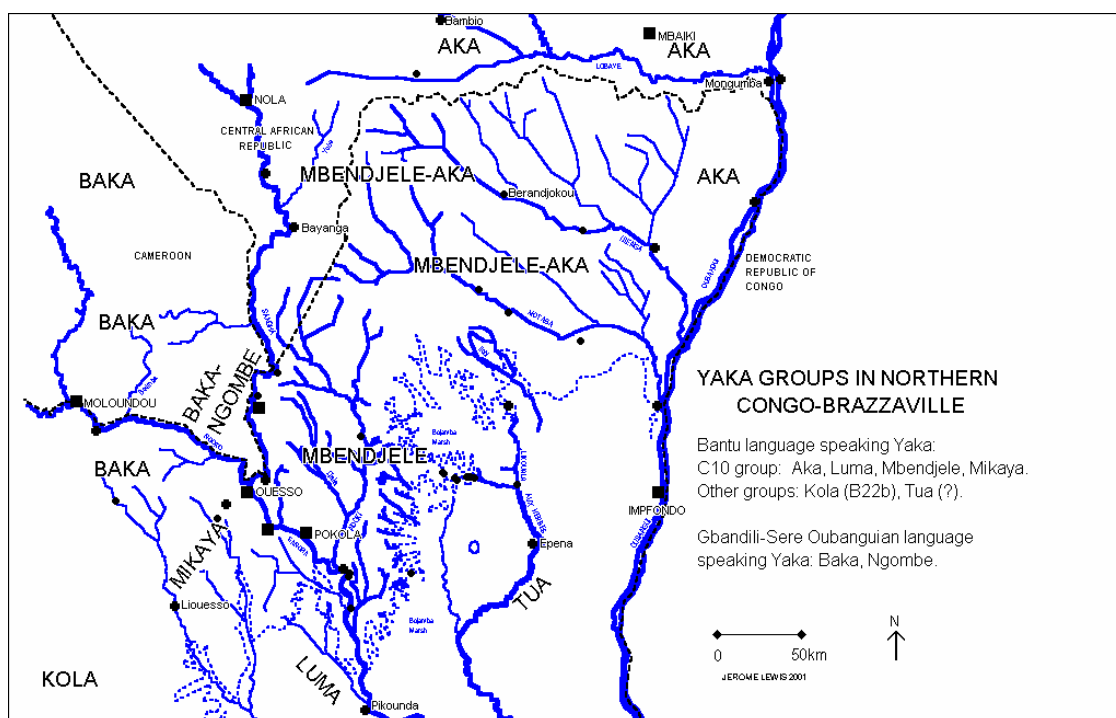


Figure 5. Map showing Yaka groups in Northern Congo-Brazzaville

Mbendjele refer to all the Pygmy people they know of as Yaka (plural *Bayaka* or *Baaka*, and singular, *Moyaka* or *Moaka*) and consider them to be *bisi ndima* (forest people) regardless of which language they speak. Thus even the Ubangian language speaking Ngombe (Baka) on the west side of the Sangha River are Yaka to the Bantu language speaking Mbendjele on the east side. And vice versa, Baka Pygmies living near Mouloundou in southeastern Cameroon call themselves Baka and refer to other Pygmy groups – like the Mbendjele, Luma or Mikaya – as Baka too. Despite the linguistic classification of Bantu and Oubangian languages as entirely different in structure and origin, and in support of Bahuchet’s (1992b) reconstruction of an original Pygmy language called *\*baaka*, Mbendjele say they all used to speak Yaka and that, when they go to stay

with Ngombe (Baka), they are able to understand and speak Ngombe easily after a short time<sup>43</sup>.

All Pygmy groups in this area either use the ethnonym *Bayaka*, *Biaka*, *Baaka* or *Baka* to describe themselves. All claim shared ancestry and origins with the first forest people, and recognise that these slightly different names are all versions of the same stem - \*yaka (Bahuchet (1992b) refers to this stem as \*baakaa). The differing pronunciations of this term relate to regional accents and the popular tendency to drop consonants in normal speech.

### **Bilo – village people, *bisi mboka*.**

All Yaka groups make a similarly broad ethnic classification of non-Yaka farming or fishing peoples who have moved into Yaka forest and speak a wide variety of different languages. The Mbendjele term ‘Bilo’ encompasses over 40 different ethnic groups, though currently Mbendjele maintain formal relations with only around ten of these<sup>44</sup>. ‘Bilo’ are various Bantu and Ubangian language-speaking, village dwelling agriculturalists. These peoples have migrated into the Mbendjele forest where they make a living from farming, and fishing or trapping. For the Mbendjele they all fall into the category of ‘*bisi mboka*’, (village people), who like to live in clearings that are hot and open to the sky, and who make aggressive claims to own rivers, forests and other people. The Mbendjele also refer to growing urban populations as Bilo.

Other anthropologists have attempted to capture this sense of a generic ethnicity using concepts like ‘Bantu’ and ‘Pygmies’, ‘farmers’ and ‘hunter-gatherers’, or ‘Grands Noirs’ (Tall Blacks<sup>45</sup>) and ‘Pygmées’. Importantly, the Mbendjele use of the term Bilo does not make a distinction between Bantu and Ubangian language speakers or between distinct modes of subsistence, or height. In this way the term Bilo aptures well a Yaka perspective on outsiders and a general sense of ethnicity that I adopt here.

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<sup>43</sup> My own experience of three weeks with the Baka confirms this. I was astonished by how much of their vocabulary I could understand and how quickly I was able to begin to speak it.

<sup>44</sup> During survey work for PROECO I recorded 48 different Bilo ethnic groups living rurally in Mbendjele forest. Only large established groups are in formal relations with groups of Mbendjele. In Northern Congo these are the Pomo, Yasua, Kaka, Sangha-Sangha, Bongili, Kabunga, Ngundi, Bomitaba, Monzombo and Bodongo.

<sup>45</sup> Bahuchet and Guillaume (1982: 193) use ‘Tall blacks’ as their translation of *bilo*. However since height is not a distinction local people I met ever made, this translation seems arbitrary.



In Chapter Eight the relations between the Mbendjele and Bilo will be examined and the developed oral tradition that elaborates and entrenches cultural stereotypes differentiating Yaka from Bilo through accounts of the past will be discussed in more detail. These numerous and widely told stories attest to the enduring and elaborate nature of the opposition between Bilo ‘village people’ and Yaka ‘forest people’.

Similar ethnic distinctions are widespread among the peoples of Central Africa and their indigenous elaboration has been commented on by other ethnographers of the region, for example, in the Ituri Forest of the Democratic Republic of Congo by Turnbull (1966) for the Mbuti forest people, and more recently by Grinker (1994) for the neighbouring Lese Dese village people. It is interesting to note that even where forest people no longer have access to forest, even where they speak the same language and have many cultural practices and beliefs similar to those of their farmer neighbours, these ethnic oppositions do not break down. Indeed, they can become more entrenched when segregation and discrimination increase as it becomes more and more difficult for the Pygmies to gain an independent livelihood from the forest. This has happened to the Twa Pygmies in many parts of the Great Lakes Region (Lewis 2000).

Hewlett and Cavalli-Sforza (1986: 933) state “there seems to be high similarity of cultural traits across a vast area in Central Africa”. Bahuchet (1992a: 247) also remarks on certain similarities in the mechanisms and organisation of spatial and social mobility among four Pygmy populations, Mbuti, Efe, Aka and Baka, from east to west across the Congo basin. These different (but all forest-dwelling) Pygmy groups are similar in the way groups tend to coalesce around a patrilineal core but are highly flexible with constantly changing group composition and much inter-group visiting. This disperses relatives and affinal relationships giving people access to several territories. Several neighbouring groups aggregate during some weeks of the year, supplying themselves by collective hunting and celebrating large festivals dominated by polyphonic singing and involving the participation of all. Bahuchet (ibid) names these ceremonies as *jengi* (Baka), *mokondi* (Aka) and *molimo* (Mbuti). The Mbendjele use all three of these appellations: *molimo* refers to spirit in general, *mokondi* to all the forest spirits that people have caught and can dance, and *jengi* to the spirit controlled by men that they took from women when they first met. *Ejengi* is the

most important ritual association of Yaka peoples. Many authors have commented on the great similarities between widely separate areas, especially their unusual singing style<sup>46</sup>.

### **Yaka - forest people, *bisi ndima***

“Our fathers, they were advising us. They were advising us in the forest. We walked together in the forest, always walking in the forest. They showed us how to kill our first pigs: ‘take the spear like this...’. The people of before, they gave us advice: ‘You should walk over here, you should walk over there, you stab pigs like this. You mustn’t make fights, you just stay here peacefully. You should always laugh a lot. You should like people like this. You should laugh about it.’ For us it’s like that. My warriors are like that.”

*Bokonyo, 65-year-old Mbendjele man, kombeti (spokesman) of Djello.*

In this explanation Bokonyo brings out three basic elements of the Mbendjele sense of identity: that they are the descendants of forest people who have always lived in the forest; that they are knowledgeable about the forest and have a special relationship with it as nomadic hunter-gatherers; that they are people who recognise and highly value social harmony, pleasure and laughter.

Mbendjele say that Yaka forest people have always lived in the forest and that they share common ancestors and certain myths, a distinctive forest-orientated lifestyle and social organisation, and a distinctive Yaka aesthetic in speech, singing, performance style, ritual life and corporal appearance. All Yaka groups are hunter-gatherers to varying degrees and each has its own recognised area of forest (see Map 7). Their relationship with the forest is seen as intimate, like a person and their own body, expressed in the proverb, “A Yaka loves the forest as he loves his own body.”

Other Yaka groups which the Mbendjele know they call the Ngombe (Baka Pygmies speaking an Oubangian language), the Ngabo (Aka Pygmies, speaking Bantu C14 language), the Mikaya and Luma (classified as speaking Bantu C10 groups languages, the same language group as the Mbendjele), and the Tua (language group not known but probably similar to their neighbours – Bantu C10 group)<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, Turnbull 1966:23; Arom 1978; Thomas 1979:145; Kazadi 1981:836; Sawada 1990.

<sup>47</sup> Language classifications are based on the tables provided by Klieman 1999: 90-1 and Rossel 1999: 109 fn.4.

Relations vary greatly between these different Yaka groups, as the following sections will detail. However, it is noteworthy that their relations are based on notions of common descent and a shared past together with interaction in ritual and marriage in contrast to relations with non-Yaka, such as Bilo or Mindele ('white' people), that are predominantly based on economic transactions linked with work, trade and exchange.

Despite the emphasis being on forest-living and not stature the term Yaka would seem to be roughly equivalent in usage to the European term 'Pygmy', although the Mbendjele have never heard of the Mbuti or other distant 'Pygmy' groups. In order to refer to these groups my informants said I must use *baaka* or *Yaka*<sup>48</sup>, not Aka, Pygmy or Mbenga.

Thomas (1974, 1976, 1977 and 1979), Bahuchet (1979, 1985), etc. describe what the Mbendjele call the Yaka as two groups of people; the Aka (Bantu C14 speakers) and the Baka (Ubangian language speakers). The academic labels chosen are based on linguistic differences. Interestingly the Mbendjele see linguistic differences as marginal to their overall identity as Yaka. The marginality of language to their sense of identity is also demonstrated by the clear denial of a shared identity with Bilo who in some cases speak an identical, or very similar language to certain Yaka groups. This is clearly demonstrated by the case of the Ngombe Yaka (Baka) and the Massa fishing-agriculturalists.

Despite differences in language there are several *gano* fables, shared by all Yaka groups, in which the story does not vary much over the whole region (e.g. How the dog became, and several about *sumbu*, the chimpanzee). The various Yaka groups also share similar myths of creation, ideas about hunting and human reproduction embodied in practices relating to *ekila*, ritual association structures, ritual performance styles and certain key rituals associations (e.g. *Ejengi*, *Yele*, *Niabula* and *Djoboko*, see also Chapter One, pages 30-1). Referring to villagers as Bilo (literally: the uninitiated) and *Bebobo* (gorillas) is also characteristic of Yaka people in general.

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<sup>48</sup> In many Bantu languages the prefix "ba" signifies a group of people, or the plural of a noun. In order to deal with the very large number of Bantu groups whose name begins with "ba" linguists and ethnographers have by convention omitted the "ba" prefix from ethnic labels to make classification easier. Since *Bayaka* is the fullest name for Mbendjele and other groups I employ the term Yaka here.

In sharing the same creation myth Yaka people express their shared identity in terms of descent from the first forest people. Here, I will briefly describe the basic elements of the Yaka creation myth that are shared by the Mbendjele, Ngombe, Mikaya and Luma. In Chapter Seven I shall examine the Mbendjele version of the creation myth in more detail.

God (*Komba*, *Njake*, or *Bolo*) makes a group of men and a group of women and puts them in different parts of the forest. The men copulated with *mapombe* (wild calabash-like fruit). The *mapombe* made lots of male children. The men hunted large game and collected honey. Elsewhere the women lived together and collected wild yams and fished. They danced *Ejengi* and female children fell from the raffia of the forest spirit's clothing. *Ejengi* made them many children.

One day the *kombeti* (elder) of the men<sup>49</sup> decided to go hunting alone. After a walk of several days he happened upon traces of the women. He heard the women singing and watched them from a hiding place. They saw him.

He returned and told the men about the women. The following day the men took many leaf parcels filled with honey and walked to the women's camp. They stalked the women, encircled them [as in pig hunting], and then closed in. The women scattered in panic but wherever they went they were beaten with honey. The women tasted the honey and loved it. They decided to stay with the men. They gave the men *Ejengi*, and the men abandoned the *mapombe*. Since then men have sex with women and women give birth to men's children.

Many generations passed and they lived together in the forest their numbers increasing greatly. However differences began to divide them and they broke up into groups.

The Ngombe are blamed for the break up into different groups. The Mbendjele, Mikaya and Luma say that the Ngombe started eating people and so the others left them. Contrary to Arens' (1979) theory of cannibalism where it is a myth always claimed of others but never oneself, the Ngombe I talked to admitted to this (as do many Bilo groups in northern Congo<sup>50</sup>). First the Ngabo and Mbendjele broke away but stayed in the area. The Ngombe (the Baka) travelled west, dividing many years later once across the Sangha River in present-day Cameroon. The Luma and Mikaya went southwest crossing over the Sangha River.

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<sup>49</sup> This is the men's version of the myth. Chapter Seven also gives the women's version.

<sup>50</sup> See also Bruel 1910 and Grangeon 1965 for some accounts of this.



## **The Ngombe Yaka**

A 50-year-old Ngombe man called Lokanda, a *kombeti* of Bomassa on the Sangha River explained to me how the Ngombe began speaking Massa (the Oubangian language of the Massa people). Before some learned to speak Massa, the Yaka all lived together in the forest around the Motaba and Ibenga rivers. At some point certain clans of Yaka began to associate themselves with the Massa and became, amongst other things, cannibals. All agree that this was the root of their separation and the conflict that continues in certain places today<sup>51</sup>.

All did not go well for the Massa and the Yaka with them. After a series of defeats by other (forgotten) groups they were forced to flee westwards into the forest away from the Oubangui River. During many generations they fled together through the Ndoki forest, the Yaka guiding them and hunting. The Massa are fishermen and explained that they are incompetent if alone in the forest. They had more battles with other groups they encountered and were driven further and further west. Eventually they arrived at the Sangha River at the time of the Massa chief Mbilo. As a precaution they crossed the Sangha River. Here they established the village of Mokondo in present-day Cameroon.

After one generation the Massa decided to abandon Mokondo to go lower down the Sangha to Ingolio (present-day Bomassa), led by the chief Iwewe. On the eve of the community's departure from Mokondo they held a big dance. In the early hours of the morning nearly all the Yaka fled the Massa and began moving further West and some south towards the Ngoko River. Both the Ngombe and the Massa say this was due to the Yaka resentment of bad treatment by the Massa. Only a few families of Ngombe Yaka remained to accompany the Massa back over the Sangha into present-day Congo. Today these are the Ngombe of Bomassa and Kabo, the only Ngombe to live east of the Sangha.

Although rarely encountered by the Mbendjele groups we stayed with, the Ngombe are the most significant Yaka 'other'. The Ngombe are feared for their mastery of the art of shape-

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<sup>51</sup> Verhilles (1948c: 149) recounts that the Ngombe said the Mbendjele were their enemies. Hauser (1953: 149; 163) also remarks that the Mbendjele and Ngombe live in hostility, despite occasionally exchanging wives. He describes that the Mbendjele told him the Ngombe were elephant men and held them responsible for the disappearances of Bayaka (Mbendjele). Hauser thought it more likely to be rubber-tappers coming from the Lobaye in CAR.

changing (*mokidwa*). Ngombe sorcerers are renowned for changing into elephants, travelling into Mbendjele forest and killing men or stealing women and children. This surprising belief is widespread<sup>52</sup> and remains remarkably powerful as we experienced during fieldwork<sup>53</sup>.

Kibino, a Bilo research assistant of ours, and a commercial bushmeat trader spent time buying meat from Ngombe communities on the Ngoko River. He told me many of the elaborate stories the Ngombe tell of their *bita* (conflict) with the Mbendjele. The *bita* was said to have continued because the forest in Cameroon is not rich in wild yams and because Mbendjele women are so beautiful. His elderly Ngombe friend Ndanga living at Mbendja on the Ngoko River told him that his father was a great spirit-controller and master of *mokidwa*. Unfortunately he was killed by the Mbendjele whilst transformed as an elephant and roaming their forest. His mother told him this to explain why she did not know where his father had died.

Not all Mbendjele groups I met are still in conflict with the Ngombe. In villages north of the logging town Kabo (Mbandaka, Bonga, Gbagbali, Bonda and Bomassa) Mbendjele and Ngombe live and intermarry together and share the same forest camps. They say the *bita* is a thing of the past and that they get on well with each other nowadays.

### **The Luma Yaka**

The Luma Yaka at Molenda say the Ngombe attack them too, as *mokidwa* gorillas. The Mbendjele relationship with the Luma is very different to that with the Ngombe.

The Mbendjele call the Luma “*baluma*”, or “*baaka ua ngele*” (Yaka from below) and say they were once one with the Ngombe. The Luma call the Mbendjele “*bayake*” and call themselves “*Baka*”. They live with the Pikounda Bongili around Molenda and Pikounda south of Ikelemba on the Sangha River.

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<sup>52</sup> Hauser (1953: 149 and 163) recounts identical beliefs among Mbendjele near the Oubangui living far from any Ngombe communities. He attributes such beliefs to Mbendjele disappearances that he blames on rubber-tapers coming from the Lobaye.

<sup>53</sup> Appendix One is an account of an attack by Ngombe elephant men that occurred in a camp in which we were living.

In the past the Mbendjele and Luma had little to do with each other. But recently contacts have been increasing as Mbendjele men have begun marrying Luma women, mostly as second wives while they stay in Luma-Bongili villages working as paid hunters for Bilo. This pattern of marriage resembles the way Bilo men only marry Yaka women, never letting their own women marry Yaka men. It is also quite different because the Mbendjele men live in the Luma wife's community, eat together with their in-laws and share out any extra goods they may have with the wife's family. When the Mbendjele husbands return to the Mbendjele forest, their Luma wives and children rarely come with them. They are too frightened of Mbendjele women. These marriages seem to be marriages of convenience, a legitimisation of sexual relations, rather than the creation of enduring clan relations as they are when between Mbendjele clans.

Luma women quite often marry low-status Bilo men, always as a second wife of very low status. They live in the Bilo village and will travel to camps and other villages with their Bilo husbands. According to my Mbendjele informants, her Luma family consider her to have done well and she will be endlessly harangued for gifts whenever she visits. The demands for goods will exceed her ability to provide and often these women practically sever relations with their own Luma families. Such a wife will be discriminated against by her husband's family. Indeed other Bilo will mock the husband for having taken a Luma wife. His first wife may leave him saying "You brought Yaka filth into this house. Well I'm leaving!" His friends will not eat food prepared by her, his family will not share living quarters with her and she will be endlessly sent to do chores by the first wife (if she stays) and by the husband's female relatives. These Luma women will enjoy the outward markers of Bilo respectability- many clothes, pots and pans, plaited hairstyles and shoes to wear, but many find it very lonely "with their eyes stuck on the Bilo".

The Mbendjele in our area never marry Bilo. They sometimes have clandestine sexual relations but this is not common and goes on between Mbendjele women and Bilo men more commonly than between Bilo women and Mbendjele men.

The Mbendjele say they are superior to the Luma "*buse di to soko ba.luma*" (we are at the head of the Luma). The Mbendjele say this is because the Luma live like Bilo: they eat alone without sharing food, and spend more time in boats on the river and working for Bilo

than anything else. They often pointed out that the Luma don't know the forest well, not like Mbendjele. The Luma don't like going into the forest for long journeys. They go for the day and come back to sleep in the village. As Tomota, a 45-year-old Mbendjele man with a Luma second wife, explained to me;

“There are some *bai* (natural clearings) near the villages where the Luma go with a rifle if they hear an elephant trumpet. But not like the Mbendjele *tuma* (elephant hunter) who can run into the forest after them, and even spear them. They are only half *tuma*. That's why we can always find money when we go there. The Bilo like to pay us to hunt for them. They don't even have many *mokondi* (forest spirits), only *Ejengi* and *kwatambela* from Pikounda. They stole *Malobe* from us. They never paid for it. We forbid them to dance it. But they still do when we're not around. That's why they fear us. They all run into their houses when we arrive! They fear our forest spirits. When we Mbendjele sit down on their *njanga* (*Ejengi's* sacred area for the initiates) at Pikounda, they don't bother giving us the tests. They just say “Aa, he's entered *Mabonga!*” and keep quiet!”

### **The Mikaya Yaka**

The Mikaya are a small dispersed group of Yaka living along the former road from Ouessou towards Brazzaville, in Ouessou itself and in the logging towns on the Sangha, especially in Ngombe logging town that was originally a Mikaya camp. The Mbendjele call the Mikaya “*mikaya*” and “*baaka ba soko*” (the Yaka of above), in contrast to the Luma who are the Yaka of below. Contacts between them have increased in frequency in recent times. This is due to greater Mbendjele interest in wage labour and the availability of this in Yaka satellite communities linked to logging towns. Whereas the Ngombe and Mbendjele rarely inhabit the same camps, the Mikaya and Mbendjele often do. The Mbendjele respect the Mikaya for their education and independence from Bilo. The Mikaya admire the forest knowledge of the Mbendjele, but fear their mystical powers and despite living with them tend to mistrust them.

For the past twenty years many Mikaya have had access to education by Catholic nuns from Ouessou. A large number of Mikaya are literate in French and in Mbalouma near Ouessou there is a small school run by two Mikaya men for other Mikaya. The Mikaya in the south (80 kilometres. from Ouessou) are still active hunter-gatherers but the majority of Mikaya now specialise in providing services for urban communities. These include

collecting palm-nuts, trapping and hunting, collecting honey, marantaceae and *koko* leaves for Bilo consumption in urban centres as well as providing services as ritual specialists, singers and dancers, blacksmiths and craftsmen, healers, house builders and wine producers. They also provide agricultural labour for Bilo clearing farmland, assisting with harvest and transportation. Their education allows them to get jobs in the logging industry more easily than other Yaka, notably as domestic servants for expatriate Europeans and Muslim traders, in the sawmills and in forest prospecting. As a result they are considered wealthy by the Mbendjele. This has consequences for bridewealth payments when Mikaya men marry Mbendjele women.

The Mbendjele and Mikaya have a long history of sporadic contacts and intermarriage. The Sangha-Sangha Bilo of Ikelemba incorporated one Mikaya family into their clans, along with fourteen Mbendjele families, when they first arrived on the Sangha five generations ago. The descendants of this Mikaya family are now considered Mbendjele. Intermarriage between Mikaya and Mbendjele continues today but mainly in Yaka satellite communities associated with the logging industry. In these communities the Mbendjele and Mikaya share forest spirit ritual associations with each other.

The Mbendjele say that the Mikaya are too few and do not have a proper forest, therefore if they marry a Mikaya the couple should remain in Mbendjele forest, even when large bridewealth payments have been made. The Mbendjele will demand considerable bridewealth payments from Mikaya men. In one exceptional case a Mikaya man I know had to pay 126,500CFA (approximately US\$ 250) in goods and cash to his Mbendjele in-laws. Between Mbendjele bridewealth is minimal, never exceeding 4000cfa (approximately US\$ 8) in my experience, but the brideservice expected from the wife-takers is considerable and continues throughout married life.

### **The Ngabo Yaka**

The Ngabo live in the Central African Republic (CAR) around the Lobaye River. They have been subject to extensive research over the past 25 years, most notably by Serge Bahuchet and researchers from the CNRS in France, and by Barry Hewlett. The Ngabo, like the Mbendjele, are referred to as the Aka in the academic literature because they speak almost the same language.

The term Ngabo is used by the Congolese Mbendjele to refer to Yaka from the central and eastern parts of the Lobaye region in CAR. The Yaka living in the western part of southern CAR call themselves Mbendjele, and are called Mbendjele by the Congolese Mbendjele. The Mbendjele Yaka community of Bayanga (Haute Sangha, CAR) marry with Mbendjele communities living in Berandjokou and Makao (Congo-Brazzaville). As I travelled towards the CAR-Congo border Yaka communities would refer to the northern immigrant groups from CAR as Ngabo, but when I arrived in these communities they would refer to those living around Mbaiki as the 'real' Ngabo.

*“Ko bangabo ba die ngwene na bankgando”* (the real Ngabo are over there with the Bangando).

This refers to the Ngando Bilo living south east of Mbaiki. These immigrant communities claimed they had fled mistreatment by the Ngando 25 years ago by coming to live in Congo. Despite being neighbours for so long the Congolese Mbendjele living near them mistrusted the Ngabo immigrants. They would not marry or visit them and would not hunt in forest inhabited by Ngabo.

The Ngabo have been the subject of intense evangelism by various European and American churches based in CAR. These missionary organisations have been competing for Ngabo converts over the past 20 years. The main attractions of Christianity for the Ngabo have been regular free handouts of clothing and farming implements and the belief that Christianity can protect them from sorcery. The Ngabo communities I visited were sedentary, were all dominated by Christians, and were very actively involved in hunting for Bilo commercial bushmeat traders coming from CAR.

While I walked between these different communities, Emeka and Bushango, from my research area in the south, accompanied me. Emeka is an important *kombeti* (elder) in our research area and he was deeply shocked and upset by what we saw in these Ngabo communities. When we arrived in Malele, a large evangelised and sedentary community, we spent the night. The village and its inhabitants were infested with chiggers to such a degree that many children were unable to walk properly. Some crawled around on their hands and knees, their leg muscles wasted from being unable to walk for so long.

That evening, after they had finished singing church songs and praying, we sat and talked with the men under the *mbanjo* (men's meeting area). Emeka was keen to find out what *mokondi* (forest spirits) they possessed. An Ngabo catechist from CAR was staying in the community and he took great offence at Emeka's questions. He launched a tirade of abuse at the 'devil-worship' of the ancestors, and proudly said that no one there danced the *mokondi* any more, or told *gano* (fables). Emeka was appalled:

"How tragic. You cause me great sadness. Why have you left the path of our fathers? Our fathers had great wisdom. At the town called Pokola there are many churches. You can hear *Ejengi* drums on the *njangga* (sacred area for initiates) at the same time as the church drums. There's no problem there. God is for all people not just half of them. Oh tragedy, you have given me great sadness."

The catechist took this as a threat to his authority and began insulting us in Mbendjele. If I had not intervened to change the subject, we could have been in trouble with the community. Emeka remained upset and despite the difficulties, repeated his thoughts several times to the men while we were there.

After our departure he observed to me that he had never seen such suffering from chiggers before:

"They spend every morning and evening singing and praying instead of removing the chiggers from their children's feet. Then they go net-hunting for the Bilo all day. They work very hard, they are strong in the forest, but look at their feet! When our children get chiggers we always take them out so it doesn't get too bad. If the children cry, we hold them down. They should move camp. Just staying there for the church is killing their children. When chiggers get bad we move camp. That's how we leave them behind. They are being ruined by the church."

### **The Tua Yaka**

The Tua, also referred to as Bakolo by Lalouel (1949:11), are a small group living along the Likouala-Aux-Herbes south of Epena. The Tua refuse to accept that they are Yaka. They insist that they are Bilo. However their Bilo neighbours, the Bomitaba, call them "*baaka*", as do the Mbendjele and all other Bilo groups in the area. Mitanda, a 35-year-old Mbendjele man who had visited Tua communities many times, commented:

“The Tua were once Yaka but now they’re almost like Bilo. They have their own language but mostly they only speak Bomitaba. They don’t point their teeth or scar their bodies. They live in Bilo villages in their own ‘quartier’, in houses just like Bilo. Many Tua go to school and some have even left the village to become soldiers and others teachers. Some Bilo men have married Tua women, but no Tua men take Bilo wives. Those Bilo men who take Tua wives get really teased and insulted by the other Bilo, and their friends will refuse to eat food the Tua wife has prepared. Even if they finish with the Tua woman, they’ll never be able to marry a Bilo woman.

The only dance I saw them do was when we killed an elephant. They called it *esembo*. In the past they only liked the forest. Now they’ve got used to the hot village and spend lots of time there. They still net-hunt and do lots of fishing in the marshes but their eyes are stuck on the Bilo. They are the Bomitaba’s Yaka.”

### **An Mbendjele perspective on Yaka forest people**

In the material presented above I have sought to illustrate the ways in which Mbendjele I lived and worked with define the groups which share their forest-orientated lifestyle<sup>54</sup>. Despite claiming a shared identity as forest people, the Mbendjele put forward strikingly different ethnic stereotypes about each Yaka group. By examining these ethnic stereotypes it is possible to show that the concept of being Yaka depends on certain features, or indicators, which the other Yaka groups possess to varying degrees. At its most general this shared sense of identity is based on a known present or past forest-orientated hunter-gatherer lifestyle that is believed to demonstrate descent from the first forest people.

That a group like the Tua should be considered Yaka shows the importance of this central characteristic for Yaka identity. Apart from their engagement in net-hunting and marsh fishing, the Tua show no other signs of a forest-orientated lifestyle. What my informants emphasised was their past forest-orientated lifestyle in justifying their inclusion as Yaka. Their ritual life is different to the other Yaka groups. They have no sense of the Yaka aesthetic in performance styles or bodily appearance (in relation to pointed teeth and body

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<sup>54</sup> The presentation is biased towards male conceptions. In general Mbendjele women are more conservative. They often talked about outsiders more stereotypically than men. My questions to women often got responses like “They’re bad”, “They kill people” or even “They eat children”. Women represent outsiders as too often violent and dangerous, whether they be forest animals (women always sing loudly when in the forest to frighten animals), or other Yaka groups who desire them, or the aggressive Bilo. As a result they generally prefer men to be the ones who deal with outsiders, themselves remaining suspicious, and often publicly uncooperative to propositions made by outsiders.



tattooing). They like to live in hot, open Bilo-style villages and to go to school. They even contest their identification with the Yaka. There are other Bilo groups like the Kaka who greatly value forest activities, and probably spend as much time in the forest as the Tua, yet they are not called Yaka. But neither are they discriminated against by other Bilo as Yaka people are.

In the modern context discrimination by the Bilo appears to me to be emerging as an important marker of Yaka identity. It is possibly this feature that confirms to the Mbendjele that the Tua are really Yaka despite the paucity of other indicators. At the same time the Tua are considered marginal: “They were once Yaka but now they are almost like Bilo.”, The Tua appear to be seeking to assimilate as Bilo but in response are marginalized by both the Yaka and the Bilo.

The Mikaya often live in sedentary villages and are becoming increasingly urbanised. In many respects they resemble the Tua. They live in villages, are educated, have access to wealth and jobs but are still discriminated against by the Bilo. However, unlike the Tua, the Mikaya are still orientated towards the forest and take pride in forest skills. They greatly value the cool forest life and still travel into the forest for extended periods, often for work as paid hunters, collectors or prospectors, but also for pleasure. They have maintained the Yaka aesthetic in their speech, singing, performance styles and ritual life, although less and less in their physical appearance.

The importance of the forest-orientated hunter-gatherer lifestyle to the concept of being Yaka is clear in the Mbendjele’s perception of the Luma. Their shared descent and past is still acknowledged by both groups. However, the Mbendjele I talked to claimed they were superior to the Luma. My informants clearly linked this to their increasing preference for living and working in hot, open places as opposed to the cool, shady forest. Rather than going for long journeys hunting and gathering in the forest, the Luma prefer to remain in the hot, open village and pass their time working for the Bilo on the river or at their farms.

The Luma have lost their passion for forest living and as a consequence the mystical power and freedom the Mbendjele believe this brings. The Luma’s lack of mystical power is

epitomised by the theft of *Malobe* from the Mbendjele, and their lack of freedom in the expression “with their eyes stuck on the Bilo”.

Of all the Yaka groups discussed, the Mbendjele perceive the Ngombe as the most similar to themselves. Their shared past is well known and surprisingly well remembered by both groups as described in Appendix One. Their forest knowledge is considered equal to the Mbendjele’s and their rituals and spirit-controllers as powerful. The Ngombe, like the Mbendjele, are discriminated against by the Bilo but are at the same time respected as a result of their mystical power and ancestral knowledge, and the independence and freedom their forest-orientated lifestyles permit. But the Ngombe forest is considered poorer than Mbendjele forest and Mbendjele women very desirable. In this sense the Ngombe threaten the Mbendjele more than any of the other groups. They covet Mbendjele forest and women because they are so similar to the Mbendjele.

The material as a whole demonstrates that for the Mbendjele the category Yaka is built from a series of indicators that mark out the degree to which a group are considered ideal forest people. The most important criterion is acknowledged descent from the first forest people. This is demonstrated by a forest-orientated hunter-gatherer lifestyle involving regular movement, a pride in hunting and gathering wild forest products for consumption and a complex of beliefs and rituals designed to regulate the human group’s relations with animals, and those between the sexes, as well as to enlist the support of forest spirits. The secret knowledge of the ancestors is believed to endow the Yaka with great spiritual potency. Following in the ancestors path produces a distinctly Yaka aesthetic, particular speech, singing and performance styles, a particular oral tradition, a taste for forest foods above all other food, and a love for the cool, shady forest over the hot open spaces of rivers, fields and villages.

Language here is manifestly not synonymous with culture. Many Yaka groups have adopted grammatical structures and extensive vocabulary, even an entire language in the Ngombe case, from non-Yaka groups without losing their distinctive cultural identity. Mbendjele and Ngombe, for instance, see each other as sharing a similar culture, despite speaking very different languages. They contrast their Yaka lifestyle and values to those of

**PLATE 1. Yaka Faces**



their villager neighbours, even when they happen to share the same language with the villagers.

They identify performance styles rather than vocabulary, speech protocols such as the *mosambo* (public speaking) rather than grammatical structures, not asking questions, a sense of understatement and subtlety, of the sacred and the secret. The habit of dropping consonants and otherwise disguising speech, of perfectly mimicking animal sounds and people's languages, or excellence at singing and dancing, and the art of calling forest spirits into camp, of teasing, joking and playing the buffoon. It is not what people are singing but the polyphonic yodelling singing style, not which dances they dance or which spirits they call but the ritual structures they follow, not the language they speak but how it is spoken. The perception of what it means to be Yaka is based on an aesthetic quality and lifestyle as much as on genealogical accident, a distinctive sense of style in which music is more central to culture than language.

### **Hunter-gatherers**

I have described the Mbendjele and other Yaka groups as hunter-gatherers. Bird-David (1990) has referred to the Naiken of Southern India as 'gatherer-hunters' to emphasise the significantly greater contribution of gathering to subsistence than hunting, which is for the Naiken a relatively rare occurrence. However among the Mbendjele hunting is a daily activity and animals are often killed and eaten. Most Mbendjele men enjoy hunting regularly and their casual conversations are often dominated by discussions of hunting and animals. Although gathering is a valued and respected daily activity for most women, it is far less culturally elaborated than hunting. Bahuchet (1985:77) even argues that it is less culturally valued than hunting due to the absence of large collective rituals focused on gathered foods.

'Hunter-gatherer' is here taken to mean people whose economy is dominated by hunting wild animals and gathering wild foods, including fish, reptiles, insects and honey as well as vegetable foods. The Mbendjele concept of themselves as forest people implies hunting and gathering. In a similar way to western stereotypes of Pygmies as hunter-gatherers, Bilo stereotypes of Yaka people also cast them as archetypal hunters and gatherers. This is clear

in the meaning of Bilo ethnonyms for Yaka such as *Bambenga* which means ‘people of the spear’.

When Mbendjele talk about other Yaka people, it is understood that they are or were also hunter-gatherers. However this is not understood to imply that they are exclusively hunter-gatherers, but simply that this is their speciality<sup>55</sup>. Just as not all Bilo are farmers at any given moment, not all Yaka will be hunting and gathering at all times. People enjoy variety and will indulge in novel or different activities as well as those they know well. Thus just as Bilo may take jobs in the local administration, industry or as a trader, so too may Mbendjele work as guides, porters, or farm labourers in order to try new things or get access to particular goods that they desire. Many Mbendjele have taken up farming, often of a very restrained type, at some point in their lives. For most this has involved clearing a small area in a particularly favoured part of the forest and planting crops like banana, plantain and chilli that require little attention and can be abandoned for extended periods.

Some older Mbendjele men (Phata and Mongemba) and women (Njimbo) in the group we stayed with had even established large manioc fields near the Sangha River for a year or two. Production was so great that Bilo came to buy manioc from them. Often as Bilo left with their manioc, an Mbendjele would call out ‘Ooo, those who called us manioc thieves, now come to buy our manioc!’<sup>56</sup>. Mbendjele seemed to be seeking to show their capacity to operate on the Bilo level in these moments. However in general such changes in occupation tend to be for limited periods and will not involve giving up hunting and gathering. Most Mbendjele regularly return into the forest to live exclusively by hunting and gathering and idealise this lifestyle as the most desirable one.

In summary, the vast majority of Mbendjele typically spend more than half the year hunting and gathering in forest camps and some part of the year near or in agriculturalists’ villages trading, labouring and performing services in return for manufactured goods, food, alcohol, tobacco, marijuana or money. Other Mbendjele further south in the Ibamba area, or around the Ilobi north of Mbandza, spend most of the year in the forest with some groups not coming out to villages for years at a time.

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<sup>55</sup> Bird-David (1988, 1992b) makes a similar argument that hunting and gathering is one of several strategies employed to make a living and rarely the unique occupation of people so-called.

<sup>56</sup> *Bato bayangaka buse moyibi batibene. Elo basomba buse bomako!*

The situation and balance between different activities vary greatly from place to place. Mbendjele near the Central African Republic (CAR) border with Congo are evangelised and relatively sedentary, spending their days net-hunting to supply commercial meat traders trafficking bushmeat into CAR. Those living near logging towns may spend long periods working outside the forest as household servants, porters, guardians and in menial jobs associated with the sawmills. Others may work as hunters, or trackers, as tree prospectors for logging companies, as path-makers, as guides, occasionally as chain-saw operators and in one case, as a caterpillar tractor driver. Frequently the same group or family may spend several months, or even up to a year or two, in a logging town followed by the next few years mostly in the forest.

Seasonal residential mobility is the norm, but the number of places visited is limited. Thus over several years people will move between well-known resource centres within their traditional territories and sometimes beyond these areas. Such resource centres may be salt licks popular with large game, areas good for wild yams, seasonal caterpillars, fruit or nut trees, fishing sites, stands of raffia palms, abandoned palm-nut plantations, farmers' villages (both inhabited and abandoned), logging towns, or prospecting camps. Mbendjele travel light and their movements are as likely to be opportunistic as planned in advance.

### **An introduction to Mbendjele social organisation**

One of the central concerns throughout this thesis is to elaborate some of the key ways Mbendjele structure and organise their society. Rather than classifying Mbendjele social institutions in terms of formal criteria as Thomas has done so effectively (Thomas and Bahuchet 1991b: 1-174) my account only attempts to introduce some key social institutions from an Mbendjele perspective. My emphasis is on the operation of these key institutions rather than an exhaustive listing of all possible social institutions. I often observed, during disputes for instance, how Mbendjele social rules<sup>57</sup> were the beginning point for negotiation rather than the boundaries of what is acceptable. One characteristic of

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<sup>57</sup> Certain rules relating to incest, *ekila*, *massana* (ritual associations) and brideservice are more rigid than others.

Mbendjele social organisation is flexibility<sup>58</sup>. However, as Thomas convincingly demonstrates in her systematic and thorough presentation, it is possible to formalise Aka social organisation. My aim is to compliment this account by presenting some of the key everyday processes that contribute to social organisation.

When formalising certain aspects of Yaka social organisation there is a tendency to overlook the way Yaka peoples' discriminated status may lead them to present themselves in ways they think outsiders will understand and approve of. For instance, in colonial times Bilo villages were established in accessible places using the threat of force, or actual military intervention if necessary, in order that demands for taxes (payable in forest produce) could be extorted. Since these villages were composed of previously independent lineages, the colonial authorities attributed to the newly formed village all lands previously inhabited by the lineages that composed the new village. Thus each recognised Bilo village became associated with particular areas of forest. Mbendjele communities associated with the members of these lineages gradually associated themselves more and more with the newly formed villages. To counter claims that they originated like wild animals in the forest, many Mbendjele present these associations as their origins, despite this not necessarily being the case.

Every Mbendjele community, like the Bilo with whom they associate, are locally perceived of, and present themselves, as owners of particular areas of forest delineated by rivers, marshes and Lac Telle<sup>59</sup>. As part of my research I mapped these traditional territories and found that the forest in the Sangha-Oubangui triangle between 1° and 3° 30' North of the equator, and 16° and 17° 30' east of Greenwich is recognised as being the territory of particular lineages of Mbendjele (Map 7) associated with a Bilo village or abandoned Bilo village. These territories are referred to by Mbendjele as '*ndima angosu*', literally 'our forest', and are shared by a number of lineages that intermarry and to whom these areas are intimately familiar.

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<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to note that two of the main authors on the Aka do brief descriptions of social organization: Bahuchet (1985) devotes just 12 pages out of 638 directly to social organization, Hewlett (1991) devotes 4 out of 200 pages. Do these authors also implicitly recognise the difficulties inherent in attempting to fix in writing, that which is so flexible, adaptable and negotiable?

<sup>59</sup> Issues of land and property are examined in Chapter Eight.

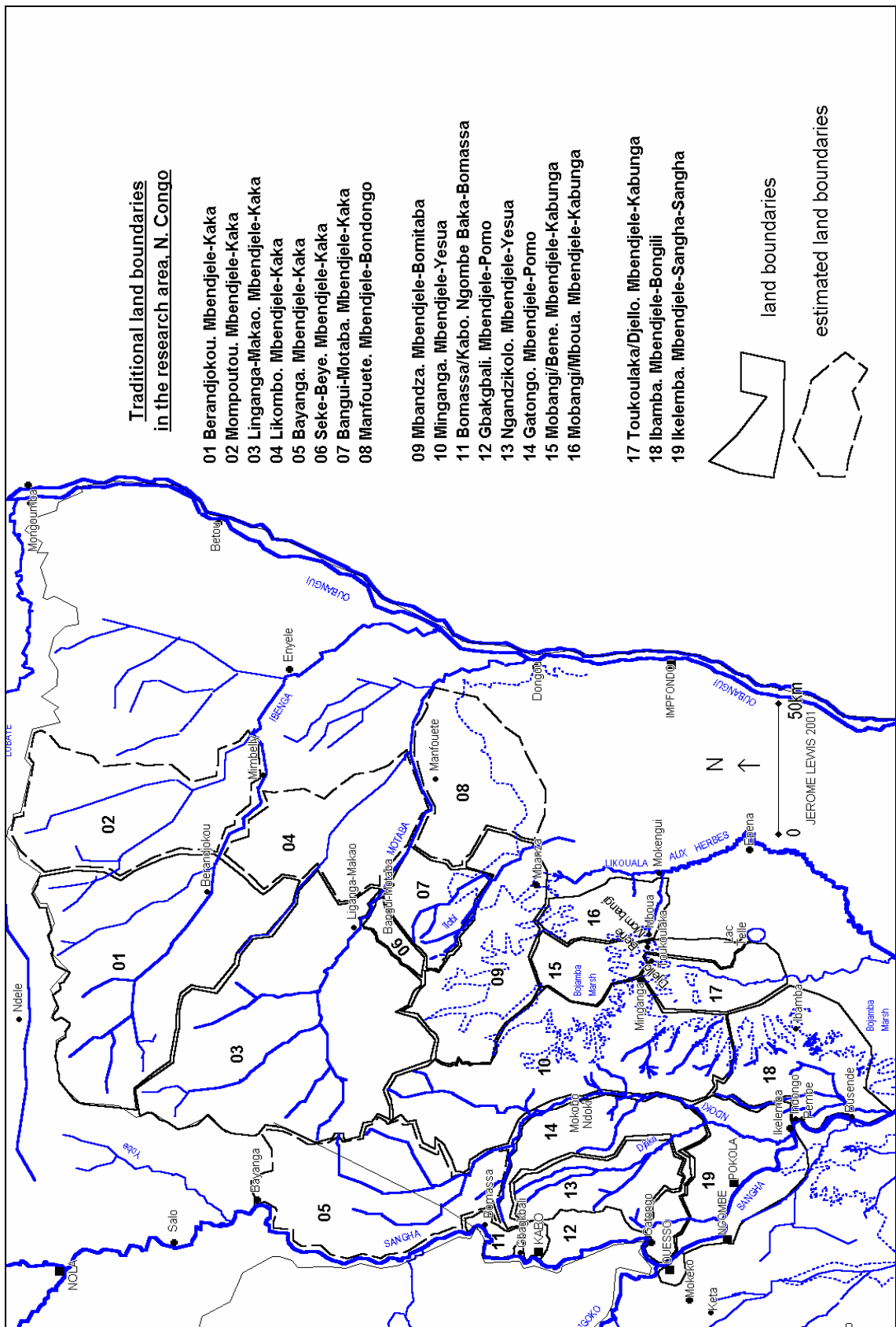


Figure 7. Map of Traditional Land Boundaries in Mbendjele Forest.



Clan is here used to translate the word *ganda* that refers to an exogamous, patrilineal and named group. Genealogies are not long, rarely more than three or four generations deep. These clans always extend beyond the limits of a single territory and most Mbendjele will thus have easy access to a wide range of different forest areas. Mbendjele travel huge distances through the forest visiting clan relatives and affines, and seeking work. This contrasts greatly to the 50 kilometres from the Bilo village that Aka studied by Hewlett, van de Koppel and Cavalli-Sforza (1982) walked. Mbendjele movement over a very wide area is not a recent phenomena, Lalouel (1950: 184) reports meeting ‘Bayaka from Ikelemba’ (my main research area) in north Kabounga on their way to Bangui Motaba on the Motaba River – an 800 kilometre round trip! Such extended journeys (*moongo abole*) still occur today and every physically capable man is expected to have done at least one such journey during his youth<sup>60</sup>. In general, Mbendjele consider all the forest to be theirs. Their rights to go where they wish and use whatever they like in the forest are a birth-right that they consider inalienable.

Within the forest Mbendjele move between resource centres (*ebende ya benda*, literally ‘place of things’) depending on the time of year<sup>61</sup> and make new camps (*lango*) wherever they wish. Certain groups prefer certain areas and tend to frequent these areas more than others, but most important resource centres, such as Bilo villages, abandoned plantations, certain salt licks, fishing sites, etc., will be visited by most Mbendjele associated with a particular territory at some point during the year. These sites often have permanent campsites on them that are more or less continually occupied by some members of one group or of a number of groups.

Mbendjele tend to move around the forest and to camp in small groups of between 10 and 60 people except during dry-season ceremonies when hundreds of people may come together. I discuss these meetings in the context of *massana*, and the ritual spirit associations in Chapter Six. Here I will focus on a different aspect of these ceremonies that is of crucial importance for allowing people who normally live in small isolated groups the chance to meet.

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<sup>60</sup> Indeed I also had to undertake a long journey like this as part of my initiation cycle.

<sup>61</sup> Kitanishi (1995, 1996) provides details of this for Mbendjele.

These large gatherings and associated ceremonies are called *eboka* and provide the opportunity for young people living in different camps to meet and to get to know each other. Pre-marital sexual relations are seen as a normal way to find out if a partnership would be suitable. If the couple decide that they want to marry they approach their fathers. Their fathers discuss it together to ensure there is no breach of the rule of clan-exogamy and if they accept, tell the couple. There is often the payment of some bridewealth (mostly a few thousand CFA francs or US\$4-5) to the bride-giver to show the seriousness of the groom. The groom will have to perform brideservice for his affines for a number of years, living in their camp and hunting and collecting honey for them. The Mbendjele say that this is so that the bride's father is sure the groom will be able to care adequately for his daughter.

Mothers may or may not be informed of the impending marriage (*bolonga*). If the woman is marrying for the first time and she is still a teenager her mother may become very upset by the prospect of her becoming pregnant. Childbirth is a hazardous experience for Mbendjele women and mothers greatly fear the dangers of this for their young daughters. Sometimes an attempt to marry may lead to a huge late-night row instigated by the prospective mother-in-law and the younger siblings of the bride at the moment when the groom sneaks quietly into their hut to lie with the bride on her sleeping-mat for the first time. Such a row may last for many hours. It is often the only public sign that a young couple wish to live together and have children.

Many individuals enter into a succession of monogamous marriages during their lives. Polygamy does occur but is relatively uncommon, polyandry even rarer<sup>62</sup>. Divorce is relatively straightforward for either partner but is generally preceded by frequent arguments and even fights interspersed between repeated attempts at reconciliation. Because divorce is frequent, many marriages occur between mature individuals, who often already have children. Although still involving payment of bridewealth (often to compensate the previous husband) these marriages occur without any obvious public events to mark them, apart from the construction by the woman of a new leaf hut for herself and her new

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<sup>62</sup> A number of cases of polyandry were reported to me. The most famous instance involved a Mikaya woman who was married to two men, one of whom she would stay with in the logging town of Ngombe, the other in a forest camp.

husband. The husband will still be expected to stay with the bride's family for an extended period and must respect normal brideservice obligations to his affines. After that time the couple may make their own camp, or as normally happens, travel between camps of both sides of the family.

Bahuchet (1985:93-4) and Hewlett (1991:27) working with the Aka in the Central African Republic have described the socially recognised positions of *tuma* (master-hunter), *nganga* (healer) and *kombeti* (elder). These also exist among the Mbendjele where *tuma*<sup>63</sup> and *nganga*<sup>64</sup> are recognised specialists. *Kombeti*, meaning 'elder', carries the obligation on one so called to care and give freely to those addressing him in this way. Although each camp can present a *kombeti* to outsiders, these *kombeti* have only as much influence as their persuasiveness or charisma can evoke, and camp members do not have to do what they say. Bahuchet 1985:93 states that *kombeti* in his area theoretically had the power of life and death over their classificatory children. This was certainly not the case among Mbendjele though it is among local Bilo.

There are separate *kombeti* for men and for women, especially in large camps. In smaller camps the men's *kombeti* and the women's *kombeti* may often be a man and his wife. Men do not speak for women. They ask them through their *kombeti* and when the women have discussed the issue, their *kombeti* replies on their behalf. The individual addressed as *kombeti* frequently changes as groups come together and break up during activities. For example the eldest child in a group of playing children can be addressed by the children and adults present as *kombeti*. The young men (*boka*) in camp will have their *kombeti* too, as will the young unmarried women (*ngondo*). The role of *kombeti* confers no coercive power on one so called. Instead, it confers responsibility and the obligation to give. Most people, including children, will have been *kombeti* in one context or another.

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<sup>63</sup> In Mbendjele communities living in areas with substantial elephant populations, almost half of all households may have at least one *tuma*. For example in Indongo (Sangha River), in a permanent campsite of 181 Mbendjele living in 46 individual huts, 20 huts were occupied by one or more *tuma* (Lewis 1997a: 99.1-4). A *tuma* can only influence the activities of others during an elephant hunt. His authority ends when the elephant dies.

<sup>64</sup> Among Mbendjele most mature adults will be *nganga* to others in certain situations in which they are considered to know the best remedies. Every individual knows many different herbally-based remedies and treatments. Certain families specialise in particular illnesses or treatments, such as diarrhoea or bone setting. There are some famous *nganga* reputed for their power and skill, but they cannot influence others overtly or coerce them to do things.

Members of the same camp will normally be in family (*bandi*) groups centred around a married couple (*bwamopwa*) and their hut (*mongulu*). *Mongulu* are quickly built by pegging large marantaceae leaves onto a domed latticework of lianas (see Plate 4). It is easy to extend them to have an extra room or two when relatives or friends arrive. Within the *mongulu* nuclear family units each have their own hearth and smoking rack (*munia na bota*), and adjacent sleeping area (*tange*). Members of the family will often include visiting relatives and almost always some children of the married couple's siblings. Children enjoy, and are encouraged, to sleep in the huts of their mother's or father's siblings (their *ilele*) and even to camp with them in different places away from their parents for extended periods. Adolescent boys (*boka*) and single men (*ndenga*) sleep together under a simple lean-to covered in leaves (*mbanjo*). Friends and their families may also be present in camp, sometimes for several years.

Camp size and composition varies throughout the year mostly because of visits but also the availability of seasonal resources (Bahuchet (1992) examines this in detail). In general it seemed to me that small camps of less than thirty people tended to be organised along family lines with decisions often being expressed by the eldest couple present. However in large camps of around thirty or more people, especially at permanent campsites where many smaller groups combine together, camp life revolves around the activities and relations between gender groups. Regardless of camp size, camp life is regulated by the daily *mosambo*, a public speech event in which all can participate, in the appropriate manner. More than any other institution *mosambo* is the major vehicle for the political life of the group.

### ***Mosambo* – public speaking**

*Mosambo* should be heard twice a day, in the morning and evening, but anytime somebody addresses the whole group it is *mosambo*. Although the prospective speaker can be any member of the community who wishes to speak, there is an etiquette or code of conduct for *mosambo*. Some people are better at *mosambo* than others and they may be asked by others to speak the *mosambo* for them. The person wishing to speak shouts 'Oka, oka, oka!' (listen, listen, listen!) and only begins speaking when the camp is silent. Even small children are expected to be quiet. During the full length of the speech no one should

interrupt the speaker. Speech during a *mosambo* has a particular style. Words are stretched slightly, shouted rather than spoken and short intervals are left between subjects. Listeners use idiophones and expletives to accompany key moments in the speech and express their reaction to what is said. Humour is an important component of a good *mosambo* especially when the orator is angry or upset.

*Mosambo* should occur in the mornings and evenings. Morning *mosambo* often feature an individual's complaints directed at a particular person (or group), though never mentioning their name, not even indirectly by saying, for example, 'wife of so-and-so'. General terms will be used like 'people who do this sort of thing are bad', as the affair that caused conflict is explained, often with the talker becoming more and more angry. Sometimes the *mosambo* can break down into an argument (shouting match) and I have even seen them turn into serious fights. But mostly morning *mosambo* are used to make a point and get the annoyance off the speaker's chest. At other times the morning *mosambo* will be used to reinforce decisions made at the previous evening's *mosambo* – such as reminding the young boys to go for palm-nuts or honey, or encouraging the women to collect wild yams at such and such a place that a hunter saw.

There is not always a *mosambo* in the morning but there is always one in the evening. In the late afternoon the men sit together discussing the day's activities and listening to each others' reports of what they saw or did. The events are discussed and commented on or simply listened to. Time is given for the women's accounts of their day to be heard by the men. This may happen by women addressing the men directly. Women doing this will often stand at their hearth and speak to their neighbour in a loud voice intended for all to hear. Or they may say nothing publicly and someone else (male or female) may come to tell the men.

If a woman is angry about something and she decides to address the camp, her *mosambo* may slowly increase in volume, in its use of sung expletives and she will begin moving around the central space in an exaggerated re-enactment of the recounted events. As the *mosambo* builds up women often end up standing next to the men's *mbandjo* (meeting area). Although they will address another woman, or sympathetic listener, the speech is clearly aimed at the men. Widows (*kuso*) have a special status in this respect. More than

any other people widows are permitted, even expected, to criticise others openly who have committed grave errors. This usually occurs with intense comedy and such explicitness that all are left in no doubt about who is being criticised. Such comical criticism is called *madjo* (re-enactments).

The men discuss all that they hear and add their own points of view. After some time the senior man present (the *kombeti*) suggests his *mosambo* to the other men. They listen and express agreement by exclaiming ‘*bonaape*’, by repeating key themes and embellishing the details. If they disagree they remain silent until the *mosambo* is over and, waiting for a suitable moment, propose their own ideas or version of events that will in turn be discussed by the men present. The men may call certain individuals to the *mbanjo* to explain something in particular. When there is agreement on the subject of the evening *mosambo* one of the men will be proposed, or volunteer, to give the *mosambo*. Such a person is called the *lipwete* (speaker). These men are always good orators, but not necessarily influential members of the group.

A typical evening *mosambo* was given by Ekonjo on the 11<sup>th</sup> May 1997 in which he began by complaining that the pig meat that had come into camp that day had been cut too big and so some people did not get any.

‘Oka, oka, oka... Cut meat into small pieces so that everyone can get some. It’s no good when people cut meat too big. Then others take it and immediately put it away in their hut so no one can see. Everyone should be eating meat tonight, but some people don’t have any to cook. That’s bad, really bad (repeated several times while others express agreement, especially some widows who had been given nothing).’

Then Ekonjo began explaining the morrow’s walk. Where we would camp. How we would walk:

‘Just walking without hunters going ahead. When we get to the new camp, then the hunters will go out, but they’ll go in the direction from which we came so as not to ruin the forest ahead with the smell of people. *Angamu ncia*.’ (Mine is finished – the proper way to end *mosambo* to indicate that the next speaker can begin.)

The next speaker may comment on what has been said, add further thoughts, contradict it politely, or simply change the subject completely.

Evening *mosambo* in small camps often comment on the activities of the children and adolescents as elders complain about dangerous behaviour or attempt to get them to do a specific task the next day. Often in small camps evening *mosambo* turn into sung fables (*gano*) or comical re-enactments of past events (*madjo*). In bigger camps this can also happen but there is often so much to talk about that a good ambience is maintained.

The essence of evening *mosambo* appeared to me to lie in its role to advise, criticise and organise the camp. The individual speaking the *mosambo* is expected to express what most people think. Thus *mosambo* leads the group by consensus. What is said is supposed to be what the majority thinks or wants to do anyway. People who may not agree normally make this known at this point by punctuating the speaker's speech with appropriate idiophones. They may or may not choose to speak.

Nobody has the right to oblige others to do anything that they do not want to do. If individuals, families or groups do not agree with a *mosambo* they might not even say anything publicly. But the following day when everyone else leaves to a particular place, they go elsewhere. This will happen without remonstrations from other people and their right to do as they please is respected. It sometimes happens, that although the men may agree, the women do not, and will simply refuse to do what the men proposed in the *mosambo*. In these circumstances the men will be obliged to seek a compromise.

In the highly egalitarian political environment of Mbendjele camps, authority is ephemeral and superior status actively shunned in case it should attract jealousy and cursing. Sharing<sup>65</sup> is the norm and people will aggressively demand things they want. Mbendjele egalitarianism is assertive. It is not someone's right to refuse or withhold items that they are not immediately using, but the right of the demander to have. This is what Mbendjele politeness involves – responding to all demands to the extent that you have nothing left for yourself. In addition to being morally sanctioned, sharing behaviour is underpinned by a strong faith in the ability of the forest to provide abundantly the things Mbendjele need.

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<sup>65</sup> Woodburn (1998) explores in greater detail the dynamics of sharing in immediate-return hunter-gatherer societies. His presentation has many parallels with Mbendjele sharing practices. In this paper he demonstrates that 'demand sharing', and other types of sharing, are not forms of exchange or reciprocity, but are an involuntary imposition on the producer by society. In this way demand sharing is the main means of redistribution, and it promotes egalitarianism rather than dependencies or hierarchies between people.

Indeed most Mbendjele are eternal optimists. They believe that the forest is an ideal place and people do get all they need on condition that they respect certain rules (called *ekila* and discussed in Chapter Four) and avoid making others jealous.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE FOREST ENVIRONMENT

#### The Mbendjele and their environment

“*Komba* outed (made) everything for us. We just found it like this.”<sup>66</sup>

Mbendjele, like other Yaka groups, consider all the forest to be theirs. Mbendjele see the world (*yombo*) as contained within the forest (*ndima*). Yaka were the first people to live in the forest. Indeed, the Mbendjele believe *Komba* (God<sup>67</sup>) created the forest for Yaka people to share, and encouraged them to live in a certain way that includes a system of forest management and certain key social values, such as sharing.

They call the area in which they were born, where they do most of their hunting and collecting as “*ndima angosu*” (our forest). This is a claim of communal rights and of ethnic priority but not of exclusive rights. It refers to a sense of intimate familiarity with their God-given area and a deep affection for the memories enshrined in the places where much time has been spent and where significant events have occurred<sup>68</sup>. Yaka people’s rights to go where they wish and use whatever they like in the forest are a birthright that they consider inalienable. The forest is considered totally abundant and always capable of sustaining Yaka people as long as they conduct themselves properly. The Yaka people who call themselves Mbendjele tend to live in the general area around the Ndoki River basin. This area is sometimes called the Ndoki forest.

Mbendjele forest can be described from different perspectives. I shall briefly illustrate this by relating some of the ways expatriates have described and categorised the forest – from the colonial cartographers to the present-day media, conservationists and loggers, before

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<sup>66</sup> Mongemba, a 55-year-old Mbendjele man from Indongo, Pembe 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Contra Sawada (2001) the Mbendjele are very clear about their notion of *Komba*, the creator of all things. I translate this as God since *Komba* is considered the all-powerful creator God that loves Yaka people and may intervene to help them. Mbendjele ask for his help when they feel like it. A typical hunter’s prayer might be ‘*Komba* I am hungry today, I need meat. If I meet an animal today I will like you very much!’

<sup>68</sup> Some of the rare moments when Mbendjele can become very sentimental are upon returning to areas of forest in which a loved one was buried, or to an area they frequented at a particularly important part of their lives, such as when they were children. These situations are often the best for talking about the past.

relating how the Mbendjele do. The marshy, semi-deciduous equatorial forest of the Mbendjele area is characterised by a mosaic structure of different forest types and great floral and faunal species diversity<sup>69</sup>. This structure contrasts with the mono-specific or mono-dominant rainforests of South-East Asia and some parts of South America where a single tree species will dominate large areas.

### **Some expatriate perceptions of the forest**

The media have referred to the Ndoki Forest as the last great wilderness of the Congo basin (*Congo. Spirit of the Forest*, 2000), or more dramatically by Chadwick (1995) in the National Geographic as 'Ndoki, Last Place on Earth'. Despite these sensational portrayals of a primordial wilderness (promoted by natural history documentaries glamorising their material and sometimes by conservationists seeking funding) the forest is under increasingly intensive exploitation by industrialised logging companies. This technological engagement with the forest is rapidly transforming it. The primordial jungle wilderness, if it ever was one, is no more. It has been conquered by being mapped and dissected with a grid of roads and pathways. The jungle has become a forest. It is now industrially productive and divided into a series of convenient chunks of faunal and floral resources - concessions called Unités Forestières d'Aménagement or UFAs – which central government auctions off to international institutions.

The speed and intensity with which this is happening is astonishing. Even during our three years of fieldwork we witnessed dramatic change. Forest areas, like the Terres des Kabongas, and their associated villages had taken over ten days' walk to reach in the first year of fieldwork. By the end of fieldwork in 1997 these areas could be reached by vehicle from the regional capital Ouessou on the same day. With change occurring at this speed, it is difficult for many local people to adapt to, or comprehend, the consequences of what is happening. The rural exodus that accelerated after independence has taken on a new intensity as the majority of the agricultural population leave their lands in favour of the social life, trading and employment opportunities in the towns and cities.

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<sup>69</sup> Bahuchet (1985:49-61; summarized in Thomas and Bahuchet 1991a: 25-36) provides a detailed classification of the forest, comparing Aka terms with botanical concepts, and develops an interesting explanation of why this forest is appropriately described as a mosaic.

**Plate 2. Environments**



2.1. The dense equatorial mosaic of the Northern forest 1997.



2.2. A loggers' road. 1995.



2.3. Elephants clear forest to eat salty sand 1997.



2.4. An ancient and still popular salt lick, Fulungu, 1997.



2.5. Marshes are common in Mbendjele forest 1997



2.6. The Sangha river 2001.



2.7. An Mbendjele forest camp. 1997.



2.8. A forest covered stream. 1997.

Abramson observes how urbanisation and technological development in Britain led to romanticised images of the countryside by the self-exiled new urban population ‘in direct proportion to its [the countryside’s] rate of capitalisation’ (2000: 6). The process may be in reverse in Congo as Western portrayals of Mbendjele forest will inevitably change as it becomes increasingly apparent that it has been conquered to such an extent by industrial extractive procedures. The views of the local Congolese elites who sometimes hark back to traditional images of an ever-abundant and inextinguishable forest resource will also inevitably change.

For the colonial cartographers forest areas were classified as flooded forest, semi-flooded forest or forest on firm land. These classifications relate closely to issues of accessibility from an outsider’s point of view. These are the standard cartographic distinctions available on maps of the region and represent the dominant view of the forest by outsiders up until the late 1970s and early 1980s when logging began to expand with technological developments in earth-moving vehicles, road-making, tree-cutting and transportation. As logging activity intensified, a more sophisticated understanding of the different habitats in the forest was required<sup>70</sup>.

Loggers and conservationists<sup>71</sup> now identify three main forest types in the Ndoki basin: primary and secondary **dense forest**, **Limballi forest**, dominated by *Gilbertodendron dewevrei* (*bemba* in Yaka) trees, and **flooded or marsh forest**. Mbendjele have been essential in enabling outsiders to gain a better understanding of the forest. Their vital roles as guides enabling outsiders to get into the forest, and as ethno-botanists and ethno-biologists informing and explaining the interrelations of forest flora and fauna are generally unacknowledged by conservationists and loggers<sup>72</sup>. Mbendjele knowledge and skill has helped to provide an understanding of the way each forest type is dominated by particular

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<sup>70</sup> The 1970s saw the publication of two important works on forest botany in Central Africa: Longman and Jenik (1974), and Halle, Oldeman and Tomlinson (1978).

<sup>71</sup> This section combines unpublished notes from 1997 by the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Congolese Industrie des Bois (a logging company) concerning the Kabo UFA in the Ndoki Forest, with some of my own observations and those of the Mbendjele.

<sup>72</sup> The CIB has, however, recently recognized certain Mbendjele with outstanding knowledge of the forest trees as ‘des botanistes Pygmées’ and is paying them a wage equivalent to that of a skilled or literate worker. This is the first example of Pygmy people being adequately recognized and recompensed for their skills. They are essential in the preparation of a management plan that will allow the CIB to gauge the rate of natural regrowth of the main commercial varieties through a detailed knowledge of the environments they prefer and their distribution in the forest.

tree species and represents a distinct ecosystem associated with certain animals and other resources.

**Dense forest** is very diverse with over twenty commonly found tree species<sup>73</sup>, a dense canopy and reduced ground vegetation, and is usually found on upland areas. This is the only forest presently considered productive by loggers and all the main commercially valuable tree species are found in this forest type. It is an excellent habitat for arboreal mammals such as chimpanzees and eight species of monkey, and generally has a relatively high density of other large mammals such as elephants, gorillas, three species of wild pig, six duikers, several antelopes and large cats such as leopards and golden cats.

If primary dense forest has been logged, it is classed as secondary forest<sup>74</sup>. Generally loggers take only one tree over one metre in diameter per hectare. They are mainly cutting sapelli (*Entandrophragma cylindricum*) and sipo (*E. utile*), though other varieties are also cut. During exploitation tree falls and skidder trails disturb around 10% of the forest canopy while roads and clearings clear-cut an additional 7% of the canopy. When logging is conducted responsibly its impact on the forest biomass is sustainable. However the systematic removal of specific species will have a negative impact on biodiversity unless accompanied by other measures such as replanting.

Logged forests have advantages and disadvantages for local people. In the cases of remote villages, as soon as roads are constructed they can catalyse an economic transformation as farm and forest produce flow to the towns and villagers earn money. However these roads also tend to carry people out of the remote villages to remain in the towns. If roads are maintained, they provide people with relatively easy access to many forest areas previously only accessible with difficulty. This new accessibility is taken advantage of by commercial bushmeat traders who install trapping and hunting camps to exploit the abundant game in

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<sup>73</sup> *Entandrophragma* spp., *Milicia excelsa*, *Austranella congolensis*, *Gambeya* sp., *Diospyros* spp., *Drypetes* spp., *Eriobroma oblonga*, *Triplochiton scleroxylon*, *Mansonia altissima*, *Albizia* spp., *Polyalthia suaveolens*, *Pachyelasma tessmannii*, *Austranella congolensis*, *Klainedoxa gabonensis*, *Piptadeniastrum africanum*, *Combretodendron macrocarpum*, *Celtis* spp., *Strombosiopsis* spp., *Irvingia* spp., *Funtumai elastica*, *Erythrophleum suaveolens*, and various other tree species of *Caesalpinoid* legumes.

<sup>74</sup> Ecologists have tended to underestimate the ability of past and present local farming practices in certain areas of the forest to create large areas of secondary forest, such as between the Ndoki River and Minganga, or around Ibamba. Current categorizations of forest as primary or secondary tend to focus on logging activities and recent human impact.

such places<sup>75</sup>. This is seen as a significant problem by both Bilo and Mbendjele in whose forest territory such activities occur<sup>76</sup>.

The forest quickly reclaims roads that are no longer maintained. The broken canopy encourages vigorous undergrowth, providing excellent foraging for many small to medium sized mammal species whose numbers increase rapidly. However, once established, such secondary forest is extremely difficult for humans to travel through. In addition, as both Bilo and Mbendjele complained to me, the absence of large sapelli trees makes forest life difficult during the early rainy season (around June) because the large edible caterpillars that feed people during this period only eat the leaves of tall emergent sapelli (see Lewis 2001b for more details).

**Limballi forest**, (*bemba* forest in Mbendjele) dominated by large stands of *Gilbertodendron dewevrei*, tends to exist along upland waterways. Such stands have a dense, fairly even canopy and little undergrowth. This makes them poor habitats for many forest mammals apart from red and black, and white-fronted Colobus monkeys, wild pigs and certain duiker species such as the white-bellied duiker. Only when the *limballi* trees are fruiting are many different animals attracted, including elephants, gorillas, wild pigs, and a number of monkey species. Mbendjele generally avoid camping in family groups in large areas of *bemba* forest due to the scarcity of wild tubers. However during the flowering season Mbendjele families sometimes go to *bemba* forest to feast on honey and meat<sup>77</sup>. Men will take hunting parties into such forest during the fruiting period.

**Flooded or marsh forest** occurs widely throughout the region and is an important resource for many forest-dwelling species. Such forest provides excellent foraging for elephants, gorillas, pigs and other herbivores due to the density of monocotyledons, notably the raphia palms that can dominate large areas. Pigs are numerous in such areas and Mbendjele men are adept at running silently through the marsh to kill them. Bees like nesting in marshy areas. Due to the muddy ground, trees do not grow high and so collecting marsh honey is

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<sup>75</sup> Pressure from ecologists has led to some logging companies, such as CIB, making efforts to control the intensive exploitation of bushmeat within the limits of their concessions.

<sup>76</sup> Examples of such views are described in Lewis 1997c.

<sup>77</sup> In May 1997 we spent two weeks in an area dominated by *bemba* forest living almost exclusively on a diet of honey and pig meat.

**Plate 3      Non-Yaka Spaces**



3.1. A logging camp built deep in the forest. 2001. J.L.



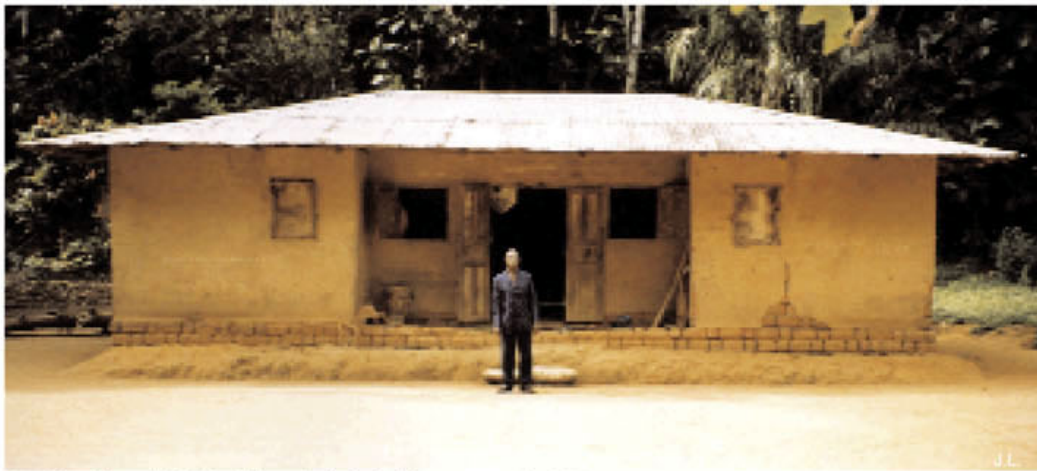
3.2. Logging roads now dissect the forest. 2001. J.L.



3.3. A Bilo hunting camp in Nganda. 2001. J.L.



3.4. The Bilo village of Mbandza, 2001. J.L.



3.5. The Ngundi chief of Ngandzikolo in his courtyard, 1997. J.L.



3.6. A Bilo fishing camp. Pembe, Sanga River, 2001. J.L.



3.7. Bilo port on the Motaba river. 1997. J.L.

**Plate 4. Mbendjelle Spaces**



4.2  
A forest  
camp,  
Mbata  
1997.



4.1.  
Mbendjele  
forest  
camps  
blend in to  
their sur-  
roundings,  
Fulungu  
1997.

4.3. Indongo, an Mbendjele permanent camp site at an abandoned Bilo village on the banks of the Sangha river, 1997.



4.4. Njimbo making her mongolu. In normal conditions a mongolu takes about two hours to complete, Niaboto 1997.

N. LEWIS



relatively easy. During the dry season the floods recede, trapping fish in pools and increasing their concentration in rivers. This enables easy fishing for Mbendjele women and children.

### **The forest from an Mbendjele perspective**

This style of classifying forest according to different areas, although done in a more refined manner by Mbendjele, does not form the basis for a more generalised structuring of the environment. Rather than focusing on forest types, Mbendjele divide the world (*yombo* or *mokili*) into forest (*ndima*) and open space (*vuli*). The Mbendjele associate *vuli*, places without forest canopy cover, with discomforts such as heat, noise and danger, whereas the shady forest (*ndima*) is associated with coolness, peace and safety.

The forest is idealised as the perfect place for people to be. Mbendjele women like to give birth to their children in the forest just outside camp. Every day Mbendjele conversations are preoccupied with the forest, with different tricks and techniques for finding wild foods, with stories of past hunting, fishing or gathering trips, or of great feasts and forest spirit performances (*massana*) that occurred or will occur in the near future. The forest links people to the past. Different areas in the forest are talked about in terms of the remembered ancestors who spent time there and the events that occurred there. Mbendjele believe that when they die they go to another forest where *Komba* (God) has a camp. They will remain in *Komba*'s forest camp until they are told to take another path and are born into this world again.

Mbendjele cannot conceive of their lives, or deaths and afterlife, without the frame of the forest around them. They express their dependency on, and the intimacy of their relationship with the forest in the proverb "A Yaka loves the forest as he loves his own body." The forest inhabits the Mbendjele just as they inhabit the forest. They are inseparable, part of each other, an organic whole. Like their bodies the forest is considered inalienable, so long as one remains alive.

*Ndima* (forest) is also the most encompassing term for plants and includes all plants growing in the forest apart from food crops, *benda ua mboka* (village food). Classification of plants continues at a more specific level with general terms like *mele* (trees), *mikodi*

(lianas), *mbumbu* or *edjabu* (grasses), and *makombo* (mushrooms). In contrast to the animal world, plants are not classified according to their value for people<sup>78</sup> and Bahuchet, who studied plant use in great detail, asserts that their classification is much less complex than that of game animals (1985:72-6). Although there are no large rituals performed specifically for plant collecting success<sup>79</sup>, Mbendjele women have a number of medicines that they use to help them find wild yams. Wild yams also form an essential part of the fee young girls must provide their elders with in order to be initiated. The classic, and very delicious staple Mbendjele dish *bebunaka* is mostly composed of boiled wild yams (*mea*), fried in palm oil and mixed with meat.

*Ndimia* (forest) and *vuli* (open space) are discussed in terms of different landscapes, each with its own distinctive qualities and associated resources. As might be expected Mbendjele have a more nuanced vocabulary to describe such places than those given earlier. For instance, when discussing marshes, *djamba*, Mbendjele refer to several different environments: *molenge* – raphia palm stands; *djutu* – muddy areas covered with aerial roots that people can use to walk on; *tanda* – narrow strips of forest on firm ground between two streams, *diko* – small islands surrounded by marsh, or *ediba* that are small pools enclosed by large aerial tree roots popular with fish which live in small holes (*guku*) in the roots, and so on.

In *ndimia* (forest) the *mooko* is the firm ground where it is good to camp, to dig yams and to obtain duikers. *Mooko ya bamba* would be an area of Gilbertodendron trees with large game, pigs, and antelopes. Dense primary forest abounding in game is referred to as *biyanga* or *ndimia abole* (big forest) and demands particular behaviour from Mbendjele people (see later in this chapter and Ekila, Chapter Four). *Ndimia ya bisedja* literally means ‘forest of thorns’ and refers to areas dominated by seemingly impenetrable thorny undergrowth. *Ndobo* means ‘covered forest stream’, and is associated with women’s dam fishing and good drinking water in contrast to *ebale* (river) that is a *vuli* or open space, and so on.

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<sup>78</sup> There is a complicated classification of trees into ‘married couples’ that is important for healers to understand. At present my knowledge of this system is incomplete and not adequate for presentation here.

<sup>79</sup> The women’s ritual association *Yele* ‘opens the camp for food’. This includes wild vegetables and meat.

'Vuli' are, by definition, places where there is no forest canopy cover. The huge rivers in northern Congo create great gaps in the forest canopy. The *mokii* (riverbank) is a marginal space, being at the edge of the forest and open river where fishing and trading opportunities exist. *Mbumbu* (grasses) also mark the transition from open village or fields to forest cover. *Toko* (palm-nut plantations), often found on the outskirts of Bilo villages are also marginal to the forest.

*Vuli* places are often places where Mbendjele, especially men, go to get things. In *bai* (salt licks around a small stream that has been cleared of forest trees by elephants), or *esobe* (small encapsulated savannahs), or in *eyanga* (openings in the forest with still water in the centre) where visibility is good, Mbendjele men go looking for game to hunt. In the Bilo village (*mboka*), forest produce can be traded or casual employment found. Farmers' fields (*kuba*) are *vuli*. Bilo abandon their villages and farms from time to time (this was much more common in the past) and the forest quickly reclaims the area. Such abandoned villages are considered part of the *ndima* (forest) and are called *zimo* by Mbendjele. *Zimo* are a popular place for long-term campsites and those groups that do not come out of the forest for years at a time will often be based in or near *zimo*.

### **The forest animals - *banyama ua ndima*.**

Mbendjele say they share the forest with animals.

"It is *bita* between us. Animals don't give themselves up to us freely. If they see you from far, they'll run away. They are frightened of us. If we want them, we have to take them by force. If you hunt without intelligence, you won't kill anything. Animals don't give their bodies to us. We have to take them with intelligence. We have to cheat them to catch them."

*Mongemba, 55-year-old Mbendjele man from Indongo, Pembe January 2001.*

The Mbendjele characterise their relationship with animals as *bita* (conflict). *Bit*a is also used to describe large-scale group violence like the ethnic violence of the precolonial period or the campaigns of pacification led by colonial soldiers against the people of whole regions. As expressed by Bokonyo in Chapter Two (page 54), the men are 'warriors' (*bomboti*) regularly engaging in deadly combat with animals, sometimes even elephants. Mbendjele men cultivate a particular bravado. They like to speak loudly and boldly, even to shout at each other in animated exchanges. They make light of their physical sufferings

during hunting or honey collecting and are obsessed with discussing their different tactics and tricks for catching forest animals and for finding bee-hives. In this section I shall first describe how Mbendjele classify animals and then examine some of the roles animals play in Mbendjele collective representations and religious ideology.

The Mbendjele equivalent to our category 'animals' is not as clear-cut. It represents a continuum of life-forms running from parasites and insects to people with unclear and overlapping or fluid border areas. Animals in general are referred to as *banyama*. In common with many Bantu languages (and Swahili) *nyama* also means 'meat'. Prototypical *nyama* are forest-dwelling mammals, the favourite game animals of the Mbendjele. These animals have firm meat, and according to some informants this is what defines an animal as a *nyama*. Such firm-fleshed animals are contrasted with the soft meat of fish that falls apart easily. Thus *banyodi* (birds) are *nyama* (animals) because they have firm flesh, whereas fish are just *baswi* – fish.

The category '*nyama*' begins as the category '*nyama-nyama*' ends. Typical *nyama-nyama* are parasites (ticks, leeches, chiggers, ascaris worms etc.) insects (flies, mosquitoes, ants, etc) or spiders. Bahuchet translates *nyama-nyama* as 'bestiole' (1985: 75); in English this is something like 'creepy-crawlies' or 'small, unpleasant beasts or pests'. Borderline *nyama-nyama* are edible 'creepy-crawlies' (creatures such as caterpillars, snails and snakes) and will only be referred to by their species' names.

The category '*nyama*' has three sub-categories. The largest and most important group is *nyama ua ndima* (forest animals) that includes all forest mammals, birds and large land-dwelling reptiles like tortoises and monitor lizards. The second group is much smaller, *nyama ua mai* (water animals) and refers to large firm-fleshed water dwelling animals such as hippopotamus, crocodile, turtle and the aquatic chevrotain. The third group is *nyama ua mboka* (village or domestic animals). Although these animals are recognised as firm-fleshed and edible by the Mbendjele, they are rarely eaten because they are considered polluting and disgusting from eating old clothes and human excreta. All these categories of *nyama* have firm meat. Other animals that are eaten but do not have firm meat, such as fish, certain beetle larvae, or flying ants, are referred to by their individual names.

The category *nyama* ends as the category *bato* (people) begins. People, especially children, often insult each other using the term “*nyama*”. Like Mbendjele people, forest animals are said to have a body (*njo*), spirit (*molimo*), awareness (*boyebe*) and intelligence (*mayele*) – all based in the heart or stomach, depending on the informant<sup>80</sup>. “Animals think just as people do. But their hearts are different, they have their own sort of hearts. All animals have the same sort of heart, people’s hearts are different.” Explained Mongemba, a 55-year-old Mbendjele man from Indongo, Pembe 2001. The point at which *nyama* become *bato* (people) is murky, populated by gorillas, Bilo and sorcerers from both the human and animal world. Doka gave details,

“All animals have *molimo* (spirit), even snakes. They grow and change and this shows they have *molimo*. Death throes also show something has *molimo*. When a tree comes down it screeches and then ‘buuuuu’, it hits the ground. Trees also grow and change, look at their children. Spirit comes into the body at birth and leaves with death. Tree spirits are different, but animal spirits are like people’s spirits. *Komba* gave a spirit to everything that should have one. All spirits go back to *Komba*, unless they have eaten people, then *Komba* refuses them. *Komba* doesn’t like people who eat others. Bilo don’t go to *Komba*. *Komba* made another place for them, as animals in the forest. *Komba* does this to all people with bad stomachs (witchcraft substance is found in the stomach).

*J.L.: Were all gorillas once Bilo?*

“Yes, all gorillas were once Bilo and all animals have the spirits of *bisi bosu* (people of before) that ate people. They think they are the animal that they look like. A duiker thinks he’s a duiker and when he sees a leopard he runs away. They must get killed and eaten.”

*J.L. What does Komba do with Bilo that loved people and didn’t eat them?*

“Well, *Komba* will accept them, but whether they go to the same place as Yaka I do not know. That’s up to *Komba*. We Yaka go to *putu*. *Putu* is the place where *Komba* takes people out again (reincarnates them).”

*Doka, 70+-year-old Mbendjele woman from Ibamba. Pembe, January 2001.*

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<sup>80</sup> Heart, stomach and sometimes the lungs are said to be the source of thought and feeling. ‘The heart thinks and sends it to the head. The head takes the thought out and tells the body. If the heart gets too big it takes over the thinking in the head and the person becomes mad, talking all over the place and stops thinking properly. If the heart gets too small, people stop talking and start thinking too much (depression).’ Mongemba, 55-year-old Mbendjele man from Indongo, Pembe, January 2001.

### Aspects of the Mbendjele's supernatural landscape

For Mbendjele, as is claimed for the Mbuti by Sawada (1998: 88), what we might call the supernatural world exists together with the plant, animal and human world. For this reason it is not only appropriate, but also necessary, to describe the supernatural landscape inhabited by Mbendjele. Of course it is not supernatural to Mbendjele and not all Mbendjele see this landscape in the same way, from the same vantage point or in the same detail. Elder people, especially important forest spirit guardians, like Doka quoted above, tended to give me the most coherent accounts of this when we were alone. When other people were around, people tended to reply minimally to such questions. By travelling to different communities and passing time in sacred places with other initiates I feel confident enough to summarise some of the commonalities expressed to me in my research area.

The Mbendjele believe that people are reincarnated as forest animals for having been sorcerers or cannibals who killed people when they were human<sup>81</sup> or simply for having been a Bilo. The Bilo become gorillas after death. But Bilo sorcerers and cannibals become the small helpless mammals that everything hunts: duiker, monkey, hyrax, porcupine, etc. *Komba* (God) does this to annoy them, so they get killed and eaten many times over, as they did to others while they were sorcerers. After many lives (and deaths) as forest animals, the spirit<sup>82</sup> of the sorcerer, cannibal or Bilo is eventually allowed to return to a new village (i.e. be reincarnated as a person). People who lived peacefully go to *Komba*'s forest camp in *Putu*<sup>83</sup> (actually the term used for Europe in Lingala) to await reincarnation. Phata, the leading senior man of our area explained this to me in the following way:

“Suppose somebody dies, their body goes into the earth. Dead people do not come out again. They die, only *Komba* knows. If you die you go to *putu*. You come out in *putu* over there. Your body changes, just like a snake. Yes, exactly like a snake, your skin becomes completely different (i.e. translucent or white-looking). Your body is in the ground but your spirit, it goes walking, it goes walking, it goes walking, it goes walking. If your spirit is without *maloki* (evil sorcery, i.e. someone that kills other people), you walk until you hear a

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<sup>81</sup> Köhler (2000: 10) reports similar beliefs among Baka living near Souanke in Northwestern Congo.

<sup>82</sup> Spirit is used to translate the word *molimo* that refers to the disembodied essence or vital force of something that is born, grows and dies. It is appropriately used in relation to people, forest spirits, animals and trees. The forest does not have a ‘spirit’ but houses all the spirits.

<sup>83</sup> A common expression used to say someone is dead is ‘*a dua Putu*’ literally – s/he went to Europe. At first this was very puzzling to me. Phata, whose account follows, asked me if Bilo were in Europe and was very disappointed when I told him that they were. I was told that the reason for this belief is that spirits are white, and so the world of white people, Europe, must be a sort of spirit world.

place with people. They are eating food, meat - pig and elephant. If you are really without *maloki* (evil), you can stay in this place, your spirit goes into the camp.

If your spirit has evil you suffer. Your spirit goes walking, goes walking, goes walking. But your spirit is suffering since you walk exactly like an animal! *Komba* says ‘they will kill you, they will pierce you’. You will get up again and be well. Then others will kill you. They will eat the monkey (i.e. you) they killed. *Komba* will annoy you in this way for a long time. ‘Come here you bad person, you killed people didn’t you!’ [*God’s speech*]. Your body is tired of being killed and eaten as an animal. Then your piercing is enough, it’s been strong! *Komba* sends you to another village. You go to that other place.

The *kombeti* (elder) is *Komba*. *Komba* is a man. He has a wife and children. We are his children. All our strength comes from *Komba*. Do you understand?

If my spirit is without evil sorcery it will arrive easily to *Komba* with great joy. *Komba* will say: ‘Pass by, here is the path. See there is my camp. Your spirit is a beautiful one.’ His dogs block the path to sorcerers. *Komba* will say ‘Tie-up the path! There is a person with *maloki* (evil), tie-up the path!’ His dogs will close the path; the spirits of dogs are there. That’s *Komba*’s place. We all walk in *Komba*’s hands. *Komba* is in *Putu*. Then he shows you the path, ‘Look at that village over there, see that camp!’ You go.

*Phata, 65 year-old Mbendjele kombeti, June 1997*<sup>84</sup>.

There is debate among researchers working on Pygmy peoples concerning the degree to which presentations of their cosmologies have been influenced by each researcher’s preoccupations (Joiris 1996:245), and the misapplication of western religious terms such as ‘God’, ‘ghosts’ and ‘spirits’ (Sawada 1998:86). Here I have presented as literal a translation of what Phata said to me as possible. Whether his presentation may have been influenced by exposure to Christianity (from neighbouring Bilo Christians) or not is difficult for me to ascertain<sup>85</sup>. However, the similarities Phata’s account had with several other accounts I collected from different Mbendjele in different communities lead me to suppose that it is a fair representation of Mbendjele cosmological beliefs in my research area.

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<sup>84</sup> Very few Mbendjele would have been willing or able to give me such a complete description of their cosmology. Other informants mentioned different aspects, but only Phata ever strung it all together so coherently. It was only after living with Phata for over two years that this interview was possible. Phata, in addition to being considered the elder with the ‘heaviest *ngamata*’ (medicine pouch), in a large area, is a charismatic and respected *kombeti* that Mbendjele recognize as extremely knowledgeable in all aspects of healing, magic, secret knowledge and the ceremonies of diverse ritual associations.

<sup>85</sup> Mbendjele distinguish between *Komba* and *Nzambe* - the Lingala word used by Christians for God. They say *Komba* came first and is the God for Yaka people, and *Nzambe* came later to be the God of Bilo. Some young men thought *Satani* was the God of Europeans!

*Komba* is the creator and loves people who live properly. When people die they go to live in a forest with *Komba* to await reincarnation. During this period they may return to their living relatives in dreams to give them important advice and information, such as where to find game or a special leaf, or even to cure them of illness or misfortune.

When Mbendjele people talk about such an experience they refer to the dream visitor by the appropriate kin term. They say that they looked just like the person, but that '*Komba* had cleaned them up, so that if they had been shrivelled and old they'll look young and well, and they all have light skin' (Doka, 70+-year-old Mbendjele woman). These types of spirits might more appropriately be translated as 'forbears' ('*bisi boso*'- literally, the people of before and the term Mbendjele normally employ to refer to their ancestors), rather than 'ancestors' (*edio*) in order to make clear some important differences<sup>86</sup>. Mbendjele I talked to said that *edio* are a Bilo thing. What complicates matters is that the Mbendjele sometimes use the term *edio* when talking of dead Yaka people. But this is not because they are the same thing. As one man explained to me: 'The *edio* of Bilo are bad. The *edio* of Yaka are good.'

Generally, Mbendjele I spoke with were made uncomfortable when I risked the subject of *edio* and were reluctant to say much. In Djello, an Mbendjele elder (*kombeti*) Bokonyo did not appreciate my questions on this subject, but made an effort to answer:

"*Edimo* (a regional variant of *edio*) are a bad thing. When someone dies, they are buried and they sleep and sleep. But, when someone dies, people get scared and don't want to go anywhere in the forest. They are frightened. The forefathers did a bad thing giving names to wicked things (*edimo*), that we cannot even see. Not all people who die become *edimo*, only *bisi maloki* (evil sorcerers) do. Other people just go.

*Bokonyo, 60+ year old Mbendjele man, kombeti of Djello, Terres des Kaboungas, November 1994.*

The Mbendjele mostly hear about the local Bilo concept of *edio* in the context of curses being made by Bilo. I too have heard Bilo lineage heads cursing individuals by speaking out their name and what it is wished will happen to them, followed by pouring a libation of

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<sup>86</sup> These differences have also been reported among the Baka by Tsuru (1998: 52).



palm wine to the ancestors. If he has an audience, the lineage head may make a great drama of how his ancestors did this to ‘so-and-so’ and made that accident happen to ‘such-and-such’. The seat of Bilo elders’ authority is the ability to curse the living using the dead.

An Mbendjele man, Tomota put it bluntly, “*Bedio* are in the forest. They cut people’s throats. They were Bilo.” Bilo *edio* need blood to remain powerful. Although rarely practised today<sup>87</sup>, animals, and apparently even people in some places, were regularly sacrificed by Bilo to their *edio*. Thus *edio* have developed a strong desire for blood and will seek it out whenever they have the chance. *Edio* will even give mystical powers to individuals in exchange for blood. In contrast to this, the Mbendjele see their ancestors’ spirits (*bisi boso*) as caring, kindly and beneficent.

There is also an in-between stage. Some people although not cannibals, Bilo or killers, do not immediately find their way to *Komba* when they die. These dead people (*sisua*) are jealous of the living for remaining alive when they have to go, and remain close to people in the forest. They seek to make the living suffer by ‘closing’ (tying) the camp to food, by making game animals run away or not die when hit, or children ill. Either an *nganga* (healer), or the women ‘taking’ *Yele* (performing the *Yele* ritual association ceremonies), can ‘open the camp’ for food by sending these spirits on to *Komba*.

Thus, in summary, Mbendjele people die and go to *Komba* from where they await rebirth whilst helping their living relatives. This is the ideal. But when some people die, things are not ideal. If an Mbendjele or Bilo person ‘ate’ (as a cannibal or using sorcery) other people during their life they become small animals to be hunted and eaten many times. Additionally other Bilo become *edio* and gorillas.

### **Forest animals as transformed persons**

Similarly to many hunter-gatherer peoples, in everyday encounters Mbendjele explain animal behaviour by attributing human-like emotions and intentions to them. However, in contrast to most other hunter-gatherer peoples do not consider the animal to give itself up, or allow itself to be killed. Mbendjele are clear: it is *bita* (conflict)<sup>88</sup>. They must take animals by force and with stealth. Mbendjele are not simply hunting forest animals. They

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<sup>87</sup> This may simply be that I was ignorant of sacrifices occurring among the Bilo.

<sup>88</sup> This perspective seems unusual in the literature on hunter-gatherer’s attitudes to animals. See for instance Morris’s discussion (2000: 19-21).

are in conflict since these animals are transformed ‘bad-bellied persons’ who have emotions, intelligence, awareness and intentions. They try to kill forest animals, just as dangerous animals (bongo antelopes, elephants, buffalo, leopards, gorillas, snakes, crocodile and hippopotamus) try to kill people. The suffering inflicted on forest animals is justified with reference to the suffering inflicted by sorcerers on living people.

Kata, a forty-year-old Mbendjele man from Makao on the Motaba River, would always break out into loud raucous laughter every time he heard the *yoka* (tree hyrax) let out its very long, comical and sexually desperate sounding call. In general people react vocally and instantly to animal sounds, just as they do to human sounds. One old man spent every night awake answering with animal sounds any animal calls he heard around the camp. Hunters regularly mimic animal calls in order to attract the real animal towards them. This is most commonly done to call duikers and monkeys, but also for crocodiles, pigs and buffalo.



*Figure 8. Ekonjo (cigarette in mouth) sells a special string to protect the other man from repeated attacks by gorillas.*

Animals can be mocked when they are alive but not once killed by people. Thus the hunter Ekonjo spent several minutes unable to move, convulsed with laughter, when we came across a flattened area of large marantaceae leaves:

“Look that’s the house of a gorilla, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha, yes really that’s the house of a gorilla, ha ha ha ...” Ekonjo found the rudimentary structure hilarious much in the way one child cruelly laughs at another’s inept attempt at copying. Not long after, a lone male gorilla (*ngile*) repeatedly charged a hunter and was killed. The hunter claimed the attack was intentional. Since he was cursed five years ago, he believes that any gorilla that smells him will try to kill him (see Figure 8). He is upset that he so often wastes his precious cartridges on an animal no-one will eat. He abandoned the corpse in the forest. Some young men came across the huge corpse and began spearing it and laughing, teasing the dead gorilla. Ekonjo and I arrived and he shouted at them to leave it and not ruin the hunter’s *ekila* (future hunting success)<sup>89</sup>.

Forest animals are attributed with personality in the same way that people are. In *gano* (fables) there is often no clear distinction between animals and people. Animals can become people, though more commonly people become animals. Indeed one of the highest accomplishments for a spirit-controller is *mokidwa* (shape-changing) and taking animal form if human, and human form if animal. There are numerous *gano* (fables) in which the characters are people to begin with but through outrageous behaviour are transformed into animals and banished from human society. Thus it is chimpanzee’s filthy toilet habits, his extreme gluttony and shamelessness that made God banish him from human society. Through *gano* fables each forest animal’s distinctive personality is elaborated. The monkey eagle is scheming and deceitful, tortoise is clever and honest, dog is a sneaky and shameless thief who hangs around on rubbish tips, leopard is too self-assured, proud and greedy, and so on.

The characters attributed to forest animals are also attributed, in certain cases, to people. Thus strong individuals who easily lose their temper and become violent can be called “*mokobo*” (black buffalo). A man reputed to be mystically powerful was called “*mboloko*”

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<sup>89</sup> The hunter later commissioned Ekonjo to make him a special string to prevent further gorilla attacks (see figure 8).

(blue duiker). Another renowned for his great strength and ability to catch and kill animals with his bare hands was called “*embongo*” (leopard).

The most striking cases of animal labels for people are those given by the Mbendjele to groups of people. Europeans or white people are called *bangwia* (pigs) and the Bilo are called *bebobo* (gorillas). In retaliation the Bilo call the Mbendjele *sumbu* (chimpanzees). The Bilo get deeply insulted when called gorilla, as they very frequently are, and assume that by calling an Mbendjele “*sumbu*” (chimp) the Mbendjele will be similarly insulted. Two Mbendjele friends, both respected elders, call each other by the shared nickname “*sumbu*” as a term of affection, after one of them had repeatedly been called chimp by Bilo intending to insult him. Both men find it tremendously funny that the Bilo get so upset about being called gorillas whereas they, the Mbendjele, don’t mind being called chimpanzees.

In many contexts the Mbendjele refer to the Bilo only using the term *ebobo*. In private between themselves they always use *ebobo*. In public these contexts are generally ones in which opposition to the Bilo is expressed as in ritual or during disputes. Interestingly when a gorilla has been killed, it is only referred to as Milo (singular of Bilo). In a mixed forest prospecting camp of Bilo and Mbendjele working for a logging company a gorilla had been killed and after butchering was placed in a pile of pieces on the ground for sharing. The gorilla was continually referred to as Milo, each share was handed out by the Mbendjele hunter with the words “*Bosa milo angope*” (take your villager). The Bilo present were clearly disturbed, but felt they could not complain as they were being offered free meat. Most Mbendjele do not eat gorilla because they say it is another sort of Bilo and liken eating it to cannibalism; “*ba di bibi bato. Amε na mu bia.*” (They are the same as people. Me I refuse it / Me I’m frightened.) There are several *gano* fables explaining this relationship. I shall discuss these in more detail in Chapter Seven describing Mbendjele conceptions of Bilo.

The striking enmity between forest animals and humans expressed in the term ‘*bita*’ (conflict) is explained because the Mbendjele incorporate forest animals as persons into their cosmology. Not only does this incorporation justify the violence inflicted on forest

animals, but it also provides the mechanism by which *Komba* ensures cosmic justice and consoles those who endure suffering and misfortune caused by sorcery.

The attribution of a shared emotional life, awareness, intention or purpose, and spirit between forest animals and people is not simply an ideological construction, but is also the result of pragmatic observation. The explanatory force of doing this in hunting and other encounters with animals is part of the knowledge employed by the Mbendjele to put others in great awe of their understanding of animal behaviour. This is also characteristic of other Yaka groups in northern Congo. That forest animals are transformed ‘persons’ is not only an intellectual construction but as the example of Ngombe *mokidwa* elephant-men shows (see Appendix One), it is sometimes difficult for even the Mbendjele to distinguish between human and animal persons.

### **Discussion**

This chapter has shown that *nyama*, animals, occupy part of a continuum of classificatory distinctions between moving creatures. The core members or ‘best exemplars’ (Smith et al. 1988: 372) of each classificatory label are clear and undisputed but, as distance increases away from these core members, classification becomes more ambiguous and disagreement between informants more likely. The boundaries between the major categories of moving creatures flow into one another over hazy borders occupied by groups that share attributes with both sides. The system is structured along one main principle, that is according to the creature’s relationship to Yaka people, and three minor ones, their physical appearance, the texture of their meat, and their habitat.

Thus prototypical *nyama-nyama* (‘bestioles’) are parasites, and biting or stinging insects, spiders or centipedes. Many of these creatures feed on people, or are poisonous and thus the opposite of *nyama* (meat). The doubling up of ‘*nyama*’ to designate this class, *nyama-nyama*, expresses this opposition and the negative connotations of this class for humans. Prototypical *nyama* (animals or firm meat) are forest-dwelling mammals, the favourite game animals of the Mbendjele. The borderline creatures are ones whose attributes fall into either category depending on which structuring principle is applied. Thus snakes are dangerous biting reptiles, but large snakes like pythons have firm meat and can be eaten. To avoid this ambiguity, they are most often referred to by their group name ‘*miseme*’

(snake), rather than *nyama-nyama* or *nyama*. Other creatures, such as caterpillars – *koongo*, are also misfits. Their meat is firm and delicious, but they resemble *nyama-nyama*. They too are only called by their group name, not as *nyama* or *nyama-nyama*.

The category *nyama* ends as the category *bato* (people) begins. Prototypical *bato* are the Yaka, “*ko bato*” (real people) or “*bisi ndima*” (forest people). Other groups such as sorcerers, Bilo, or Mindele (whites), occupy transient, marginal positions in relation to the Yaka. They are seen as coming from *vuli* (open spaces), to where they eventually return. The Mbendjele share the *ndima* forest with other types of persons: other Yaka people, forest animals, various types of forest spirits, and the spirits of dead people. Mbendjele interact differently with all these ‘persons’ depending on their particular qualities.

In relation to forest animals that Mbendjele kill often because their meat is good to eat, Mbendjele say that they are in permanent conflict. Mbendjele do not think of the animals giving themselves up to them as do Inupiat whale hunters (Bodenhorn 1989, 1990). Animals must be taken with intelligence, by trickery and violence. Mbendjele cosmology explains this and justifies killing and eating forest animals, at the same time as consoling those suffering misfortune by sorcery. Forest animals’ intelligence and awareness of this makes them dangerous to humans, especially vulnerable ones like women and children.

The rules and beliefs embodied in the concept *ekila* attempt to control and minimise this threat to human social life by regulating people’s relations with prey animals. *Ekila* is a complex system of proscriptions, practices and beliefs which are intended to ensure success for, and avoid danger to, the hunters, their wives and children. These practices and beliefs relating to *ekila* are basic internal structuring principles of Mbendjele labour and social organisation. These will be described in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *EKILA*

In all the research so far conducted among Yaka Pygmies, relatively little attention has been given to the notion of *ekila*<sup>90</sup>. For instance, Bahuchet's 640-page monograph on the Aka only devotes six pages directly to the subject of *ekila* (Bahuchet 1985: 443-6, 495, 524). In my view this is an important area of Yaka culture that has not yet received the attention it deserves. The Aka, Mbendjele, Mikaya and Luma Yaka all refer to *ekila*, use the notion in similar ways and attach much importance to it.

Although *ekila* practices are highly visible to the inquisitive researcher, they are difficult to understand without a good deal of contextual knowledge and experience. Some of the first notes I recorded in my field notebooks concern *ekila* practices. However it was not until I had been in the field for over two years and my language skills were advanced that the full significance of *ekila* began to dawn on me. This slow process of realising its significance is a key characteristic of the concept of *ekila*, and has consequences for an anthropological analysis. For now, so as to illustrate the complexity of the way in which Mbendjele use the word '*ekila*' and the meanings they attribute to it, two abridged interviews on the subject follow.

*"Ekila is the same as mobeku. That's the name of the medicine Komba sent women when women put in the moon [menstruate]. The business of ekila was first with them. It is all about children. You can see women's tummies swell up at this time. It's the wind. They have to expel their wind as blood; this cleans out their wombs. If that blood stays in the body, it will make the woman ill. She has to get rid of it. If she doesn't do ekila, then she has to do ekila. That is how it should be. Women's biggest husband is the moon.*

*If I'm a hunter, I don't sleep around with different women. If I slept with her, then her, then her, and then her, all the animals would know. They would smell my smell and know 'that hunter has ruined his own hunting'. [He has ruined his ekila]. Some will come with great anger. Others, you shoot them, but they won't die. You are very surprised. When you shoot at an antelope from close range and it doesn't die, we call this ekila. If someone's hunting (moengi) is good, they won't say his ekila is strong. They will say 'he hasn't ruined his ekila'.*

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<sup>90</sup> This is said 'makila' or 'mokila', the singular of *ekila*. For clarity, I simply refer to this as '*ekila*'.

Even a great hunter who sleeps around with women all over the place will ruin his hunting. We call a man who's ruined his hunting with women "*matena*".

We Yaka call all this *ekila* because our fathers called it that. This whole business comes from our ancestors. Women's blood is one thing, men killing animals is another. *Komba* made it like this. When women put in the moon, its *mobeku*. Men's *mobeku* is just nose bleeding. Men's *ekila* is about hunting. The hunter's meat is *ekila*. If someone else eats your hunter's meat, then your hunting is ruined.

Animals have *ekila*. They caused suffering to our fathers: buffalo, bongo antelope, black-fronted duiker [all are red animals] and sitatunga – but only the red coloured females, not the dark-coated ones. They thought that the red sitatunga looked like a bongo antelope. They were frightened of it because it's like a bongo. The bongo has a huge and dangerous *ekila*.

If you eat a black-fronted duiker, it kills your child. You will say 'My kids are being killed by sorcery'. You'll think it's sorcery, but it's actually that black-fronted duiker you ate. It's the same with blue duiker. You must never eat his belly (*gundu*)<sup>91</sup>. If you do your child will get terrible diarrhoea. We people from Ibamba, we eat blue duiker. Before it was nothing, it didn't do anything to us. We killed many in our hunting nets and everyone would eat them. But now we think blue duiker is *ekila*.

The Yaka from below [a southern Yaka group called the Luma] gave us this business about blue duikers. Their healers explained the *mobeku* of blue duikers. Blue duikers are bad animals. When we heard about this, we did the same.

*Emeka, 48 year-old Mbendjele man from Ibamba, June 1997.*

On another occasion, as I sat in Phata's *mongulu* (leaf hut) in forest teeming with large game, he pointed to his sleeping mat.

"This is where I sleep, all alone. Just me, without any women, by myself on this mat. I don't sleep with my wife anymore because of *ekila*. My *ekila* is big, very big. I kill elephants 'baaaaaam'! *Kombeti*, old men like me, don't screw women any more because of *ekila*. That's how the fathers advised us to keep our *ekila* strong.

*Ekila* is something only for one person. It's not for anybody else. If you mix your *ekila* around with lots of people then, if you're a man, your hunting is ruined (*matena*). A woman has problems in childbirth (*ekondi*), and her infants get weak and ill. Children who can walk can do as they like, they have their own *ekila*."

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<sup>91</sup> Sorcerers are often incarnated as blue duikers (and other small helpless animals) as punishment for eating people when human. This is the reason for the emphasis on avoiding the '*gundu*' (belly) - the seat of sorcery.



After your wife has given birth, you must not have sex with her until the child can walk. Otherwise you can kill the child. It's difficult because women are very beautiful after giving birth. Don't even go hunting because a gorilla or elephant will attack you.

Women have *ekila* too. A woman's *ekila* is with the moon. When a woman is *ekila* [*menstruating*] her husband takes her smell. So he doesn't go hunting or walking in the forest with friends. Animals flee when they smell a woman's *mobeku*. The animals smell her on him. If strong (dangerous) animals, like gorillas, elephants, buffalo, or leopards, smell it they will come, even from far away, charging towards you in a rage, passing other people by just to get you<sup>92</sup>.

[J.L.: *Why do they do this?*]

*Komba* just made things this way. We don't know what the animals are thinking when they come. They just get angry when they smell that smell."

*Phata, 65 year-old kombeti from Ibamba, March 1997.*

These two men bring out the variety of domains covered by the concept of *ekila*, but their accounts are by no means exhaustive. For instance, it is *ekila* to burn human blood-sucking parasites. Thus chiggers, ticks, fleas, tsetse flies, mosquitoes, loa loa flies, leeches etc must never be disposed of in a fire. It is also *ekila* to burn any bandage or other item containing human blood. If this is not respected people become ill from the poisonous smoke, especially if it is a fire for preparing food. Some people can even go mad.

*Ekila*, although obviously concerned with blood, does not refer to ordinary blood. When blood from either a human or animal wound is seen it is normally referred to as *muanda*. However, one morning in a camp in which I was staying, drops of blood were seen on the ground around a hut. This blood was only referred to as *ekila*. The drops were unanimously said to be traces left by a blood-consuming spirit or sorcerer who had been feasting in the hut. This event sparked a big row, as accusations flew between clans. The event was never resolved.

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<sup>92</sup> Some researchers (March 1980 and Nunley 1981 cited in Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:22) have argued that the cross-cultural roots of menstrual taboos originate in observations that animals either attack (bears in their examples), or are repelled (white-tailed deer) by humans emitting a menstrual odour. See also Kitahara (1982) and Child and Child (1985). However, March (1980) and Nunley (1981) admit that empirical research on the effects of menstrual odour on animals has been informal and inconclusive.

Translated in context *ekila* can refer to any of the following: menstruation, nose-bleeding, hunter's meat, blood, taboo, animal's power to harm humans, dangers to human reproduction, health, sanity and the food quest. This polysemy makes any single word English translation of *ekila* problematic. For this reason I use the Mbendjele term rather than an English one. *Ekila* is an ambivalent term. So long as *ekila* is not 'ruined', it is positively valued, but it can also have negative consequences. *Mobeku* is ambiguous too, but simply put seems to refer to an incident (like a nose bleed) that, if not properly handled, can result in danger and suffering to humans, or is taken as a sign that *ekila* has been ruined.

Both Emeka and Phata emphasise that *ekila* comes from *Komba* (God), and that the ancestors explained it to them. Each human develops their own *ekila* as soon as they begin to walk. This *ekila* remains with them throughout life and must be carefully guarded to ensure the individual's success in highly valued and gendered productive activities – child bearing for women, and hunting for men. If someone's *ekila* has been ruined, a herbal bath (*mossoso*) is required to help to restore it.

*Ekila* is manifest in humans, animals and certain plants. Plants with *ekila* are rare. I was told of only one example, the *mondanda* liana used by women as a frame in basket making. Men must not touch it while it is still fresh and green. Its *ekila* makes a man's erection become weak and floppy.

Forest mammals and certain other animals have *ekila*. Their *ekila* can be represented by the hunter's meat (simply referred to as '*ekila*'). Only certain parts of a hunted animal are called *ekila*. The precise parts depend on the animal killed and the type of weapon used. These rules can be summarised as follows:

The *ekila* meat of a gun kill is the heart and breastbone<sup>93</sup>; of speared animals, the stomach; of animals killed with a crossbow (mostly monkeys) only the breastbone. The *ekila* of elephants is the trunk and stomach opening. Of small trapped animals (e.g. duikers, porcupine, marsh mongoose, pangolins, etc) the leg and whole chest, because they have big

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<sup>93</sup> The breastbone is cut away so that the rib ends are still attached. The large amount of cartilage this represents is valued by Mbendjele because it makes an excellent stock for the sauce.

*ekila*<sup>94</sup>. For a trapped pig, the mouth and lips. For all net-hunted animals the *ekila* meat is the lungs.

To maintain his *ekila* intact the hunter<sup>95</sup> who first struck the animal must eat these portions with his son(s), father and wife<sup>96</sup>. This will ensure that he finds game easily, that his aim is good and that he makes a quick kill when he next goes hunting. If others (such as his own mother, parents-in-law, or potential sexual partners other than his wife) eat it, his hunting will be ruined. These practices clearly emphasise that the hunter's success is tied into his social relationships, notably to commensality. He must also provide the men in camp with the *piko* meat for immediate roasting and consumption at the *mbandjo* (men's meeting place). *Piko* meat is normally composed of certain internal organs, often the liver, kidneys and stomach and sometimes also the ribs. The *piko* meat is spiced (salt and chilli) and cooked for the men by the hunter's wife, or by the men themselves.

Certain animals have a 'big *ekila*' (*ekila abole*). These animals pose a direct threat to human reproduction. If the parents of an infant, or a pregnant couple, eat any of these animals they will endanger the pregnancy or the life of the infant. However, children and post-menopausal couples can eat these animals and so hunters will kill many of them, but rarely the bongo antelope which is seen as particularly dangerous. The actual list varies from family to family. People told me they followed their parents' prohibitions and would add any animals that cause them problems. Just to know that a particular animal might cause problems is enough to put some people off eating it. The adoption of blue duikers into the *ekila abole* category of animals is an example of this occurring between Yaka groups. The animals most commonly named as *ekila* animals were: bongo antelope, buffalo, black-fronted duiker, Gabon duiker, yellow-backed duiker, blue duiker, crocodile, tortoise, long-tailed pangolin, giant pangolin and all apes and monkeys apart from *koyi*, the white-nosed monkey.

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<sup>94</sup> This is because sorcerers who ate people when they were humans are reincarnated as small helpless animals.

<sup>95</sup> Hunting dogs, like human hunters, have *ekila*. Specialised dog trainers give medicines to dogs to make them successful in hunting – i.e. to give them a big *ekila*. When they attack prey, mostly pigs, they bite the back leg or buttock and shake it violently until the prey is immobilised. Then the dog calls the men by barking. The men kill the animal. The dog must eat the lungs (*mulema*) for his *ekila* to remain big.

<sup>96</sup> If you struck a pig first, but another hunter delivered the fatal blow, you would still get the *ekila* meat. Mbendjele call a hunter striking the wounded prey after you *mokobe*, and the hunter so doing will be eligible for certain favoured cuts of different prey: an elephant's forearm, or a pig's *mbanja* (the ribs).

Although many of these animals are not red-coloured, the minimum list is composed of red animals. This is the list Emeka cited as coming from the ancestors (see the first quotation at the beginning of the chapter). The Mbendjele have three colour terms, *mopindo* (black or dark), *motele* (red) and *pumbu* (white or light). Black and white are not coded in consistent ways as good and bad, or as some other dichotomy (though white is the colour of spirits), but red is frequently used to mark people in vulnerable situations. For example the newborn baby is smeared red with *mongole* paste<sup>97</sup> after each bath. The *Ejengi* neophyte is smeared red with *mongole* paste on the day of his ordeals during which he risks death if he fails. *Mongole*, a red paste, is used more generally as the most common base to which medicines are added. Ill people or people undertaking mystical activities are often painted red using *mongole*.

Animals with big *ekila* give their characteristics to the infant of a man or woman who eats them. For instance, if a pregnant woman or her husband were to eat blue duiker, people claimed this could make the foetus turn its head up and backwards, (like a frightened blue duiker looking backwards as it flees) making birth difficult and dangerous. Two mothers whose newborn infants had chesty, hooting coughs explained that during pregnancy, at a time of hunger, they had eaten a *kalu* (black and white colobus) monkey. Now the babies have hooting coughs that resemble *kalu*'s calls. Putting fresh *kalu* skin bracelets on the new-borns should cure the coughing. Problems created by eating *ekila* animals are often cured by treatment with some part of the same species of animal. Eating *ekila* animals does not affect hunting success, it affects reproductive success.

Although elders and children happily consume most animals, I observed that as Mbendjele youths approach late puberty they begin to respect the rules concerning *ekila* animals. All animals react strongly to human *ekila*, especially immediately after sexual intercourse, during a woman's menstruation, for the duration of a pregnancy, and while suckling a small infant. Couples involved in such activities can be referred to as *mobeku*.

“If you are *mobeku* animals attack you. In big forest full of animals, having sex is *mobeku* – a huge *ekila* because we are in conflict (*bita*) with the animals. If they smell the odour of women, some are frightened and flee from you. Others will come from far away and follow

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<sup>97</sup> Made from the dead bark of *Pterocarpus soyauxii*.

you, only you. That's why women are frightened in the forest. The animals smell them. In forest like that the elders will make a *mosambo* (public speech); "We are now in big forest, don't get too close to your wife! Each of us should look after himself properly" [*i.e. not endanger himself by having sex and then going hunting*]. Just like they did when we came here. Many people don't respect this and make arrangements to go off together into the forest to make love, especially those who share their house with many people."

*Kabelo, 28-year-old man from Ibamba, January 1997.*

Human *ekila* is especially offensive to animals at these *mobeku* times. Kabelo explicitly links this to the *bita* between humans and animals. There is intentional violence between human groups and animals in both directions. When people are *mobeku* they are in the process of making new humans and therefore particularly offensive to animals. When a man's wife is pregnant he should not go hunting if he can avoid it. He is vulnerable to attack and other animals will flee. On a number of occasions after tracking game for some time, we lost the prey. I was surprised when this was blamed on one of the party having a pregnant wife, despite more straight forward reasons, such as the strong black tobacco elders love to smoke or the noise we made, seeming more likely to me. Men whose wives are pregnant are actively discouraged from accompanying hunters and ideally should remain at camp doing odd jobs and looking after everyone else's children. Since pregnancy lasts for so long men tend to ignore this from time to time. However when a woman is menstruating she and her husband will invariably remain around camp.

Menstruation, due to its odour, is the most dangerous time for humans in relation to fierce forest animals. This is further embedded in the Mbendjele folk biological model of human procreation. A woman is considered most fertile during menstruation. Sexual intercourse at this time is widely held to be a sure way of ensuring pregnancy begins. Menstrual blood is the symbol par excellence of human fertility. This is why its smell so angers or frightens animals. It is not polluting or said to make other people weak, it is positively valued as a necessary and desirable event. A pregnancy requires repeated and frequent intercourse to reach fruition. Once born the baby is breast-fed until s/he can walk. At this point the child has her/his own *ekila*.

### **Ekila and the sexual division of labour**

“Children come out of men, the liquid of men. A child is only sperm. You put your sperm into the body of a woman. You do this every day, every day until her moon is dead. Who saw her moon? So she asks you, her husband, ‘Where’s the moon? He didn’t come up this month.’ We men cut the moon from women. [*Said with laughter – as if the moon must be tricked*]. If your wife puts in the moon, you her husband must cut her moon. If you do this, a child will start growing in her womb. We men don’t know women’s secrets. Their big secret is making children from our sperm. Our work is to give body to the child; the woman’s to give birth to it. When the child is born you must stop making love to your wife. She will say to you, ‘Wait until my child walks, then we shall make love again...’ Women love to have sex but are terrified of giving birth!”

*Kabelo, 28-year-old man with two wives, from Ibamba. January 1997*

In contrast to European thought, the Mbendjele emphasise that conception is a process requiring continuous ‘work’ from both husband and wife throughout the duration of the pregnancy. Conception is, from the Mbendjele perspective, not a single event for the couple concerned. Maintaining the cessation of menstruation is attributed to repeated acts of intercourse which also develop the foetus into a child during the pregnancy. These repeated acts link the couple’s *ekila* together in maintaining the pregnancy. These ideas underlie the prohibitions placed on sexually reproductive couples as a unit rather than solely on the woman in whose body the pregnancy is signalled.

Most animals are believed to flee from humans involved in the procreative process. But, significantly, certain animals can become furious and attack when they smell human *ekila*, epitomised in menstrual odour. These are dangerous animals: gorillas, elephants, bongo antelopes, buffalo, leopards and poisonous snakes. This has important implications for women as Kabelo mentions. Mbendjele men and women have distinctively different compartments, exemplified in the way they act in the forest. Whereas men walk quietly in small groups or alone, women walk in large groups, rarely alone, and yodel loudly to frighten away any animals<sup>98</sup>. Pre-menopausal women fear large animals because they smell of *ekila* from their vaginas. So long as a man has not recently had sex, or been sleeping

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<sup>98</sup> This singing style is one of the most popular samples taken from ‘Pygmy music’ and used in European ‘pop’ music. For example, the hit album ‘Deep Forest’ by Mouquet and Sanchez (1993), made much use of samples of this singing style.

near menstruating or pregnant women, he will not smell of human *ekila* and so be able to pass without offending the animals.

The differing experience of *ekila* by each sex is the basic organiser of gender roles, justifying the key distinctions between men and women's interests and activities, between hunting and procreation and also between going outside the group to get vitality and transforming vitality into new human life within the group. Women are focused on their families and their immediate Mbendjele group. They view other groups from different places with fear and great suspicion. Men tend to orientate themselves more pluralistically and opportunistically towards other Mbendjele groups, towards Bilo villagers and in relation to urban populations. Mbendjele women are culturally conservative. They are much more reluctant than men to use or try new goods from outside the forest. Most men speak some Lingala. Most women speak none. Men and women eat separately and people sit around in gender groups when socialising.

Some Bilo observed that Yaka men and women are like two different societies, one of men and one of women. Indeed, according to the Mbendjele origin myth (cited in the previous chapter), they once were. Women lived from fishing and collecting wild yams without men. The men lived by hunting and collecting honey. The gendered work roles in this myth are the actual work roles of men and women in the forest today. Potentially women and men are economically independent. This has important implications for women's power and influence in society. As in a number of other societies with immediate-return systems of social relations, Mbendjele women, like men, have direct and unrestricted access to much of their food and many of their other requirements that can be obtained from their forest environment. This measure of autonomy provides local groups of women with political leverage, with a starting point for the elaboration of the complex balance of ideological interconnectedness and interdependencies between men and women that are analysed in the present chapter (Woodburn 1978, 1982a provides further discussion of some of these issues).

Daily life is characterised by the different communal activities of each gender group when they leave camp. Ritual life repeatedly plays on the differences between the sexes and their gendered roles in society. *Ekila* related beliefs and practices make gender difference and

gendered activities seem primordially defined. The differences between men and women's groups are so marked that men and women use different arms. Men pointed out to me that women tend to be left-handed, they chop and cut using the left hand, whereas men use the right<sup>99</sup>. If someone says to you '*dua obo baito*' (go to the women's arm), it means turn left. If someone says '*dua obo batopai*' (go to the men's arm), it means go to the right<sup>100</sup>.

Gender differences are embodied in many ways. Women's speech style is markedly different from men's, being more 'sung' and with its own distinctive accompanying idiophones and expletives. Women speak loudly and discuss personal problems in public, communicating everything to each other in a manner often intended to shame. Men rarely publicly criticise others, except as a group speaking during *mosambo* (public speaking). Men are generally more private about their problems. If they discuss problems together, this tends to be in the forest in small groups, or in sacred spaces, but rarely in front of the whole community as women often do. Women clearly orientate themselves inwards, towards the other group members, whereas men represent the group to the outside, and spend much time concerned with outsiders, whether animal or human. Men see themselves as warriors, fearlessly hunting the large, dangerous mammals of the forest, or obtaining goods from Bilo.

Women's fear of large game encourages them to do all their activities in groups. They will gather in groups, fish and collect nuts together, and rarely spend time alone. This creates a strong solidarity between women that is often used effectively to influence group decisions<sup>101</sup>. For instance, during one evening *mosambo* (public speaking), men said the camp would move to a new place known to be rich in large game but poor in wild yams. The following morning, when the men attempted to encourage their wives to pack up the household, they simply refused saying they liked the present spot and so would stay. The men decided they would not leave alone and the camp remained where it was. Women will quickly support each other in situations of conflict with men. I have witnessed women joining together to beat a man with large sticks in order to prevent him from beating

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<sup>99</sup> Men and women are, in practice, rather ambidextrous. But in typical gendered tasks, like finely slicing the *koko* leaf for cooking (a woman's task), or slicing meat in butchering (a man's) this tendency to contrasting handedness seems to apply, at least ideologically.

<sup>100</sup> The Hadza also have the same expressions in their language (Woodburn, personal communication).

<sup>101</sup> Appendix One provides examples of women using their solidarity to force the men to do as they wish.



another woman<sup>102</sup>. If women refuse a proposition made by men, men have great difficulty in persuading them to change their minds.

Basic beliefs about *ekila* differentiate people according to gender, and to a lesser extent, according to age. These basic beliefs have multiple implications for an individual, from her or his relationship with the forest, spirits and animals, to speech styles, ways of walking, and the definition of other appropriate gendered activities. In a cultural process of elaboration basic principles become clearly expressed differences between the sexes and an ideology of gender that defines appropriate activities and behaviour between the sexes, and proper ways for interacting with animals, in order to maintain the ideal state of abundance for human society.

Mbendjele express many of the relations between different gendered activities in terms of ‘cutting’ (*moena*) and ‘tying’ (*mokata*). The dialectics of cutting and tying negate claims to higher status by either men or women by emphasising the contribution both have to make to the successful outcome of key productive activities. Thus women ‘tie-up’ the spirits of game animals<sup>103</sup> in order for men to be able to kill them, most notably during the performance of *Yele* when women enter trance and fly out over the forest to find large game. Men ‘cut’ the life of the animal and butcher it. Women’s cooking ‘ties’ the meat back into the community. Men ‘cut the moon’ in order for women to become pregnant. Women ‘tie-up’ the man’s semen to make it into a child in their wombs. Women ‘cut’ the umbilical cord at birth and with this action the baby is separated from the mother and ‘tied’ into society by the father giving her or him a name, thus incorporating the child into his clan. At death women are ritually concerned with cutting the spirit from the body (sending the spirit to *Komba*), the men with burying the body and ensuring the body is ‘tied’ into the earth.

Mbendjele have made most of these distinctions to me, but I have inferred some from their actions (given *in italics* above). By risking the over-systematisation of the use of this relation of cutting and tying, I hope to have made clear one means Mbendjele ideology uses

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<sup>102</sup> Woodburn 1978: 21 reports similar behaviour by Hadza women against a violent man.

<sup>103</sup> There is a verb that refers specifically to the action of women tying up the spirits of game – *mo.kobi.e. – baito ba mu kobie nyama na gundu angabo* (women ‘tie-up’ game with their powerful stomachs).

to create interdependencies between the sexes by attributing the highly valued gendered production of one sex group to the activities of the other. Thus women grow men's children by turning semen into a foetus and men kill and butcher the animals women's mystical activities have enabled to be caught. This could be described as an ideological 'levelling mechanism' (Woodburn 1982a) that effectively disengages both gender groups from potential status derived from the high value of the tasks they uniquely perform.

The following tables describe the Mbendjele division of labour. However, these roles are not rigorously applied and a man can do women's tasks, and a woman men's, even killing animals when they come across them (this mostly occurs when women look after their husband's trap lines while he is away<sup>104</sup>).

Table 3: THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR.

FOREST – ORIENTATED ACTIVITIES	
MEN'S WORK	WOMEN'S WORK
Kill and butcher wild animals. 'Cut the moon' (stopping menstruation) Butchering (men cook their <i>piko</i> meat). Share out uncooked food. Honey collecting. Setting traps. Spear fishing. Climbing for nuts, fruit and caterpillars. Wine making.	Tie-up animal spirits Pregnancy and childbirth. Cook (women help butcher big game). Share out cooked food. Vegetable collecting. Collect firewood and fetch water. Dam and basket fishing. Make oil and soup from nuts, detoxify caterpillars, carry meat back to camp.
Carry infants, weapons and tools when moving camp. Clear forest for camp. Craft handles, blades and crossbows.	Carry household possessions and basket when moving camp. Build family hut – <i>mongulu</i> . Craft baskets, sleeping mats and skirts.
Magic of hunting. At death, men bury corpse.	Magic of childbirth and infants. At death, women send spirit to <i>Komba</i> , God.
Widower in mourning can only eat leaves from women, otherwise only men's produce. Woman must pay to have sex with him	Widow in mourning eats no products of male labour, can only have sex with HBs who must pay the widow.
In ritual, <i>Ejengi, Mabonga, Niabula, So, Malobe, Eya, Monano, Bibana, Yolo, Malimbe, Bolu</i> .	In ritual, <i>Ngoku (Molimo)</i> and <i>Yele</i> .

<sup>104</sup> In the cases reported to me women had used spears, machetes and sticks, but not guns or crossbows.

Childcare, net hunting, and healing are done by men and women. The division of labour is only rigidly respected in ritual and most adults will perform any task as need dictates.
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ON THEIR OWN FARMS	
Mbendjele farms are generally small; men and women do most farmwork together.	
Felling large trees Climbing for palm nuts and wine	Planting Harvesting, especially manioc and bananas
IN THE BILO VILLAGE	
Felling large trees. Collecting palm nuts and making wine.	Planting crops. Harvesting and carrying harvest to village.
Treating sorcery and illness. Hiring their services as blacksmiths and wood carvers. House building – roof tiles and frame.	Treating infertility and illness. Hiring their services for basket and mat making, and domestic work. House building – putting mud into the walls.

The Mbendjele mostly discuss *ekila* in a practical idiom. Breach of rules surrounding *ekila* causes particular practical problems, like unsuccessful hunting or difficult childbirth. This makes the gendered division of labour appear primordial, as inevitable and logical, as derived from practical considerations. In many *ekila* beliefs the underlying relationships posited between actions and consequences appear to combine cosmological or religious ideas with practical common sense. There is no clear point where the practical ends and the religious begins. The statements Mbendjele make about *ekila* seem to pay little heed to such distinctions. This is true more generally in Mbendjele explanations for actions or beliefs. Indeed the process of clearly defining different domains as mutually exclusive is not a major concern of Mbendjele analytic thought.

*Ekila* and collective representations associated with it return again and again in diverse areas, but most obviously in relation to gendered production, in disengaging men and women from potential claims to special skills or abilities and therefore acting to encourage equality between the sexes. In this sense I would argue that *ekila* is a key component of the way non-explicit egalitarianism works. The Mbendjele do not have an equivalent to our notion of ‘politics’ or any explicit discourse on ‘equality’. Instead their implicit valuation of equality crucially underpins the cultural logic of key social concepts linked together through the experience of *ekila*.

My presentation of *ekila*, so far, has obscured the differences in distribution of knowledge about *ekila*. In general, most knowledge varies in distribution according to age, gender and ability. This is true of *ekila*. Small children know a lot less than adults, women focus on *ekila*'s implications for pregnancy and childbirth, men on its impact on hunting, specialist elephant hunters and healers will know more than others about the relevance of *ekila* for their specialist concerns. In the section that follows I shall seek to show how the process of experiencing *ekila* is relevant for an anthropological presentation because this is how Mbendjele learn about *ekila* as they pass through life.

### **Ekila and the developmental cycle**

The core beliefs and practices of *ekila* focus on primary human experiences and the primordial symbolism of blood. By using phenomena that are inevitable for each successive generation to experience (like menstruation, childbirth, killing animals and so on) as a focus for thought, abstract cultural concepts become tangible, meaningful and personalised. If, for instance, Mbendjele moral order or cosmology was expressed in abstract scientific-like or legal terms, it is unlikely that much would be remembered in such an oral culture<sup>105</sup>. *Ekila* exhibits high memorability due to its vivid core symbol of menstrual blood around which are clustered a series of relationships connected to the core by culturally mediated metaphoric transformations and metonymic logic.

An examination of how children build up a picture of *ekila* is illustrative here. By taking the developmental cycle into account, we can see how understanding the category *ekila* develops through life.

The existence of *ekila* is often first signalled to young children by the food prohibitions that their parents respect as younger siblings are born and learn to walk. Food is of great interest to small children. The prohibitions on *ekila* animals will not be applied to them, and their mother will cook them *ekila* animals without even tasting any herself and may sometimes even go hungry. This striking behaviour of the parent is noticed by the young child, but only partially understood. On other occasions they will hear adults making remarks about

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<sup>105</sup> Sperber (1985) provides a detailed discussion of the importance of memorability for cultural continuity in oral cultures.

*ekila*. These actions and events will only be partly understood by the child because Mbendjele folk-biology and cosmology are not yet of much interest.

Menstruation is one of the main events that triggers a girl's interest in *ekila*. Mbendjele girls, in our brief experience, normally begin menstruating between 12 and 14 years of age. The first time a girl menstruates will normally be hidden from all except close female relatives. No special celebration or other event takes place to mark this. Her mother will explain to her what to do. On realising she has her period, she must inform her siblings, and, if she is married, her husband. During this time they, like her, will not go in the forest for fear of being attacked by dangerous animals<sup>106</sup>. Departures to other camps will be put off for several days. Her mother will take her to an *essiko* tree and show her how to prepare the spongy side of *essiko* bark into a soft material to place in the cache-sexe (*gondo*) and catch the menstrual blood. *Etebe* bark is added as a deodoriser. *Doto* leaves are sometimes tucked into the waist string for their perfume. During menstruation a woman changes her *gondo* (cache-sexe) as necessary several times a day. She will go down to water to do this. Her mother will emphasise strongly that the blood-filled *essiko* bark must not be put into water but taken to a secret place in the forest and left there for the *bedio* (lost spirits of dead people).

For the first time she will become acutely aware of *ekila*, its startling appearance in her own body and its impact on hunting, animals and spirits. Her brothers will also become aware of this as they get lectured about not accompanying hunters or going too far from camp while their sister is *ekila*. The differing physical experience of *ekila* clearly differentiates boys from girls, orientating them towards different activities and different perceptions of their role in society. Girls now become interested in what their mothers do and begin to understand how *ekila* limits their mother's and their own activities. They begin getting interested in feminine power, in procreation and in cosmology as it relates to these subjects. This process is marked by a girl's initiation into the women's secret cults. In *Ngoku* she begins to learn the secrets of women. In *Yele* she learns how women use their secret knowledge to 'open the camp' for meat, and 'to tie up' the spirits of game animals so that men may find and kill them.

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<sup>106</sup> Adolescent boys and young unmarried men (*boka*) often build their own lean-to and sleep together in camp. This is partly to escape the restrictions on their movement caused by menstruating sisters.

A boy begins to learn more about *ekila* through accompanying his father when hunting and then helping with butchering and carrying back the meat. This normally occurs around the age of eight or nine, or whenever a boy shows sufficient strength and ability. The learning is almost entirely implicit and mostly occurs as the boy overhears hunters discussing *ekila* in relation to hunting and animals. His understanding of *ekila* only takes off after he has realised the metaphoric equivalence implied by labelling the menstruating women in his family *ekila* too. This metaphoric equivalence between hunting animals and creating children will become clearer to the boy as he gets older and can draw on a wider range of experiences and knowledge to make sense of it.

Once he has begun killing game himself (the age this occurs varies greatly between individuals), he has to begin looking after his *ekila*. Although married men will be reminded that adultery and promiscuity ruin hunting, the young unmarried hunter is not. The sexual encounters of teenagers, being not seriously concerned with procreation, do not seem to harm *ekila* unless too many different partners are involved.

However, if his mother becomes pregnant, he has to take precautions. He, like his father and other brothers who hunt, will prepare a small, 3-4cm-diameter ball of red *mongole* paste. In a very ordinary atmosphere the pregnant mother will have her lower belly incised, just below the navel, by her husband. The blood that flows from these fine lines is mixed into the *mongole* paste of each hunter. They will carefully store this red ball (*ɛsiyo*) in their skin bags for use until the birth. Whenever they go hunting, honey collecting or undertake a mystical activity, they will rub the paste ball vertically down the middle of their forehead, creating a red line running from hairline to nose. They must not rub or otherwise remove the line; the wind must be allowed to take it. In this way he will have a chance of finding game. If he kills, he must butcher the animal where it died and throw the breastbone, heart, liver and lungs (his *ekila* meat and part of the men's *piko* meat) into the undergrowth. An older man might also add the words 'Take it!' or 'That's yours' as he throws the meat.

Observing this aroused my curiosity, as I imagine it does for youthful Mbendjele. After witnessing hunters going out with red lines on their faces several times and asking people why, I was even more intrigued. I began puzzling over the answers given me. I was told such things as 'They are *mobeku*', 'So they find food' or 'To make sure they aim well'. I

asked a good friend when well out of earshot of others. He explained in a whisper that there are numerous spirits of the *edio* type that consume human and animal blood voraciously.

‘They are very attached to blood, and become jealous and nasty when deprived of it. They need blood to exist. That’s why a menstruating woman leaves her *ekila* blood in the forest. These spirits eat that blood and like it more than other blood. They get used to it, and will look out for her. When her man cuts her moon and she gets pregnant, those spirits miss many meals. They get furious and very jealous of men when they realise. So they try to stop us getting food. But the ancestors found ways to avoid this. That’s what the *esiyo* (red paste ball) is for. You don’t rub it off. You let the wind take it to the *edio* spirits. The blood will calm them, so you can find food. We leave the *ekila* meat for them to eat.’<sup>107</sup>

Yaka cosmology is essential for understanding *ekila* practices. For instance, knowing that small helpless animals are often reincarnated sorcerers who ate people when human, explains why they have big *ekila* and must be treated carefully when killed. It is their jealousy of living people that causes them to seek to harm human fetuses and infants (the work of human *ekila*). But they cannot affect hunting since they are destined to be hunted as punishment from *Komba*.

Jealousy has a political dimension in conjunction with *ekila*. Jealousy ruins *ekila*, but only when felt by other people or spirits, not animals. This acts as a restraint on the activities of good hunters. They will prefer not to hunt, rather than be perceived as being a particularly good or successful hunter. This can arouse envy among their peers or spirits, especially of those who have recently died. This effectively prevents individual hunters from openly proclaiming the dependence of the group on their kills, encourages proper sharing and makes claims to status on the basis of hunting prowess unlikely.

As new *ekila* related practices are demanded of the growing child, new challenges to their intuitive logic are presented. In an informal way, the rules relating to *ekila* provoke questions that require learning further key areas of cultural knowledge in order to be

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<sup>107</sup> It is bad form to talk about *edio*, rather than to them, since it is like talking about them behind their back. This can offend them if they happen to hear, and, particularly if done in public, is likely to incur their wrath. Misfortune may follow. Conversations about *edio* should only occur ‘between four eyes’. This partly accounts for the difficulty in researching cosmological issues in groups or with an interpreter. My informants on these issues often preferred to remain anonymous.

understood. This is not taught formally, but requires the child to take the initiative. In this way *ekila* acts as a trigger that encourages people to learn about more abstract knowledge. Through *ekila* practices abstract cultural knowledge is embodied in people's lived experiences and so becomes meaningful, relevant and memorable.

### **Discussion**

From this point of view my analysis of *ekila* has similarities with Atran's analysis of 'complex cultural categories' that are composed of a 'core of spontaneously learnt knowledge and a periphery of further knowledge that requires deliberate learning ... one is more stable than the other; it also indicates that they are functionally related: the very existence of the periphery is made possible by the core' (1993:67). The spontaneously learnt core of *ekila* is based in the powerful symbolism of blood, the inevitable primary experiences of every individual's life cycle – food, puberty, sex and the procreative process, and expands, with deliberate learning, into moral, normative, political and gender ideologies.

In a sense, the developing experience of *ekila* sets up a series of mental puzzles whose solution requires the acquisition of other more abstract areas of cultural knowledge. *Ekila* seems to be structured 'to make you think'. As a reader of this chapter you may have noticed how *ekila* invites you to puzzle. Eventually this pleasurable puzzling leads to an increasing comprehension of *ekila*'s rationale of smells (its causal structure), normative, moral, cosmological and political components (its participatory structure).

Children can learn the core of *ekila* practices and beliefs, about *ekila* animals, the effect of menstruation on animals and its consequences for hunting fairly easily, couched as this core is, in vivid symbols and powerful bodily experiences. But children will be unlikely to understand the relations between these core symbols and the clusters or series of meanings that connect with abstract social values and cultural ideologies on the periphery of *ekila*. Understanding this periphery builds up over time as other experiences and models are internalised. This process is not taught in any formal way, but occurs at different rates depending on gender and individual ability. This may partly explain why old people were so often more coherent informants on religious topics than younger people.



From what Mbendjele say about *ekila*, a sort of logic of smells is posited as an elemental structure of many *ekila* beliefs and practices. Menstrual smell causes animals to flee or attack. The odour of sexual intercourse can do the same. Blood consuming spirits are especially attracted to menstrual blood that they consume through the wind. The movement of smell appears to be the core structure linking *ekila* actions with their consequences<sup>108</sup>. Being grounded in the practical experience of forest life where visibility is often poor, the importance of smell as a means of communication is obvious to all Mbendjele, and thus provides a tangible connection for an early understanding of *ekila*.

However this logic of smell is insufficient to explain all *ekila* practices. Like numerous other hunting peoples the Mbendjele insist that animals must not be laughed at. As Phata explained to me, if someone mocks an animal brought back by a hunter, they would be likely to get the following response:

“‘Stop laughing at my animal. That animal felt great pain and suffering from my bullet. Why do you laugh at my hunting?’ If the person mocking the carcass does not stop, the hunter will try to stop him from taking any of the meat. *Komba* (God) does not like people to laugh at animals, even when they are away from game. If you do, your *ekila* will be ruined and you’ll miss and miss. You will need a *mososo* (herbal wash) to hunt again.” (Phata, 65 year-old *kombeti* from *Ibamba March 1997*).

How does laughing at animals, which ruins *ekila*, fit the logic of smell? It does not, as Phata made clear, ‘Stop laughing at my animal. That animal felt great pain and suffering from my bullet.’ This is a moral problem, not one concerning smell. Animals, especially their deaths, should be respected by people. Mbendjele are involved in killing almost on a daily basis. Lethal weapons are readily at hand and most Mbendjele know how to use them effectively. The importance of defining appropriate violence and controlling inappropriate violence is crucial in such a situation for people to live together peacefully. *Ekila* is centrally concerned with this. Killing animals is justified by the belief that humans and animals are in conflict (*bita*) and that sorcerers are reincarnated as game for people and

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<sup>108</sup> Although most authors dismiss hunter-gatherers’ claims about a logic of smell as improbable or inadequate (e.g. Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:23, or Knight 1991:377, 394), research into the subject, though far from conclusive, does suggest that such claims may possibly have some validity. As scientists begin to understand the way organisms communicate through pheromones, it is possible that we may begin to understand the logic of smell.

other predators to kill and eat. This belief also serves as a powerful sanction against killing other people<sup>109</sup> for fear of being reborn as a duiker or monkey.

*Ekila* acts to deny individuals recognition of their unique or exceptional skills. Men deny that good hunters have greater skill than other hunters. If ever I asked why a particular person was a good hunter, men would dogmatically insist that it was because he does not ruin his *ekila* by ‘wasting it on other women’. That he does not sleep around and respects only one woman is what gives him success. It is not a question of his hunting skills but of his sexual discipline. This frequently expressed causal relationship is an implicit condemnation of adultery, and an assertion of the moral value of monogamy and faithfulness.

*Ekila* contributes to the mechanics of a non-explicit egalitarianism in many ways. Mbendjele social organisation allows individuals a degree of autonomy and independence that permits a striking fluidity in association between people. This tendency to social fluidity through a lack of dependence on specific others is countered by the ideology of *ekila*. The complex relations linking hunting and procreation, eating meat and the growth of children, and women’s labour with men’s, create a range of equivalences, often expressed in the language of ‘cutting and tying’, that negate the uniqueness of gendered production, and emphasises interdependency. This acts to restrain the potential of valued production to accumulate social capital that might enable one person or gender group to claim higher status than another. *Ekila* beliefs serve to negate any group or individual’s claim to autonomy in producing socially valued capital, and thus acts as a sophisticated ideological levelling mechanism.

At its most fundamental level *ekila* serves to organise gender roles by defining them as primordial, as bound to bodies and biological processes. *Ekila* establishes hunting and childbirth as prototypical activities defining people as men and women and weaves these roles together in a complex set of interrelationships that serve to counter the strong tendency towards individual autonomy and fluidity in association. In the next two chapters

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<sup>109</sup> Even drawing blood in a fight is seen as *ekila*. Mbendjele control fighting with a succession of levels of fighting, (see Chapter Five). Murder is almost unheard of among Mbendjele. Only once did I hear of a situation when Mbendjele grouped together to kill another Mbendjele man whom they accused of murdering their clan brother over a woman.

I shall present the Mbendjele concept of *massana* that is the locus for the process by which gender differences are culturally elaborated and celebrated, and within which individuals learn sophisticated skills to enable them to enjoy and appreciate doing things in community with others.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *MASSANA*

*Massana* are a valued group of activities that bring Yaka together in distinctive ways according to their age, gender and experience. *Massana* activities are always communal activities, involving lots of fun and laughter, based on the complementary opposition between gender groups and requiring the cultivation of particular individual and co-operative skills and abilities that are distinctively Yaka<sup>110</sup>.

Whereas *ekila* is about a particular Mbendjele way of understanding the world and people's relations to each other and the forest, *massana* is a central concept that embodies a distinctive Mbendjele way of doing things pleurably as a community. *Massana* activities are great fun and crucial in bringing people together who are otherwise dispersed and individualistic and who greatly value their personal autonomy. *Massana* does this at ever increasing spatial and social levels. For instance, *massana* brings the children in a camp together in play on a daily basis. From time to time *massana* brings all the adults in camp together for a forest spirit performance (*mokondi*<sup>111</sup> *massana*), and sometimes also the people from neighbouring camps (during a period of hunger for example), or even a whole region and beyond (to end the mourning period after a death). In addition to this, I shall argue in this chapter that *massana* activities are the main vehicle for Mbendjele to learn about a distinctively Yaka way of 'working'<sup>112</sup> together and the practical skills they require to be successful through life's stages – from child to adult to spirit.

How a person participates in *massana*, which *massana* they can join and what they do during *massana* are indicative of an Mbendjele person's position on the journey from child to spirit. Participating in the different aspects of *massana* demonstrates how far an

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<sup>110</sup> Upon return from fieldwork I assisted my wife, Ingrid, and brother, Nico, in making a film about *massana* from footage taken at the end of fieldwork. The resulting film, *Massana. Moments in Yaka Play and Ritual*, is listed in the bibliography.

<sup>111</sup> *Mokondi* are a type of forest spirit. The later section on *mokondi* explores this concept in more detail.

<sup>112</sup> The Mbendjele have only recently adopted the concept of 'work' (*musala*, from Lingala) and normally use it to describe remunerated employment rather than other activities, although this is in process of changing.

individual has mastered the skills Mbendjele see as most important for leading a joyful and successful life full of laughter.

In a similar way to *ekila*, *massana* is difficult to translate by a single English term without misrepresenting it. *Massana* is used to describe children playing casually and children's role-playing games, as well as adult group rituals. Although some *massana* activities could be described as religious, many could not. It would also be inaccurate to treat *massana* as similar to the Euro-American notions of 'play' or 'leisure activities' as opposed to 'work'<sup>113</sup>. Sometimes during long complex *mokondi massana*, people may describe *massana* as 'work' (see Minjembe later in this chapter for example). Also, certain *massana* are considered materially productive activities. For instance they are believed to enable hunters to kill meat easily, or more obviously, they may enable small girls to find wild yams while 'playing' around camp.

*Massana* is about doing things together in a distinctively Yaka way. During *massana* everyone is expected to participate and contribute according to his or her ability. This is a general principle for most activity whether or not it is *massana*. When people said they, or others, were 'taking *massana*' (*ba pia massana*), it seemed to me they were describing the quality of their relationships - the joking, laughter and co-operation between the participants enjoying the activity together. That *massana* is about how people are relating to each other is also suggested by the fact that although *massana* can start at any time during any task, it would be seen as inappropriate and criticised if started during dangerous activities like hunting, collecting honey, or during certain mystical procedures like divination (*mbondo*). Almost all children's play is described as *massana*. But if the quality of their relations deteriorates, such as when big arguments or fights break out, they are no longer described as doing *massana*. Instead adults will demand that they stop making *mobulu* (commotion and disorder) or *motoko* (unpleasant noise or racket) and take up *massana* again. People recognise that adult *massana* may also deteriorate into *mobulu* or *motoko*, especially when excessive quantities of alcohol are consumed.

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<sup>113</sup> Tsuru 1998:53 reports that Harako 1980 and Sawada 1991 (both in Japanese) have argued that to distinguish rituals and play does not make sense among Pygmy groups.

*Massana* activities include all the most elaborate public rituals of the Mbendjele. The Mbendjele are extraordinarily skilled ritual performers, as dancers, singers and musicians. This is partly to do with the frequency with which singing and dancing take place and also because they take great pride in excelling at singing and dancing. In the forest, women sing throughout the day to accompany their activities. Mbendjele women yodelling loudly in the forest sounds very beautiful. Everyday *massana* activities are the children's major pastime and most evenings the adults in camp will also participate in telling sung fables. Often children beat any drum-sounding object they can find and animate a dance among themselves. Sometimes, when at least ten or so adults are in camp, this can inspire the adults to begin a *mokondi massana*, and call forest spirits into camp. In larger camps of thirty or more it is rare for a month to go by without a major ceremony being performed. Sometimes Mbendjele get quite carried away and will dance *mokondi massana* every evening for a week or more. This may be provoked by vocal adolescent girls becoming obsessed with particular songs, and singing them so beautifully that everyone gets inspired, night after night.

Quite widely in the region the Mbendjele are considered the most accomplished people in the art of ritual, of singing and dancing and summoning forest spirits. Indeed all the neighbouring Bilo groups depend entirely on the Mbendjele to perform their major rites. In the cultural traditions of all the non-Yaka people of northern Congo the most elaborate public rituals tend to occur around key moments in the life cycle of a person – events such as birth, circumcision, marriage and death. The Mbendjele will be requested to come and perform *massana* at many of these occasions for the Bilo. In certain rites, such as circumcisions, initiations and death rites, they will also be the ritual leaders, ensuring that the correct procedures are followed and that no one is harmed by the spirits summoned.

Significantly Mbendjele do not perform *massana* for themselves to celebrate the lifecycle of Mbendjele individuals. No *massana* activities occur to mark any of these events. Public Mbendjele rituals celebrate communities, not individuals, and are concerned with communal aspirations rather than those of individuals.

Most actions the Mbendjele carry out that we would call ritual or religious, are woven into daily life so subtly that they are almost invisible. Thus after the birth of a baby, there are no

elaborate ritual procedures. The father simply sleeps in the mother and baby's hut for at least three days to acknowledge his paternity, and the child's grandmother (or grandmother's sister) will make special fibre strings to tie around the baby's waist, wrists and ankles. The Mbendjele see these activities as practical. They are considered to give the child its first clothing and are said to protect and to ensure healthy growth. These events occur so informally and without any apparent fuss that they are easy to miss.

Marriages, as previously mentioned, are similar. Most marriages occur without any remarkable public events to mark them apart from the woman constructing a new leaf hut for herself and her new husband and the payment of a small amount of bridewealth to her clan. The husband will be expected to stay with the bride's family for several years in a casual form of brideservice<sup>114</sup>. However if the woman is marrying for the first time and she is still a teenager, her mother can become very upset by the prospect of her becoming pregnant. This can provoke a row that may last for many hours. It is often the only public sign that a young couple wish to live together and have children.

Death does involve certain ritual procedures, like ritually removing the deceased's tools and weapons from their hands whilst muttering appeals to them to leave the camp open for food, or burying them in a certain way. Also, close kin and friends of the departed use particular face paints to make themselves invisible to the spirit of the deceased so that it will not trouble them in their daily life by making food difficult to find, or disturb their dreams. The ritualised procedures that do occur during burials are more concerned with those left behind than with the deceased.

Mbendjele move through life without the elaborate rituals many other people use to mark the life stages of an individual but instead the way in which they participate in *massana* demonstrates what life-stage they have reached. They do not have calendrical rites that must be performed at a certain time of year, although the dry season is the favoured period for the performance of *eboka* – commemoration ceremonies - for those who have recently

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<sup>114</sup> The Mbendjele practise both bridewealth and brideservice. Brideservice is the really important institution whereas bridewealth relations are about matching the *Bilo* who see this as the proper way to marry.

died<sup>115</sup>. Rather, Mbendjele rituals occur in response to events in daily life such as good or bad luck in hunting or gathering, illness, to celebrate a coming together, or to dispel a negative atmosphere from camp or wider community. They are concerned with celebrating groups of people living in community and with assuring their wellbeing. These are the only public rituals of the Mbendjele.

Assuring wellbeing and celebrating community are intrinsically connected in *massana*. Thus a group of children seemingly aimlessly digging the ground with machetes are assuring their wellbeing by learning the skills involved in digging. Similarly the Mbendjele consider that performing the *mokondi massana* of *Malobe* will ensure that game is killed the next day, assuring the camp's wellbeing. These are skills Mbendjele consider fundamental to leading a successful forest life.

As I shall seek to show, by doing *massana* Mbendjele learn practical survival skills to enable them to live in the forest and in community. In effect *massana* provides the opportunity for each Mbendjele to learn the skills required to survive (potentially) autonomously in the forest, allowing them to extract the foods they require. However *massana* counteracts this movement towards individual autonomy by simultaneously emphasising the fun, pleasure and the synergistically increasing efficacy of action when in community.

### **Children's *massana***

In order to understand *massana* in more detail, I will begin by describing children's *massana* and then move on to adult *massana*. When children play they are described as 'taking *massana*' (*pia massana*). Effectively children are doing *massana* most of the time. By examining some of the *massana* activity children do, I hope to show how they learn certain distinctively Yaka skills.

Until they can walk (around nine months to one year), Mbendjele infants are cared for by both parents and their older siblings while in camp but will generally only be taken out of camp by the mother. Infants will participate in much of the mother's food gathering

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<sup>115</sup> These are unlikely to occur every year in the same community, apart from certain areas (Mbanza, Minganga) where Mbendjele are so numerous that *eboka* can occur every year.



**Plate 5. Children's Massana**



5.1. Spinning seeds - ndaanga 1997



5.2. Boy's mimic elephants during hunting games. Mbata, 1997.



5.3. Bolu. Ndongo, 1996.



5.4. Bolu in the evening. Ndongo, 1996.



5.5. Ndaanga ya songo, Mombangi, 1995.



5.6. Children swinging from lianas, 1997.



5.7. Ndaanga ya songo, 1997.

activities. Mostly they will be cared for by other children in order for the mother to get on with whatever she is doing. As the babies grow stronger they may be helped by other children to perform simple procedures – like scooping out water during dam fishing, or washing yams.

An important pastime for babies and small infants is to be sung lullabies, to beat drum-sounding objects, and sometimes to get danced about, especially if *massana* is occurring. Whenever babies or infants cry excessively, their carer begins yodelling even louder than the baby, and often pats a percussive rhythm on their back. This usually calms them. The frequency with which I observed babies and infants experiencing this intense musical involvement led me to conclude that early exposure to Mbendjele rhythms and sounds literally drums this music into them from their earliest moments. A process is instituted that assures the development of the musical skills and sense of rhythm necessary for the sophisticated performances of many *massana* activities.

Among small children, games are only loosely structured although mostly modelled on adult activities. As soon as they can walk, children are encouraged to familiarise themselves with long knives (machetes). Much of their *massana* involves using machetes, or bits of wood of a similar length, to dig, cut or chop. They will spend most of their time with elder children, rather than their parents, and will watch and try to participate in children's *massana*.

Elder children play more structured games, many of which have individual names. For example *edjanguma* is a game in which the participants climb a young tree up into the topmost branches until it bends over with the weight of the children. When they have nudged up enough and the tip of the tree is near the ground they all drop to earth except for one of them, who is then catapulted upwards at great speed. The children will take turns to enjoy being thrown around by the tree springing up. *Kwete* is like the English chasing game 'tag', 'had' or 'it', with the difference that sitting down takes the player out of danger and being caught does not prevent a child from continuing to play. *Nguli* is a gendered version of 'tug of war', in which the boys are against the girls. However there is no line to be traversed by one side or the other in order to win. Rather, the tugging goes on back and forth until one side or the other, or both sides, collapse with great hilarity. Wrestling, *dtoka*,

is not done between two people but in raucous groups tumbling over each other. In these games the emphasis is on combining together to have more fun, not on competing to win.

There are no Mbendjele games that involve competition, or the emergence of winners or losers. The emphasis is on combining together to increase enjoyment through cooperation. This accords with the Mbendjele's implicit egalitarian ethic that values the equal worth of all and the synergistically increasing pleasure of cooperative activity. The only game I observed in which winners and losers sometimes emerged was in the occasional football match. This is a recently introduced game but becoming more popular as footballs become more widely available. However, people would often fail to keep count of goals, and would show little interest in who scored, in fouls or handballs and so on.

There are some *massana* games for children that are only played by one sex. The gender of the participants is modelled on gender roles in adult activities. Thus *boambe lango*, that involves making play camps in the forest near the adult camp with miniature huts just big enough for small children to enter, is a girls' game and reflects adult women's activities. The girls will build fires and dig wild yams to roast. Often they will also carry infants only a few years younger than themselves on their hips mimicking their mothers. Sophisticated games like *boambe lango* may be led by older children who act as *kombeti* (elders, spokespersons) for the group play. These children informally teach their juniors as they participate in play versions of adult activities. The participants are effectively learning adult activities. Explicit intergenerational teaching is rare between Mbendjele. Peer group action in *massana* is the major avenue for the transmission of cultural and gendered skills.

Boys develop their skill and accuracy in using spears by playing *ndaanga wa songo*. This involves spearing a fast-rolling slice of banana tree stem or other suitable plant with a light wooden spear as it speeds through the camp. Boys also have sophisticated hunting games. One group will skilfully and accurately mimic particular animals' noises and movement, and dress themselves up in leaves and branches to represent the animal (see Plate 5). Another group hides in the undergrowth to prepare an attack – pretending to be hunters. Each group will try to be as realistic as possible. The hunters will use sign language (see Appendix Two), and work in formation in order to encircle the prey. In this way boys become familiar with the techniques, signs and vocabulary of hunting and the sounds,

behaviour and movements of prey animals without the danger of being in the presence of the animals themselves. They also learn about group coordination of the hunt.

In their games girls learn about hut building, digging for food, fishing and infant-care. In small camps where the children are too few to split up into gender groups girls and boys play together and do many of the same games. In these ways *massana* activities begin the process of equipping each Mbendjele child with the skills they will require to live in a distinctively Yaka way.

Developing relations with forest spirits (*mokondi*) is another important constituent of the Mbendjele lifestyle. This process occurs through *mokondi massana*. *Mokondi massana* are highly complex activities that require the cultivation of specific skills and understandings. Children begin learning these early on in their lives.

#### ***Bolu – the children’s mokondi***

One of the most sophisticated children’s *massana* is called *Bolu*. *Bolu* leads directly into adult *massana*. It is like a prototype, containing all the basic elements of adult *mokondi massana*, including its own *bwanga* (medicine). It involves a secret area (*njanga*) from which to prepare and call the spirit. The *njanga* context of sharing secrets develops same-sex solidarity with other initiates. A successful *mokondi massana* performance requires boys and girls as separate groups to co-operate and co-ordinate their groups in doing different but complementary tasks. Singing and dancing are used to call and enchant the *mokondi*. The singing and dancing is built up, often by playing on taunt and praise relations between the sexes, until the *mokondi* is attracted into camp. Maintaining the *mokondi* in camp leads to the enchantment of all who hear, including other forest spirits.

*Mokondi massana* further develop some of the central themes of economic production. Typically men contribute meat, honey and foodstuffs that must be climbed for – such as certain fruits and nuts, while women contribute yams, fish, leaves and any foods that can be gathered on or in the ground or water. These activities are generally carried out in single sex groups. In bringing into camp, cooking and sharing their gendered production Mbendjele people enjoy far more than if each gender group were to keep the products of their labour. In *mokondi massana* the principle is similar. Men and women work

independently to call their *mokondi* out of the forest to the *njanga*, where it will be prepared to dance. Although some *mokondi massana* are danced in private by the initiates (for example *Mabonga* and *Niabula*), most *mokondi massana* require the participation of both genders to achieve their climactic stage when the *mokondi* comes into camp and enchants all present. By doing different but complementary activities men and women enable *mokondi* to spread their blessings beyond the immediate group of initiates. *Bolu* teaches this to children.

*Bolu* happens informally, and games among children can lead to *Bolu* especially when there are large groups of boys and girls in camp. Performances of *Bolu* tend to occur in clumps rather than at regular intervals. It seemed to me to depend on the right mix of young adolescents and small children among both girls and boys. When this mix occurs *Bolu* will often be danced, sometimes every day. *Bolu* is a daytime activity.

To begin the boys will often start by singing *Bolu* songs. They will move into the forest near the camp and using whatever they can get their hands on, clear a small space well out of view of the girls and adults. This space is now referred to as the *njanga* and is forbidden to girls and adults. The boys collect certain branches to make clothes for *Bolu*, and often beg a cloth from somewhere to add to the costume. Here they will prepare *Bolu* to come into the camp.

The girls begin assembling in the clearing in the middle of the camp (*mosenge* or *dindo*) and sing *Bolu* songs, clapping the percussion. They dance around whilst carrying smaller children, or wooden objects that substitute for a child on their backs, as their mothers do during *massana*. The girls' singing and dancing must lure *Bolu* into camp by the beauty and enthusiasm of their performance. They will dance provocatively forward, with leaf-padded bottoms pointed outwards and hips wiggling, whilst challenging the boys to bring out their *mokondi*.

Any adults in camp will join the girls and make suggestions or comments about their singing and performance. This is one of the rare occasions when adults explicitly teach children about singing and dancing. Adults show their respect for *Bolu* by pretending to be frightened of him, pleading to be left out of the *massana* and by shouting praise and advice

**Plate 6. Bolu**



6.1. The boys escort Bolu into camp with singing and dancing. From a safe distance, the girls have grouped together, luring Bolu with their own beautiful singing, dancing and clapping.



6.2. Always keeping a respectful distance, the girls dance and sing alluringly for Bolu. At once making sure Bolu keeps his proper place, the boys sing and dance.



6.3. Then with enthusiastic dancing, Bolu's costume begins to come apart.



6.4. The boy's hurriedly try and make a few make-shift repairs. The girls begin mocking the boys and Bolu.



6.5. The repairs don't last long. Amid shouts of advice from adult onlookers and the mockery of the girls, the boys have no choice but to get Bolu out of the way. "Oh Bolu, off you go back to the njanga..." sing the girls.



6.6. To their great pleasure the girls chase Bolu towards the forest. The boys retreat back to their njanga where they will make repairs before re-emerging and trying to get it right.

to the children. As the girls' challenges and singing increase in intensity the boys on the *njanga* will prepare *Bolu* to come out into the camp. When they are satisfied with the costume, *Bolu* emerges surrounded by the boys and dances into camp. The girls must not touch *Bolu* and the boys create a dancing, moving circle surrounding *Bolu* to ensure that this does not happen. As the dance continues the adult spectators encourage the girls and boys to do certain dance formations, and praise them loudly if they achieve them.

These formations often involve a co-ordinated challenge and controlled opposition between the boys and girls; this teaches them to respect their differences while working together effectively in a distinctively Yaka way. Once having lured *Bolu* into camp, the girls must keep him there with their beautiful singing and provocative dancing, so that *Bolu* may empower all those present with his dance. The boys guide the spirit, making sure *Bolu* does not touch the girls. A successful performance requires both sexes to comply with the rules of the *massana*. However this does not always happen and *Bolu* can disintegrate into chaos as either the girls or boys (often both) begin teasing each other too much or purposefully break rules to antagonise the other gender group. The adults present will often reprimand the children who are to blame, and may intervene if things start getting out of hand.

*Bolu* is the learning ground for adult *mokondi massana*. *Mokondi massana* are far more numerous and complex community activities than children's *massana*, but their structure follows the basic pattern elaborated in *Bolu*. Versions of this underlying pattern are found throughout *mokondi massana* and, I have argued in Chapter One, are a type of ritual grammar<sup>116</sup> shared by Yaka people in the western Congo Basin.

The skeleton of this grammar is hung around the institutions of the *njanga* (sacred and secret path) where the initiates (*bangonja*) meet and prepare clothing so that the potential danger to the uninitiated from seeing the naked forest spirit is neutralised<sup>117</sup>. Once summoned, certain songs and dance styles (performed faultlessly) are used to enchant the forest spirit and (among other possibilities) attract it into camp. Access to the sacred spaces

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<sup>116</sup> The use of the term grammar is here inspired by what Barnard has called the grammar of religion in the Khoisan case (1992: 251).

<sup>117</sup> Joiris (1998: 169) presents the Baka fable of *Nabango* that is also known to the Mbendjele as *Djabango*. This fable emphasizes the mortal danger of seeing a *mokondi*'s naked body to uninitiated people.

(*njangga*) is governed by initiation and the *mokondi* is controlled by the *bangonja* (initiates) represented by the *konja ua mokondi* (forest spirit-controller).

### **Adult Massana**

Unlike most children's *massana*, much adult *massana* activity appears to fit the anthropological categories of ritual or religious behaviour since it is composed of large elaborate ceremonies during which masked figures dance among the participants. Some contemporary anthropologists working with Yaka people describe adult *massana* as ritual, and focus their presentation of religion on classifying, within a predetermined framework, (some of) these *massana* performances together with other activities they identify as ritual (often private rites), according to what function they are seen to execute for society, most notably in relation to hunting<sup>118</sup>.

In this fashion Thomas and Bahuchet's (1991a: 169-193) chapter entitled 'L'Organisation Religieuse', classifies activities the authors recognised as religious according to their own theoretical preoccupations. They divide Aka rituals into five classes: appropriation rites, fertility rites, divinatory rites, expiatory rites, cathartic rites, and rites of passage. This begs the question of whose organisation of religion they are presenting.

Although a useful presentational device and analytic tool, the focus on function leads these authors to mix together *massana* and non-*massana* activities – community ceremonies with minor magical-medicinal acts. Mbendjele consider the latter practical activities that are done privately in a mundane and discreet manner, whereas the former are, amongst other things, spectacular, joyful and exuberant communal activities. Here I attempt to follow Mbendjele classifications. From this point of view, activities such as tying strings around a new-born's wrists and waist, or men using the red ball of *esiyo* mixed with a pregnant relative's blood in order to stop game fleeing during a hunt (page 118), are better explained when in the context of the particular beliefs and relationships they embody, rather than grouping them according to our own categories of interest.

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<sup>118</sup> For example: Hewlett 1991: 31, Bahuchet and Thomas (1991a: 169-193), among the Aka; and by Joiris (1996) among Baka Pygmies.



My approach is similar to Tsuru's (1998, 2001). In his splendid accounts of the diversity of *massana*-like activities carried out by the Baka (called *be*<sup>119</sup>) in Southeastern Cameroon and the ways these spirit rituals are created and transacted, there are many similarities with what I describe here among the Mbendjele<sup>120</sup>. Bundo (2001) continues in this research vein among the Baka and even rejects the use of the word ritual as not relevant to his study (2001: 97 e.n.1), and instead uses the Baka word *be* in a similar manner to my use of *massana* that encompasses both non-spirit and spirit performances.

There are three main types of *massana* activity that I observed. In addition to the children's *massana* and the *mokondi massana* already mentioned, Mbendjele children and adults participate in some *massana* simply for *bisenjo* (fun or joy). These *massana ya bisenjo* include *Bolu* described above, but most of them are dances accompanied by singing in which spirits do not participate, but the gendered and cooperative principles of *massana* are maintained. These are *massana* such as *mongandi*, popular with young children and adolescents, though adults also do it from time to time. It is used to liven up the camp in the evening or before a major *mokondi massana*. The same gender group will dance up and down the camp clearing (*musenje*), arms over each other's shoulders and stamping in unison while singing songs like: '*ango ... ango*' (large elephant with tusks), or '*upa elo ... upa elo*' (come out today), or ruder ones popular with small children such as '*nebo etele*' (bright red anus), or '*nebo wa penge*' (an anus with sores).

The courting dance *elandu* is also a *massana* done for joy. A line of girls and women face a line of boys and men. They dance back and forth maintaining their lines, rhythmically coming close then far, whilst one person in the line dances up to the opposite gender line. With a flourish, stamp and clap they nominate one of the opposite line to dance forward in a similar manner, and so progresses the dance. These dances often occur when camps come together and young people want to get to know each other and celebrate being together.

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<sup>119</sup> Based on Tsuru (1998: 52-3) and Bundo (2001: 86) *be* is a composite of two Mbendjele terms; *massana* and *eboka*. *Massana* is the broad concept discussed here. *Eboka* can mean song, dance, and any large gathering during which *massana* is performed.

<sup>120</sup> Mbendjele and Baka initiate each other into each other's ritual associations. I too, whilst visiting the Baka near Moloundou in southeastern Cameroon, have been initiated into a Baka ritual association – *Mbouamboua*, in December 2000.

Although I refer to ‘adult *massana*’ children will also participate in appropriate ways, just as adults similarly participate in children’s *massana*. In normal speech Mbendjele rarely distinguish between adult and children’s *massana*, or between ordinary *massana* just for fun and *massana* involving *mokondi* in the way I am doing for presentational purposes<sup>121</sup>. Mbendjele consider *massana* as a continuum, a natural progression of the same type of activity. Children’s *massana* are an important vehicle for acquiring the skills needed to assure their social and material wellbeing. Adult *massana* focus on fine-tuning these social and technical skills but also go beyond them to assure abundance and good luck so that the skills can be used effectively. Adult *massana* thus include activities that are concerned with both social and mystical skills.

### **Mokondi Massana**

*Mokondi massana* involve different permutations of the basic performance structure that can be observed in *Bolu*. My use of the Mbendjele term ‘*mokondi massana*’ corresponds to Joiris’s ‘ritual association ceremonies’: “Public ceremonies ... organized by groups of people or ‘ritual associations,’ who share a link with certain spirits ... Thus *yeli* (*Yele* among Mbendjele) refers to the ritual association, the ceremonies it organises, and the spirits with whom it is associated” (1996:249). There is a huge diversity of different *mokondi massana* in the Yaka region. The Mbendjele think that all Yaka people have *mokondi*, and the literature so far supports this view<sup>122</sup>.

Mbendjele like to discuss each other’s *mokondi*, make comments on their *massana*, and compare each other’s performances. Among the Mbendjele of the Sangha Region and Terres des Kaboungas I collected information on over 20 different *mokondi massana*, each with its specific songs, dances and secret knowledge. These include *Ejengi*, *Sho* (or *So*), *Yele*, *Ngoku*, *Djeŋguma*, *Malobe* (*Mobe*, *Bolobe* or *Bobe*), *Eya*, *Bibana*, *Monano*, *Longa*, *Djoboko*, *Niabula* (or *Bula*), *Mabonga*, *Bonganga*, *Malimbe*, *Yolo*, *Minyango*, *Moshunde*, *Mombembo*, *Enyomo* and *Bolu*.

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<sup>121</sup> Tsuru (1998) and Bundo (2001) make similar distinctions between spirit performances and non-spirit performances. Bundo writes that adult Baka men consider the non-spirit performances to be for women and children (2001: 88). This is only partially true among the Mbendjele in our area, where many adult men will participate in *massana ya bisengo* (performances for joy).

<sup>122</sup> For instance, Tsuru (1998: 55) lists 51 different ritual associations among 227 Baka residence groups, along the Yokadouma-Mouloundou road in Cameroon.

If these *mokondi massana* are arranged according to the context of their uses then the following table emerges:

Elephant hunting Mwaka ya baito <sup>123</sup>	Food quest Beke yoma	Male power Mendo ya batopai	Female power <i>Mendo ya baito</i>	Funerals, sorrow <i>Eboka, mawa</i>	Fun, joy <i>Bisengo</i>
<i>Niabula</i> <i>Moshunde</i> <i>Malimbe</i> <i>Yolo</i> <i>Minyango</i> <i>Eya</i> <i>Yele</i>  <i>Ejengi</i> (once feasting)	<i>Yele</i> <i>Malobe</i> <i>Sho</i> <i>Eya</i> <i>Bonganga</i>  <i>Ejengi</i> (once feasting)	<i>Ejengi</i> <i>Mabonga</i> <i>Sho</i>	<i>Ngoku</i> <i>Yele</i> <i>Djenguma</i>	<i>Ejengi</i> <i>Ngoku</i> <i>Yele</i> <i>Djenguma</i> <i>Monano</i> <i>Bibana</i> <i>Enyomo</i> <i>Sho</i> <i>Niabula</i> <i>Mabonga</i>	<i>Mombembo</i> <i>Longa</i> <i>Djoboko</i> <i>Bolu</i>

Table 4. Mokondi organised according to context of use

One or other of the gender groups is in charge of each *mokondi*. The women control *Ngoku*, *Yele* and *Djenguma*, and these *mokondi* are danced exclusively by women. The men control all the other *mokondi*. They dance *Niabula*, *Sho* and *Mabonga* alone. *Malobe*, *Eya*, *Bibana*, *Monano* and *Enyomo*, although controlled by men, depend on being called into camp by women. Women's *mokondi* do not depend on men. Although *Ejengi* does not need women in order to dance, *Ejengi* always demands their participation if he is to enter camp.

Each *mokondi* and its *massana* (both referred to by the same name, e.g. *Ejengi*) are controlled by the *konja wa mokondi* (forest spirit-controller<sup>124</sup>) and the initiates of the corresponding ritual associations. Almost every Mbendjele clan owns *mokondi* like *Ejengi*, *Ngoku* and *Yele*. In cases like these, each clan's *mokondi* has its own name that is unique to that clan and the clan elder (*kombeti*) is their spirit-controller. Thus in Ibamba, similarly to elsewhere, the *Ejengi mokondi* are as numerous as are the clans and each has its own name: Lobo, Bossεε, Missokε, Baŋgota, Mibeŋga, Mondjandja or Mikana.

<sup>123</sup> An elephant hunt is referred to as 'a women's hunting journey' (*mwaka ya baito*) because of the dependence of elephant hunters (*tuma*) on the work of women to 'tie-up' the elephant's spirit, to enable them to kill it.

<sup>124</sup> In the Baka literature this position is often translated as 'spirit-guardian'. Tsuru describes this role as denoting "the personal right to keep a special relationship with *me* and to organize a ritual association for the spirit. This right can be shared with other persons through inheritance, gift exchange and even by purchase." (1998:54). This definition does represent some important aspects of this role in Yaka society but misses certain others. Shortly, I will discuss my use of the term spirit-controller in the section on *mokondi*.

The *konja wa mokondi* will be the eldest clan member of the appropriate gender who is still physically and mentally capable<sup>125</sup>. This position does not give the individual any lasting authority beyond the immediate task of organising the *massana*, and even then the initiates in the ritual association will constrain the *konja* with mockery and outright rebuttal should she or he become unreasonable. Although the *konja* will receive initiation fees, he or she is obliged to share these items out with all the initiates present, including the neophytes. Her or his special role is to have the medicine (*bwanga*), to know how to call *mokondi* from the forest, and to ensure the *mokondi* behave appropriately, safely and are thus efficacious. This is the elders' medicine. Access to *mokondi* ritual associations is governed by the initiated members (*bangonja*) and is only possible by initiation.

In order to do more than simply observe the public manifestations of *massana*, I soon realised that initiation was necessary. People were refusing to discuss anything but the basics of *mokondi* with me. However, I had to wait until six months had passed before I was invited to be initiated into *Ejengi*, shortly followed by my wife Ingrid's initiation into *Ngoku*. This was the beginning of a process of further initiation that marked successive stages of the Mbendjele's acceptance of us<sup>126</sup>. Eventually, some three years later, Ingrid and I became *konja* (spirit-controllers) of certain *mokondi* and even began initiating young Mbendjele.

By undergoing this process I have been able to understand *mokondi massana* in some depth. However I have also promised not to reveal the significant secrets of the initiates (*bangonja*), the secret areas (*njanga*) and forest spirits (*mokondi*). This places limits on what I can and cannot discuss. This will be most apparent in my descriptions of *massana*

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<sup>125</sup> Masembe of Mobangui was holding *eboka* for his dead sister and an aunt in 1995. His brother, although the elder, gave a moving speech on the *njanga* to the initiates explaining that, since his leprosy had caused his fingers and toes to be eaten (it was advanced), he did not feel the same as before. He did not know why it was happening, but it made him think that he was not able to manage the *eboka* himself and so had asked his brother to take over the guardianship of their clan's *Ejengi*.

<sup>126</sup> I have an intimate knowledge of the *mokondi massana* into which I have been initiated. These are: *Ejengi*, *Sho*, *Malobe*, *Eya*, *Monano*, *Bibana*, *Enyomo*, and *Mobembo*. In addition to this, being an *Ejengi* spirit-controller has allowed me to gain privileged secret knowledge. Apart from those associated with elephant hunting I have witnessed all the main ritual association performances, most on numerous occasions. Never having been present when elephants were killed I have not had the opportunity of witnessing these *massana*: *Niabula*, *Moshunde*, *Malimbe*, *Yolo* and *Minyango* and for them I rely on descriptions given me by Mbendjele.

performances that must be presented from the point of view of an uninitiated person and without explanations of the technology of the performance. I apologise for failing to satisfy the natural curiosity that these accounts may provoke. However, although these questions are intrinsically interesting, answering them would betray the promises I have made and I hope to be forgiven for leaving this out.

Due to the gendered nature of *massana*, I only really know about the public aspects of women's ritual associations and what my wife Ingrid and a few other women I was close to, and other men, have been able to tell me. Thus my presentation is heavily influenced by men's *massana*, and it is possible that some of the generalisations I draw may not fit women's *mokondi* as well as they do men's.

Despite not always fitting exactly, these generalisations are the grammar or key structural elements organising *mokondi massana* and focus on Yaka<sup>127</sup> ideas about forest spirits (*mokondi*), the role of the initiates (*bangonja*) and the spirit-controller (*konja mokondi*), and the importance of the secret and sacred space or path called *njanga*. Within this religious structure the specific style or content varies between ritual associations. Thus rules of participation, dancing and singing styles, songs, the clothes given to the *mokondi* may all vary, but the underlying structure remains remarkably stable despite this diversity of form and content throughout the Yaka area.

## **Mokondi**

“*Mokondi* have hard spirits and many secrets. The affairs of *mokondi* are no small thing, they do not come out into the open. *Mokondi* stay only in the forest. They have bad spirits, they can cause suffering. They are not nice spirits ... *mokondi* are not something to joke around with.”

Tomota, 50 year-old Mbendjele-Yasua man from Indongo. March 1997.

*Mokondi* are a type of forest spirit. Spirits in general are referred to as *molimo*. Uncaptured *mokondi* are wild, temperamental, and potentially deadly. *Gano* stories elaborate upon the nature of *mokondi*. Some focus on how Mbendjele people have been tricked by *mokondi* but somehow manage to escape their machinations. Others may focus on how a certain

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<sup>127</sup> The material presented here should be compared with that presented by Joiris (1998); Tsuru (1998, 2001) and Bundo (2001) on the Baka.

*mokondi* claimed particular forest resources, like wild yams, and tried to prevent Mbendjele from collecting them. Often the Mbendjele had to kill them, with Komba's (God's) help, in order to be able to enjoy that wild food freely as they do today.

Similarly to the descriptions of Baka *me* reported to Tsuru (1998:60), Mbendjele say *mokondi* wander naked in the forest, they are often short, with large heads and bellies and have whitish, translucent skin. They are able to perform extraordinary feats of metamorphosis and often dwell in the tops of fallen trees. They are capable of voracious consumption.

Spirit-controllers 'capture' or make pacts with *mokondi* and other types of spirit in order to manipulate them for some advantage or benefit. This manipulation may, the Mbendjele believe, be done for good or evil purposes. *Mokondi* can be captured physically, or in dreams<sup>128</sup>. Once a *mokondi* is captured, it can be shared with other Yaka through initiation, passed on by inheritance or sale, or even stolen, as the example of *Monano* (below) illustrates.

Mbendjele attribute great significance to dreams and treat dream experiences as directly linked to waking life. Thus if you dream of game animals, you are encouraged to go hunting as soon as you awake. If you dream of fish or fishing, then people are talking about you behind your back, so when you awake you must make a public speech (*mosambo*) telling the camp to stop talking about you. When a child is seriously ill, you may dream of a dead uncle or grandfather who tells you about a plant remedy that will cure your child's illness. You may dream about a *mokondi* and then walk in the forest and capture it, and become its *konja* (controller).

In order to establish relations with a captured *mokondi*, its feeding preferences need to be established. As a rule of thumb, negative or destructive *mokondi* feed on blood, sometimes from the kin of their evil human controller. Therefore good spirit-controllers only make pacts with positive *mokondi* that are 'fed' by singing and dancing. These two types of *mokondi* are often opposed to each other in everyday speech but in reality appear to

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<sup>128</sup> Tsuru (2001) provides some examples of these different methods that are similar to Mbendjele accounts.

represent more of a continuum from socially positive to socially negative, with *massana mokondi* grouped at the positive end and evil spirit-controllers' *mokondi ua kiti* at the other.

*Mokondi*, which eat blood, serve only one spirit-controller and possibly a few other people they may have initiated. Blood-eating *mokondi ya kiti* have no place in *massana*; they belong to the world of *butu* (darkness-night), to the emotions of selfishness, jealousy, hatred, and are generally referred to as *mokondi ya kiti* (or) *bagboko* (evil spirit-controllers' forest spirits). These *mokondi* give their spirit-controllers extraordinary abilities, often with the aim of making them powerful and wealthy (for instance, enabling them to kill lots of large-tusked elephants). My informants told me that evil spirit-controllers use a wide variety of different types of spirits, and that those using *mokondi ya kiti* are uncommon.

The most commonly used evil spirits with whom alliances are established are water spirits called *nzimba* (a Bilo term) rather than *mokondi* that are forest spirits. However in all cases, the cost to the person making the alliance and benefiting from the spirit's assistance is potentially devastating. He may eventually be obliged to offer these spirits his own kin as blood sacrifices in exchange for power. If care is not taken as time passes the evil sorcerer's family diminishes (through accidents and illness from a European perspective) until finally only he remains. In this situation he has failed to manage his spirit ally carefully and becomes the last sacrifice<sup>129</sup>. Mbendjele often lament that the Bilo taught them about how to use spirits in this way and frequently point out Bilo clans that are disappearing or have disappeared as examples of sorcerers who could no longer handle their spirit allies.

*Mokondi* that 'eat' singing and dancing are all *mokondi* that help the community, not individuals. They obtain their food from a sustainable source and return their powers to the participants and enchant the forest. These *mokondi* are the subject of *massana* and my discussion in this chapter. These *mokondi* have been shown how to behave in the company

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<sup>129</sup> To deal with this situation people with evil spirit allies are said to have adopted a development idea called '*ristourne*' (French – lit. refund) aimed at increasing people's access to money for commerce. Several people form a group and each donates 10,000 CFA (£10) to create a kitty. Each contributor then has the use of the kitty for one month before they must refund it. In this way, small traders are able to buy larger quantities of goods and make more profit. People with evil spirit allies form *ristourne* groups by sharing kin with the same spirit. Therefore, on one occasion, X designates a family member, on the next, Y designates a family member, then Z and so on, and all benefit from the powers or wealth received.

of people, and people have learnt how they like to be treated. If treated correctly, they can assist in the food quest, protect their initiates from harm and danger, transform negative emotions and tension in the camp into laughter and co-operation, disharmony into co-ordination, cleanse bad luck, protect from sorcery, bring people together in extraordinary harmony, sometimes creating ecstatic trance states, and empower men, or women, or the whole community of men, women and children. Minjembe, below, provides some examples of how different *mokondi massana* help the Mbendjele.

Women, when they sing *Yele* and open the camp, they open the camp, yes! When they open the camp there's no chance of trouble. When they send it out like that [sing and dance a beautiful *Yele*], soon animals will die. "Go [women say to men], you'll eat food, your camp is open!"

It's like this with *Malobe* too. If you see *Malobe* dancing, then you know when the men go in the forest, food will die.

*Ejengi* is different; he's not the same. If they dance him, maybe they'll kill meat. Really its when they have already killed lots of food. Then yes, they dance *Ejengi*. When people are joyful because of food, when food has opened the camp, then the camp won't hear anything else [apart from *Ejengi*].

*Ejengi* gives thanks for things that have come, when a joy of joys overwhelms you. When people from far hear *Ejengi* they know things are there at that camp. 'We'll eat food today, let's follow them!'

[JL]: Why do you dance *Ejengi* when people die?

[Minjembe]: They do this to remove sorrow from people. When we begin the work of *massana*, it must be done exactly as the work of *massana* is done. They take *massana* everywhere. Then they take your wife ['you' are the deceased]. They throw her in the river, they remove all her hair, all of it. Then they throw all the hair in the middle of the river. Then again they dance up and down. Then *massana* is finished. The sorrow is finished, all the sorrow is finished. Their thoughts [about the departed] are finished.

*Minjembe, 40-year-old Mbendjele man from Ibamba, May 1997.*

To ensure the *mokondi* are treated correctly and in return empower people, the initiates are prepared to be ruthless and uncompromising. All the important preparation for *mokondi massana* takes place on the *njanga* and great attention is paid to detail and to discussion of procedure and best practice. It is to the *njanga* that the *mokondi* is called from the forest by



**Plate 7. Women's Mokondi Massana**



7.1. Yele spirit controllers bring their secret drink into camp. Ibamba, 1997.



7.2. Yele spirit controllers. Ibamba, 1997.



7.3. An Ngoku spirit controller demonstrates how to dance. Mombangi 1995.



7.4. Women dance Ngoku during a Bilo commemoration ceremony in return for alcohol. Bene, 1995.

**Plate 8. Some Men's Mokondi Massana**

8.1 - 8.2. Bonganga Niaboto 1995.



8.3. The Ejengi called Mikana dances, surrounded by initiates. Indongo, 1997.



8.6. Malobe, Indongo 1996.



8.3. Initiates go to marshy rafia palm stands to prepare Ejengi's clothes to begin the massana Niaboto 1997.

its spirit-controller (*konja*) to be prepared for the *massana*. The *njanga* is the link between the unseen world (*butu*) and the seen world (*yombo* or *mokili*).

### **The *njanga* – the sacred path**

Men's and women's groups each have their own *njanga*. The initiates carefully choose a place where they can be sure that no uninitiated person (*bilo*) will be able to see or hear anything that happens. *Njanga* are always situated some 50 – 200 metres away from a long-term campsite and their entrances are carefully marked with branches or raffia palm fronds to warn the uninitiated away. All significant actions relating to calling *mokondi* out of the forest, preparing its clothes and the dance, and the secret aspects of the initiation ceremony take place there. Uninitiated people must never see these activities since they are the source of hidden capabilities.

There is a specific code of conduct appropriate to the *njanga* that includes sharing, peacefulness, laughter, consideration for others' right to finish what they are saying, and particular speech styles and accompanying performance styles. The *njanga* is the preferred place for sharing secret knowledge and forest lore, for discussing important issues in the community, resolving conflicts, airing grievances and making preparations for dancing. I discuss these aspects of *njanga* in more detail in the following chapter on *Ejengi*.

Trespass on an *njanga* by an uninitiated person is one of the only occasions in which Mbendjele will unite to punish someone<sup>130</sup>. The punishment will vary depending on the gender of the individual and the ritual association involved. If the gender is the same, initiation will be obligatory and immediate. This can be very dangerous in certain ritual associations since the correct preparations have not been made, and often a fine has to be paid in alcohol.

Cross-gender trespass is a grave problem. In theory capital punishment could be justified. However, the most serious punishments reported to me were severe beatings, death by

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<sup>130</sup> Woodburn (personal communication) reports similar coordinated violence by Hadza men in relation to trespassing women or children on or near the place the men do *epeme* activities. Woodburn observed a small child stray close to where the men were preparing *epeme* meat. The men blamed the women and rushed into camp smashing most of the women's possessions. The women, especially the young women, fearing beatings or rape, fled into the bush and did not return for many hours.

illness and rape. A widely sung *Ejengi* song alludes to one such affair: '*kota bopayo kobo a Yeye mopata ba eba mbeka nde kwa mo swi*' (Yeye has such abundant pubic hair that you can plait it like hair of the head). Men told me that this song was made up after a woman called Yeye had been found on the *njanga* in the logging town Pokola. The song implies that she left the *njanga* naked.

### **The *bangonja* – initiates and *mboni* - neophytes**

The *bangonja* are crucial to any *mokondi massana* since they make all the necessary preparations for the realisation of the *massana*. Young initiates are expected to do the bulk of the hard physical work in preparing for a *massana*, while the elders supervise them and intervene at critical stages. Elders justify this to the youth by comically recounting how hard they were made to work when they were young. Elders have the 'medicine' (*bwanga*) and use of this medicine is their work in *mokondi massana*. The *bwanga* work is an area of secret knowledge not even revealed to many of the initiated. Since the role of initiates differs in each *massana* I cannot generalise too far, but in the following chapter on *Ejengi* I shall expand on specific cases.

All *bangonja* had first to be *mboni* (neophytes) and get initiated (*mogwie*, literally 'to enter into'). Each *massana* has its own procedures and requirements. There is no fixed time for initiations to occur. Often it will depend on an individual's circumstances at the time of the *massana* being performed. Since the different *mokondi massana* are danced at very variable intervals, neophytes may be of varying ages.

Initiation into the different *mokondi massana* is seen as necessary for developing specific understandings about men and women and their different powers and abilities in relation to society, spirits and the forest. Thus *Ejengi* initiation, among other things, gives the neophytes *diso ua Ejengi* (*Ejengi* eyes) that help initiated men to see trails and animals in the forest, and give them the ability to avoid large charging animals like buffalo or elephant. The neophytes will begin to learn about masculine power, and gain access to the special conversations that take place on the *njanga* path. Similarly young women who get initiated into *Ngoku* will begin learning about feminine power and what it means to be an Mbendjele woman.

Initiations can occur whenever a *mokondi massana* is performed. This will always involve a fee to be paid to the spirit-controller of the *mokondi* and generally an initiate to sponsor the *mboni* (neophyte). The difficulty in obtaining this fee often limits who can be initiated. Fees can be paid in kind (often alcohol, meat or honey for men, and stingless bee honey (*koma*) and wild yams for women) or in cash. Part of the fee is given to the *mokondi* and the rest is shared among all initiates present. Initiation ceremonies differ widely between *mokondi*, but always involve a preparation – beautification period, a public ceremony, a secret part on the *njanga* path, and end with further public ceremonies where the neophytes behave as, and thus become, initiated members. These initiations always challenge the *mboni* to surpass themselves, and in certain men’s ritual associations if the *mboni* failed the *mokondi* could kill him.

During *massana* it is the initiates’ duty to ensure the correct atmosphere is created for the *mokondi* to wish to come among them. In the following paragraphs I shall attempt to evoke something of this atmosphere and the experience it creates among participants. Since achieving this special atmosphere is so crucial to successful *massana*, I shall explain some of the more obvious ways the Mbendjele do this. The initiates often begin this process by vivaciously animating the singing and dancing to build enthusiasm among participants. This is a skilled task and people good at it are greatly appreciated. The *mokondi* will not come until its preferred rhythms and songs are being performed faultlessly. The polyphonic Yaka singing style demands a high degree of co-ordination and if one section falls away or loses time it really lets the others down.

The Mbendjele have developed some interesting techniques for building up the ‘energy’ of a song. One striking method that is commonly used is to utter “Hé hé ... hòòòòòò” at exactly the right moment and so bring everyone to an instantaneous end on the hòòòòò. This is often done when the singers are in full swing, really lost in the music. The person bringing the singing to an end must then begin a new round with some beautiful singing. If they mistime the break, or fail to inspire the others, people shout ‘*Moyibi, moyibi*’ (thief, thief). Instead of building the energy of the group, they have stolen it. When done correctly the effect can be extraordinary as the participants are taken from one crescendo all the way down, and then race back up to the next. The music takes on a life of its own as the co-ordination between the singers reaches astounding synchronicity. The effect is synergetic

and euphoric. People dance out from the group and trance-like states engulf participants<sup>131</sup>. Then the *mokondi* appears.

Most *mokondi* are shared with the whole community in this way. Indeed when *mokondi massana* are happening, all initiates must be present and the rest of the community is expected to attend, even if only to fall asleep on a mat among the singers. Women often lie across each other, legs resting on each other, shoulders touching, arms lying across their neighbour's lap. They melt<sup>132</sup> into one another physically and acoustically. Men sit close together or dance around with great skill and humour, occasionally shouting encouragement to the participants, criticising bad singing or drumming, and making jokes.

*Mokondi massana* often last for many hours, some much longer. If *Ejengi* dances, he must dance for three days. Over such extended periods the trance-like states of *mokondi massana* are easy to slip into. A sort of dreamy, heightened experience and appreciation of sound and movement, and an irresistible desire to sing and dance combined with tremendous energy and control. The *mokondi* are always striking in appearance and some are exceptionally beautiful. To evoke something of this I will briefly describe a *mokondi massana* from the perspective of an uninitiated person, based on notes taken at the beginning of my research.

If the *massana* of *Malobe* is called on a night of no-moon<sup>133</sup>, the fires are extinguished so the camp is totally dark. The singing is built up as described above until the performance is faultless. Certain women may begin to sing antiphonal duets in nasal voices that sound like enhanced seal barks. One may begin to ask questions, and the other will respond just before the question has ended. These women often make reference to their hunger, or others' hunger since *Malobe* opens the camp for meat, especially pigs. Sometimes they make

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<sup>131</sup> The trance states of *mokondi massana* do not produce the violent loss of control reported among !Kung healers (see for example, Katz 1982). Instead they are more euphoric or ecstatic, producing exuberant and spectacular dancing or singing. Mbendjele have camp guardians called *esongo* or *djonga* who perform a similar role to !Kung healers during the trance dance. They are living people, whose spirits, like the !Kung healers, travel out to battle with malevolent spirits threatening the health and safety of the camp. They do this every night regardless of whether *massana* is being held and simply appear to be asleep.

<sup>132</sup> Mbendjele say it is good to '*mosanganye*' – to mix up, by lying across one another. It makes people strong and quietens their stomachs (i.e. makes them feel calm).

<sup>133</sup> This is the only *mokondi massana* I witnessed that can be performed during no moon. However it is more often danced on moonlit nights, simply because the moonless period is so short.

comments about events in camp, they may even go into trance and begin mystical conversations with the moon (the women's other husband). Under the canopy in the moonless darkness it is difficult to tell if your eyes are open or shut. Listening is all you can do.

As the singing builds up to ever more intense and beautiful crescendos the sounds of the *mokondi* drift into camp. The *mokondi* begin coming in from the forest and their hoots and cries can be heard echoing under the canopy as they approach. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, small luminous dots and shapes begin swirling around the camp, moving rhythmically to the singing and drumming while whistling beautiful, short melodies. Perfumes drift up as the rustling luminous *mokondi* pass by, miraculously able to know where they are going. The atmosphere is extraordinary, an aesthetic delight that lifts the spirits of all present. The Mbendjele say that the forest also loves it, and that they will find food when they walk out of camp.

Each *mokondi massana* has its own rules of participation, or degrees of participation. *Mokondi* like *Mabonga* can only be danced by initiated men far from uninitiated people. Others like *Niabula*, the elephant hunter's *mokondi*, can be very shy and only exceptionally come into camp. When the women's *mokondi*, *Ngoku* or *Yele*, come into camp, men and boys will not participate except when invited at certain moments. When the women bring *Ngoku* into camp, the men have to take their sons and hide themselves away. When men dance *Sho* at night the women, children and uninitiated have to shut themselves up in their huts. During the day they may participate. To ensure the dangerous clothing of *Ejengi* does not touch the uninitiated the initiates have carefully to control his movements among the women while they tempt and excite him with beautiful bottom wiggling. This sort of tension and challenge between the men and women is typical of community *mokondi massana* and is a crucial element in the creative energy that keeps the *mokondi* in camp.

### **Eboka – commemoration ceremonies**

The most elaborate articulations of *massana* are *eboka*. *Eboka* are essentially long festivals during which feasting will occur and *massana* will be performed every day. *Eboka* bring Mbendjele together in greater numbers than any other event. Burials occur immediately

after death, whereas *eboka* are commemoration<sup>134</sup> or remembrance ceremonies and tend to occur at least a year after death.

Since the Mbendjele live in small dispersed groups people are often not around when loved ones die. Getting news to them in time to arrive for the burial is often impossible. The corpse is buried with much lamentation within 24 hours of death. If the deceased was not a small child or baby, their close relatives now enter a period of mourning and must respect certain prohibitions. Camp is abandoned immediately after burial<sup>135</sup> and the departed is begged to leave the living alone and go to *Komba* (God). If not, they may prevent the living finding food. *Eboka* bring the mourning period to an end.

During the months following a death the news will spread around the forest by means of leaf signs left on important paths, and by word of mouth. The clan of the departed decide when to hold the *eboka* and call all their affines as well as the clans of their area. People are sent far and wide in the forest to inform distant groups of the coming *eboka*. *Eboka* take place during the dry season, between December and April when hunting and fishing are relatively easy, yams are abundant and honey is in season. As this period approaches people prepare, with much excitement, to attend *eboka*. Long journeys to distant camps or villages for *eboka* are called *doomba* and form an important reference point when people talk about the past.

These events are the highlight of the social calendar. All the members of the deceased's clan should participate and will travel long distances to be present. If the person was married, their affines are also expected to participate. The clan elders (*kombeti*) will be responsible for efforts to provide food and drink for all those who come (see plate 10). This is very difficult for many Mbendjele to do since it requires sustained cooperation by the majority of clan members in order to collect sufficient quantities of food and drink. Some Mbendjele clans will spend weeks net-hunting in order to build up a large surplus of smoked meat for their guests during the *eboka*. They will also need to tap many palm trees

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<sup>134</sup> Woodburn (1982b: 191) uses the term 'commemoration' dance to describe the Hadza performing *epeme* some months after a death to remember the deceased. The Mbendjele *eboka* seems to me to be a more elaborate example of this.

<sup>135</sup> After a death at a long-term campsite people will leave, but others less close to the deceased may decide to remain despite the death.



**Plate 9. Dressing up for Eboka**



9.1. Leaf and flower adornment for Eboka, Mombangi 1995.



9.2. Mombangi 1995.



9.3. Mombangi 1995.



9.4. Mombangi 1995. The Sons of one of the deceased return from brideservice in Mbandza to lead the mourning.



9.5. Mombangi 1995.



9.6. Mombangi 1995.



9.7. Mombangi 1995.



9.8. Mombangi 1995.

**Plate 10. Preparing Food for Eboka**

"The real work of massana is feeding everyone". Doka, a seventy year old Mbendjele woman.



10.1. Tapping palm wine, Indongo, 1997 .



10.2. Pressing palm oil at an abandoned Bilo vil-  
lage, Ibamba 1997.



10.3. Breaking payo nuts, the oil is used as stock  
or thickener, Ibamba 1997.



10.4. Washing wild yams Indongo 1997.



10.5. Arranging piles for meat sharing during  
Eboka, 1997, Ibamba 1997.



10.6. Making salt, Indongo 1997.

for wine, timing the process so that they will be producing large quantities by the time the guests arrive. However, the reader should not be deceived by my emphasis on what should happen. Preparations are generally rather chaotic and the mistiming of winemaking and the arrival of important guests often account for the long duration of periods spent visiting for *eboka*.

The appropriate level of organisation is achieved by some clans but is difficult for many others. It is normal to await a series of deaths before celebrating *eboka*. This allows clans to pool their labour together and so reduce their individual burdens. It also means that the *eboka* will attract increasing numbers of guests, and this is seen as good.

When several clans do *eboka* together, they will try every means possible to make the various Bilo claiming to be their '*konza*' - owners, (see Chapter Seven), compete with each other to be seen as the most generous in providing alcohol and some manioc. When important *massana* are being performed, Bilo will come and watch if they are nearby. If the *konza* come, they will endlessly be harangued for alcohol and other goods, or else loudly and unfavourably compared to other Bilo *konza*. Mbendjele compare the competition that quickly develops between Bilo *konza* to be seen as generous to the behaviour of two competing chest-beating male gorillas (*ngile*).

The Mbendjele know that if they are not able to organise an *eboka*, the Bilo claiming to be their *konza* will eventually feel shame that a clan member has not had a proper commemoration ceremony. Other Bilo will tease them for being incapable of burying 'their *Babinga*' properly. Fear of teasing and shame may prompt them to make a great effort to supply alcohol and manioc. The emphasis on such provision is an important part of Bilo claims to authority over the Mbendjele (see Chapter Seven) but is considered a good ploy for extracting lots of goods from Bilo by the Mbendjele. The Mbendjele do not treat the claims to authority seriously but do value the entitlements that they give rise to.

How the clan manages to get food and drink matters not to Mbendjele, but that there is abundant food and drink does matter. With so many participants *eboka* gatherings are intense social experiences for people normally living in very small, dispersed groups. Old friends get to meet up again, young people will get to know one another better, marriages

may be arranged, affairs will occur, and also fights. Often they will involve initiation ceremonies. Elders will discuss marriages and who are good affines, and who not.

*Eboka* gatherings can last for weeks if commemorating several people and if Bilo assist in supplying provisions. During this time dancing will take place almost every evening and often also during the day. Around 300 Mbendjele attended one *eboka* we participated in with daily *massana* for over five weeks. Most *eboka* are much shorter, normally around three to ten days. A wide variety of different *mokondi massana* will be danced depending on the area and initiations undertaken by the deceased, and which *mokondi* the dead person's clan control, or the dead people's clans control.

### **Fighting - *itumba***

There are certain events that typically occur during *eboka*. Fighting is one of these. In gathering so many Mbendjele together, *eboka* often bring together people who may have spent years apart. This is both looked forward to and dreaded. Usually the Mbendjele avoid each other when arguments or conflicts break out, but the coming together of people who normally do not stay in the same place, combined with excessive alcohol consumption, can lead to fights at these events. When fights break out, people will sing '*Massana an dua, mobulu a mu phia!*' (*Massana* has left, commotion and disorder has come). Although fighting is publicly frowned upon, it is seen as a legitimate means of expressing indignation or resisting others, and many Mbendjele enjoy the excitement and spectacle of a fight.

I have witnessed so many fights that I have become aware of the performative aspects of Mbendjele fighting. They have a series of levels of behaviour depending on the seriousness of the combatants, and their gender. Levels one to four, and six are not gender specific, I only observed Level five among women and children, and Level seven mostly between men. Level eight is normally the last recourse for both men and women. In reality different levels often occur simultaneously, and there is plenty of overlap between levels. However these levels are used by the Mbendjele to make implicit statements about how strongly they feel about an issue.

Level One: Staring into the eyes of the opponent. An exaggerated stare often with the chin slightly jutting out in indignation. This introduces the fight.

Level Two: Shouting. Mbendjele have loud voices and the loudest is heard. These shouting matches are often about real events, and refer to perceived wrongs.

Level Three: Insulting. Almost imperceptibly at first the combatants will begin to utter ludicrous insulting statements about each other – ‘Your wife has a moustache!’, ‘Maggots are coming out of your vagina!’ or ‘Your penis is rotten!’, or vaguer allusions to the other’s parents, or grandparents, ‘Your mother’s cooking!’. These seemingly innocuous references to kin really enrage the Mbendjele and actual combat becomes imminent.

Level Four: Cloth pulling and pushing. Words are said with force and emphasised by repetitive cloth pulling, finger tapping, or steady pushing – all aimed at annoying the opponent to the maximum.

Level Five: Wrestling (women and children). An immediate reaction to an insult is to bear-hug the opponent. Often when it is an elderly woman against a young woman they may remain hugging and pushing each other in this manner for some time as the insults continue to fly. Their kin may break them up at this stage. However if the insulting gets too much, and they are evenly matched, one or other of the combatants may begin trying to wrestle the other to the ground, or go up a level.

Level Six: Hitting, punching, biting and kicking. This is the rage reaction when insults get too much, or wrestling out of hand. This is much like brawling in Europe, except that Mbendjele are able to go on and on and on. I have seen fights lasting for days, with regular extended bouts between repeated attempts at reconciliation.

Level Seven: *Itumba na koni* (a fight with firewood). This is the most spectacular fighting style and popular among men, especially when fighting at night. As two men shout insults at each other, they often pace about. One may suddenly lose his self control and grab a large piece of burning firewood out of a nearby fire to swipe at his opponent. A brawl may develop or the opponent may also pick up a piece of firewood and return the blow. The two men face each other and exchange blows with the smouldering logs. At night this is very spectacular. As each swipes the log makes an orange-red arc in the darkness, and if the

blow hits home, an explosion of sparks. Spectators sing accompanying ‘wuuuuuu’s ‘iiiiiii’s and ‘ooooooo’s depending on the action at that moment. Firewood, although capable of inflicting cuts, bruises and burns is not normally capable of breaking bones. Wood suitable for firewood should be dry and a bit rotten, and hence brittle.

Level Eight: *Itumba na mele* (a fight with sticks). This is very serious fighting and can lead to serious injury and even death. When people fight like this they really want to hurt each other. I only saw this type of fighting used by women to control men who had gone *zomwa* (crazy, run amok) as a result of the over-consumption of alcohol.

Despite the availability of powerful weapons, including spears, crossbows with poisoned arrows, occasional guns, axes and the ever-present machetes, Mbendjele strongly dislike and disapprove of combat that draws blood. It is *ekila*<sup>136</sup>. I never heard of combat involving hunting weapons, only household items (notably firewood and sticks, but occasionally pots too), and exceptionally machetes. I only heard of one case of murder between Mbendjele. While hunting a man killed another because he wanted his wife. The victims clan executed the murderer in revenge. I was told that in the past *Ejengi* would kill people who had done terrible things.

### **Songs and song journeys**

Another important feature of *eboka* are the songs (also called *eboka*) that people sing and those that are composed during the course of *massana*. Since each *mokondi* has a specific musical style, new songs are not created casually or often. Occasionally people will dream of a song and sing it the following day. If others pick it up, it may be sung during the next *massana*. Sometimes a moving or remarkable event inspires a great singer (*kombo*) to invent a song. If such songs are good they become popular and are often sung. A ritual association ceremony that is popular in a large area may lead to a newly invented song spreading widely among Mbendjele communities. Many songs are ancient and some are not understood anymore. However, many songs are still understood and sung with fervour, while others may lose popularity and not be heard for a long while, or even be forgotten.

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<sup>136</sup> The early French military explorer, Captain Cottés was struck by this dislike or ‘fear of spilling human blood’ (1911: 105).

Songs travel on journeys between communities of Mbendjele as clan members come together for *eboka* gatherings and then return to their different home areas, and through the marriage links between clans in different areas that compel them to attend the *eboka* of their affines. New songs sung during *eboka* can thus travel widely, communicating significant events and relationships, or moralising comments.

*Ejengi* is a particularly popular *massana* during *eboka* commemoration ceremonies and has many songs. These include: ‘*Esosa makolo*’ (all wash your feet!). A moral song using the metaphor of a communal washing place to refer to a woman who has been having sex with many men. ‘*Sida a die maabe*’ (AIDS is bad). A song implicitly warning Mbendjele not to have sexual relations with Bilo because of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. ‘*Kaanga eeo ya buwe, Kolongo eee eee oo*’ (Friends, you know what? Kolongo! yes) A song honouring Kolongo for the good things he did.

*Malobe* is another popular *massana*. Some of its songs include: From the logging town Pokola: ‘*Mona milo a gia pipi kwa milo, moaka monie kwa na milo.*’ (The Bilo<sup>137</sup> child is like a Bilo, a Yaka is as beautiful as a Bilo). Mbendjele face intensive discrimination from some people in the logging town and this song responds by asserting their equality. A song from Ibamba shames an adulterous couple: ‘*Mindongo na Mate*’ (their names were Mindongo and Mate). They were caught having sex in the forest. A song was made up about this, to their great shame and suffering. They are both dead now.

Women’s *Ngoku* songs often mock men. ‘*Mojambi na yobe mapeni, ba mu ena*’ (they cut the water liana with a sharp knife) mocks the men’s need for circumcision, and emphasises the perfection of women’s reproductive organs. Many others focus on sexual relations, like ‘*Njombo*’ (young men), which emphasises that women like young men more than old men. Or ‘*lenga dika ma dongi*’ (penis stop sleeping) – i.e. become erect, or ‘*mapindi ma mu bola*’ (their balls are empty), and ‘*dika bepango*’ (stop pinching me) – i.e. let me sleep and stop disturbing me because you want sex.

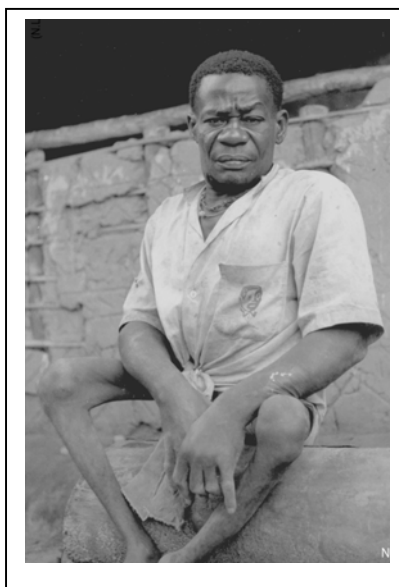
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<sup>137</sup> Milo is the singular of Bilo.

Songs are an important means for communicating views and news as well as for enjoying *massana*. The way songs travel also parallels the way *mokondi* can travel, and *mokondi* do travel. The case of *Monano* illustrates some of the processes described in the preceding sections.

#### **A brief case study of a recently captured *mokondi* called *Monano***

Although the most important and widespread *mokondi* are said to pre-date men and women coming together, many other minor ones have been more recently acquired. Most commonly this is done by ‘sale’ between clan leaders whilst visiting each other, though theft is also common. The history of *Monano*, the most recently captured *mokondi massana* in my research area, illustrates some of these processes.



Mokaba is a fifty-year-old man from Ibamba<sup>138</sup>. As a small boy he got poliomyelitis and consequently both his legs are severely wasted. He walks on his hands, with his stunted and bony legs crossed tightly together dragging under him. Despite this, Mokaba has travelled widely in the forest, often swimming across the numerous marshes, and has even killed animals in traps. He has been widowed twice and is currently remarried with one remaining daughter. Mokaba is a great singer and song composer (*kombo*), as well as the most respected Mbendjele craftsman and blacksmith in the area.

Figure 9. Mokaba, Indongo 1997.

Whilst walking in the forest around 1985, Mokaba captured a forest spirit called *Monano* using a special type of fibre string<sup>139</sup> (*mokodi*). Exactly how Mokaba captured and established relations with *Monano* is a secret that must be kept from women, but when he showed *Monano* to the other men he was camping with they were so impressed that *Monano* became an instant success. Upon return to their long-term campsite, Indongo on the Sangha River, *Monano* was danced. When the uninitiated see *Monano*, his body is

<sup>138</sup> Mokaba sadly died in 1999.

<sup>139</sup> Hand-rolled fibre strings (*mokodi*) of various compositions play a central role in Mbendjele sorcery and healing practices (see Figure 8).



covered in cloth, he wears socks on his feet (he has no arms), and his face is a wooden mask. *Monano* has his own *njanga* (sacred path) and access is governed by initiation.

*Monano* has become very popular and is danced at every major *eboka* commemoration ceremony and now has many initiates. During the years following the spirit's capture visiting Mbendjele from other regions were also initiated into *Monano*. One such man, Samba, came from Minganga, north of the Ibamba area, and stayed for several years whilst doing his brideservice. During this time he was initiated into *Monano* and certain other *mokondi* of the Mbendjele of Ibamba. After his return to Minganga he began initiating Mbendjele from Minganga into a new *mokondi* he called *Ekatambili*. However *Ekatambili* was exactly the same as *Monano* despite its changed name.

News of this got back to the Mbendjele of Ibamba. They were infuriated that Samba had stolen their *mokondi* and began to insult and abuse him and the people of Minganga. As far as the Mbendjele of Ibamba are concerned, Samba and his group are *mokondi* thieves and any insult or wrong they now do them is justified.

Samba was very friendly with Njulle, the spokesman (*kombeti*) for a large group of the Mbendjele of Minganga. Njulle is roughly the same age as Mokaba and is also an invalid. He was born with a tiny malformed right arm attached to a full hand. In order to insult Mokaba he composed a song '*Mokaba a mu tonga ye, a pia mambi na mabo!*' (Mokaba got sewn up (i.e. ensorcelled), he takes faeces in his hands!). Since Mokaba walks on his hands, he must put his hands in faeces. Mokaba was on *molongo* (a long journey in deep forest) when he heard the song from some Minganga Mbendjele. Mokaba was shocked 'He sings about me like this! We are both invalids! So, they shall sing further!' And he responded by creating another song insulting Njulle. '*Njulle a bukia obo na mitambo a bunjia*' (Njulle broke his arm in a fibre trap). Meanwhile Mokaba took the camp to fish and hunt by rivers in the territory of Mbendjele from Minganga.

The song was sung far and wide until Njulle heard it. He was furious and said that, if ever they meet Mokaba and his group, there will be a big fight. Subsequently the two groups have been insulting and offending each other in any way possible. While I was in the field

a large brawl took place in the main logging town and another far more serious affair, involving dozens of men on either side, was narrowly averted by my intervention.

### ***Mokondi* economies**

Diverse relations between distant Yaka groups and regional economies build up around the movement and dancing of *mokondi* that connect Mbendjele and other Yaka communities over a wide area. There is a stock of ancient *mokondi* whose antiquity is suggested by their wide distribution among all the communities I visited<sup>140</sup>, and widespread reports of them among other Yaka groups<sup>141</sup>. These are *Ejengi*, *Ngoku* and *Yele*. They are now rarely traded because all clans have them<sup>142</sup>. Each clan has its own named *mokondi* in these three *massana* and when a clan's *mokondi* is danced all clan members are expected to attend.

Apart from these three *mokondi*, there are always other differences in types of *mokondi* controlled between clans and between communities associated with particular forest areas. These other *mokondi* have a variety of histories. Some were traded from other Yaka groups such as the Ngombe (e.g. *Malobe* and *Niabula*, see Appendix One), some came from other Mbendjele clans or communities and others were captured in the forest as in the case described above.

Introducing a new *mokondi massana* to one's patrilineage or clan after a long journey is valued as one of the spoils of the journey that has been brought back for others to share. It can 'bring out' wealth and may increase the respect others have for the clan. This becomes relevant during *eboka* commemoration ceremonies in the dry season when affines and relatives congregate to do *massana* for several weeks.

Introducing a new *mokondi massana* involves initiating as many eligible people as possible in order to ensure sufficient initiates to manage the *massana*. When initiations occur the neophytes will pay an initiation fee. Fees contribute to the purchase of alcohol and other items for the *massana*. If the hosting clan entertains their guests with a wide variety of

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<sup>140</sup> They are sometimes no longer danced in evangelised communities.

<sup>141</sup> Bahuchet 1992b; Joiris 1993a, 1996, 1998; Tsuru 1998 report these *mokondi* among the Baka. In Congo the Mikaya and Ngombe also have them, but the Luma only have *Ejengi*.

<sup>142</sup> These are the *mokondi* that my wife (*Ngoku* and *Yele*) and I (*Ejengi*) have become spirit-controllers of. This was thought important to enable us to hold our own ceremonies and not depend on others.

*massana* this is admired. However, if the hosting clan does not control the *mokondi* their guests are expecting, they will be obliged to find a spirit-controller to call the *mokondi* for them. This may require the payment of a fee to the spirit-controller or their clan.

When I asked why every clan had so many *mokondi*, people told me that the reason is that they do not like to depend on others when they have to do *massana*. Due to so much conflict over payments when one clan used to dance another's *mokondi*, each *kombeti* (spokesperson, elder) decided to get his own *mokondi* and so not depend on anyone. This was given as the reason for there being so many *mokondi* in Ibamba and Indongo. The Mbendjele of Ibamba have so many that they are famous for this among other Mbendjele groups, earning them the nickname 'bisi mo phua' (the people who fly).

Emeka told me that the ancestors have bought and sold *mokondi* since ancient times. He knows which *mokondi* his ancestors bought and from whom, and he also knows which people his ancestors initiated as spirit-controllers in ritual associations they controlled. Some of these transfers occurred several generations ago. Most elders know who legitimately owns what, and the initiation of a new *mokondi* spirit-controller is considered hot news in *njan̄ga* discussions between initiates.

These *mokondi*-centred relationships are carefully remembered and form part of the way Mbendjele identify, discuss and judge other Yaka people, ranging from clans sharing the same forest area to clans in neighbouring forest areas, and on to clans of other more distant Yaka groups. *Mokondi massana* are discussed in terms of the accomplishment of particular performances. Each *mokondi* is associated with specific, often named dance moves and songs. People will discuss the various key aspects of the performance – the quality of the singing, and the dancing, the appropriateness of the *mokondi*'s behaviour and the success of the dance formations characteristic of the *mokondi massana* being discussed.

As the event is described the speaker will interject the description with exclamations like 'Saii!' (extraordinary), 'Monjelle' (beautiful), 'Njor!' (my word!), 'Bonaape!' (that's the way!), 'Ba mu gia lundjako!' (they achieved the euphoric trance-like state), or others that use negative terms to express extreme positives such as 'Baabe!' (wicked), or 'Bokono' (sick/ill) to emphasise the degree to which specific movements of the *massana* excelled. If

this did not happen, the speaker will describe the *massana* as *pola* (empty), or as *wa po* (of nothing), or may comment that the singing was *kilikili* (all over the place) or *amu dimdia* (it got lost).

In Appendix One I present some of these *mokondi* relations with other Yaka groups, notably with the Ngombe Yaka (Baka Pygmies), with whom many Mbendjele are in conflict. In contrast to the Mbendjele perception of a fairly equal match between themselves and the Ngombe, the Mbendjele consider themselves superior to the Luma Yaka and Mikaya Yaka. This is because of their superior forest skills and because ‘*Mokondi nabo to Ejengi, wete na mokondi mike te.*’ (They don’t have many *mokondi* apart from *Ejengi*).

The Luma learnt *Malobe* when visiting the Mbendjele and took it back to their forest without paying the Mbendjele anything. They stole *Malobe*. The Mbendjele have forbidden them from dancing it any more, though they still do when Mbendjele are not present. Apparently some Luma fear the Mbendjele so much because of this that when Mbendjele come, they hide themselves away. Some Mbendjele reckon the Luma even stole *Ejengi* many generations ago. The Ibamba Mbendjele got *Malobe* when Dito Dzelle bought it from the Ngombe Yaka five generations ago. Since then it has travelled from Ibamba up the Sangha River north of Ouesso, and into the interior to the Terres des Kaboungas and further north to Mbandza. However it has not yet got to the Motaba River communities.

The *mokondi Enyomo* however, is not at Ibamba but has gone South out of Mbandza to Terres des Kaboungas and North to the upper Motaba River and some parts of the Ibenga River. In 1997 I participated inadvertently in part of this process because the elder, Toma, who brought it to the Motaba River travelled with our party from the South back to his home area around Makao. Upon arrival he began initiating his clan’s people, and many others too. A great *Enyomo* was danced for three days. Toma was perceived as exploitative by some, since he cashed in on all the new initiates when in fact it was his younger brother who had bought *Enyomo*. Toma, being older, claimed the right to also be its controller. However he had not told his brother that he would do this and some thought that his actions would be likely to cause trouble between them.

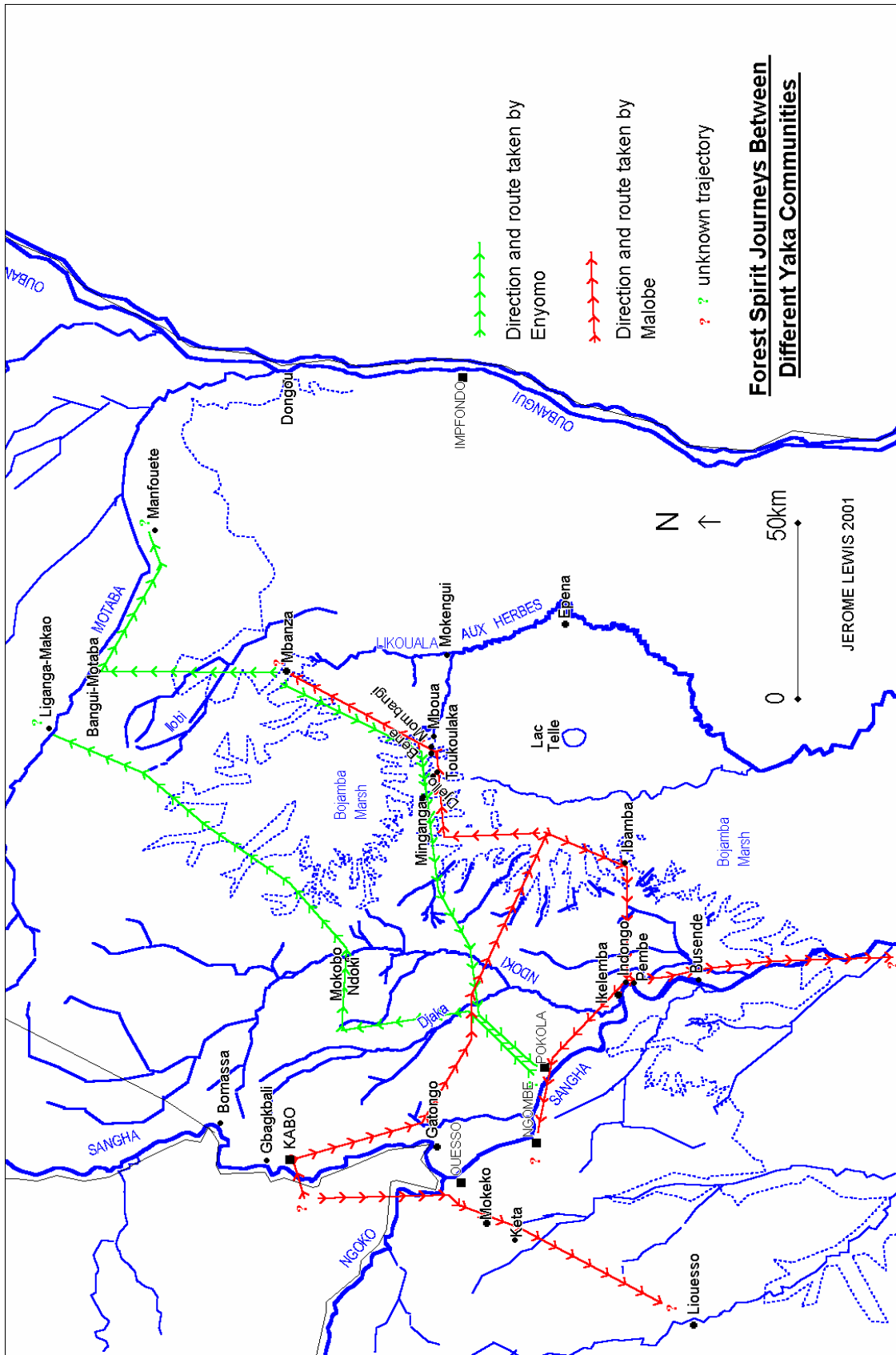


Figure 10. Mokondi journeys

When a man travels far to do brideservice or to work outside his traditional forest he may learn about other *mokondi massana*. If accepted by the original spirit-controller, he can also become a spirit-controller. He must give the original spirit-controller all that he demands, such as metal goods, wine, food, cloth and often some money. If he satisfies the spirit-controller, he will be initiated and can become a legitimate spirit-controller himself. Then he can begin initiating others.

Giemba is a lively forty-year-old man from Ibamba. Some years ago he travelled far North up the Sangha River and returned a spirit-controller of *Sho*. Since then he has enthusiastically encouraged people in Indongo to dance *Sho*. For example, one evening after doing the *massana* of *Mombembo* Giemba launched a *Sho*. The men present all wished to continue *massana* and so *Sho* began. But some boys visiting from Ngelle had not been initiated. Giemba had set them a trap. He knew they would want to participate and waited until they had been joining in for a few songs. Then he demanded an immediate fine of 500 CFA each, in addition to obligatory initiation in the morning at a cost of 2000 CFA. The boys had no choice but to accept, and the relatives they were visiting had to find some money fast. The money was immediately used to buy alcohol. The dance continued late into the night. In the morning it started again at 6am. And the boys were ‘bitten’ (initiated<sup>143</sup>) by the *mokondi* on the *njangga*.

There are numerous tricks, like Giemba’s above, to oblige eligible uninitiated people to get initiated. If paid in money rather than goods, their initiation fee will provide the means to obtain desirable goods like alcohol, tobacco and marijuana for the *massana*. Doing this and sharing out the benefits are recurring topics of conversation on the *njangga* during *massana*. Other *konja ua mokondi* (spirit-controllers of forest spirits) also actively seek to ‘bring out wealth’ (*ulua mbongo*) by calling for initiates for their *mokondi*. Among Mbendjele men small amounts of money are often hidden and their existence denied. By obliging or pressuring eligible young men to become *mboni* (neophytes), their elder siblings and parents are forced to pull out their money to pay the fees. Since the money or goods received are shared among participants, no one individual will benefit more than others. This is another way in which *massana* is considered a productive activity.

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<sup>143</sup> When describing initiations it is conventional to say that neophytes of *Sho* are ‘bitten’, and neophytes of *Ejengi* are ‘killed’.

**Plate 11. Enyomo**



11.1. Enyomo is always accompanied by a rattle (engesse). Mombangi 1995.

11.2. When Enyomo emerges the women dance enthusiastically to excite him.



11.3. Enyomo is called to dance with the women.



11.4. Enyomo was first captured by an Mbendjelle man from Mbandza, from where it has spread far and wide.



11.5.



*Mokondi* are also used in this way to obtain goods from Bilo. The Mbendjele are proud that the Bilo depend entirely on them for the proper performance of their major rites. Mbendjele see this as a clear indication of the Bilo's dependence on them and are astute at extracting vast quantities of goods when Bilo request them to dance. Many Bilo have complained about this to me as they feel blackmailed when Mbendjele stop a *massana* much too early simply because they have consumed all the alcohol and tobacco offered by the Bilo.

It is important for inter-Bilo claims to prestige and status that large numbers of Mbendjele perform *massana* during their rites, especially during commemoration ceremonies. Between Bilo, wealth is demonstrated by conspicuous consumption and by creating large numbers of dependants. A well-attended Bilo commemoration ceremony, with abundant supplies of food and drink, is the mark of a strong clan. Bilo often talk about *konja* relations at this time, trying to use this to pressurise the Mbendjele to attend. The Mbendjele see this as a sign of the Bilo's desperation and dependence on them, and agree to what is demanded with the air of a tolerant parent taking pity on a child.

If it happens that a Milo dies, the Bilo must call *Ejengi*. They call him [*Ejengi*] to come to the *massana*. When one of their people dies, they have to do *massana* for a long time. Kokokiyo kokokiyo kokokiyo ... The sun sets and the dancing dies down. The *massana* goes back [to the *njanga*].

[J.L.]: Why do they call you?

[Minjembe]: They can only call us. 'Come to the dance!' They call us to the same place as them [to the village]. 'These Yaka are for us their owners! Our Yaka are coming! They'll work to make us a *massana* here, they are Yaka!' [Bilo speech].

Over there they'll get up to follow the *massana*, and over here. Ki ki ki ki ki ki [sound of drums] until it's finished. Then they return home. The Yaka are *numelo* [number one] at singing and dancing you know.

*Minjembe, 40 year-old Mbendjele man from Ibamba, May 1997.*

Initiation controls access by outsiders to Mbendjele *massana*. Only outsiders who are perceived to be loved by the forest (shown by mastery of forest skills and good luck in hunting or gathering), and who show respect for and understanding of Mbendjele culture are considered for initiation. According to my informants outsiders were never initiated in



the past. It is a relatively recent phenomenon that began when certain very senior Bilo men were initiated into *Ejengi* after demonstrating their appreciation of the Mbendjele and their forest. Nowadays initiation into *Ejengi* is widespread among some Bilo communities, and certain Mbendjele in logging towns have managed to profit from their position as spirit-controllers of *mokondi* by initiating large numbers of outsiders. In the context of the logging towns and salaried wage labour, it is easier for the spirit-controllers of *mokondi* to insist on keeping some of the initiation fees for themselves.

A *mokondi* spirit-controller normally has to share the benefits of his *mokondi* with others. Like the hunter who has to share his prey, so the *mokondi* spirit-controller has to share the yield of his *mokondi*. Indeed his *mokondi* will be worthless unless he is able to share it widely and ensure that it is fed plenty of dancing and singing. This is done through initiation and *massana*. The actual authority and potential claims to status by the spirit-controller are negated because of his or her dependence on the initiates to do *massana*. The pressure on the spirit-controller to share any advantage he may have gained from initiation fees or other gifts is intense and normally cannot be resisted or evaded.

In a similar way, people returning to camp with large quantities of meat, honey, fish, mushrooms, or other forest foods, are obliged to share them. As soon as they enter camp, and often before, other people take their basket or bundle and unpack it to prepare it for sharing. The pressure to share is here again overwhelming and accepted unquestioningly. Food creates great joy for the Mbendjele and they are expert at feasting continuously for many hours, even days if the opportunity arises, until the food is exhausted or light enough to carry. Such feasting may last for a week or so when an elephant is killed.

### **Elephant hunting and *massana***

Elephant hunting combines many types of *massana* and illustrates how *massana* and production are woven together. Elephant hunting produces huge amounts of meat, often from the physical labour of a single individual. The opportunity to gain prestige, dependants or wealth is therefore great. *Massana* activities around elephant hunting have the effect of ensuring that elephant hunters do not gain too much prestige or wealth from their activities by dividing responsibility for their success and requiring the equitable sharing of the meat.

The departure of men to go elephant hunting is frequently preceded by *Yele* (a women's *mokondi*). In this women will 'tie up' the elephant's spirit in the forest while in trance, and then tell the men where to go to find it in the morning. In effect women catch the elephant first. This accounts for this type of hunting journey being called '*mwaka ya baito*', a women's hunting trip, despite the fact that no women accompany the men. Men depend on using the abilities of *mokondi* like *Niabula* and *Ejengi* to supplement the great skill they have developed in tracking and stalking to get to the elephant. Approaching close enough to shoot or spear the elephant requires secret knowledge acquired on the *njanga* in addition to an intimate knowledge of its habits, precision in aim and movement, and courage.

While the men are out hunting the elephant, the women may continue *Yele* in deep trance<sup>144</sup> until the *mokondi Moshunde* flies through the forest to tell them the men have killed, and leads them to the place<sup>145</sup>. The *mokondi Malimbe* appears at the site of the kill and uses children as his emissaries to demand whatever he needs (normally meat) from the wife of the elephant hunter (*mwito ya tuma*). *Eya* is called in after dusk to mark the death of the elephant. The *mokondi* of *Eya* begin a raunchy and sometimes insulting conversation with the camp in squeaky, screechy voices, which the singing women reply to. During feasting *Yolo* will be sung, celebrating the abundance of meat, and later *Malimbe* for some more raunchy provocation. Sex and feasting go together. Until the majority of the meat is consumed, *massana* and feasting will continue, sometimes involving the men in all night sessions of *Niabula*. Any extended feasting is accompanied by *mokondi massana*. If sufficient people are present *Ejengi* is the *massana* of choice in such situations. In achieving and enjoying these periods of sheer abundance, all types of *massana* come together in a meaningful whole.

### **Discussion**

*Massana* activities range from children casually playing to elaborate ritual performances. This indicates that the Mbendjele notion of *massana* encompasses more than our notions of

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<sup>144</sup> This *Yele* trance has a characteristic posture. Women in such trances have a raised arm resting on the top of their crooked head, that boughs forward, as if weighted down by the arm. They move rhythmically back and forth as they sing the *Yele* songs.

<sup>145</sup> I have not witnessed this event and am recounting what happens as people explained it to me. The way *Moshunde* tells the women is unclear to me.

play or ritual. When people are described as doing *massana* both the type of activity and the quality of relations between participants are being commented on. Relations between participants doing *massana* are based on sharing, joking, fun and co-operation. In *mokondi massana* these are developed into synchronicity, synergistic action and creating abundance.

In looking to see what links all the different *massana* activities together there seems to be an implicit Mbendjele theory of learning inherent to them. *Massana* activities appear to embody a theory that is based on the idea that mimicry, conducted in a suitable social atmosphere, becomes effective and productive. To become an expert at any activity, you should begin with the intention, apply *massana* to the intention, and expertise will follow. By imitating their elders digging for yams, girls will become expert yam diggers. Boys will become expert hunters by mimicking animals and hunters. Initiates intending to call a forest spirit (*mokondi*) into camp will imitate it in order to induce it to come into camp.

The marked tendency towards individualism and personal autonomy in many Mbendjele activities is counterbalanced by the fun and enjoyment of *massana* and the stress on the efficacy of such community action. The opposition between personal autonomy and community is the central dynamic animating much social interaction among Yaka people, whether this interaction consists of camps coming together and dispersing again, or family members parting or reuniting, or the dealings between men's and women's groups within a camp. *Massana* is an important arena for negotiating between these seemingly contradictory forces that simultaneously endows both personal autonomy and community with value.

When children do *massana* they gain experience in all the key skills they will require to lead a successful, and distinctively Yaka, forest hunting and gathering life. *Massana* ensures that the Mbendjele belief in the forest as a place of plenty is substantiated. This is done by cultivating a combination of physical and mystical skills from yam digging to the secret knowledge of the *njanga*. Throughout these varied *massana* activities particular gendered roles, ways of relating to others and styles of co-ordinating within and between gender groups recur as guiding principles. As the *massana* increase in sophistication, so too do the co-ordination and the skills they require to be successful.

*Eboka* (commemoration ceremonies) are the most challenging tests of the skills *massana* teaches. Elders joked to me that the real work of *mokondi massana* is feeding everyone (see plate 10). In preparation for and during *eboka*, the hosting clans must co-ordinate and excel in hunting and gathering food, as well as in dancing, singing and calling *mokondi*.

*Mokondi massana* are sophisticated, many dimensioned, aesthetic achievements. There is huge creativity within this form, with innovations to the songs and dances of established *mokondi*, as well as new *mokondi* being discovered, or learnt from neighbours and then brought home, to be taught and practised. Participating in *mokondi massana* is a profound experience. Participants are stimulated by the poetry of the songs, the wisdom of the philosophy and mystical teachings of the *njanga* path, as well as by the sense of solidarity and community. *Mokondi massana* require the cultivation of dancing, singing, clapping and drumming to masterful levels. Great sensitivity and coordination are then necessary for participants to achieve the astounding synchronicity that calls the *mokondi* into the group. It is only when this happens that the trance-like communal euphoria of good *mokondi massana* can be achieved. The magnificence and elegance of the *mokondi*'s dance and the beauty of the singing often move as one, allowing participants to become integral to this spectacular aesthetic delight.

*Massana* activities connect and identify Yaka communities throughout the forest and mark them as distinct from other ethnic groups. But *massana* is not about competition, resistance or rebellion<sup>146</sup>. It is forest-centred, Yaka-focused and inward looking. *Massana* is about community empowerment and success in the forest way of life. This is achieved by sharing in the bounty of the forest whether it is the collective euphoria *mokondi massana* create, mystic secrets, wild yams or pigs speared by young men. *Massana* deliberately glorifies the forest, the gender groups, and the joy and inherent beauty of their co-ordination and mutual co-operation in distinctive but complementary ways. The next chapter will continue to explore this in relation to the *massana* of *Ejengi* and *Ngoku*.

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<sup>146</sup> Woodburn has pointed out that in general among African hunter-gatherers “there is little evidence of protest religion, of religion focused on dramatic repudiation of their menial status.” (1997: 358).

## CHAPTER SIX

### HOW MEN AND WOMEN CAME TOGETHER, AND STAY TOGETHER – THE *MOKONDI MASSANA* OF *EJENGI* and *NGOKU*.

In this chapter I describe some aspects of the ancient and widespread *mokondi massana* of *Ejengi* and then *Ngoku*<sup>147</sup>. Both these *massana* are represented in several different ways, some public and some hidden. I shall focus here on the public aspects of these *massana* since they are laden with explicit and implicit gender symbolism that provides a commentary on Mbendjele conceptions of gender and gender relations. The interplay between these two *mokondi* provides an ethnographic window onto the dynamics of gender egalitarianism, and the assertiveness that maintains this dynamic. My focus will be on *Ejengi*, a *mokondi* owned by men. This is because I am male and have been initiated into *Ejengi* but not *Ngoku*, a women's *mokondi*. *Ngoku* is the women's equivalent of *Ejengi* in the significance it has for women's power and for elaborating their gender distinctiveness.

#### *Ejengi*

*Ejengi* is a fundamental cultural institution among Yaka people. *Ejengi* is so central to male identity that I have not come across a grown Yaka man who is not an *Ejengi* initiate (*bangonja*) except in evangelised communities far to the North of the Mbendjele area. The Mbendjele consider this to be one of the ancient *mokondi* that all Yaka people possess and consider it characteristic of Yaka people regardless of where they live or what language they may speak today<sup>148</sup>. The ritual association of *Ejengi* is reported among the Baka, Kola (Joiris 1993a, 1998: 231; Tsuru 1998) and among the Aka (Thomas and Bahuchet 1991a). However it seems that the similarities in the ritual grammar of *Ejengi* ceremonies (clothing, *njanga* path, initiates) may not be matched by similarities in ideology<sup>149</sup>. Joiris reports

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<sup>147</sup> Our film '*Massana. Moments in Yaka Play and Ritual*' presents a visual account of both *Ejengi* and *Ngoku*.

<sup>148</sup> Apart from three exceptions all *Ejengi* spirit-controllers are Yaka men. Only one Bilo clan (in Minganga) owns an *Ejengi* (called Lota) in the entire Mbendjele area. It belonged to an Mbendjele man without descendants who decided to give his *Ejengi* to his Bilo exchange partner. In this way one Bilo clan obtained an *Ejengi*, but no others ever have. The only other non-Yaka, apart from myself, to become an *Ejengi* spirit-controller was the late '*Mokobo*' Courtois, a French forest prospector and elephant hunter who spent fifteen years living in the forest with the Mbendjele.

<sup>149</sup> Joiris's reconstruction of a *jengi* performance (1998: 188-92) could have occurred among Mbendjele. However her elaboration of a symbolism of yams, and view of *Ejengi* as a combination of an elephant spirit and a dead *tuma*'s (elephant hunter's) spirit was not signaled to me by the Mbendjele. Elder Mbendjele men instructed me in aspects of Ngombe *Ejengi* lore and emphasized that the Ngombe *Ejengi* has power in relation to elephants.

*Ejengi* to be symbolically associated with wild yams and elephant hunting (1993a, 1998), and Hewlett (1991:30-1) describes regional differences among Aka in the Central African Republic in relation to whether *Ejengi* is linked to elephant hunting or not. Among the Mbendjele *Ejengi* celebrates abundance. In the Mbendjele region there is some subtle variation, but in general the situation is remarkably similar to what I describe here.

In order to contextualise what will follow, it is necessary first to explain the Mbendjele creation myth. This myth provides a basis for the explicit symbolism during *Ejengi massana*, as well as some of the basic principles of Mbendjele conceptions of gender. The myth is unusual because, unlike the *gano* fables mentioned earlier, it is rarely told in its entirety. Instead people make reference to bits of it, or recount the parts they like. Although most mature adults seem to know it fully, I have never heard anyone recounting it apart from when I asked in appropriate circumstances. People seemed to treat this myth almost as secret knowledge, often being uncomfortable talking about it, or declining entirely by claiming ignorance if too many people were around. This may be due to its contested nature or because outsiders like Bilo have ridiculed them about it in the past.

Despite some diversity in the way people recount the myth and the emphases they make, the basic structure of the myth is remarkably similar between different areas. The various different narratives begin with Komba (God) creating the forest and all that is in it. He makes men and women and puts them in different parts of the forest. Neither knows of the existence of the other. They eventually meet and Mbendjele society as we know it today is founded. Within this basic structure exist some ancient and important disagreements.

In order to explain this, I shall begin with the men's version of the myth. I shall start both accounts from the same point, after creation when the gender groups are living alone. The men's group live in one area of forest hunting mammals such as duikers, pigs and elephant, and collecting honey, nuts and fruit. They copulate with a large hard forest fruit (*mapombe*) that has a creamy whitish substance inside it and the *mapombe* create many boys. The women spend their days fishing, collecting yams, mushrooms and leaves in another part of the forest. They dance *Ejengi* and baby girls fall from *Ejengi*'s raffia clothing.

### **The men's version of the creation myth**

The *kombeti* (spokesperson, elder) of the men's group was called Toli [Ndjeka in some areas]. Normally the men hunted together but one day Toli decided to go hunting alone. He walked far in the forest. After much walking he found himself walking up a forest stream when suddenly he saw a broken piece of *mea* (wild yam) floating on the water.

'Aaa, people must be up there!' Toli said to himself. [*Mea* yams are slender and easily broken during extraction from the ground. Women wash *mea* yams in a stream before cooking them.] He decided to walk upstream and retrace the yam's journey.

He walked up many streams, up, up and up. Finally, as he approached the headwaters of a stream, he heard voices. Stealthily he approached the women who were washing *mea* yams. He observed this new type of people for several hours. He saw their camp, he even watched them dancing *Ejengi*, and saw the babies falling out of *Ejengi's* raffia. [This section is often elaborated to varying degrees; here I give the minimalist version].

He was amazed and rushed back to the men's camp. He recounted all he had seen. They did not believe him and insisted he take them to see for themselves. The next morning the men prepared themselves. Each took a leaf parcel of honey.

As they approached the women, they heard singing. Employing the encirclement technique used when group hunting herds of wild pigs, they surrounded the women [*bofienga bangwia* – to encircle the pigs, then send one hunter in to make the first attack thus scattering the remaining pigs towards the other hunters]. Toli led the attack and took hold of the *kombeti* of the women. He beat her with honeycomb on the shoulders. Each man grabbed a woman and beat her with honeycomb. At first the women fought but when they tasted the honey they stopped.

'Tasty, ooo so tasty! Who are these people with such sweet things? Such sweetness, wonderful sweetness. I will follow them to get such sweetness!' exclaimed the women and started making friends with the men. Each man found a woman and they went back to the women's camp. The men threw away their *mapombe* fruit.

Later the women told the men to stay in camp while they went off to do something. The women started dancing *Ejengi*. The men found them and demanded to have *Ejengi* for themselves. The women were forced to give the men *Ejengi*. By taking *Ejengi* men obliged women to make love to them in order to have children.

### **The women's version of the creation myth**

The women's version of this myth begins in the same way as that of the men's with men and women living in different parts of the forest and ignorant of each other. The women's version parallels the men's in basic narrative. However, in the women's version Toli is not a man but a woman, and the *kombeti* (elder, spokesperson) of the women's group.

Although women frequently alluded to this account, none of them ever told me it. This version was only ever told to me once, and by a man.

Toli was the person who led men to the women. Toli had a dream in which *Komba* (God) told her about the men. When all the women were out fishing, Toli left them to walk alone in the forest. She went to find the men. There is a song the women sing at this stage of narration '*a dua kenga batopai, Toli a to ko, Toli a to ko*' (She went out to find men, there's Toli there she is). Eventually, after much walking, she came across their tracks. The men were hunting. She followed them.

The men were copulating with *mapombe* (the large, hard forest fruit). That evening she entered their camp. Upon setting their eyes on her, the men all got erect penises. [Another song celebrates this – something like 'When Toli came they all stood up'.] She had sex with them and told them about all her friends back at her camp. The next morning they left early and Toli led them back to the women's camp. Each man took a parcel of honey with him.

Upon arrival the women were difficult to convince that the men were nice until they had tasted the honey. Each woman took a man for herself. The men threw away their *mapombe* fruit. Then the women told the men to stay at camp while they went to dig *mea* roots.

One of the men followed the women into the forest. To his surprise he saw the women dancing *Ejengi* and babies fell out of the leaves. He was impressed. He ran back to camp and told the men. They said to themselves – 'that's something for us men'. They went to the women and demanded that they be given *Ejengi*. The women gave it to them.



The women interpret their gift of *Ejengi* to the men as demonstrating their strength. The implication is that if they could give away *Ejengi*, then they must have had even better things that they kept. Men emphasise that they took *Ejengi* by force. The women had no choice. The different interpretations of this myth are characteristic of the way the men's and women's groups vie for respect and undermine each other's claims to be more important. In effect each gender group stresses the significance of their own action in the establishment of contemporary society and contests the other group's claims. The gender groups have agreed to disagree, and maintain a balance of power that shifts with the moment but remains roughly equal over time.

This rivalry animates Mbendjele gender relations more generally, and is particularly obvious during *massana* like *Ejengi* and *Ngoku*. To elaborate further on this topic and return to the themes of the myth, I will begin with a description of the *njanga* path.

### **The *njanga* path**

The *njanga* paths recreate the original single sex area of forest mentioned in the myth. When the initiates go there, they in effect recreate that original society and are expected to conduct themselves in appropriate ways that emphasise sharing, laughter, peacefulness and respect. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Massana*, both men and women have their own *njanga* paths in different places. Since I have no experience of the women's *njanga* path, my discussion will focus on some of the basics of the *Ejengi njanga* path.

Every permanent campsite has an *Ejengi njanga* path. It is clearly marked with large palm fronds or branches to warn the uninitiated not to enter. The path leads into the forest away from other paths and opens out. It is here that men meet and discuss their most private and sacred preoccupations. On the *njanga* the *bangonja* (initiated men) are expected to follow an ideal code of conduct.

When *Ejengi*'s children are heard calling in their loud, clap-like, voices all the initiated men know they must go to the *njanga*. As men arrive they sit down saying certain words and make themselves comfortable. Discussions should be melodic, unhurried and accompanied by theatrical and comical re-enactments of recounted events. Speakers are not interrupted, but allowed to finish in their own time. It is a place for reasoned discussion, not

boisterous argument or squabbling. Important affairs in the community will be discussed, problems ironed out, advice given, fines levied, and *nengomae* (secret knowledge) will be heard. Here, men are bound never to repeat what they hear to the uninitiated unless it is agreed otherwise<sup>150</sup>.

Typical discussions will include organising *massana* or discussing particular aspects of the *massana*, exchanging hunting or honey collecting information, and animated re-enactments of past hunts or other events. These discussions are an important source of knowledge about esoteric practices, hunting and honey collecting. One reason why the *njan̄ga* path is a preferred place for sharing this information is that men can be sure women will not hear and thus men can maintain their monopolistic control of hunting, honey collecting and *Ejengi*.

Speeches on the *njan̄ga* path are made in a particularly animated style in which the speaker often stands up and energetically cavorts around illustrating the account while mimicking key sounds. Elders are the specialists at this, and it is their duty to demonstrate the accomplished arts of the Mbendjele orator to the young initiates. This should always involve great hilarity and often takes the form of a long monologue. To provide an illustration I have summarised a speech given by Moanja, one of the greatest orators. When seen as text the story may appear rather dry. However Moanja's blow-by-blow enactment of it turned it into a hilarious tale that captured everyone's attention, ensuring his point was not missed. The story goes something like this.

X did not respect the *nengomae* (*Ejengi*'s secrets) properly. Moanja and X were pig hunting and just about to *fienga* (the 'encircle and scatter' technique) when X screams out as a sharp stick pokes into his eye! He cries and wails. Moanja does his best to heal him with eye drops (*looki*) from many different forest leaves. Over several months he tries everything he knows. But X still sees only darkness from that eye. He cries and laments, but nothing can be done. 'O *sakana na bekutu te!*' 'You don't fool around with men's secrets!'

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<sup>150</sup> Any breaches of these rules can potentially lead to co-coordinated physical punishment of the transgressor by the initiates. In one case a huge fight broke out when some young Bilo initiates did not respect *Ejengi*'s food correctly. The fight was so serious that the Mbendjele of Ikelemba abandoned the Bilo. However, I only ever saw men get fined.

Any food, drink, money, tobacco or marijuana that enters the *njanga* path is scrupulously shared among all present. Initiates are expected to be ‘generous to a fault’, i.e. they should share everything they have to the point of destitution. Feasting is vital during *Ejengi* since *Ejengi* celebrates a state of plenty. When a large camp returns to a permanent campsite after a long journey in the forest, their *Ejengi* will greet them to celebrate their bounty. It is necessary to have many things when *Ejengi* dances since *Ejengi* eats things.

When *Ejengi* desires something, he sends his warriors (*bomboti*), the young men, to fetch it. They leave the *njanga* path in tight formation stamping in unison and chanting in deep loud voices while the song leader interjects high pitched hoots and calls like ‘*moi eee!*’ – ‘tummy hey!’ or ‘*mondumbele!*’ - smoke! They sing and stomp their way to the hut or person they wish to demand something from. The song leader breaks off to make the demand. The person has no choice but to go to fetch whatever is being demanded. Until they have given what is demanded, *Ejengi* ’s warriors remain close to them continuing to sing and stamp, keeping up the pressure. When *Bilo* call *Ejengi* for commemoration ceremonies, *Ejengi* ’s warriors endlessly approach them until everything they can provide has been obtained and is consumed.

### ***Ejengi* initiation**

Initiation into *Ejengi* is the only way to be incorporated into this exclusive group that reconnects with the first people. It is through this connection that the initiates have special abilities. These abilities develop depending on individual aptitudes, but begin with protective assistance for life in the forest as a hunter. *Ejengi* also hones forest skills, enabling initiates to see with *Ejengi* ’s eyes and so on.

The initiated men (*bangonja*) call themselves *Ejengi* ’s warriors (*bomboti ua Ejengi*) and elaborate an ideology of masculinity and male values within this context. These include acting as a unified group, respecting *Ejengi* ’s secrets, speaking honestly and boldly without fear of the consequences, and not complaining about hardship or suffering. The initiation ceremony incorporates the neophyte (*mboni*) into this male group and connects him with his mythic past. The public aspects of initiation illustrate parts of how this happens.

Initiation is not likely before a boy has reached seven or eight years old and may occur at any time until he reaches maturity. The key qualities the elders look for are courage, since the initiation is very dangerous, and maturity, to ensure the boy understands the importance of respecting *Ejengi*'s secrets. Elders observe small boys and comment to each other when they think someone is ready. They may even ask the boy if he thinks he is ready to 'enter' (*bogwie*) *Ejengi*. This will be the signal to the boy's elder male relatives that they should prepare themselves so that at the next *Ejengi massana* the boy can be initiated.

The time of initiation is governed as much by the neophyte's family's access to the initiation fee and food for feasting as it is by the readiness of the boy. Some boys ready for initiation remain uninitiated for many years through lack of sponsorship. This is often a problem for boys with few or no elder male relatives. The neophyte's sponsor will be obliged to provide distilled corn or manioc spirit (*ngonlongolo*- traded or bought from Bilo), palm wine, tobacco and foodstuffs such as honey, meat, yams or manioc in sufficient quantities for the feasting of the initiated men.

Initiations often occur for a number of boys together, but rarely more than three or four. The neophyte's sponsor from among the initiates is referred to as his *Ejengi* father (*tai ya Ejengi*), and it is his role to ensure the neophyte understands the trials he will face and that he breaks none of the prohibitions imposed on him during the initiation period. These prohibitions are explained to the neophyte in the morning at the beginning of the procedures. He must not eat any food prepared by his female relatives. He must also not talk to or touch them. He can only wear the traditional loincloth (*nganja*) and must remain barefoot at all times. From that moment on until the end of the initiation he must sleep in the forest away from the women. He must not wash until all his ordeals are over, and then it is *Ejengi* that must wash him.

The boy is then prepared for seclusion. Women bring red paste (*mongole*) to paint his whole body red. This paste is used in a variety of contexts in which the person painted is in danger or dangerous to others – such as after birth, during illness, during mystical procedures or when bereaved. Black paste from a variety of natural sources and white lime will then be applied to the face and torso in dot and/or line patterns. Jewellery in the form

of brightly coloured beaded strings and other odds and ends like can pulls or shiny plastic fake jewellery will be added. The neophyte is then secluded in a dark hut for several hours.

Meanwhile *Ejengi*'s warriors will have been coming regularly to the neophyte's sponsor's household with various demands that have to be met. Alcohol and tobacco will often be demanded at this stage. As more goods are demanded and arrive at the *njanga* path, the *konja* will call his *Ejengi* and the initiates will begin dancing and singing in the open space of the camp or village.

When the dancing and singing has built up the necessary momentum, *Ejengi* appears and the whole community is in full *massana*. Often around midday, the neophyte is brought out into the central space and made to sit on a mat with his eyes firmly down on the ground, head resting in his hands. As he sits there in the fierce midday sun the women dance up behind him to bless him so that he may survive the ordeals. Women are proud that a boy will enter *Ejengi*, but fear greatly for his safety as it is well known that the ordeals are very dangerous. They claim that they say secret spells to break the power of *Ejengi* and ensure the neophyte is not harmed and succeeds in the trials he is set.

During the hour or two this lasts the neophyte is turned to sit facing each cardinal point and steadily brought closer to the *njanga* path. Eventually he is so close that the initiates pick up the mat he was sitting on and, using it to shield the neophyte from the women's view, take him running onto the *njanga* path. Now his ordeals begin.

The women remain behind. The neophyte's mother, mother's sisters and father's sister spray water and throw sand or earth over the places where the neophyte sat. The neophyte's mother then begins dancing up and down in a straight line dragging a fallen leaf from *Ejengi*'s clothing behind her. His sisters sit on the ground next to the path she follows. They remain doing this, sending the neophyte courage, until the initiates emerge from the *njanga* path with a spear smeared in the neophyte's blood. *Ejengi* has eaten their boy. The women must then take up leafy branches and wave them over the spear to dry the blood and prevent flies landing on it. Should a fly land on it before the blood is dry the neophyte will die. After a short while the men return to take the spear and leafy branches back to the *njanga* path.

Some time later, while the women are still assembled together, *mapombe* (the large, hard forest fruit that used to make children for men in the myth) fly out of the undergrowth at them. If one of them should hit a woman it is said that she will die. So, naturally the women scatter and flee into their huts, closing up the entrances. Shortly after this the initiates collect many fresh stems of the *ngongo* leaf. They are 1.50 metres long, thick at the base tapering up to a thin stem, and are firm but not hard. The initiates begin hurling these stems at the women. As the women scatter the initiates charge out of the *njanga* path at them, wielding large sticks and shouting. The women again flee into their huts, closing up the entrances firmly. The men use their sticks to smash up any women's belongings they are lucky enough to find - items like cooking pots, a fireplace, a meat-smoking table or water containers. They also bash the sticks violently against the huts in which the women are hiding. After a few minutes of terrorising the women and children, they return to the *njanga* path.

An hour or so later the neophyte emerges from the *njanga* path surrounded by chanting initiates and dragging *Ejengi* behind him. They parade around the open space and huts. The neophyte is proudly showing his 'work' to the women, who shout and clap praise as he passes. The neophyte has succeeded in his ordeals and now requires instruction. The procession returns to the *njanga* path.

The neophyte will remain on the *njanga* path for a total of three days. He must 'get used to' the *njanga* and must eat all his meals there. Men will prepare food for him. During this period much secret instruction takes place, punctuated in the evening by *Ejengi massana* lasting until the early hours of the morning. After a short sleep the neophyte will be woken at first light (around 4 a.m.) to begin another *Ejengi massana*. The singing and dancing will continue until mid-morning, at which point the initiates and neophyte return to the *njanga* path until *Ejengi* dances again in the evening.

At around midday on the third day the neophyte emerges for the last time from the *njanga* path. Again he drags *Ejengi* behind him as the initiates surround him chanting and stamping in unison. After parading around they go down to a river where *Ejengi* will wash the dirt (*mbindo*) of the initiation off the neophyte. He is now one of the *bangonja* (initiates).

The initiation ceremony publicly emphasises the way the men's group has changed since the mythic past. All the key characters of the myth are present; the men's group, the women's group, *Ejengi* and the *mapombe* (the large hard fruit men copulated with). The ceremony shows them in a new relationship to each other. The women, who have given birth to the boy, beautify and prepare him for the initiation. They voluntarily give him up to *Ejengi* and the initiates. Through their actions he is given courage and protection during his ordeals.

When the men throw the *mapombe* fruit at the women, they are reminding the women of *Ejengi's* complex reproductive potency and also reiterating their mythical rejection of the *mapombe* fruit and their preference for women. They are also emphasising men's power – the physical strength they used to take *Ejengi* from the women and their control of the sperm women now require to become pregnant and to procreate. The attack on women and their things is intended to reinforce the message that women must respect the men since that original strength with which they took *Ejengi* remains present.

Initiation is incorporation into an exclusive and powerful group. The trials set the neophyte are focused on testing their skill and confidence in the forest. In many obvious and hidden ways *Ejengi* ensures that boys become Mbendjele men. As they pass time on the *njanga* path, new initiates learn from all they hear about hunting, honey collecting and *nengomae* (*Ejengi's* secrets). These recitals are unique to the *njanga* path and provide boys with informal instruction and important techniques that facilitate a successful forest life. Through the skills they learn, the secrets they are told and the values these instil, they are, at least in theory, capable of all that will be required of them in the forest world.

A description of the *massana* of *Ejengi* will also serve to illustrate how *Ejengi* resonates with echoes and memories of the mythical time of single sex groups and enacts the new relationship between the gender groups.

### ***Ejengi massana***

*Ejengi* is only normally danced at permanent campsites or villages and takes three days to perform. However, for Mbendjele *Ejengi* celebrates abundance and can only be danced

**Plate 12. Ejengi is Called To End Mourning For Bilo**

12.1. In return for food and alcohol Mbendjelle call Ejengi into the Bilo village of Ikelemba.



12.2. After three days of Ejengi dancing in the village, Ejengi is lead to the house where the bereaved Bilo have been secluded. They have been in mourning for over a year, unable to cut their hair, or wear new clothes.



12.3. Ejengi brings them out of the hut in their old clothes for the last time.



12.4. All the bereaved join together as one and are lead out of the village to the river where their sorrows will be washed away.





when there is abundance. Typical occasions when *Ejengi* is danced are when a clan returns to a permanent campsite from a long journey with food, or during commemoration ceremonies (*eboka*). During any of these occasions boys or young men may be initiated, and sometimes, when there are a number of neophytes, an *Ejengi* may be called solely of the purpose of initiating them.

*Ejengi* plays a crucial role in the lifting of mourning, or commemoration ceremony, for Bilo or Mbendjele who have died. Most ethnic groups in the region practise this ceremony. It requires the participation of *Ejengi* to dance and end the ceremony by taking the bereaved down to water to be purified from their sorrow (see Plate 12). Mbendjele dance *Ejengi* for Bilo funerals because Bilo will provide food and drink in abundance. Bilo want *Ejengi* to dance for them in order to remove the pollution of death. These different objectives do not clash, but are well integrated by *Ejengi* and have in effect expanded *Ejengi's* role. When Mbendjele dance *Ejengi* to end the commemoration ceremony after someone has died, they emphasise abundance. If the dead person was still hanging around, they might stop people finding food. The ability to get sufficient goods for the commemoration ceremony is the sign that they are allowing the living to continue finding food, and therefore the bereaved can now cut their hair and dress in nice clothes again without causing their dead relative to become jealous.

*Ejengi* has a history of negotiating between the sexes. Although I have never observed this, I was told that if a woman is considered to have unfairly rejected her husband the community will call *Ejengi* to attempt reconciliation. *Ejengi* will dance up to the hut where she is sitting. *Ejengi* will demand she hold her husband and remain there until she has at least rested her leg over her husband's. An elderly widow recounting her life explained that when her husband proposed to her, she refused him. She felt that she was much too young and he too old. Despite this everyone was telling her he was a good man and that she would be happy. She refused to sleep in the same place as him and repeatedly returned to her mother's hut. When her mother also insisted that she should go to stay with her suitor, she ran away and hid up a tree. This she did night after night. The men called *Ejengi* to dance round the bottom of the tree demanding she come down. She had to agree to come down. *Ejengi* then led her to her husband. *Ejengi* stayed until she had taken some love magic from her husband. After that she accepted him and loved him very much. He died some ten or so

years later leaving two children. She refused to marry again, saying her husband's love magic was too strong.

*Ejengi massana* requires far more preparation than any other *massana*. *Ejengi*'s clothes (*mondimba*) must be collected from established raffia stands in a marsh and prepared, often the day before. Since people will dance intensively for three days, food, drink and other suitable items such as cigarettes should be available in much greater abundance than normal. The initiates will make many demands from the *njanga* path on behalf of *Ejengi*. Only if *Ejengi* is satisfied will the *massana* begin.

To begin the initiated men form a line with the drummers. This acts as a barrier to protect the uninitiated men, women and children from the dancing *Ejengi*. Initiated men take turns beating the long *mokinda* drum and the shorter, double sided *ndumu* drum<sup>151</sup> from a fixed place in the central camp space. The drums are all that remain stationary once *Ejengi* comes out to dance. They provide the initiates with an anchor in order to reform their line should it break up. Even when *Ejengi* is not present the initiates maintain this line, dancing forwards and back in a distinctive six-beat rhythm while doing a double clap beginning on every fifth beat as they come forward singing. Elder men will dance up and down the line animating participants. Women with small children on their backs collect behind the barrier of initiates and join in the singing and clapping. The women pad their bottoms with *mogebo* leaves and raffia skirts (*malamba*) and dress up in brightly coloured cloth. On special occasions they may also paint their bodies and wear flower jewellery (see plates 7 and 9).

When the singing is good enough, *Ejengi* emerges from the *njanga* path, swirling and twirling, rising up very tall then suddenly becoming very small, crouching for a few moments before continuing his swirling motion towards the line of initiates. Their bodies act as a barrier that prevents *Ejengi* from getting to the uninitiated behind them. Sometimes *Ejengi* breaks through the barrier, scattering the uninitiated as they flee. It is strongly believed that should *Ejengi*'s clothing touch an uninitiated person it will cut them and bleeding will not stop until they die. For this reason people are genuinely terrified when *Ejengi* breaks through the initiates' line.

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<sup>151</sup> The *mokinda* beats the base-line or basic rhythm, whilst the *ndumu* weaves in and out, sometimes joining the basic rhythm, sometimes going its own way.

The belief in the danger of *Ejengi* to the uninitiated is so strong that I have never witnessed anybody not flee when *Ejengi* approached them, let alone actually touch it. This was particularly striking when a young Mbendjele girl, thinking she could not escape the oncoming *Ejengi*, fainted from fright on the spot. Panic broke out as the women thought *Ejengi* had touched her. The men assured them that *Ejengi* had not done so, and as she regained consciousness the women were satisfied. Uninitiated Bilo are particularly terrified of *Ejengi*, and it is not uncommon to see them flee into their houses when they hear or see *Ejengi* dancing. Occasionally sceptical Bilo youths assemble to watch the dance. Yet without fail, despite their attempts to put on a brave face, they flee in panic when *Ejengi* seems to be heading their way.

The fear *Ejengi* creates is also part of male identity. Men should be feared since they are potentially deadly. This aspect of danger is an important dynamic directing the action during the *massana* and contributes to a heightened sensory awareness that facilitates the trance states people enter as the dance proceeds. For the non-initiated the tension between fleeing *Ejengi*, and then attracting him in again by beautiful singing and dancing, maintains an exciting atmosphere. Women's seductiveness plays an important role in maintaining this crucial dynamic animating the *massana*. Women's dancing is intended to look irresistible to both men and *Ejengi*. Women lure him in, while men control the male danger that he brings.

*Ejengi* will dance towards the singers and then retreat back towards the *njanga* path. Some initiated men will always encircle *Ejengi* loosely. However, as *Ejengi* becomes more and more excited by the women's singing and dancing, his movements become more difficult to follow and other initiates will break out of the line to help follow *Ejengi* more closely. If *Ejengi* retreats towards the *njanga* at this stage women may break through the gaps and go past the line of initiates, dancing out following *Ejengi*. The women sexily lure *Ejengi* back with their provocative bottom-wiggling dance.

Many Mbendjele men are obsessed with women's bottoms, much as many European men are obsessed with women's breasts. As one man explained 'Men only see women's bottoms. That's what they are after!' A woman's bottom wiggling quickly, especially a

plump one rippling makes many Mbendjele men, or an *Ejengi*, become consumed with lust. The leaf and cloth padding women stuff into their waist strings during a dance accentuates the size of their bottoms to increase their beauty and seductiveness.

As they dance the women advance sideways, curving their necks down away from the direction of motion, giving the impression that their wiggling bottoms are leading them forwards. If a woman wants to show respect or affection for an initiate she may dance up behind him at this stage and firmly grab his collar bones from behind, one in each hand, and then drag her palms down his back. When women get carried away this can get almost aggressive, as the force of their hands causes men to lose their balance. Other women will pass beyond the initiates' line and dance forward provocatively taunting *Ejengi*, until he begins to return towards the women. Then they rush back to get to safety behind the drums and initiated men. From time to time *Ejengi* retreats to the *njanga* path followed by the initiates. The singers may rest briefly before calling *Ejengi* back with the enthusiasm of their singing.

There are many different ways in which the dance may come to an end. These include the sensational *ndalandala* – when *Ejengi*'s clothing, the *mondimba*, suddenly fall to the ground in a lifeless heap. The initiates then pick it up and ceremoniously return it to the *njanga* path. The initiates then come out in a line singing '*Libata, libata, ooooo moto na kombo ee oo moto na kombo*' (head-piece, head-piece, o, the person's name? E o, the person's name?). The song reminds the women that it was *Ejengi* dancing. More frequently, *Ejengi* is ended with *motoma ya Ejengi* when *Ejengi*'s warriors come out chanting and stamping in unison to make some last requests before *Ejengi* retires from the *njanga* path. These are often extremely theatrical and focus around demands for *mai* (water) and *mondumbele* (smoke).

*Ejengi* massana combines the men's and women's groups together in ways that emphasise their uniqueness and difference in order to achieve a remarkably synchronised and synergistic whole. Women's sexual attractiveness lures *Ejengi*, men's strength and fearlessness controls and manages him. In combination they manage to bring him out of the forest into the human group, and so all are able to benefit from *Ejengi*'s blessings.

### ***Ejengi* - Some conclusions**

*Ejengi* is one of the most dangerous and powerful forest creatures. That men can summon and control *Ejengi* expresses their mastery of, and skill within, their environment. *Ejengi* has far-reaching implications for Mbendjele men's relations with all the significant beings they interact with, be they animals, Mbendjele women and children or Bilo. *Ejengi* is a realm in which male identity is elaborated, expressed and recreated for each generation. The emphasis of the *Ejengi* ritual association is on developing male power in opposition to women. The source of this power is in the forest and forest activities.

*Ejengi* provides the initiated with social, religious and economic power. Social power is obtained from the great solidarity achieved between men by participating in *Ejengi*. This co-ordinated support between initiates is demonstrated during an *Ejengi* performance in the way they control and handle *Ejengi*. Being called by *Ejengi*'s children onto the *njanga* path creates an important occasion that publicly demonstrates the men's unity and brings them together so they have the opportunity to discuss important events, make group decisions, and share male experience.

Religious power comes from the fact that *Ejengi* is considered the most important forest spirit, and because *Ejengi* plays a crucial role in all the major group rituals of the Yaka and local Bilo people also. *Ejengi* gives the initiates greatly respected mystical knowledge and skills (*nengomae*), and is widely feared. This earns the initiates respect from the wider community.

*Ejengi* has economic power (*boulue benda* – to bring things out) because, when he is called to dance and if he should ask for something, he cannot be refused by anyone. Thus during an *Ejengi massana* numerous demands will be made on people which they cannot refuse, most notably for water, alcohol, tobacco and marijuana. Initiations also cause many goods to 'come out', and as also discussed in the *massana* chapter, are times of great demands. Of all *mokondi massana*, *Ejengi* is widely considered the most effective at 'bringing things out'.

In relation to women the ritual association of *Ejengi* expresses their ignorance of male power and how men control the dangerous beasts of the forest. By implication the ritual

association of *Ejengi* also expresses their acceptance of their dependence on men to obtain social products from these dangerous creatures. Women show their support for this division of labour and their respect for *Ejengi* and the men by their crucial role in calling *Ejengi* into the human group with their beautiful singing and seductive dancing. *Ejengi*'s power is strong and both feared and loved by the women. This gives *Ejengi massana* a unique atmosphere of tension, challenge and excitement. The fear Mbendjele women have of *Ejengi* is also extended to the initiates. Yet they are also proud that their menfolk are able to survive initiation, and then by adhering to certain rules, control the dangerous *Ejengi* enabling his positive forest power to emanate into the group.

*Ejengi* is not a cult of protest against women or Bilo<sup>152</sup>, nor a cult emphasising male purity over others. Although at times providing the men with the opportunity to elaborate ideas about male superiority, these claims are not tolerated outside the context of *Ejengi*. Rather than legitimacy, this gives the claims a performative value, giving them a playful or game-like quality. For this reason they are tolerated by the women and accepted during *Ejengi massana*.

The central theme of *Ejengi* is a celebration of Mbendjele men's unique abilities, skills and powers in the forest and their intimate relationship with the forest creatures. By depending on Mbendjele women and children to sing and entice *Ejengi* into the human group the men emphasise that Mbendjele women and children are complementary to this power. It struck me that their respective roles could be paralleled with those of hunting and cooking. Men bring in the raw meat. Women cook it and enable all to gain energy from it. When men are with *Ejengi*, he is raw. Women's dancing cooks *Ejengi*, getting him hotter and hotter so his energy can be enjoyed by all.

The fear of the men created by *Ejengi*, and the deliberate aggression with which they ensure *Ejengi* is respected can lead to a superficial understanding of *Ejengi* as an assertion of male dominance. The mythical claims men make to have taken him from the women

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<sup>152</sup> Although some Bilo now get initiated, they are only given the most basic *nengomae* (*Ejengi* lore), and when Bilo are present on the *njanga* path discussions focus on obtaining goods and their distribution rather than on secret knowledge and forest skills. Bilo initiates sit on the river or village side of the *njanga*, whereas Mbendjele stay on the forest side, making it almost like two *njanga* in one.

could also be seen in this way. During an *Ejengi massana* men will appear to dominate the community, demanding complete obedience from the uninitiated.

The dominance men exert during *Ejengi massana* does not extend beyond *Ejengi*. It is context dependent. During the *Bolu massana* of children (described in the *massana* chapter), the children dominate the community, though much less effectively than the men during *Ejengi*. During women's *massana*, women dominate the community. To illustrate this I will briefly describe some aspects of the women's *massana* of *Ngoku*. As mentioned above *Ngoku* is considered the women's equivalent to *Ejengi*.

### **Ngoku – a women's mokondi**<sup>153</sup>

Despite men owning most of the *mokondi* called during *massana*, women claim that originally most of them were women's. The men saw them, as they did *Ejengi*, and were so struck by them that they would ask the women for them; 'Give us that *mokondi*, tell us all its secrets.' Sometimes the women would give them, other times they refused. But the men would keep asking. The women emphasise that they gave the men the *mokondi* slowly, one by one, but imply that some were taken by force. However, the women smile, 'We kept two, the most powerful – *Ngoku* and *Yele*. We'll never give them to men!'

For this reason women consider themselves to be the mothers of all *mokondi*. Certain very old women are sometimes only referred to as '*ngwei ua mokondi*' (mother of *mokondi*) or simply '*mokondi*' by men and women alike. They have special roles in women's *massana*, and certain of these women may also participate in men's *massana* in odd ways, like holding *Ejengi*'s clothing at certain times. This would normally be fatal for another woman. They are described as having 'hard tummies' (*gundu budi*). This is a double allusion to their strong mystical powers and that their wombs are long past childbirth. During women's *mokondi massana* these women can speak for their *mokondi* and lead the key sections of the *massana*.

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<sup>153</sup> *Ngoku* is exclusively for women and consequently I am only familiar with the public aspects of the *massana*. My wife Ingrid was initiated early in our fieldwork and later became a *konja ua Ngoku* (*Ngoku* spirit controller). However she refuses to tell me much about it so although she corrects me, the information I know about *Ngoku* was mostly gleaned by observation, from other men and only occasionally from women.

**Plate 13**     **Ngoku, Mombangi 1995**



Plate 13.1. -13.2. Elder initiates and the Ngoku spirit-controller lead the singing among the women.



Plate 13.3. -13.5. As they do so, other young women dance up and down the central space, calling all other women to come, and letting all the men know that Ngoku has come



J.L.



*Ngoku* is the *mokondi* of the women's *molimo* (spirit). It is exclusive to women. Girls must be initiated and taught its secrets, and it is dangerous to men if they don't stay respectfully away<sup>154</sup>. When women begin *Ngoku*, all male children have to go to their fathers and take themselves well away from the women. Any male occupants of huts near where the women decide to sit must go elsewhere. The women firmly take control of the communal space and the rest of the community is subjected to their authority. The men frequently try to ignore the raucous proceedings by going into the forest or remaining in their huts.

*Ngoku* begins with the girls and young women joining arms and doing a sort of goose-stepping run up and down the central space while singing '*Ngooku! Ngooku!*' in time with their steps. As they go up and down, more and more women join them, whilst others go to sit with the old women. The women charging up and down the central space clearly impose *Ngoku*'s authority over the camp (see Plate 13).

As more and more women join the old women, they begin to sing *Ngoku* songs that are then taken up by the dancing women and girls. These songs are often very sexual and frequently insult the men. They include songs like; '*Mapindi ma mu bola!*' (Their testicles are broken!) or '*ba ena mojambi na yobe mapeni*' (They cut the water liana with a sharp knife – referring to men's need for circumcision), or '*baito wonda to njombo, doto ba die ebe!*' (Women only chase young men, old men are no good!), and so on. The women will all sit together when every woman has arrived. From here they may remain seated and singing or they may perform some of the many *Ngoku* dances.

Many of the dances women perform during *Ngoku* have sexual connotations. Small girls and young women often sing '*Baka tunde*' as they dance in a line bringing their heels up to bash against their own buttocks. They say they do it to make their bottoms become fat and beautiful. Others are more overtly sexual. In one dance the women lie on their backs on the ground rubbing their thighs together until they become frenzied and are lifted up from behind one at a time by one of the elder *Ngoku* initiates. These elderly women often wear bushy leaf headdresses, with similar leaf bands around their arms, chest and waist

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<sup>154</sup> Bilo women occasionally pressurize Mbendjele women to initiate them. Mbendjele women feel obliged to do so since they fear being cursed if they do not. In a similar way to their subversion of male claims to authority, Mbendjele women accept the Bilo women but teach them slightly wrong words to the songs so they have no power and when Bilo are present they only sing the wrong words.

interspersed with seasonal flowers. There are many different dance movements in *Ngoku*. These are only a few examples to provide a sense of the style and variation.

The central theme of much public *Ngoku massana* is explicitly sexual or to do with women's reproductive skills. Making babies grow in their wombs from men's sperm is a miraculous feat that mystifies Mbendjele men. This is the side of *Ngoku* most often shown to men. However there remains much that women do alone in the forest of which I am ignorant. This public side is what concerns me here.

One of the most popular *Ngoku* songs women sing, often while parading up and down the central space repeats the following two lines;

'*Biyaka-i, Biyaka-i* (We the Yaka, we the Yaka)

*Bibale mayellε!*' (twice the intelligence!)

The *Ngoku* song implicitly refers to the mythic past when women owned all the *mokondi* and got their babies from *Ejengi*. It could be translated as 'We the women are the Yaka, and we are twice as intelligent (as the men)'.

*Ngoku* songs often tease the men and can sometimes provoke angry reactions. However men will not dare to interrupt the *Ngoku*, but rather wait until it is over and then get angry with their wives, complaining about their behaviour. This is a dangerous course of action for a man to take since other women will quickly come to her support by ridiculing him. In general men behave respectfully towards the women and *Ngoku* despite their discomfort and embarrassment at the words of the songs and the dance moves their wives perform. They often simply remove themselves, together with their male children, from the camp or village and go to bathe or sit with other men in the forest.

*Ngoku* and the ritual association of *molimo* remind all of the power and solidarity of the women. They teach women where their power in society lies and how to use it. Sexual teasing, evident in many *Ngoku* songs and dances, is an important device even very young wives use to shame an undutiful husband. A woman who is upset with her husband's behaviour – he may be chasing another woman, or not providing enough to eat, or in one case, not having sex often enough with his wife – will go to sit with other women in a

prominent place. In loud, exaggerated tones she talks about her problems with her husband, enthusiastically miming his actions and expressions.

This is a terrible situation for the hapless husband as he hears the women, children and other men laughing boisterously at his expense. The shame is great and, although he may well be furious, further negative actions towards his wife will only incite her to elaborate the performance and often get joined by other women, further shaming him<sup>155</sup>. The solidarity that underpins such behaviour is based in *Ngoku* and permits women to have a powerful sanction against men.

The endless references to sexuality, in particular to men's insatiable appetite for women (see also the *Ngoku* songs on page 159), drum home to the women some of the very powerful controls they have over men. Women make themselves very desirable through their dances, yet in their songs deny the men control over their sexuality. The tension made by creating desire, yet denying it fully to men, is explored vividly during *Ngoku*. Although most clearly expressed during *Ngoku*, this tension is the basis for much of the sexual teasing during other *massana* too.

### **Discussion**

The *massana* of *Ejengi* and *Ngoku* explore and develop the unique and valued abilities and powers of each gender group with which they will be able to lead a successful life in the forest. The initiation, songs, dances and movements of each *massana* allow successive generations of Mbendjele to explore gender, as their ancestors understood it, and to learn the skills they need to use gender to their advantage. The *njanga* path is the favourite place to learn and cultivate these unique gendered skills and provides the location for establishing the intense solidarity that is central to same-sex relations, and that ensures neither gender group is effective in attempting to dominate the other.

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<sup>155</sup> Most men leave for a secluded place when they see themselves becoming the centre of the women's mirth. Some men good-humouredly join in, and laugh at their wife's impersonations of themselves. Occasionally these performances have led to violence. On one occasion a husband became so enraged that he began trying to beat his wife with a stick. She fled. He followed, but not without bashing several bystanders inadvertently. Other people became involved and the problem threatened to escalate. Although calmed, the row erupted again several times that evening. The consequences for the man involved were serious and took many months for him to resolve. He had to pay fines to all the other people he had hit.

Men, due to their physical strength and mastery of hunting weapons, are more easily able to dominate the community than women. However male attempts to assert their dominance outside specific *massana* contexts are ineffective because they are constrained by women's counter-culture. This is expressed in the rival creation myths. Men claim they 'caught' women, seduced them with sweet things, and stole their only chance to have children independently by taking *Ejengi*. Yet asking the women reveals a different angle that attributes authorship of the significant events of the myth to women, and places the source of religious power firmly in their hands. It was given to the men in stages, as a mother bequeaths her knowledge to her children. And of course they kept what they consider to be the most powerful – *Ngoku* and *Yele*.

Men cannot control women's labour nor the yield of women's labour. Neither can they control the destination of women in marriage since they are unable to oblige a woman to marry anyone against her wishes. These are crucial aspects of male domination in other societies (Woodburn 1978; 1982a). The dominance exerted by men during *massana* such as *Ejengi* could influence other contexts if those other contexts tolerated this or allowed it to happen. However, Mbendjele women ensure this is not the case.

Each gender group continuously subverts the potential prestige the other group might accrue from their role in society. This has been a theme running throughout Mbendjele collective representations and religious ideology. Beginning with *ekila*, and then *massana*, I have presented some of the key ways the Mbendjele work to avoid hierarchy in society whether between individuals or gender groups.

*Massana* like those discussed in this chapter, celebrate gender and emphasise independence yet interdependence, antagonism yet desire, separation and unity, subversion and respect, and the management of their relations by same-sex solidarity and taunt and praise, or shaming and loving.

These seemingly contradictory emphases struck me as a critical dynamic by which the Mbendjele maintain relatively egalitarian gender relations. Relatively because at different moments, most obviously during *massana*, but at other times too, either men or women may appear to dominate the other gender group. However this appearance is transitory. The

interplay between men's and women's groups is better represented as an egalitarianism that depends on each gender group asserting itself effectively in front of the other, and in spite of the other.

*Ngoku* and *Ejengi* demonstrate how this happens. They both glorify their respective gender group and demand total respect from the other group during performances. In this way they celebrate each gender's distinctive contribution to society. This may be done with such enthusiasm that it appears as if the men doing *Ejengi*, or the women doing *Ngoku*, are trying to assert their dominance over the group. But it is important to understand that this is only tolerated by other Mbendjele because it is ephemeral.

This offers an interesting window on Mbendjele perceptions of when authority is legitimate and when they are prepared to accept it. The basic principle seems to me that when doing specialised activities, notably elephant hunting (*tuma*), healing (*nganga*), or calling spirits from the forest (*mokondi massana*) then Mbendjele will accept a specialist's authority for the duration of the activity. During this period Mbendjele are respectful and defer to the specialist(s), but as soon as it is over they revert to normal relations in which no-one can expect someone else to do something they ask unless that person feels like it.

This Mbendjele notion of circumscribed and contextual authority is a regular source of friction in relations with their Bilo neighbours. Mbendjele attitudes conflict with Bilo claims to total authority over Mbendjele. Indeed, as the following chapter will seek to show, Mbendjele attempt to subvert these claims in many different ways. *Ngoku* and *Ejengi* contribute to this because they are centrally located in Bilo conceptions of Mbendjele men and women as mystically powerful semi-human creatures that are so intimately tuned into nature that they have mastered all of the most dangerous forest creatures, including the *mokondi*. This generates some respect from the Bilo for the Mbendjele, in a relationship that otherwise attempts to systematically denigrate the Mbendjele and their way of life. The following chapter will now move outside the forest world of the Mbendjele to consider the Mbendjele's relationship with Bilo and other outsiders.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **GORILLAS, PIGS AND PEOPLE: MBENDJELE CONCEPTIONS OF OUTSIDERS.**

This chapter examines Mbendjele relations with groups they see as coming from outside the forest, notably their Bilo neighbours. The way Mbendjele talk about their Bilo farming neighbours contrasts with the way Mbendjele discuss relations between themselves and other Yaka Pygmy groups described in Chapter Two. In contrast to the enduring history shared by Yaka groups (see Appendix One), Mbendjele do not discuss the history of relations with Bilo and other outsiders. Rather, they mostly perceive these relations to be utilitarian, temporary and disposable.

The different ways Bilo and Mbendjele talk about each other will be compared with observations on how each achieves their goals within what is predominantly an exchange-based relationship. The ethnography shows that despite Bilo claims to authority, and attempts to tie-down Mbendjele into long lasting relationships, Mbendjele have never fully acknowledged these, and instead actively structure encounters with Bilo to achieve their own immediate goals.

The Mbendjele interact with Bilo in a variety of ways that they see as a series of strategies to exploit goods that Bilo have. These strategies are talked about in a similar way to forest subsistence activities. In particular, similarities are drawn between hunting strategies designed to be suitable for the animal being hunted and the way Mbendjele approach Bilo.

Most Mbendjele have some contact with Bilo several times a year. Although rarely sharing the same places most Mbendjele will be within one day's walking distance from a Bilo village for around half the year. High points in their interactions occur at harvest time in the late rainy season, when Mbendjele women assist in harvesting, and in the late dry season, when the Mbendjele perform ceremonies for the Bilo and trees must be felled to clear new

fields. At other times of the year contacts are mainly for the small-scale exchange or sale of forest produce, or when Bilo seek Mbendjele workers for particular tasks.

At the formal level, relations between Mbendjele and Bilo are between clans. In general Mbendjele clans are incorporated into Bilo clans as imaginary cousins. As if the first bonds created between Bilo and Mbendjele were between two brothers, with the Bilo being the elder brother. Fictive kin terms may be used between individuals in order to emphasise the special relationship between their clans, notably the term ‘*noko*’ (cousin), and ‘*bokilo*’ (affine)<sup>156</sup>. These two terms will be employed depending on the relationship of ego’s clan to that of the person addressed, whether as part of the same clan or as a wife-giving clan. However, most commonly Mbendjele refer to Bilo members of their partner clan as ‘*Milo angamu*’ (my Bilo), and the Bilo to the Mbendjele clan members as ‘*Bambenga nangai*’ (Lingala for ‘my Pygmy’).

Each individual can create ties with several people within the group of formal partners, as well as break individual ties without losing access to other members of the group. These individual relations are at the core of the exchanges between Mbendjele and Bilo. Generalisations are complicated by the Mbendjele’s mobility and the facility with which they establish new exchange relationships with individuals outside these formal clan relations. Mbendjele frequently move, often remaining in places they like for several months, or even years. Thus most people will maintain a variety of partners at different times and in the different places they frequent.

### **Models of Pygmy – Farmer interactions**<sup>157</sup>

Travelling widely in the Mbendjele area in 1906, Bruel noted the high mobility of the Mbendjele. He described his experiences at the Pomo village Mene (now abandoned) on the Ndoki. When he first visited there were many Mbendjele (Bruel calls them Babinga but also mentions that they are called ‘Babandjélé’, 1910:111). On his second visit the Mbendjele had all gone and the Pomo were complaining that they no longer got meat or

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<sup>156</sup> Joiris 1998 notes three models used to incorporate Baka Pygmy groups into Bilo clans: Ritual friendship; pseudo-kinship; and co-initiation in the circumcision ritual ‘*beka*’.

<sup>157</sup> This theoretical section, and other parts of this chapter were used in the preparation of a recent paper (Köhler and Lewis forthcoming 2002). In that paper greater emphasis is given to the revisionists’ arguments and to historical reconstructions.

ivory, but that they were too scared to go looking for the Mbendjele all alone in the forest. Similarly to Regnault's (1911: 285-6) characterisation of these relations as based on 'free contract', Bruel claimed that relations with Bilo 'are voluntary and result from different needs each wishes to satisfy. As soon as relations turn to their detriment, as soon as the Babinga think they have reason to complain about their [Bilo] associates, they break the relations, emigrate and often go far away in the forest where they will make new friends.' (1910: 113, my translation).

Bruel explained that the Mbendjele's mobility is what allowed them to maintain their independence, and disagreed with claims by other (unnamed) European observers that 'the Babingas are the serfs of the sedentary populations.' This assumption, he argued, was due to the Bilo wanting to maintain control of the ivory Mbendjele brought them, and therefore misleading Europeans into thinking the Mbendjele were their slaves. He also pointed to the inability of Europeans to communicate with Mbendjele, allowing the Bilo to claim whatever they wished and to pretend that the Mbendjele were their slaves.

In contrast to these early observations, later writers in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s tended to accept Bilo descriptions and took the view that the Mbendjele were slaves or vassals of the Bilo (for example; Hauser 1953: 167-71<sup>158</sup>; Grangeon 1965: 138). Such disagreements also occurred in the Ituri forest. Against earlier descriptions of the Mbuti of the Ituri Forest (Schweinfurth 1874; Schmidt 1910; Schebesta 1933; 1936) as a race of prehistoric remnants that depended on their culturally superior farmer neighbours for food, Colin Turnbull (1966) brought this debate to anthropological attention with his now well-known argument that Mbuti Pygmies had a high potential for complete autonomy, and that their relations with neighbouring farmers had to be understood in terms of economic exchange and mutual convenience. Since then, anthropologists have discussed the status of Pygmies both as dependent, independent or interdependent actors in a variety of historical and geographical contexts.

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<sup>158</sup> Hauser interestingly calculates that in 1951 a Bilo 'patron' earned 7000CFA from the sale of copal collected by 'his Mbendjele', and 6000CFA from the sale of palm oil made by 'his Mbendjele'. The daily wage for manual labour then was between 25 and 30 CFA for an adult Bilo. The income derived from their relations with the Mbendjele was therefore considerable in comparison.



Most contemporary authors hold the view that Pygmies and farmers have been engaged in exchange relationships for thousands of years in some areas. Groups of Bantu, Adamawa-Ubangian and Central Sudanic language speaking cultivators expanded southwards into the forest from about 5000 - 4000 BP onwards, and had settled most areas by 1000 AD. Clist (1999) provides archaeological evidence that suggests a continuous presence of hunter-gatherers for 100,000 years, in some forested areas. Since no relevant skeletal remains have yet been found, there is no conclusive evidence of whether these people were ancestors of contemporary Pygmies.

With the notable exceptions of Bailey *et al.* (1989, 1992) and Blench (1999), most researchers are of the opinion that contemporary Pygmy groups are the descendants of these indigenous Central African rainforest hunter-gatherers. As farming groups arrived on the edges of the forest, they created relationships with Pygmy groups they encountered. These Pygmies guided their migrations across the forest and showed them how to live in their new environment. In return farmers are believed to have provided cultivated food, iron and salt – and more recently modern consumer goods such as tools, imported household goods, secondhand clothing, etc. – in return for labour, meat and other forest products from Pygmies.

However, a ‘revisionist’ debate on the historical origins of tropical forest hunter-gatherers began simultaneously with regard to the Mbuti Pygmies (Hart and Hart 1986) and the Penan Negritos of Borneo (Headland 1987). Bailey *et al.* (1989) further developed the argument that humans were and are unable to live in tropical rainforests without agriculture, and therefore hunter-gatherer groups could not have been in the forest prior to the arrival of farmers. Since I have dealt with this issue in detail (Köhler and Lewis forthcoming 2002) I will only outline the argument here.

The claim that people cannot live by hunting and gathering alone in tropical rainforests is an inference from a restricted set of environmental data that suggested that ‘primary’ rain forests produce low yields of energy-rich foods. This is said to explain why contemporary rainforest hunter-gatherers are almost universally engaged in exchange relationships with cultivators. Pygmy specialisation in obtaining forest products – skills they are thought to have acquired in forest fringe zones, forest-savannah ecotones or through seasonal forays

into the forest – is presented as a necessary condition for the joint colonisation of the deeper forest in symbiosis with savannah cultivators (Bailey *et al.* 1989:63). The claim is that forest hunter-gatherers' relations with farmers come from necessity<sup>159</sup>, not choice, and that this accounts for their domination by farmers.

Following a debate on the topic in Volume 19 (2) of the journal *Human Ecology* (1991) and a number of subsequent publications, Headland (1999) recently conceded that various authors<sup>160</sup> “have found serious deficiencies with the wild yam hypothesis, at least as we originally proposed it in the late 1980s. Solid criticisms have been put forth in the 1990s that bring the hypothesis into question.” In the Baka area not far from Mbendjele forest, Sato (2001) provides conclusive evidence to demonstrate the sufficiency of wild starch food plants for people in all types of forest. It is, I believe, likely that similar results will be obtainable in other areas of the Congo basin, including the Mbendjele forest.

This revisionist bias is one instance of a more general problem of materialist bias in the analysis of African tropical forest hunter-gatherer cultures. Pygmy-farmer relations have been seen through a materialist lens, as though they derive from the material components of their interactions. This has been the case for many researchers addressing this relationship, from the Harvard Ituri Project and some of the Japanese researchers in the Ituri, DRC, to some of the ethno-ecologists in CAR and Congo–Brazzaville. They appear to believe that the complementary and specialised subsistence practices exploiting different ecological niches were developed to promote material exchanges. The relations are symbiotic in origin, and therefore socio-economic and cultural interdependency is inevitable, and has led to patron-client relations developing that are politically biased in favour of the farmers (for instance, Bahuchet 1985: 546). Within this materialist and behavioural ecology approach, qualitative aspects of these relations tend to be gauged in terms of the quantification of exchanges and a comparison between local subsistence technologies and resource management.

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<sup>159</sup> This suggests that hunter-gatherer/farmer relations were continuously maintained once they had been established out of a nutritional necessity. This is not borne out by the ethnography.

<sup>160</sup> In relation to the Congo Basin these were Ichikawa (1983 and 1991); Bahuchet *et al.* (1991: 208); and Bahuchet (1993a).

With some notable exceptions (Bahuchet and Guillaume 1982; Delobea 1984; Terashima 1987; Ichikawa 1991a and b; Grinker 1990, 1994; Joiris 1998; Kohler 1998)<sup>161</sup>, little attention has been paid to the symbolic and cultural dimensions of these relations. Grinker most clearly criticises the material bias and the analytical primacy of economic factors for obscuring or ignoring ideas and beliefs underlying farmer/hunter-gatherer interaction. Focusing on the symbolism of exchanges rather than their economic content, his analysis of Lese farmers and their Efe Pygmy exchange partners argues that their cultures are mutually constituted. They are, he suggests, best represented as interconnected subgroups participating in a larger social collectivity, indeed as one ethnically differentiated society (1990, 1994:4). Joiris (1998: 330-2) in a similarly sophisticated historical and linguistic analysis of Baka-villager relations in South-eastern Cameroon, tentatively proposes the possibility of a similar situation existing there.

Grinker's presentation of his 'two cultures – one society' model is heavily biased towards the Lese farmers' perspective and treats Efe cultural distinctiveness as a product of their subordinate incorporation into the Lese social system. From the Lese perspective, Efe are incorporated as children into their 'Houses' and thus figure as juniors in the relationship. Although Grinker discusses ethnicity as a historical process in which the Lese and the Efe have integrated themselves into a set of relations of inequality, he crucially omits the Efe's agency in this process. Grinker does not discuss whether Efe contest Lese views, or how they interpret and respond to what he presents as a hegemonic system of cultural distinctions and an apparently unchallenged ideology of Efe subordination. In his account the Efe have, in effect, no voice at all. The 'mutual constitution' of hunter-gatherers and farmers is presented through a one-sided focus on Lese representations of themselves, the Efe and their mutual relations, privileging a perspective that takes Efe subordination for granted.

The dual structure that is central to Grinker's approach, in terms of a dominant and a subordinate culture united in a single social system, resembles a reformulation of the patron–client model that is also implied in most subsistence-related analyses. However, Grinker's study is important because it provides a very sophisticated analysis of the way

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<sup>161</sup> Kenrick 1996 also applies a more holistic approach to the analysis of Pygmy relations with outsiders, in this case conservation initiatives.

agricultural groups attempt to legitimate their demands for Pygmy labour by an elaborate ideology which places specific Pygmy groups under their authority. Similar ideological constructions are typical of many farmer peoples in the Congo basin. Joiris (1998) offers an analysis of some of these constructions in the western Congo basin.

Joiris (1998) examines the ideological constructions implied in the terms villagers and Baka use to refer to their relationships in South-eastern Cameroon. Her ethnography is presented alongside an erudite and historically informed analysis that shows Baka-villager relations to have been established within the context of inter-ethnic and inter-group raiding, and the villagers' need for ivory to participate in prestige economies prior to the colonial pacification. Villagers, fearing attacks by Baka *mokelakela* (elephant-men, see Appendix One), sought alliances with Baka elephant hunters to protect themselves from attack. In addition renowned Kwele, Konabembe and Bangando warriors sought initiation into Baka ritual associations such as *Jengi* or *mokela* (shape-changing association) for the mystical powers these gave. Joiris convincingly demonstrates that establishing relations with Baka was a political decision by villagers, not one forced upon them by ecological limitations. Those influential villagers or feared warriors who could attract Baka would greatly enhance their clan's numbers, their ability to conduct raids, and increase their fame and prestige.

In summary, Joiris shows that relations between Baka and villagers were based on similar principles to the warrior alliances commonly used to unite villager groups during this period. She elucidates three major ways that Baka-villager relations are symbolised and maintained: as ritual friendships between members of the same sex; as fictive kinship relations; and as the solidarity established between co-initiates during *beka* circumcision rites. These relations have modified and adapted to changing contexts to produce the relations we observe today. Joiris' overall formulation demonstrates the significance of political, social and military considerations in creating Pygmy-villager relationships rather than concerns for carbohydrates and protein. Joiris' formulation agrees in many ways with the historical context described to me by Bilo in the late nineteenth century when the present Bilo-Mbendjele alliances were established in my research area.

The surprising omission from Joiris's otherwise thorough and compelling analysis is her acknowledged inadequate discussion of the context of villager hierarchies and

discrimination against Baka or the degree of status asymmetry implied in the local terms she analyses that are used to categorise relations with Baka. This leads Joiris (1998: 315) to leave unanalysed the issue of why villagers claim the authority to 'own' Baka groups, and equally how Baka respond to such claims being made over them.

I suspect that this omission is partly due to Joiris's common sense observation that villager claims are generally ineffective. But she overrides the need to analyse this data further with the observation that 'the proprietor of a Pygmy camp seems simply to correspond to a friend *eso ...*' (ibid: 314-5, my translation). This is a statement that I agree with fully, and so would most Mbendjele I know, but which most Bilo I encountered would strongly resist. It implies an analytic jump that deserves closer examination.

In addition to the political advantages for farmer groups that managed to attract Pygmies brought out so clearly in Joiris' study (ibid), villager groups denigrate Pygmy people in order to justify claims to authority over their labour and forest land in a similar manner to that described by Grinker (1990, 1994). Following Vansina (1983: 84) and Waele (1986:387), this denigration is one strategy many farming groups in the Congo basin use to overcome similar problems in obtaining the additional farming labour necessary at key moments in the agricultural cycle. By imposing asymmetric relationships on Pygmy peoples farmers seek to improve their chances of actually obtaining Pygmy labour.

Despite some diversity in the ways different Bilo groups ideologically express their aspirations to dominate Pygmy people and to incorporate them into their social systems, there is a shared core of practices and claims that may appear suitable for analysis in terms of anthropological concepts of patron-client relations. In northern Congo, Bilo try to represent their Yaka partners to the state, claim rights over their labour, and describe their position as that of 'owner' or 'patron' of Yaka people. However, describing these attempts as patron-client relations ignores a rather resolute, and effective, opposition by Yaka groups to Bilo claims, and the very limited ability of Bilo 'patrons' to coerce their 'clients' to obey their wishes. Classifying this complex ethnic interaction as a straightforward patron-client relationship is a misapplication of a European category that is misleading because it takes no account of the Mbendjele perspective.

The tendency to report non-Pygmy characterisations of relations with Pygmies as the terms of relations between Pygmies and non-Pygmies is disingenuous. At best, this is the result of a bias to Bilo informants and Bilo concepts, and at worst to the unfortunately common habit of conducting research among Pygmies with the help of non-Pygmy interpreters and research assistants. In this way a formative input in the investigation of politically charged relations comes from a necessarily biased and partial party.

As explained in Köhler and Lewis (forthcoming 2002), in both Köhler's experience among the Baka, and my own, the context created by the presence of Bilo, even of those sympathetic to the Yaka, always affects the way Yaka talk about their relations and respond to questions about them. We agree with Vansina (1986:432; 1990:29) that it is a fatal flaw to study only part societies, and that it is important to examine both partners' conceptions of each other in order to understand their relations. But we would add that it is even more fatal to collect data about Pygmies through neighbouring, often more accessible groups. This is common in many authors' approaches, even those focusing on the Pygmy 'side' of interaction, and has led to the tendency to accord priority to the agency of farmers and to their strategies to bind Pygmies to them.

Although Pygmies are undeniably seen as actors in their own right, the common assumption is that farmers are the dominant social and economic force and are able to impose their will on their Pygmy neighbours. Of course this may be, or have been, the case in certain areas, but as this chapter will seek to show, such an approach obscures how Yaka people conceive of this relationship and how they act in their dealings with their non-Pygmy neighbours.

These tendencies in research, I would argue, account to some extent for the seeming ethnographic support for Grinker's view that Pygmies are simply a specialised component of farmer societies (for example Joiris 1998: 330-2). When studying farmer-Pygmy relations from the farmer point of view and from their conceptualisations, it is predictable that Pygmies will seem to be incorporated into regional farmer social and political systems. Here, I hope to demonstrate that a 'Yaka-focused' presentation reveals this not to be as straightforward as either Grinker proposes or Joiris suggests. As the Mbendjele explain, shared words do not mean shared meanings.

### **The situation in Northern Congo**

I suggest that the Mbendjele case provides an important ethnographic counter-example to this trend in the literature. By presenting the too often ignored voices of Pygmies, I will attempt to explain the Mbendjele's perception of their relations by contrast with that of their neighbours. While I accept the importance of quantifying these interactions<sup>162</sup>, I am more concerned here with countering the dominant bias in the literature towards Bilo discourse with a presentation and analysis of the collective representations underlying Mbendjele interaction with outsiders. Although historically sensitive, my presentation is orientated to contemporary relations and representations. These representations<sup>163</sup> are common to all Mbendjele groups I worked with, despite them having relations with a variety of different Bilo ethnic groups.

The ethnographic data presented in this chapter are based mainly on Mbendjele relations with the Sangha-Sangha, Bongili and Kabounga Bilo ethnic groups. My informants were both Bilo and Mbendjele of different ages. Focusing on cultural stereotypes of their relations, as my analysis does, obscures the slightly different ways these groups interact, and ignores the variety of possible inter-personal relations that can develop between individuals. But the strong similarities between Mbendjele communities in the ways they talk about relations with Bilo, even though the various Bilo ethnic groups may differ, justifies analysing these cultural stereotypes in an attempt to elucidate a more general understanding of their relations.

Today Mbendjele clans in northern Congo have formal relations with clans from over ten different Bilo ethnic groups<sup>164</sup>. The Mbendjele in my main research area, associated with the village of Ibamba, maintain relations with three different groups of Bilo: the Bongili (for around 125 years), the Sangha-Sangha (for around seventy years), and Bodingo (Bomitaba, for about six years). The neighbouring Mbendjele groups with whom our group has intermarried inhabited the Terres des Kaboungas and maintained relations with the

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<sup>162</sup> There exists a body of high quality work on this subject, Delobea (1978, 1989), Bahuchet (1985:535-543), in the Aka region and Ichikawa (1986) in the Ituri Forest.

<sup>163</sup> These representations are certainly not limited to the Mbendjele. Köhler and I have argued that they are common threads in Yaka strategies to 'exploit' resources and to structure relations with outsiders.

<sup>164</sup> These include the Pomo, Yasua, Kaka, Sangha-Sangha, Bongili, Kabounga, Ngundi, Bomitaba, Monjombo and Bodongo.

Kabounga (for around 125 years) and the Yasua. The variety of different ethnic groups living in different places, yet involved with the Mbendjele, indicate the usefulness of the term Bilo to designate these different people.

### **How Yaka classify outsiders**

In normal speech the term Bilo is used to refer to any non-Yaka black people. Mindele is used to refer to all light-skinned people, whether Caucasians or Asians. In conversation, unless people are Yaka they are simply referred to as Mindele, Bilo or by animal names. It is important to understand that in contrast to the Bilo or European view of the Mbendjele as nomadic and living in perpetual motion, the Mbendjele see all non-Yaka people as temporary inhabitants of their forest, people who are just moving through. They consider themselves to be permanent, always staying in roughly the same areas of forest, whereas outsiders come and go over long distances, but do not stop for long<sup>165</sup>. Mbendjele elders often remark that these groups are “passing by”, “they have arrived but not yet gone”, “they came into life but will go again”. Abandoned villages or logging sites and the population reduction in rural Bilo communities are given as examples of this movement.

The term Bilo encompasses members of over 40<sup>166</sup> different ethnic groups with whom Mbendjele have contact. In effect the term refers to any non-Yaka African people who live near Yaka people. Although growing urban populations are also called Bilo, typical Bilo are village dwelling, agriculturalists, and fishing or trapping peoples, who speak Bantu or Ubangian languages. They like living in hot open spaces and make aggressive claims to own rivers, forest and other people, despite their transient occupation of the land. It is this transience that makes their claims empty and therefore of little consequence from the Mbendjele perspective.

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<sup>165</sup> In the pre-colonial period inter-Bilo raiding and warfare caused great movements of people. Then the forced labour of the early colonial period compelled Bilo communities to relocate in order to fulfil their quotas. Finally with the development of urban centres and industrial activity, a steady stream of rural Bilo have been leaving to enjoy the social life and education or employment opportunities of towns and cities. Other observers have commented on the high mobility of local Bilo communities, for example Lalouel (1949: 5-6).

<sup>166</sup> During survey work for the PROECO project we came across Bilo from 48 different ethnic groups living rurally in the Mbendjele area and in contact with Mbendjele (Lewis 1997a-e).



**Plate 14**     **A Selection of Mongemba's paintings to illustrate Mbendjele-Bilo difference.**



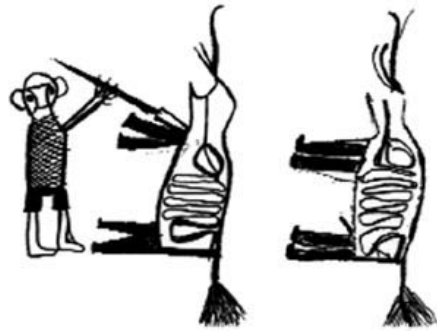
1. Yaka travel on foot. Women carry their entire household in their baskets.



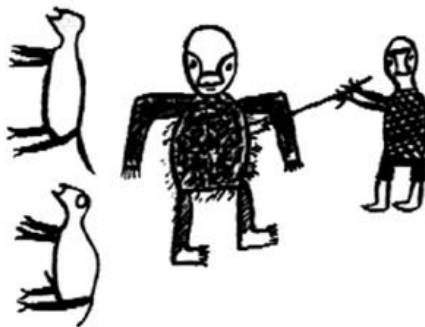
2. Bilo travel by boat. They don't like walking in the forest.



3. Two pigs trapped on the same day.



4. A Yaka elephant hunter doing his work.



5. A Yaka tracking pigs is attacked by a gorilla.



5. A Yaka tracking pigs is attacked by a gorilla.

According to elderly Mbendjele informants, the ancestors called the Bilo “*Bamakaba*”. This literally translates as “they will give”. This usage probably coincided with the precolonial period, before 1870, and the early colonial period when the Bilo and Mbendjele in my research area claim they first began establishing relations. The Bilo recount how they used ‘silent trade’<sup>167</sup> and gifts to attract Mbendjele to them. This tactic of gift-giving seems to be implied in the term ‘*Bamakaba*’.

Today the polite way to refer to Bilo is with the term Bilo. ‘Bilo’ literally means ‘uninitiated’. Apparently the ancestors never initiated Bilo, but today most communities do. Nowadays ‘Bilo’ carries the connotation of ‘village people’ (*bisi mboka*) rather than the uninitiated.

In every Mbendjele community I visited, in ordinary conversation among themselves, Bilo are more commonly called ‘*bebobo*’ (gorillas), than by other names. This name is not always intended to insult, although it does when Bilo hear it. The Mbendjele consider it a factual statement about Bilo character and disposition<sup>168</sup>. Bilo resemble gorillas because they are both large animals with abundant meat, or wealth in the Bilo case, but they are especially fierce and dangerous to hunt. Both Bilo and gorillas are preoccupied with demarcating and aggressively claiming areas of forest as their own, to the exclusion of all others. In both cases Mbendjele see them as opponents and oppose them.

White people are referred to by two animal names. Most often they are called ‘*bangwia*’ (red river hogs) and rarely today, but more frequently in the past, ‘*banjoku na batata*’ (elephants of our ancestors). Both these appellations refer to the economic value of white people. Elephants are a source of valuable ivory and abundant meat. This image conveys the potential of whites as sources of immense wealth. In the past white men often came singly, but accompanied by Chadian or Senegalese soldiers. Large rogue elephants provide

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<sup>167</sup> Lalouel (1950: 209); Hauser (1953: 166); Grageon (1965: 40) discuss silent trade that still occurred when they were in the area.

<sup>168</sup> Mbendjele calling Bilo gorillas is not entirely a case of what Viveiros de Castro (1998) has called ‘perspectivism’. Mbendjele are clear, animals perceive the world in the same way we do. Gorillas know they are gorillas and see people as people and antelopes as antelopes, and so on. However, it is similar in the attribution of aspects of human-like emotionality, and in certain cases intelligence, personality and spirit to forest mammals, some birds and certain reptiles such as tortoises, crocodiles, and snakes. Bilo are gorillas by analogy in everyday speech, but in cosmology by essence.

the biggest tusks and are fearfully powerful. The metaphor fits the early colonial administrators and traders well.

In the past large elephants were more common than they are today. Now red river hogs have taken over from elephants in terms of commercial value. These large, often very fat, wild pigs are in great demand for the bush meat trade with urban centres. Their habit of living in groups means that sometimes three or four may be killed at a time. The resemblances go further than purely economic criteria. Today most white people come in groups who live together, mainly as loggers, conservationists, or on scientific expeditions. Everyone lives in the same forest yet Mindele are all unbelievably wealthy, just as red river hogs somehow have huge amounts of fat.

This use of animal names for Bilo and whites contrasts with how other Yaka groups are named. They are referred to by the names Ngombe, Luma, Ngabo, or Mikaya, and have no material referent. Nicknames for other Mbendjele groups refer to their Yaka qualities, such as '*bisi mo phua*' (people who fly), which is used to refer to the Mbendjele of Ibamba and Indongo who are respected for their mystical skills. The name '*bana bambemba*' (children of the flowers) refers to the Mbendjele of Minganga, who are considered to be very forest orientated, and so on.

Both Bilo and Mindele are given animal names because they are cast as prey. They are transient resources with potential. But, like game animals, each requires particular strategies to be successfully exploited.

### **Mbendjele talk about Bilo**

Mbendjele relations with Bilo are entrenched in a contested past that has many consequences for their contemporary relations. Talk about other Yaka people with whom the Mbendjele say they share common ancestors, ritual practices and marriage relations (see Chapter Two), differs markedly from talk about Bilo. In contrast to Mbendjele interest in the history of their relations with other Yaka people (see Appendix One), Mbendjele refuse to attribute any importance to past links with Bilo. Mbendjele oppose the way Bilo manipulate history, specifically accounts of first meeting with Yaka, to justify claims to authority over them. Mbendjele do not discuss how they first met Bilo. The most anyone

told me was said by Emeka, great grandson of Dito Djelle, the first Mbendjele to be ‘captured’ by the Bongili Bilo.

“One day my ancestor Dito came back to camp and said ‘Listen, I got myself a Bilo today.’ Other *kombeti* said they wanted Bilo too, so he took them to the Bilo village and they got their own Bilo.” (March 1997).

There is both an informal and a formal discourse about Bilo. The informal discourse by Mbendjele that distinguishes Bilo values, practices and places, from their own is focussed on the forest. Mbendjele say the Bilo do not like the forest. In general, apart from the Kaka of the Motaba River, Bilo agree<sup>169</sup>. For them the forest is a dangerous, dark, unforgiving place inhabited by bad spirits and wild animals. It is the opposite of the village and farms that are safe places for humans to live in.

Mbendjele, on the other hand, see the forest as the best place for humans to be. It is clean whereas the village is dirty (*mbindo*). Domestic meat is said to be dirty meat (*nyama ya mbindo*) that makes Mbendjele adults feel ill. As my informants explained, what disgusts them about domestic animals is the way they consume human waste, old clothes, discarded food, paper, vomit and excrement. The concentration of human waste in villages makes them especially *mbindo*. Mbendjele women even say that Bilo penises are *mbindo* because they are black, whereas Mbendjele penises are light coloured (*pumbu*) and good.

Essentially, the concept of *mbindo* refers to the polluting dirt of human waste, the most dangerous of which is anything to do with death. Mbendjele find human excrement repulsive but will clear it up using leaves. However an old piece of cloth found behind a house or anywhere else will provoke loud exclamations of disgust and only elder men will clear it away using sticks. People are buried wrapped in a cloth. Old clothes could be from an old grave. The concentration of graves at villages also makes them dangerous because of the ancestral spirits (*edio*) of the Bilo. The village is hot and full of negative noise (*motoko*) from shouting Bilo, whereas the forest is cool, shady and peaceful (*pwetee*).

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<sup>169</sup> A respectable Bilo man is expected to have some forest competence. Being a good hunter is seen as an accomplishment. These skills are valued and respected by other Bilo precisely because of the negative representation of the forest as a dangerous and difficult place.

Mbendjele often state that everything they need is in the forest. They pride themselves on being ‘gourmets’, because the foods most valued by Bilo, honey and fatty meat, form the basis of their normal diet. Mbendjele take pride in only eating the best, most succulent forest foods. I was surprised a number of times when people, despite there being hunger in camp, would show me forest foods and scornfully remark that Bilo eat this, and name other animals, especially gorillas, that eat them too, while Mbendjele reject them. The things, and ways, Bilo eat are derided by Mbendjele. That Bilo are trapped into eating farm food all the time, that they don’t share food, and that they voraciously eat any forest food no matter how bitter, provoke mockery, pity and laughter.

The Mbendjele also strongly disapprove of the way Bilo prepare food. The way Bilo kill animals is the most repulsive and frequently commented upon aspect of this. Bilo slice the throats of domestic animals and even wild animals if they can. The Mbendjele never kill like this. They spear, shoot, or beat the back of the neck with blunt objects (the preferred way for women to kill), or even suffocate, but never cut an animal’s throat. Throat cutting is a favourite way that Bilo have for killing people in warfare and sacrifice. In stories this method is often cited with horror. Women find this especially repellent and I was told that, if an Mbendjele man should kill an animal like this, the women would be the most vociferous in condemning him, even refusing to prepare the meat.

Mbendjele men mock the Bilo men’s ineptitude in the forest. In one discussion about the Bilo on an *Ejengi* sacred path, Moanja (an important *kombeti* (elder) from Indongo) addressed the youth to explain to them the level of tracking skill they should achieve:

“The other day I was out checking my traps. I was walking along small animal trails. Suddenly I noticed the traces of a tortoise that had crossed the path. The tracks of a tortoise, do you understand! I looked. Aaa, he passed here, he passed there. I looked in the direction the tortoise took. There was a large tree. I will find that tortoise there, I thought to myself. Sure enough there he was. I tied it to my belt and brought it home for my grandson.” (May 1997).

Mbendjele are proud of their superior skills in hunting, tracking and orientation. They boast about their ability to walk without using paths, of being able to just circle around without getting lost. The Bilo easily get lost once they leave the path. In a Kabounga village a chief

showed me the communal slit gong style drum that he said was used for initiations. Some Mbendjele sniggered and told me that its most common use was not for dancing, but to call lost Kabounga back to the village. These informal ways of distinguishing Bilo ways from Yaka ways are complemented by a more formally expressed discourse.

This formal discourse about Bilo is expressed in a body of stories about Bilo that is widely known and forms part of larger repertoire of fables called *gano*. *Gano* are stories that express moral and social values and are often told to the camp in the evening. They explain the origin of each forest animal's particular habits and character, and why they lost their rights to share Yaka sociality.

Many forest animals are attributed with intelligence, personality and spirit in the same way that people are. In fables there is often no clear distinction between animals and people. Animals can become people, though more commonly people become animals. There are numerous *gano* fables in which the characters are people to begin with, but through outrageous behaviour are transformed into animals and banished from human society. In *gano* each forest animal's distinctive personality is elaborated. The monkey eagle is scheming and deceitful, tortoise is clever and honest, dog is a sneaky and shameless thief who hangs around on rubbish tips, leopard is too self-assured, proud and greedy, and so on. They are used in this way to explain why the Bilo are really gorillas.

One story describes how a Yaka caught by nightfall whilst out hunting, meets a group of gorillas that call him and explain that they are really Bilo. In the morning, they tell him never to hunt gorilla. He returns to camp without meat. The camp leaves for a new place. On arrival, they hear gorillas nearby. The hunter's father-in-law begins pestering him to go and kill a gorilla so he can eat. The hunter repeatedly tries to refuse. Eventually, in a fury, the Yaka takes his spear and goes after the gorillas. He spears one gorilla. The other gorillas arrive, angry that he has disobeyed them. They kill him, and butcher his body, cutting it into pieces. The camp becomes aware that the gorillas are really Bilo.

Dzunze, a 35-year-old man from Djello, on whose account this is based, ended by saying, "Gorillas killed that Yaka. But those gorillas weren't real gorillas. Bilo are going the way of gorillas. Indeed, Bilo are a type of gorilla!"

In many contexts the Mbendjele refer to Bilo as gorillas. In private between themselves they almost always use gorilla. In public these contexts are generally ones in which opposition to the Bilo is expressed, as, for example, in ritual or disputes. Conversely, when a gorilla has been killed it is normally only referred to as Bilo. Mbendjele endlessly make jokes about the gorilla-like behaviour of Bilo. Often they point out forest foods saying with mirth, ‘Bilo and gorillas eat this!’

The character and habits of Bilo resemble those of gorillas. As one man explained, gorillas charge up making terrifying noises, just because you accidentally trod on a twig while walking in forest they occupy. The Bilo do the same to Yaka, shouting a lot, becoming violent and dangerous, because you walked across his farm. Both Bilo and gorillas make lots of negative noise (*motoko*) and become aggressive and violent over artificial concepts of ownership. In both cases, Mbendjele oppose them.

One evening in a men’s hunting camp deep in the forest a nearby male gorilla began barking and screaming. The elder next to me instantly responded by shouting “*Konza ya ndima* - Owner of the forest.” The gorilla roared and screamed again. “*Djoba* – [Cunt]” shouted the elder contemptuously.

The elder first teased the gorilla for trying to frighten us away by calling him owner of the forest. When the gorilla answered, it was as if he thought the elder was flattering him. The infuriated elder responded with *djoba*, to make clear to the gorilla that it is idiotic to claim ownership of forest. No one can own what *Komba* (God) created. It is for all to share.

In Yaka tradition, notions of exclusive individual ownership are only rigorously applied to ritual and mystical knowledge, or intellectual property. Certain personal possessions are considered to be owned by individuals, but unlike ritual and mystical knowledge, they can be shared, and people will find it very difficult to refuse any member of their extended family or affines who demands the item. Yaka society is based on the principle of sharing material objects. No one can claim exclusive ownership of the material world. The notion that anybody apart from *Komba* (God) could own land, rivers or forest evokes suspicion, incomprehension and mockery. In the same way that the gorilla’s claims were rejected by the elder, Bilo claims to own people or places are seen as empty.

However, Bilo are more than ordinary gorillas, they are the archetypal other, fundamentally immoral and opposed to Yaka values because they hunt and eat people<sup>170</sup>. Fables about Bilo hunting and eating Yaka are widely recounted and known throughout my research area. Milelo, a 30 year-old Mbendjele man from Ngandzikolo in the northern Mbendjele area, tells the following story, with remarkably few differences to versions I heard elsewhere.

“A young Yaka and his wife went out gathering together. They went to a tree where they had previously found honey. But a Bilo had already climbed high into the tree. The Yaka and his wife could hear the bees, so the young man made a climbing rope. He climbed up to the hive. Sitting on a branch next to the hive, he blew up his fire bundle. Suddenly he felt a spear entering his fontanel, splitting his head open. “I’m dying,” he cried as he fell to the ground. His wife looked at his body.

“Oooo, my husband has died for no reason! We’ll see.” She removed the spear from her husband’s body and hid herself. The Bilo descended the tree.

“Eee, I’ve found some meat, I’ll eat this with corn porridge!”

Speaking under her breath the wife responded, “You killed my husband, now it’s your turn too. Die!” She plunged the spear into the Bilo.

“Who has killed me?.....Aaa, a woman has killed me!” The woman left the two bodies there and returned to camp wailing. She told the camp what had happened. All the people came with her to the tree. They took the Bilo’s corpse and burnt it. Then, carrying the corpse of the Yaka back to camp they began the burial mourning. As the whole camp wailed, *Komba* (god) appeared.

“This is wickedness. I have seen everything. I know what sort of people Bilo are!”

*[God shows them solidarity, and his appearance is that of a Yaka, very short with a round belly and a beard. He confirms that he will punish the Bilo in the afterlife.] October 1994.*

*Komba*’s frequent appearance in stories about Bilo is typical of *gano* that make moral statements. Using *gano* fables to explain the character and disposition of Bilo, their ambiguous status as gorilla-people, and that *Komba* has condemned them, casts the Bilo as legitimate prey for Yaka. The normal rules of human interaction no longer apply. Bilo that

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<sup>170</sup> In this area Bilo claim that they used to sacrifice captives and sometimes Pygmies in rituals to the ancestors, Joiris (1998: 242) reports a similar situation in South-eastern Cameroon. Additionally, some elderly chiefs of groups such as the Pomo and Yesua proudly told me that their ancestors would eat human flesh.



behave like gorillas can be deceived, lied to, stolen from, stalked and tricked like animals being hunted. But they are scheming and dangerous with the potential to kill.

Apart from accounts of the period of forced labour, all stories I heard about Bilo never name them individually, or specify places. Instead they all focus on the most appalling (to Yaka) human nightmares: being hunted and eaten, or being raped, tortured and murdered. Stories about the precolonial period, colonial penetration and forced labour are mostly recounted by women. The following example is typical of this style and probably refers to the precolonial period.

“Bring your baskets! Pack in the palm-nuts!

They left because of war. Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee. They fled the war, they fled, and they fled. The people at war were shooting each other with guns. People were torn apart, fleeing into the forest in all directions. They were chased. The others ran through the forest searching them out, to take them captive. They went, taking people, taking people, and taking people. People came to us in flight, ‘People are finishing us off! They’re shooting us. Here my friend, look after my child, look after my child.’ The children stayed with us. Those people of war were taking children and cutting their throats. Cutting the throats of children! Cutting the throats of children! Cutting the throats of children!

Mothers and fathers abandoned their children as they fled running into the forest. That’s what it was like when they used to take people captive.”

*Mandomba Marie, 45 year-old Mbendjele woman from Djello, November 1994.*

These stories are typically told in the evenings to children. I was reminded of the ‘bogy-man’ type of stories told to children in Europe. These stories are accompanied by songs that punctuate recounted events. They often have a simple, rather mesmerising, rhythm that helps captivate even the youngest listeners. They have a powerful effect on forming young Mbendjele attitudes to Bilo.

### **The Bilo point of view**

In order to understand better why Mbendjele have such strong views about Bilo, I now turn to Bilo talk about Yaka. Bilo sometimes call Mbendjele ‘chimpanzees’, and often refer to them as animals. However Bilo use of animal labels contrasts with the way Yaka use them. Yaka use animal names descriptively and many Yaka have animal nicknames, like ‘chimp’

that are not value judgements and do not cause offence. However for Bilo they are explicitly derogatory. Whereas Bilo denigrate the wild, Yaka value it. Bilo often liken the Yaka's nomadic lifestyle to that of wild animals and their physical appearance to that of great apes. The following quotation expresses some typical Bilo perceptions:

“This race of humans is easily recognised. Short in height, between 1.30m. and 1.50m., with a broad chest, their skin is often covered in velvety hair and the colour can be both light and dark. They have large flattened noses, their upper limbs seem much longer than the lower limbs. That's a pure Mbendjele. To see him you might easily think you were in the presence of a gorilla or chimpanzee. However, due to casual sex between Bantu men and Mbendjele women (the offspring are abandoned to the mother) the children are slowly taking a more human shape.

... Indeed 98% of Bantu think that the Mbendjele are smelly, dirty, stupid, childish and chimp-like. They do not like to get too close to an Mbendjele; they will not marry, sit together, eat together or share the same plates and cups. They think the Mbendjele only understand the whip, not common sense, and so comes the proverb “When you see a Pygmy being beaten, beat him.” Or “The Pygmy only respects the Bantu who beats him. If you are kind you will be ignored.”

The Mbendjele depend completely on their Bantu neighbours. We take all decisions for them. When they are born it is because we paid their parents' bridewealth, when they marry we pay their bridewealth, when they die we pay for their *eboka* (commemoration ceremony). The Mbendjele is subjugated to the Bantu until his dying breath.

The Mbendjele have always helped to maintain Bantu fields. In return, we give them work tools: machetes, axes and hoes. The Mbendjele are also useful hunters, used to provision the village with meat. They are porters for heavy loads and pathfinders for the Bantu in the forest. For this reason, each Mbendjele clan is held and maintained by a Bantu '*konza*', the uncontested owner (proprietor). If someone else wants to use a Pygmy but fails to contact the *konza*, he risks huge problems. As happens, the Mbendjele can fail in a task demanded by the *konza*. In this case, the Mbendjele can be severely punished. The punishment will depend on his master. For some masters the correction is non-violent, for others the Pygmy is someone to keep far away, who stinks, and requires a few strokes of the whip in order to understand. Today the trend is towards non-violence rather than violence. Thus the two communities, Bantu and Pygmy, help one another.

As I have always said, the Mbendjele man is a strange being. Many Bantu are hostile to the idea of 'equal work, equal salary'. They endlessly cheat them, promising many things in

return for services. But when it comes to paying, it turns into a major conflict. But the Mbendjele forgets very easily. He returns some time later, with sweet words, again asking for something. And since the ties between Bantu and Mbendjele are ones of interdependence, we come to an agreement. But we Bantu always get the biggest share. It has always been like that and shall always be so.”

*Extracts from an essay entitled “Le Pygmée dans sa Nature Profonde” by Kibino (38 year old Bongili man from Ikelemba) Written originally in 1992, and updated and re-written in May-June 1996.<sup>171</sup>*

As the following statement shows, the distinction between what Woodburn (1982) has labelled ‘immediate-return systems’ and ‘delayed-return systems’ bears remarkable similarities to the way in which Moise, an educated Kabounga Bilo, distinguishes Kabounga practices from Mbendjele ones.

“Despite production being for subsistence, the Kabounga organise themselves to make reserves of food for the future. Using elementary conservation techniques, they preserve food from the harvest, fishing and hunting. In contrast, the Yaka will always consume all the food they have before going to look for more.

The Yaka is a most sociable person. Their whole lives, and all activities, are carried out in groups. Their lives are in eternal communion with each other. In contrast, the Kabounga, whose life has evolved, is inclined to a solitary existence; ‘Each man for himself, God for all’.

While the Kabounga wastes his time making politics, organising himself, seeking to uplift his land and village, the Pygmy is totally preoccupied with the politics of the bush. He searches to discover all the possible procedures to trap or capture wild animals in the bush. From the point of view of education, the Kabounga orientates his children towards schooling, the Yaka, to the domain of the bush.

There is much conflict between the Yaka and Kabounga. Most quarrels are caused by the Yaka refusing to work. There are also quarrels caused by capricious acts committed by the Yaka, such as theft, abuse of confidence, and refusal to honour debts.”

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<sup>171</sup> Kibino was my principal research assistant among the Bongili and Sangha-Sangha. As a schoolboy in 1972, he began writing about the culture and history of the Bongili, Sangha-Sangha and Mbendjele. His enthusiasm and natural flair for recording cultural beliefs and practices was a great bonus for my research. Since he had already been writing down his observations, he offered to write them up for me. Kibino is often accused by his fellow Bilo of being an advocate for Pygmies. However he was an active bushmeat trader at the time and relied heavily on Mbendjele hunters to supply him with meat.

*Moise Taito, Kabounga chief's son and 2<sup>nd</sup> year psychology student at university, aged 26. February 1995.*

Educated Bilo, such as Moise and Kibino, were very helpful to my research. Both acted as my principal research assistants in their respective ethnic areas. Their analyses, in particular their written work, was commissioned by me as another means to develop local accounts of culture and history. I also realised that the Bilo perception of Mbendjele might be shocking to outsiders, and therefore felt it important that they express it in their own words, rather than me reporting their speech. I chose these texts because they fairly represent commonly held perceptions. However, both Moise and Kibino present them in a more articulate and structured way than most semi-literate people would.

Despite such negative stereotypes of the Mbendjele, Bilo greatly value certain aspects of their relations together. Mbendjele are valued as great herbalists and healers, and as genuine ritual experts. Their performance and musical skills are widely admired, and Mbendjele are commissioned to perform all the major ceremonies of the Bilo. The great Bilo bigmen of the past were reportedly lulled to sleep by an Mbendjele *kombo* (great singer) playing on the *sanjo* (thumb piano) or *ngombi* (palm harp). Elderly Bilo recount how Mbendjele helped them escape raids and colonial repression, and how they depended on the Mbendjele to collect food for them to eat while away from their villages. Bilo often idealise and mythologise Mbendjele men's hunting abilities and accounts of their experiences in the forest together.

Forest produce is one of the main reasons Bilo value the Mbendjele. Most notable among forest products is ivory, the source of great prestige and wealth<sup>172</sup> for Bilo able to obtain it. Additionally Bilo love forest foods and see them as particularly fortifying. The demand for game meat in towns is increasing every year. Bilo in the villages greatly value the forest foods Mbendjele can provide; wild honey, game meat, especially elephant and pig, caterpillars, seasonal fruit and wild nuts are all considered the finest local delicacies. Bilo desire for these foods, as Kibino explains below, acts as an inducement for Bilo to fulfil Mbendjele demands.

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<sup>172</sup> During research a 30 kg pair of tusks was worth the equivalent of about six months salary for a government official.

“If he finds you reject him, he will immediately inform all his colleagues, and anything you ask of them will be refused you. All the most delicious foods – meats with lots of fat, the white wild honey, etc – will be hidden from you. Now you will have to be patient, have perseverance. You must respect their traditions, learn from them if you wish to live next to them. There is never something for nothing with them. They are very capricious, annoying, exaggerated, exigent, the eternally unsatisfied. Above all you must understand them, they are made like this.”

*Extracts from an essay entitled “Le Pygmée dans sa Nature Profonde” by Kibino (38 year old Bongili man from Ikelemba)*

### **Konza**

Bilo express the position they wish to have in their relations with Yaka with the term ‘*konza*<sup>173</sup>’. A *konza* is a Bilo who claims absolute authority over a group of people and an area of land or river. It is his responsibility to assure their physical, material and spiritual welfare. The term *motamba*, is locally translated as slave, but is more appropriately described as ‘war captive’ or the descendants of a war captive. A *konza* and his kin claimed absolute authority over captives. The labour force provided by captives was vital for the success of tropical horticulture. All Bilo groups say that before they encountered the Yaka, all captives were taken during raiding and warfare with other Bilo groups, or received during prestigious exchanges between local Bilo big men. Bilo captives could not escape because they would get lost in the forest.

Bilo stories of first meeting Yaka all claim that they were initially captured using force and then brought to the Bilo village by important big men or great warriors. Here they were ‘socialised’ by being shown iron, fed, clothed, given tobacco to smoke, and in some cases even shown fire. However, as a Bongili *konza* pointed out to me,

“It was a clever trick! ... The Mbendjele agreed to all that was said to them about being *motamba* (captive), and that the Bilo was *owner* but did not understand the implications. They had eyes only for the iron being offered them.”

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<sup>173</sup> *Konza* is a widely used term throughout the region and exists among both Mbendjele and Bilo groups. In order to distinguish the Mbendjele term from the Bilo one I spell it *konja*, rather than *konza* as I do to refer to the Bilo concept discussed here.

Capture crucially justifies incorporating Mbendjele as captives in Bilo clans. This status places them under the mystical authority of the Bilo *konza*. A *konza*'s ability to curse is feared by the Mbendjele. Most feel inadequate at protecting themselves from Bilo sorcery. Bilo encourage these beliefs by regularly and verbosely cursing Mbendjele they feel wronged by. The threat of Bilo sorcery creates a contradiction between the very negative way Mbendjele talk about Bilo and the generally respectful and polite way they act when actually in the presence of Bilo. This can skew data when research is conducted through Bilo interpreters.

Mbendjele often find it difficult to refuse Bilo, especially their *konza*, even when they have no intention of fulfilling the commitment. Fifty-year-old Tomota, like most Mbendjele, thinks that all Bilo are sorcerers,

“Some people are with nothing. People of peace, without bad eating habits. But peaceful people are without strength. They just like eating food together with their friends. Others, they eat people. Sorcerers have strength, they eat people. Sorcerers get rich eating other people. Look at the Bilo, they are all rich.” *March 1997*.

Bilo use history as a tool to claim the authority to demand Yaka labour when they require it. In pre-colonial times their economic advantage lay in access to both necessary goods like iron or salt and desirable goods like European trade items. Combined with the threat of a *konza*'s curse, this was said by Bilo to have ensured Mbendjele help in labour-intensive farming procedures, and in collecting wild produce to pay colonial taxes. However, unlike Bilo captives, Mbendjele were able to leave whenever they pleased. This obliged Bilo to emphasise several structures through which they could claim the authority to demand Mbendjele labour.

From the colonial period onwards, Bilo continued to control access to all imported consumer goods and added a political authority based in exclusive access to the state administration. Bilo emphasise what they see as their paternal and socialising role. The language of domestication is common in this talk. Bilo use local ideas of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in combination with colonial ideas about social evolution to liken the Mbendjele way of life to that of wild animals roaming the forest. By paying their bridewealth,

supplying alcohol for their end of mourning ceremonies, and writing their names down, the Bilo believe that they turned the Mbendjele into social beings.

Bilo claim to represent the Mbendjele in relation to the structures of state administration and all other outsiders. Since Bilo run the local branches of these structures, the authority of the *konza* is tacitly accepted. Police, and other officials like census agents or health workers, will invariably address themselves to the Bilo *konza* rather than the Mbendjele. Mbendjele cannot independently prosecute Bilo. Their *konza* must initiate proceedings on their behalf. In effect, the Mbendjele in a dispute with his *konza* has no recourse to the national justice system for independent arbitration. In these ways Bilo have sought to allocate sufficient authority to themselves to secure Mbendjele labour and monopolise their access to the world outside the forest.

### **New markets**

With the development of the logging industry since the late 1970's to gigantic proportions today, access to outside markets has become relatively easy. Now that labour has a value and the price of goods is known, many Mbendjele no longer accept the goods Bilo used to offer in exchange for labour. This has had a negative impact on Bilo authority. An elderly Bongili *konza* explains:

“In the past Pygmies were just like our slaves. We would beat them a lot, and not give them any money for the work they did. When we beat a Pygmy, we only beat one or two at a time, never all at once. Even when we beat them, they returned to us again. At first the Pygmies were like children, they only wanted food. But, as time went by, like children they learnt. They understood better the business of gifts, and began insisting on them. Being with Pygmies is like teaching children. We Bantu are always teaching them, and they are always dreaming about the forest. We have to animate them to do things properly. Otherwise they just stay there like animals. We are their parents. That's why they must do what we say. When they have a problem, we sort it out. When they need something, they come to us. A Pygmy clears our manioc field and we give him a mosquito net.

But now it's been ruined because the whites have been paying Pygmies with money. Now the Pygmies are rebelling and want money for everything.” *Albert, aged 50. March 1997.*

Many Mbendjele adult men, and to a much lesser extent women, are now aware of the monetary value of labour and the price of goods. They apply this new knowledge to the gift exchange mentality with which they previously understood their transactions with Bilo. In the past when Bilo controlled all access to goods, Mbendjele were content to keep away from what they perceived as a very hostile outside world. Stories, often told by women, recount with horror the violence, the raping of young Bilo girls, the killing and flogging of Bilo men that occurred during much of the colonial period. The Mbendjele seem to have thought that access to outside goods during this period was fraught with too much danger. The labour demanded of them by the Bilo was considered reasonable in relation to the outrages the Bilo endured to gain access to outside goods. But now Mbendjele experience and expectations have changed. In response so have Bilo tactics.

### **How Bilo obtain Mbendjele labour**

Bilo villagers' survival depends on somehow mobilising the required numbers of people to clear forest so that new farms can be made every few years. In the past captives did much of this work. Today, due to the rural exodus of Bilo youths, many villages in the region are too small to supply the necessary labour. Now Bilo remaining in villages depend more than ever on Mbendjele labour. Examining the ways Bilo actually obtain Mbendjele labour for this critically important task reveals the contradiction between Bilo ideals of their authority and how they actually get Mbendjele to work for them.

Today Bilo cannot simply command Mbendjele to work as they claim they did in the past. Increasing access to outside goods by Mbendjele means that Bilo can no longer offer them the used consumer goods whose real value the Mbendjele may know. Present-day efforts to secure Yaka labour often depend on some form of coercion - the creation of debt relations, the threat of using sorcery, or actual physical violence.

The most effective and common of these methods is to create debt. When Mbendjele come asking for things, Bilo will make an effort to supply them. The cost of each item is then added to their debt. Bilo wait until they require labour for a specific task or desire forest produce, and then go to the Mbendjele looking for people who owe them money. They hope to catch their debtors and oblige them to come to work. If they are refused, the argument begins. The Bilo lists all that the Mbendjele owes in a loud voice, explains the



basic principles of debt and begins to menace the debtor with allusions to the types of curse he can use.

If all this fails to rouse the person to come, the Bilo will depart and then return the next day. Mbendjele often absent themselves for long periods when they feel under pressure from creditors. This obliges Bilo to create long-term debts with a wide range of people in order to have a better chance of obtaining labour when they need it. Some Bilo become so obsessed with ensuring the Mbendjele remember that they owe them money that it is not uncommon to see them walk through a Mbendjele camp or village listing names and the amount owed at the top of their voice.

Big debts are created with alcohol. Bilo women brew corn and manioc liquor. The cost of brewing is small, though it does require skill, labour and dedicated apparatus. This is preferred to imported goods which must initially be purchased, and whose cost Mbendjele may know. Bilo frequently pay men in alcohol for small tasks. A day's labour can earn one litre, ranging from 30% to 80% proof and equivalent to 1000CFA or US\$ 2. Bilo will often give young men alcohol freely and actively encourage teenage Mbendjele boys to become heavy drinkers. Once the need for alcohol is created, large, substantial debts are easy to establish. Bilo use large debts to justify using violence to secure reimbursement in labour.

If a large debtor, or his wife, is unfortunate enough to meet their Bilo creditor, they may have their belongings 'raided'. This often involves violence and intimidation by large groups of Bilo armed with knives and sticks. Hunting nets, cooking pots, plastic jerricans and other valuable items will be snatched. Only when the debtor comes to work will the objects be returned. A wife without cooking pots puts much more pressure on the man to accept his debt than any amount of shouting from Bilo. When Mbendjele get forced in this way they use the language of trapping to describe their situation. 'I am tied up', 'They hold me down' or 'They clutch me now'. They reluctantly go off and do the work.

Many exchanges between Bilo and Mbendjele have an almost theatrical structure, following a set plan. Everyone knows the motives of the other, and follow the pattern. Mbendjele accept goods but try to avoid work, and Bilo attempt to force them to work. As the situation escalates each plays his expected role until either the Bilo succeeds, or gives

up because the Mbendjele debtor has fled into the forest. Debts are remembered over many years. I have witnessed a man being forced to pay a debt he had created more than 15 years earlier.

During the dry season Bilo offer very large quantities of alcohol to Mbendjele men in order to create substantial debts before the farming season. This can lead to daily, and sometimes extreme, violence. Mbendjele see this as a problem as the following extract from a taped conversation between two elders shows. Mbako, is blind and rarely leaves his hut. Njinano was explaining events in the village to him.

“It always starts in the dry season when people are burning fields. It is we Yaka who give the *Bilo* life. We sort everything out for them. And now they’re stuck in the shit again, their fields need clearing.

Yaka chop down trees wider than a man. For hard outdoor work like that, there’s no money, only worthless liquor. You Bilo are over there with money. But look at us, we’re here with drunkards and liquor.

Oooooo the huge size of the trees! Chop down your own trees! We should have money. Instead, we have only sadness and death from drunkenness. Aaaa, it’s evil.

If you refuse to work, he’ll stab you with sorcery. You die for nothing. Bilo are really bad people.

If someone refuses their work, they even slap him. Overwhelming his body for nothing. Look at this problem Mbako. Aaaaaaaa, its evil for us. We are people too. Just people.

Mbako, don’t listen to them talking about us. Really, it is they who are animals! They’re evil animals. Aaaaaaaa, and they still haven’t left the life yet. No, they’re still here. They fill life with anger. They’re ruining us. They’re cunts. They kill people intentionally. That’s how they are Mbako.

They always cheat us Yaka. If we say their gifts are worth nothing, they get angry ‘Animals who know nothing!’ and menace us with *sorcery*. Gorillas are Bilo who are gorillas. Is this not so Mbako?

[*Whilst laughing Mbako says*] “Really the Yaka should be left to kill themselves!”

Hey Mbako! If a Yaka gets angry, then it’s bad. It’s not right when people overwhelm your body, beating you, ku ku ku ku. So you try to find a way to fight back against so many. Just fighting with sticks again, trying to kill with a stick, ging ging ging ging.

It’s we who cut down the trees in his fields. He dies without his fields. So, he tries to kill us for not sorting him out. Ooooo, Mbako, it’s evil. Aaaa, it’s bad. Those others are killing us

like animals. There's no money; we just die with nothing... [Suddenly an especially feared Bilo arrives at the door of Mbako's hut. Njinano doesn't even pause, but continues in the same breath, as if they'd been talking about wild foods.] ...they eat wild ginger for nothing. Me, I pour out the honey.

Aaaaa, Bassana. [He acknowledges the Bilo]. Njinano and Mbako, the ones who eat wild ginger." Njinano Jaques, 48 years old, from Mobangui. (February 1995)

### **The Mbendjele ideal of their relations with Bilo**

Despite frequent conflict, the two communities must meet together in peaceful ways in order to get things from each other. In friendly interaction Bilo and Mbendjele often refer to each other as "noko" (cousin) or "mogio" (in-law). Relations between cousins and in-laws of the same generation are fairly egalitarian. But Bilo often seek to justify their claim to higher status by emphasising their role as 'parents' of the Yaka, or as elders, or as owners, or make comparisons between Yaka people and animals. The Mbendjele deeply resent this and see it as Bilo *politiki*, trickery and lies, about their authority over Mbendjele. At one moment Mbendjele are animals, then nephews, children, captives, or in-laws. To Mbendjele these asymmetric, multiple and somewhat contradictory claims to superiority reveal the desperation of the Bilo.

Mbendjele get visibly annoyed by questions that approach their relations with Bilo from the Bilo point of view, i.e. in terms of justifying myths of capture, of innate inferiority and subordination. In Minganga some persistent questioning caused two elders to elaborate a little on how they defined the term *konza*.

"Konza really means 'friend'. Our fathers found them and gave them to us. If we need food he gives it to us. We give him things too. But it's a friend, not an owner...if your Bilo surpasses himself in wickedness, you must find another friend." (January 1995).

Another man continued,

"We say, 'Milo wamu' (my Bilo), but all it means is friend. It's the Bilo who don't understand. They think they are all chiefs. He's only a friend, and if he stops giving us things then trouble starts." (January 1995).

The Mbendjele ideal of their relationship with Bilo is based on friendship, sharing, mutual aid and support, and on equality and respect for one another<sup>174</sup>. Generosity is linked to status. Thus, if a Bilo claims to be superior to an Mbendjele, he has to prove it by giving more than the Mbendjele could ever reciprocate. The Mbendjele use this to their advantage and can demand a lot from Bilo. Since the economic depression of the 1990s, Bilo have been less able to meet Mbendjele expectations. This has led to increasing conflict and fluidity in relations. In the past few years Mbendjele that were with Sangha-Sangha Bilo are steadily abandoning them in favour of the Bongili and Bodingo. They explain that these new partners are more generous and respect them better than the Sangha-Sangha.

In stark contrast to the Bilo conception of the Mbendjele as *motamba* (captives), the Mbendjele consider themselves free from commitment and binding ties. Able to leave and go whenever they like, they will find new '*bakanga*' (friends) if they are not satisfied. This conflicts with Bilo claims to fixed, enduring ties with 'their' Mbendjele, who are supposedly subjugated to their dying breath. These very opposed ideals, and unrealistic expectations of what the relationship should be like, lead to a great deal of conflict in their everyday interactions.

I hope the above has demonstrated that relations between Mbendjele and Bilo are not static, nor of one particular type. Each side has its own, rather different, ideal of how the relationship should be. As a consequence their relations are fluid, requiring constant renegotiation, potentially on a transaction-by-transaction basis. This produces a spectrum of possible outcomes: from the Mbendjele getting everything they want for nothing, to the Bilo treating the Mbendjele as unpaid servants. It is this inherent ambiguity and plethora of possible outcomes that have led to such divergent interpretations of Yaka relations with Bilo groups. Attributing comprehensive political dominance to the Bilo expresses a bias towards accepting Bilo discourse and Yaka marginalisation at face value, whilst depreciating the informal mechanisms and common sense approach used by the Yaka. As already pointed out, both Bilo discourse and the 'village' situation are also more accessible to study and have, for this reason, been overstressed in the literature.

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<sup>174</sup> This has similarities with what Joiris (1998) refers to as 'ritual friendship' among the Baka and their neighbours.

### **Mbendjele strategies for obtaining goods from outsiders**

Hunting and gathering in the forest involves hard work and often some degree of hardship. That Yaka should sometimes suffer in order to obtain goods from Bilo is considered normal. As Esakola, an elder Mbendjele man from Mobangui explained in February 1995: “When you want to kill an elephant you must follow it. It is hard work and dangerous. You must smear its fresh excrement on yourself. It is the same for us with Bilo!”

The accomplished Mbendjele hunter has mastered all the strategies required to hunt successfully the main game animals in the forest. There is a predictability in hunting that comes with experience. Certain strategies in particular places produce relatively reliable results. Learning to hunt is both learning about these different places, and the appropriate strategies to use. For instance, in certain types of undergrowth duikers are common. Coming across a large junction of animal trails in such forest undergrowth, an experienced hunter squats and mimics a duiker call. Very often duikers will approach the hunter. Different forest environments contain specific resources that require particular adaptive strategies to extract them.

The village world of Bilo is one such environment from which goods can be extracted. Yaka have developed strategies to use with Bilo that are intended to get goods from them. But, as when they hunt, Mbendjele are practical and flexible, quickly improvising and adapting their strategies as a situation unfolds. In order to obtain Bilo goods Mbendjele employ strategies designed for efficacy and safety. They adapt themselves to suit the human prey just as the elephant hunter adopts particular strategies to catch his animal prey. Bilo stigmatisation annoys them, but they try and use it pragmatically to their advantage. They strategically use the stereotypes Bilo hold of them to obtain goods from Bilo. They may use flattery, or evoke pity or shame to encourage Bilo to be generous, to forget their gorilla tendencies, and share as people should. These strategies are combined with mobility and the threat of avoidance to back up demands on Bilo.

In order to minimise potential conflict and obtain the goods they desire, Mbendjele have developed a strategic 'toolbox' with which they attempt structure interpersonal relationships between themselves and individual Bilo. These interpersonal relations can vary greatly, depending on the individuals involved and the interaction of the strategies each has

employed. It is only at this individual level that Bilo may achieve some authority over an Mbendjele, or Mbendjele may exploit Bilo and obtain numerous goods for nothing. In order to present these strategies concisely I have simplified them and present them in their essential or prototypical form. In everyday interactions these strategies are often combined, or strung along one after another in overlapping succession, or adapted and modified to suit the situation.

From white people Mbendjele want employment. This is how money, which equals goods, is obtained from them. Some Mbendjele now also demand cash payment from Bilo but the Bilo resent this. Bilo are more difficult to hunt because they 'are going the way of gorillas', but they are easier to find than 'whites'. Mbendjele strategies to obtain goods from Bilo involve trying to make them as human as possible, and therefore generous because people share. Mbendjele want to get Bilo to feel like giving them things. The Mbendjele have three broad strategies for achieving this, and a fourth in case they all fail.

The first and most desirable method is based on the Mbendjele ideal of what their relations should be like. That is, as those between friends. In this context, Bilo should simply give things to Mbendjele without expectation of return. They should share, as friends ought to. However, because Bilo are a type of gorilla, they do not always behave as real people should. Often this method does not achieve the desired results.

The next most common strategy is to use pity. By making Bilo feel sorry for them, Mbendjele exploit Bilo paternalism. Since elders are responsible for juniors they must support and help them in any way possible. By making Bilo feel superior they are more likely to feel obliged to give in to the demands made on them. A 38-year-old Bongili *konza* describes this type of approach:

"If an Mbendjele approaches a Bantu to ask him for help or work he is shy, will immediately start scratching his head whilst looking at the ground, and only lifts his eyes briefly every three to five seconds. It will only be after quite some time that he painfully poses his problem to you. Even if he is habituated to you, he will do this; it's a sign of politeness."

*Extract from an essay entitled "Le Pygmée dans sa Nature Profonde" by Kibino (38 year old Bongili man from Ikelemba). May-June 1996.*

Outsiders have often interpreted this type of behaviour as a tacit sign of the Mbendjele subordinate position. Within Mbendjele logic the basic premises of Bilo claims to superiority are so clearly false that this behaviour is not approval but a rather simple and unproblematic way of getting things from Bilo. Inspiring pity is a means Mbendjele employ between themselves to get shares of 'hidden' things. Salt, tobacco, bullets and money are easy to hide. Often when people suspect someone is hiding something they want, they sit down close to them. In a quiet and pained manner they will describe their suffering resulting from lack of tobacco, or salt for their food and so on. Most Mbendjele quickly succumb to this approach and will share what they can. With Bilo, who are considered stingy, the approach is exaggerated to a theatrical level in order to get results.

The third approach to stalking Bilo is to flatter, or shame, them into taking their responsibilities as *konza* seriously. Again, this makes it very difficult to refuse their dependant's demands. One afternoon in the village of Mobangui, an important Bilo was returning from fishing accompanied by a Mbendjele man. As they walked through Mobangui on their way to the Bilo village, the Mbendjele man began shouting loudly at the Mbendjele he passed.

"Look, listen! Here is your *konza*. This is the biggest, most important of all the *konza*. Look he's here. You Pygmies should all run away! Get into your houses, hide yourselves. This is our big chief, the *konza* of us all. Show respect, sing and dance for him or go, disappear, hide yourselves away!"

This banter lasted several minutes as the two men progressed up the village. The man's aggressiveness was shocking, but utterly disregarded. Women weaving sleeping mats continued working and chatting to one another. Even children were not intimidated, and simply carried on running about and playing.

An hour later the pair returned. This time, maintaining a safe distance, the Mbendjele man accompanied the Bilo's walk through the village with shouts of:

'Look here! Here's a gorilla, look well at this gorilla; he's passing our village. A gorilla is passing. A gorilla is going his way, I am going mine. Look! Here's a proper gorilla!'

The Bilo had refused the Mbendjele man's demands. In doing this he had behaved like a gorilla and not as a *konza* ought. He was clearly embarrassed by being announced as a gorilla to the community.

When Bilo behave like gorillas, goods cannot be obtained as they would from people, therefore a fourth, and least desirable method is justified in Mbendjele eyes: to take or steal what they require. These four methods represent the main strategic tools Mbendjele employ to hunt goods from Bilo. Today, despite Bilo resistance to paying Mbendjele wages for labour, many Mbendjele are insisting on negotiating the terms of employment before work begins.

### **Directions of contemporary change**

Mbendjele relations with the Bilo are clearly in transition, and have always been changing. Today the Mbendjele openly oppose and resist the structures of authority Bilo have attempted to impose on them over the past century.

Mbendjele men, like 45-year-old Suke, generally seem very hostile towards Bilo.

“The Bilo don't like us Yaka at all. Bilo are bad people. The Bilo saw the places we stayed, places for Yaka people; they just came and took our places. They took no notice of us. So where do we stay? We can't sit at their tables or on their benches. Because our buttocks are bad, really bad. They think we're just like animals.

We Yaka, we only know about the affairs of the forest. Our way of living is not like theirs, in the middle of big open spaces, no! We Yaka just enter the forest wherever we like, we wander around, going wherever we like, doing whatever we like, and then come out somewhere else.

Bilo are our enemies, really bad enemies! The Bilo are always starting fights with us.

‘Pygmies are cunts! Pygmies are animals! Things like Pygmies should be shot like meat in the forest.’

Why do they insult us like this? What causes them to be so bad? We Yaka are not here for nothing. We have our own intelligence. Ours is the intelligence of the stomach and head. We think for ourselves. We show the Bilo our intelligence; we take them into the forest. But they keep theirs for themselves. The root of the problem is that Bilo think we Yaka are animals.”



Many Mbendjele are seeking to change the way their groups live in order to avoid ‘*suku-suku*’, the perpetual argument and fighting, of the Bilo. Although now rare, living deep in the forest is the traditional Mbendjele response to problems with Bilo.

“Our forefathers had their eyes on the Bilo. Our fathers told us to do the same. ‘You children of afterwards look after our Bilo. There they are.’ But now we say ‘Aaaaa, what kind of people did you leave us with? Why did they give us these Bilo? They are always tying us up like animals (cheating and deceiving Mbendjele). They don’t think we are real people. No, we and the forefathers are animals!

So, we left them there with that thought.

They treat us badly; their path is a bad one. So we thought ‘OK, that’s enough, we’ll never stay in the same place as them again’. So we left there and came to Ibamba. Now we are well.

We took our eyes off them.”

*Ngbwiti, 50-year-old kombeti of Ibamba, March 1997.*

50-year-old Ngbwiti and his group had been living entirely in the forest since 1991. Ngbwiti has renounced regular access to the goods obtained through contact with Bilo<sup>175</sup>. Other Mbendjele *kombeti* are more reluctant to give these goods up. Efforts to develop independent sources of revenue allowing them direct access to markets and goods are now popular. In 1996, Phata and Emeka decided to make their base on the bank of the Sangha River, in order to benefit from the trading opportunities offered by the ‘bateau courier’. When these large barges come past Bilo and Mbendjele paddle out to them in dugout canoes with farm and forest produce to sell. These floating supermarkets pass every week or two during the wet season and provide access to all the goods Mbendjele desire. By dealing directly with the traders on the boat the Mbendjele cut out the Bilo middlemen and get more goods for their forest produce.

The changes Mbendjele are making are not a concerted effort. People’s experiences are changing the way they negotiate their lives. Their experiences differ, and as a result, Mbendjele have found many different ways of engaging with the modern world. There are Mbendjele working as gardeners or as day labourers in towns, or professional bush meat traders, guides and forest prospectors, others living exclusively from forest produce, as well

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<sup>175</sup> Clan members would bring them occasional small gifts such as salt, tobacco and clothing when visiting.

as families living in the compound of their *Bilo konza*<sup>176</sup>, ready to serve at any moment. However most Mbendjele oscillate between a great variety of subsistence strategies in the course of their lives. What is important for them is variety and not to miss an opportunity for immediate personal gain the moment it presents itself.

### **Yaka representations of their relations with outsiders**

Mbendjele conceive of groups from outside the forest as transitory and as potential resources to be exploited. The adaptive strategies developed to obtain goods from outsiders, like *Bilo*, are not conceptually differentiated from strategies used to exploit forest resources. Descriptions of these strategies in terms of forest activities, often hunting, and the animal names given to groups of outsiders suggest this. Their forest life provides a rich pool of potential metaphors for discussing novel experience. The change in their experience of white people is accommodated and expressed in the changed animal label for whites, from elephants to red river hogs. This contrasts with their relations with other Yaka groups, which are conceived of in terms of permanent competition for the same resources. Other Yaka groups do not have animal names.

The village world of *Bilo* is a particular environment from which goods can be extracted. In order to obtain these goods Mbendjele employ strategies designed for efficacy and safety. They adapt themselves to suit the prey as the elephant hunter adopts particular strategies to catch his prey. The strategies described for use with *Bilo* are employed in a similar way. But, as when they hunt, Mbendjele are practical and flexible, quickly improvising as a situation unfolds.

The use of forest idioms, in particular models of predation<sup>177</sup>, to describe strategies that engage with outsiders has been reported among other Pygmy groups in Central Africa. Turnbull (1966:82), talking of the Mbuti Pygmies living almost 800 miles east of the Mbendjele, describes how they refer to the village as a place of good hunting, and consider villagers as animals. When hunting tricky animals like villagers Mbuti use appropriate

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<sup>176</sup> The other Mbendjele shunned the only Mbendjele family in my research area who lived in this way. Tato, the father, had to do so for his own protection. He was accused of killing several people by sorcery and the family of two of his victims wished to kill him.

<sup>177</sup> Demesse, discussing Mbendjele living to the north of those I worked with characterised their economy as an 'economy of predation'. (1969: 222).

tactics, like carrying wood and, building houses. Mbuti talk of eating the villagers. Another, more recent source suggests that the metaphor of predation is being used flexibly, and expanded to encompass novel situations such as ‘development’ projects. In his synthesis of responses to, and the effects of development initiatives aimed at Pygmies in central Africa Beauclerk (1993:33) states:

“Complex battles of wits can develop as *Pygmies* and their developers each pursue their separate aims. The process is, at its most innocuous, merely a game. .... (S)ome hunter-gatherers describe goods acquired in this way as ‘meat’ and the method of obtaining them ‘hunting’.

There seem to be common idioms used by many forest hunter-gatherers across a wide area of Central Africa to discuss their engagement with outsiders. The Mbendjele category ‘Yaka’ is meaningful because of these and other similarities between linguistically diverse hunter-gatherer groups. Understanding why these different groups came to speak languages very similar to those of certain of their neighbours is, I think, hinted at in the way Yaka interact with both animals and human outsiders.

Yaka people use language flexibly depending on context. The most striking example of this is in the use of an animal’s ‘language’ to catch it. This is a common feature of Yaka hunting methods. Duikers or crocodiles are successfully called to the hunter by mimicking their mating call. Monkeys are called out of the high branches by mimicking the screams of a fallen infant. Some men call buffalo. Maybe, rather than it being a sign of subjugation, part of the explanation for the widespread use of Bilo languages by Yaka groups is that they use these languages to catch the Bilo too.

Our own perception of language as equating to culture and values is clearly challenged by the ways forest hunter-gatherers in Central Africa have taken vocabulary and grammatical structures from their neighbours without necessarily sharing the values and cultural practices of those from whom the language came. They usually accomplish this borrowing without loss of their distinctive cultural identity as hunter-gatherers, or former hunter-gatherers, in both their own and their neighbours’ opinions. As Woodburn (2000:79) pointed out, the wide distribution of the term *Batwa* in the Bantu languages of sub-Saharan

Africa and its use to designate autochthonous people<sup>178</sup> with a history or actual economy of hunter-gathering, indicates that the category ‘hunter-gatherer’ is not the result of European evolutionary theories but one that is a long-standing indigenous African category.

The generic Mbendjele ethnonyms Yaka (hunter-gatherer) and Bilo (non hunter-gatherer), and the widespread use of ‘Bambenga’ by local Bilo to designate Yaka people, add support to this view. The significance of hunting and gathering in ethnic ascriptions is attested to by the observation that in some cases there are no obvious traits, like language or culture, to make an ethnic distinction between those referred to as Batwa and their non-Batwa neighbours apart from the Batwa ‘immediate-return’ values and their recognised (former) mode of subsistence as hunter-gatherers (see for instance Lewis 2000 on the Batwa of the Great Lakes Region).

Pygmy peoples’ adoption of Bantu, Ubangian and other languages may be better understood in this context. When cultural and ethnic difference is primarily defined by mode of subsistence, those practising the same mode of subsistence are more likely to focus on markers of ethnicity like language or culture in order to distinguish themselves. When the groups concerned have radically different modes of subsistence, it may be that language is much less important as a marker of difference, and hence much less significance is placed on maintaining different languages.

Woodburn (1988: 40) has pointed out that the low esteem and derogatory stereotypes most non hunter-gatherers hold of hunter-gatherers<sup>179</sup> leads them to expect hunter-gatherers to learn their languages rather than for them to learn the low-status languages of hunter-gatherers. Thus there are external reasons for why hunter-gatherers are more likely to accommodate themselves linguistically to their neighbours than vice versa. But importantly, internally, this accommodation also derives from forest hunter-gatherers’ own egalitarian values of social and economic inclusiveness.

Forest activities such as hunting and gathering, and village activities such as meeting Bilo, creating a debt or acquiring goods, are commonly described in terms derived from forest

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<sup>178</sup> Based on Schadeberg 1999.

<sup>179</sup> Woodburn (1997) provides a perceptive analysis of discrimination against hunter-gatherers.

experience. This accords with the Mbendjele perception of themselves as ‘forest people’ despite not always actually living in or from the forest. There is equivalence between different environments since they are all within the forest, and a fundamentally ‘egalitarian’ perception of human relations that is governed by demand-sharing as the means of both recognizing equality and achieving it. The egalitarianism of the Mbendjele is an orientation to the world that immediately renders claims by outsiders, like Bilo, to authority or superiority both scandalous and preposterous.

Woodburn (1997) has shown that all over Africa hunter-gatherer peoples are discriminated against and treated as inferior by their neighbours. All hunter-gatherers, or known ex-hunter-gatherers, share a stigmatised status. This is clearly true for the Mbendjele in their relations with Bilo. This stigmatisation annoys them, but they try and use it pragmatically to their advantage. Mbendjele use appropriate strategies to get the things they desire, and use their mobility and the threat of avoidance to maintain independence and avoid situations they dislike. However, in recent years technological developments and the economic forces of globalisation are transforming the forest and the ability of outsiders to affect Mbendjele in ways they may find more difficult to avoid.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **WHOSE FOREST IS IT ANYWAY? THE FOREST AS A VALUABLE RESOURCE**

As described at the end of Chapter One, Mbendjele forest has begun, especially since the early 1990s, to experience a new series of transformations prompted by technological developments in the logging industry combined with intensive international pressure to service debt repayments by ‘developing’<sup>180</sup> the timber sector of the Congolese economy. In order to put this process into an Mbendjele perspective it is necessary to examine Mbendjele notions about property and ownership in more detail before looking at the impact of these modern changes.

In this context Woodburn’s (1982a) distinction between ‘immediate-return systems’ and ‘delayed-return systems’ is a useful analytic tool. Woodburn’s distinction correlates with local perceptions, as mentioned in Chapter Seven (page 16). The ‘immediate-return’ orientation to life is widespread and enduring among forest hunter-gatherers in Central Africa<sup>181</sup>, such as the Mbendjele. It was recognised in the Mbendjele area by colonial administrators such as Dr. Lalouel, who expressed this immediate-return orientation with the phrase ‘*la loi du moindre effort*’ (the law of least effort, 1950: 185). As Woodburn (1982a) proposes, an immediate-return orientation has numerous connotations in relation to how people organise their political and economic life.

Similar practices and ideologies have been observed in different places and have caused other anthropologists to elaborate theories of their own. For example, Lee’s concept of ‘communal foraging relations of production’ (1981), or Ingold’s argument that hunter-gatherer sociality is such ‘a radically alternative mode of relatedness’ (1990:130; 1997) that the term ‘society’ is inappropriate.

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<sup>180</sup> In this case development simply means allowing foreign-based multinational companies to begin logging.

<sup>181</sup> See for instance, Woodburn 1982a: 433; 1982b, for the Mbuti of DRC, and the Baka of Cameroon. This orientation endures even among those unable to live by hunting and gathering. The forest of the Twa Pygmies of Rwanda and Burundi has been turned into farmland and wildlife reserves. They are no longer able to hunt and gather. They speak similar languages to their neighbours, share religious practices and beliefs with them, but are extremely marginalized and discriminated against by the majority society. It is their continuing attachment to an immediate-return lifestyle as a valued moral and organising principle that has become the basis for much of the discrimination against them (Lewis 2000:8-11).

Woodburn characterised this radical difference in his discussion of egalitarianism (1982a). People in immediate return, egalitarian societies do not depend on others for access to vital resources. Goods are not accumulated or conserved for longer than it takes all present to consume them. ‘Demand-sharing’<sup>182</sup> distributes excess production and thus is crucially important in assuring the relative equality of all the members of a group by guaranteeing that individuals do not accumulate more than others. Sharing is central to Mbendjele understanding of peoples’ relations to material objects, and demand-sharing the process by which they oblige others to let them take what they need. From their point of view property relations are all about sharing relations.

### **Demand - sharing**

‘If I have two shirts and someone asks me for one I should give it to them. I can’t refuse anyone, family, friend or stranger. Especially if you love people properly, then how could you refuse anyone?’

*Mongemba, 50 year old Mbendjele man, Pembe, Nov. 2000*

Bilo use of the term ‘*konza*’ (in Lingala and many other local languages) conforms in many respects with the delayed return or capitalist notion of ‘owner’. Following Barnard and Woodburn’s (1988:13-14) definition of property rights, the ‘owner’ of some ‘thing’ should have the ability, through rules, sanctions and a legitimising ideology, to restrict other peoples’ enjoyment of the same ‘thing’. This fits Bilo use of the term *konza*.

Mbendjele also use the term but explicitly contrast their meaning with the Bilo use of the same term. The different spellings I use for what is normally considered the same word, *konza* (Bilo version) and *konja* (Mbendjele/Yaka version), distinguish between Bilo and Mbendjele pronunciation and the different interpretations each has of the meaning of ‘ownership’.

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<sup>182</sup> Woodburn (1998) discusses demand sharing in detail, pointing out that it is not a form of exchange. In these societies it is often the same people regularly producing consumables who consistently have their excess production taken from them by other less successful producers who assert their entitlement to share all consumables.

In Yaka tradition, the closest people get to accepting notions of ownership similar to those of Bilo or capitalists is in relation to certain ritual and mystical knowledge (intellectual property) that will be denied to ineligible people. Thus spirit-controllers (*konja ya mokondi*) or healers (*nganga*) may refuse to share certain knowledge with other people. These strings of knowledge have been inherited, even bought and sold between Mbendjele and other Yaka groups over long periods and great distances.

Of material items, only certain personal possessions like a woman's basket (*yukwa*), her pots (*banjongo*), clothing (*betobo*) and machete (*bunu*) and a man's bag (*ngamata*), his weapons - spear and knife (*gongo na yobe*), tools (notably the *djombi* - axe) and clothing are recognised as belonging to named individuals, often the person who made, found, took or bought the item. The *konja* has priority over others' claims to the item. But in contrast to ritual and mystical knowledge these items, when not in use by the *konja*, will be shared on demand. Mbendjele relationships are based on the principle of sharing material items.

For most other items need determines who is the *konja*, especially of consumable goods. In the Mbendjele context owning something is more like a guardianship or caretaker role until someone else needs it. For instance, when the Mbendjele recognise the '*konja*' (owner) of an animal, it is only significant to ensure the *konja* gets his hunter's meat (the 'owner' is by definition the hunter that first wounded the animal), thus ensuring his future hunting success. This however, gives him no right to refuse anyone an equitable share of the carcass he 'took out of the forest' (*a mu bila nyama ya ndima*). Mbendjele compare their notions of *konja* with those of the Bilo clearly in this context:

"A Bilo *konza* is different. When they say they are the owner of an animal they will refuse people! Even if they are very hungry, they still refuse them. Their way is different, their path is bad."

*Mongemba, 50 year old Mbendjele man, Pembe, Nov. 2000*

Demand-sharing creates and sustains social relations of equality and affection. The importance of affection in defining sharing relations has consequences for spatial organisation. The Mbendjele household is the basic unit of sharing. A typical household might consist of a young married couple with small children, the wife's mother and



unmarried younger siblings. Others might be based around a mature married couple with a wide age range of children living with them. These children will often include some of their own but also some of their siblings' children. Sharing children between sets of brothers and sisters is common, and a childless couple will often be given children to look after for long periods.

There are 'circles' of sharing depending on the quantity and type of food brought into camp. Any household member consumes whatever enters the household (*mongulu*) freely and normally without restraint. This is the smallest unit of sharing. Next is the camp (*lango*). Normally only people who like each other live together in the same camp since avoidance is a common way of resolving disputes. In situations of temporary high population density (such as during dry season ceremonies, or when visiting Bilo villages) Mbendjele often make several separate camps close to each other in order to maintain this principle. Any large amount of food brought back by a camp member will be shared equally among all the households in camp.

The next level of sharing is rare and occurs in only two contexts – big-game hunting and *massana* spirit performances. When an elephant is killed any Mbendjele in the area will hear about it and go rapidly to where the carcass is lying. Large camps will be set up and feasting and dancing go on until the elephant has been consumed. During long *massana* spirit performances when forest spirits are summoned into camp, especially the three-day performance of *Ejengi*, people from all around will come and participate. In particular *eboka* commemoration ceremonies to end a period of mourning after a death will draw people from many neighbouring areas. In addition to sharing out the spiritual benefits of the forest spirits these *massana* performances also share out prized consumables – such as alcohol, tobacco and marijuana, and other goods, including money. Initiations often take place during extended *massana* performances and initiation fees will have to be paid. These fees are immediately redistributed among all present. In the past people would pay with coils of metal, alcohol and food. Now they also use money.

Similarly to men's and women's different but complementary roles in *massana* performances and in food collecting, Mbendjele men and women share in different ways. This is related to gender roles and their different productive activities. Women's gathering

activities are geared to exploiting labour intensive but dependable food sources for the regular provisioning of food for the family. These commonly include various wild yams, edible leaves, ground-growing vegetables like mushrooms and certain fruit, small fish and crustaceans. If women have collected a large amount of food they generally share it among themselves in the forest before returning to camp. Once in the camp women will prepare the food and share it again once cooked by sending plates to the men's area (*mbanjo*), and to their friends and relatives. Women's production is rarely shared out on arrival in camp, as the men's is.

Men specialise in obtaining foods with potentially large yields, like wild animals, honey, occasionally large fish, and seasonal fruit and nuts that must be climbed for. These foods are rarely found everyday and men only share if they find such food in great abundance. In such cases they will have the bundles of meat or honey they are carrying taken from them even before they enter the camp. If they are carrying a carcass someone else will take it from them, supervise the butchering and ensure the sharing is done equitably. The man who killed the animal is given the hunter's meat that guarantees his future hunting success. Apart from this the hunter gets an equivalent share to that received by others<sup>183</sup>.

### **Money economies and demand-sharing**

It is interesting to see how traditional sharing patterns are reacting to the introduction of money and wage labour. For instance, in modern contexts of hunting for sale to Bilo or logging workers, Mbendjele will announce to the camp that they intend to sell some meat for such and such a reason (often to pay a fine, clear a debt, or seek medicines when ill) and will only share half the animal with the camp. However this is controversial. People with such intentions tend to camp in small groups so as to avoid the tensions this can create when people get hungry. They will not be able to stay in the same place as the others unless they share what they have.

“We have to share things or other people get angry. They will throw their eyes at us. So you have to be intelligent when you share. If you kill a small animal then just share it with your *mongulu* (hut) and send a few plates around to your friends nearby.

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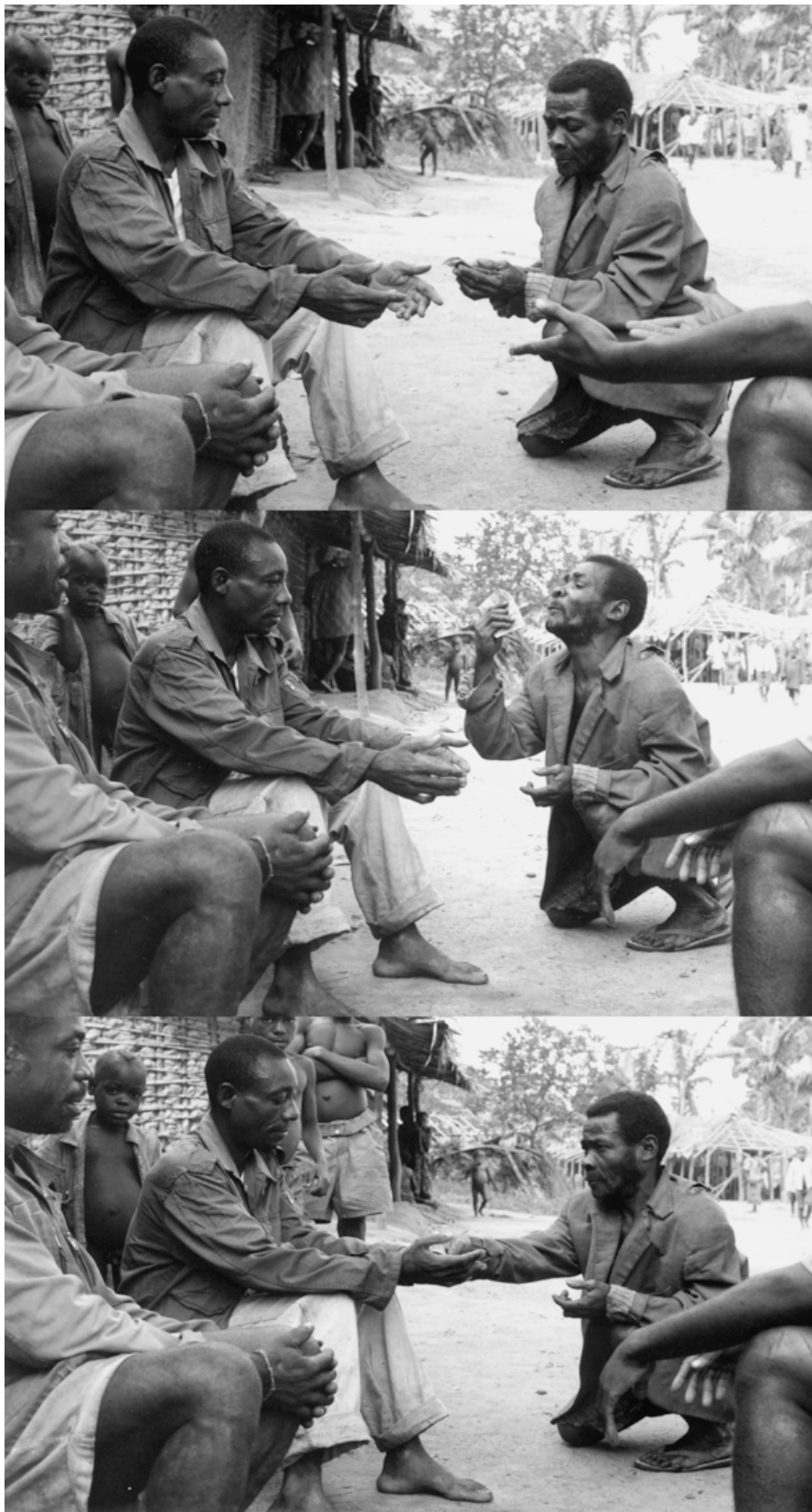
<sup>183</sup> The taboo against a hunter eating game he has killed reported among the Aka of CAR (Bahuchet 1985: 375) is not practised by the Mbendjele.

Don't do the same with money. Just share it with your family if you have a lot. When you have worked hard and got lots of money in your pocket you must use your intelligence. You don't share it around as we do with pigs. You keep it with intelligence! Wait until you have problems [and must pay a fine], or if there is great sorrow [someone dies and alcohol will be required for the commemoration ceremony] and then get your money out. Or if someone in your clan needs money badly, get it out. Give it to them. When they have some they'll give you some."

*Phata, 65 year-old Mbendjele man, Pembe, Dec. 2000.*

Money has also entered marriage relations. Marriages nowadays frequently involve the payment of a small amount of cash to the bride's father, often around 2-3000CFA (US\$4 to US\$6, a nominal fee) by the groom's father (see figure 11). This is a recent change. Coils of metal and spearheads were used in the past. Bilo introduced bridewealth in their efforts to justify their authority over Mbendjele. Paying it enables them to claim rights over the couple whose marriage they have financed and also over any children the couple may produce. Mbendjele have accepted bridewealth among themselves to prevent Bilo claiming they are not 'properly' married and so that the Bilo can be denied any claim to rights over the couple and their children. But far more important for the Mbendjele are the brideservice obligations of the groom to his affines.

Marriage relations provide an important avenue for the circulation of goods and knowledge. Brideservice requires the boy to stay with his affines and share his labour with them for a number of years, or until their first child can walk. Thereafter he will be expected to share regularly with his affines and to make an effort to meet up with them and bring them things. These long-term affinal relationships circulate goods, news and knowledge very widely between different Mbendjele communities in different parts of the forest. The incorporation of the Bilo tradition of bridewealth payments by contrast, is a statement claiming equality with Bilo, a 'levelling-up' mechanism.



*Figure 11.*  
*On behalf of his nephew Bushango, whose father is dead, Moanja pays bridewealth to Minganga, father of Koleti. In front of other elders Moanja blesses the marriage by spitting on the money (2000CFA or US\$ 4) before handing it to Minganga.*  
*Indongo, 1997.*

*Figure 11. Moanja paying bridewealth to Minganga.*

Mbendjele are flexible in how they understand sharing and are able to modernise or adapt the ways they share to achieve a variety of goals. They are ready to incorporate new ideas and practices, and are generally tolerant of other people's ways of doing things even if they do not approve.

### **Sharing the forest**

'At first we were all alone in the forest. No one else was here. Then we stayed in *zimo* [abandoned Bilo plantations]. Sometimes we would visit the Bilo to get tobacco and *minjoko* [iron and bronze coils used to make blades]. Then we made friends and would even stay near their villages.'

*Phata, 65 year-old Mbendjele man, Pembe, January 2001, providing a time-collapsing history of Yaka occupation of the forest.*

As discussed in Chapter Two, Mbendjele associate themselves with particular areas of forest they refer to as '*ndima anḡosu*' (our forest). These forest areas are composed of named rivers, lakes, salt licks, marshes, savannahs and areas of different forest types on firm land (see also Chapter Three). These geographic features are all named. They serve as the orientation markers Mbendjele use to talk about places or when they move through the forest on journeys. Unnamed areas between named places are seen as belonging to the named places. Border areas between different Mbendjele groups are often claimed by both groups, but this does not cause conflict since Mbendjele forest is open to all Mbendjele.

Mbendjele consider all the forest to be theirs. Mbendjele cannot conceive of their lives, or deaths and afterlife, without the frame of the forest around them. Their rights to go where they wish and use whatever they like in the forest are a birthright that they consider inalienable. The forest is considered totally abundant and always capable of sustaining Yaka people. *Komba* (God) created the forest for Yaka people to share, and encouraged them to live in a certain way that includes a system of forest management and certain key social values, such as sharing. The Mbendjele and other Yaka people have been willing to share the forest with others who demand shares, and in practice rarely deny anyone access to the forest.

Today, Yaka forest has multiple claims made over it by different groups. International organisations have now added their claims to those made by the Bilo. Other peoples' claims to the forest differ markedly from Mbendjele claims that rest on birth, occupancy and identity. Newcomers' claims focus on the transformation of forest into habitations or other buildings, farms, plantations, and increasingly today, logging concessions, mines or wildlife parks. These claims to land rights are recognised in national laws because the forest has been transformed. They are exclusive rights, and people not respecting them can be severely sanctioned. This emphasis on transformation (or destruction in many cases) of forest in order to claim land rights over it effectively rules out Mbendjele claims to rights unless they renounce their hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

Since the 1970s and President Marien Ngouabi's variably enacted attempts to sedentarise Pygmy peoples, all Yaka people state affiliation to a village regardless of whether or not they have a hut there or have visited there in recent years. If these affiliations are not to an Mbendjele village, they are to a Bilo village where the Mbendjele concerned maintains relations with specific Bilo from the named village. Mbendjele now discuss their spatial origins in terms of these villages to counter the suggestion by many Bilo that they live like animals wandering the forest. This has become another way of 'levelling-up' to counter Bilo discrimination.

All officially recognised villages belong to Bilo groups. For this reason, regardless of whether or not an Mbendjele village exists on their territory, Mbendjele territories are also claimed by local Bilo groups based in government approved villages. Some Bilo in these villages even claim exclusive rights and dispute that Mbendjele have any rights whatsoever. As mentioned in Chapter Two, territories were delineated during the colonial period to discourage interethnic warfare and to define the area of forest from which villagers were obliged to collect products like copal resin, rubber and duiker skins with which to pay their taxes. The colonial authorities never officially recognised hunter-gatherer land-use as a legitimate claim to rights over forest areas so used, but also never demanded that Yaka pay taxes as they did Bilo. Within this context the colonial authorities did recognise Bilo agricultural usage and accepted that this gave them rights over land. Post-independence governments have continued this discrimination against hunter-gatherer land use.

The concept of ‘traditional land rights’ has some *de facto* recognition in the Congo, but only Bilo groups are considered to possess them. These ‘traditional rights’ were first attributed to Bilo as part of the colonial effort to extract as much forest produce as possible from local villagers. Prior to the imposition of colonial rule Bilo groups were highly fluid and mobile. This mobility was related to territorial expansion, political competition for long-distance trade links and considerable local level warfare between neighbouring groups. It was only after the First World War that colonial ‘pacification’, land tenure rules, forced resettlement and forced labour stabilised populations and created permanent villages (Joiris 1998: 273; Burnham 2000:43).

As already mentioned, observing the mobility of Bilo communities over time has caused the Mbendjele to view them as outsiders, essentially transitory occupants of the forest. Maybe surprisingly to many that think of the Mbendjele as constantly on the move, the Mbendjele contrast their own long-term and permanent occupation of the forest with the Bilo’s migrations and temporary occupation. This perception of the Bilo by the Mbendjele is an accurate one, as other commentators have confirmed (see for instance Colchester 1994; Brody 2000a; or Burnham 2000).

In recent years the boom and bust economy of logging has lead to unrealistic expectations and unsustainable habits developing among young Bilo men and women whilst a logging company is operational. When the loggers go the money dries up. This contributes significantly to the rural exodus of young people who go in search of their former affluence in towns and cities. By 1990 52% of the Congolese population (and 85% of men between 25 and 29 years old) were concentrated in just two cities – Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. Overall 70% of the population is urbanised, despite an absence of large industry to sustain them in most towns (Colchester 1994:45).

Observing the gradual emptying of rural Bilo villages reinforces the Mbendjele perception of outsiders like Bilo as temporary inhabitants of the forest. This is one of the reasons Mbendjele are not over-concerned about challenging Bilo claims to authority over their forest. Conquest is a central concept in Bilo ideologies justifying their rights over things. Bilo claims to ownership over Yaka forest land are based on the legitimising ideology of

conquest, of both the forest and the people they found in it. In this manner Bilo claim authority over land, people and goods, and the right to restrict others' access to these things. This is compared to the behaviour of gorillas by Mbendjele, and strongly disapproved of since it contradicts basic Yaka values of sharing and egalitarianism.

Bailey's *et al's* (1992) account of property relations in Central Africa eloquently express this Bilo perspective on land. However it is mistakenly presented as also the Pygmies' perspective. It seems probable that their use of Bilo interpreters during research, in addition to their close association with Bilo research assistants, has favoured a Bilo view that is contrary to the Pygmy point of view expressed to me by the Mbendjele. This is an aspect of what Brody has called the 'silencing of tribal people' (2000b: 6), a process that pushes tribal people to the remotest margins of the nations they live in, and that deprives them of their richest resources and denies them rights to their heritage.

“Close relations between pygmies and farmers extend to their perceptions of their rights to land. Each farmer clan has rights recognised by all neighbouring farmer clans to a specific area of forest, which they may clear for crop cultivation or where they may hunt, fish, gather and extract required raw materials. The clan of pygmies traditionally associated with that same farmer clan also has recognised rights to exploit the same area of forest. The farmers assist their pygmy partners in maintaining exclusive rights to this area, and violations by either pygmies or other farmers are contested through negotiation, or sometimes violence.”  
(Bailey's *et al* 1992:205)

Describing land rights in this way invests Bilo claims to own Pygmy peoples' lands with legitimacy and gives their claims to control the displacement of Pygmies more credibility. Farmer communities, like other colonists arriving in the Central African forests, have divided up areas of forest between themselves. They have done the same with clans of Pygmy people over whom they attempt to exert control by limiting their mobility to defined areas. It is precisely this mobility that gives Pygmy peoples a significant degree of autonomy despite Bilo attempts to dominate them, and accounts for Bilo obsessions with trying to limit their mobility.

Forest-orientated Yaka groups I have met in northern Congo and southern Cameroon resent representations of their relationship with their forest that are based on Bilo models. It has



no relation to their perception of an abundant forest that *Komba* wished all creatures to share. Mongemba explains:

‘It is the Bilo who say they own the forest. Yet we are all in the same place. If they try and go into the forest alone they immediately get lost. They can’t go far in the forest without us. So, speak as much as they like, they depend totally on us to get into this forest of theirs.

We are the first people of the forest; we are the real *konja* (owners/guardians) of the forest. Bilo took our things with the strength of their mouths, with anger. That is why they say they have our forest. But it is rubbish. How can they if they get lost just walking a little beyond their farms? It’s the strength of their mouths’

*Mongemba, 50 year-old Mbendjele man, Pembe, Jan 2001.*

It is unfortunate for Pygmy groups like the Mbendjele that their conception of land rights are so easily negated by responsible academics in favour of a literal presentation of Bilo ideological justifications for their attempts to dominate Pygmy groups and claim ownership over forest occupied by Pygmy peoples. The impact of Bilo being present when questions over forest ownership are being asked was clearly expressed by Giemba. I had asked him about comments from some loggers involved in negotiating with local communities in areas about to be logged that, even if the Mbendjele are present during discussions, they never complain about the intrusion of the foresters or seek compensation as the Bilo do.

‘If you [a white man] ask a Yaka who owns the forest they will say the Bilo own the forest. They say this because they fear Bilo witchcraft. They do not want to tell the truth to whites when Bilo are present because they know that as soon as the white man has gone fury will overcome the Bilo and the strength of their mouths will start killing us [they will curse us].’

*Giemba, 40 year old Mbendjele man, Pembe, Jan 2001.*

The fear of being cursed by Bilo looms large in Mbendjele thinking. Bilo regularly and verbosely curse Mbendjele by wishing that their worst nightmares should befall them - that their genitals should rot, that they be bitten by a snake, fall out of a tree, or get charged by dangerous animals, and so on. Deaths are often attributed to the malicious activities of Bilo. Mbendjele even sing about it ‘*Motoko anga Bilo a di budi ya passi!*’ (The noise [speech] of the Bilo is hard and causes suffering!).

Thus the Mbendjele see themselves in a situation that common-sense shows them to be in control of, yet in which they see the advantage of paying lip-service to Bilo claims in order to maintain safe access to Bilo goods. The potential for anger and violence from Bilo when their over-bearing claims to authority over things are not respected frightens Mbendjele enough for them to acquiesce to Bilo claims when in the presence of Bilo. However the Bilo's dependence on the Mbendjele for moving around in the forest is what makes Mbendjele confident that this acquiescence holds no danger to their vital interests. Bilo claims are ideological because they depend crucially on Mbendjele co-operation if Bilo are to enjoy the rights they claim to possess. Bilo efforts to coerce the Mbendjele critically fail due to this dependence on Mbendjele co-operation and support.

While visiting the Mbendjele again in 2001 I was interested to observe that, following the announcement of hunting restrictions in forest claimed by the Sangha-Sangha Lino, it was the Lino (Bilo) who protested vigorously. Mbendjele using the same area of forest made no such fuss. The Mbendjele concerned explained to me that they were confident that no one could stop them going where they like and doing what they want in their forest. To them it was all just 'village people' politics. How can people who hardly set foot in the forest they so vigorously claim as their own be serious?

Similarly when I present ecologists' concerns about increasing faunal scarcity in order to explain their response of closing areas of forest off from human extractive activities, Mbendjele feel somehow exempt from such restrictions. Bird-David's observation about gatherer-hunters relations with their farming neighbours that '(t)he differences between them relates to their distinct views of the environment that they share' (1990:194-5) is also applicable to distinguish conservation discourses premised on notions of scarcity and the gatherer-hunters view of their ecological relations in terms of an abundant and 'giving environment'. Translating between these different views of the forest is likely to be a major challenge for building truly participative conservation in the Yaka area.

From the Mbendjele point of view the forest has always been, and will eternally be there for them. It was created for Yaka people. Mbendjele have an unswerving faith that the forest will always be able to provide them with what they need. In order to maintain this state of abundance the Mbendjele have a complex ritual life in which, among other things,

forest spirits are enlisted to support and assist the Mbendjele in satisfying their needs. From their point of view, bad hunting and gathering are related to the activities of malicious spirits rather than to inadequacies in human skill or the environment's ability to provide. People recognise each other's skills but it is impolite to refer to them. Instead hunting success is talked about in terms of the personal and mystical relationships expressed in the concept of *ekila* (see Chapter Four). This is related to the Mbendjele's egalitarian ethic, in which individual ability is downplayed and represented as a consequence of their conduct in relationships with other people and mystical agents.

The idioms Mbendjele use for discussing the efficacy of food-gathering activities may seem odd but they can be beneficial for conservation. If taken as a body of practices it could be argued that they form a system of forest management. For instance in areas of forest where hunting is consistently unsuccessful, Mbendjele hunters will place leaf cones stuffed with earth (*misongo*) on all paths leading into that area of forest. This warns other Mbendjele that the forest is populated by voracious spirits or has been cursed, and that they should not attempt to find food but turn back or simply pass through. Despite non-scientific reasoning the effect of this restriction is to allow degraded areas of forest to be left while their resources increase to sustainable levels again.

However Mbendjele idioms for understanding the forest and its resources have not yet adapted to the rapid changes brought about by the increasingly intensive exploitation of forest resources by outsiders. The sophisticated balances their traditional lifestyle has with the forest are being dramatically shaken by the immense power of modern technology to transform and degrade the environment.

Partly because they can avoid over-exploited areas, and partly due to their belief in an eternal and abundant forest, the Mbendjele do not realise the extent to which the forest is deteriorating. As many avoid degraded areas and go elsewhere others, often living near urban centres, begin to see their options for gaining food becoming increasingly limited. Some become more or less sedentarised and rely on salaried employment, day labour or piece-work to sustain their families. Manuel Thuret (1999) describes one such community living opposite the town of Ouesso. In effect, the Mbendjele in these communities are

adopting many ‘village people’ practices because their forest is no longer sufficiently abundant to support long periods away from villages.

The steady degradation of Mbendjele forest by commercial activities, its occupation by increasing numbers of outsiders, and sealing off by animal protectionists may in the not too distant future have a serious negative impact on the Mbendjele’s ability to hunt and gather effectively in their traditional areas. As their options for gaining a livelihood reduce, they will be obliged to adopt more and more of the lifestyle and practices of village people.

Mbendjele are protected from Bilo accessing their forest by Bilo dependence on the Mbendjele to guide them. This was also true of other outsiders, such as loggers, wishing to enter the forest. However international capitalist enterprises now use sophisticated navigation and positioning technology that allows a degree of independence from the Yaka that was impossible in the past.

The increased logging activity in the forest has led to large urban developments around the activities of the logging companies, the intensive development of road networks throughout the forest, and the opening up of previously inaccessible areas to commercial exploitation, mostly by Bilo professional hunters, or Yaka in their employment, supplying urban centres with bush meat<sup>184</sup>. The impact of these various uses of the forest by outsiders is that local people – both Mbendjele and Bilo – see their resource base diminishing and increasing numbers of strangers coming into their lands.

Forests owned by local people have been converted into floral and faunal assets that have been sold or rented out by the national government under pressure from international globalising institutions. The state now obtains an important income from permitting multinational corporations and conservation projects to claim exclusive rights over forest resources in areas allocated to them, and to impose top-down development in these areas.

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<sup>184</sup> Due to the seriousness of this problem in the late 1990s, the logging company (CIB) working in my research area has undertaken extensive control of bushmeat trading on their road network as part of their recognition of conservationists’ concerns.

### **From French colonial structures to Bilo colonial structures**

Despite independence for French Equatorial Africa in 1960 there is 'a remarkable continuity of interest, reflecting also the political continuity, between the colonial and post-colonial eras.' (Colchester 1994:12). Part of the reason for this striking continuity was the degree of acculturation of the local African elites. By the time of independence they had absorbed French culture, values and tastes to the point that most regarded indigenous traditions as worthless and an inhibition to 'development' (Colchester 1994:19).

This continuity is also apparent in the continuing operation of some of the colonial concessionaire companies that began in the 1880s and remain active today, or have directly passed their rights on to other foreign enterprises. It is similarly apparent in the way in which Congo's, like Cameroon's, land tenure law follows French norms in considering 'vacant and without master' all land that shows no signs of permanent occupation and defines it as state land. As Burnham (2000) points out, concepts such as 'state lands' were a convenient way of facilitating the acquisition of local peoples' lands by the colonial authorities by effectively nullifying the 'traditional' claims of local peoples.

In addition to the continuation of French administrative practices by the newly independent government of the Congo, their social policies continued many of the aims of the colonial enterprise. Ideas about '*development*' and what directions it should take continued to follow the French lead even during a long period of Marxist-Leninist government. Colonial policies like that of '*regroupement*' were continued by some post-independence leaders. The colonial government had used this policy to resettle dispersed and mobile Bilo communities along accessible routes in order to facilitate tax collection, forced labour regimes, and to provide military access in case of rebellions.

Such policies of forced relocation had several negative consequences in northern Congo. Some Bilo groups, such as the Pomo of Mene on the Ndoki mentioned by Bruel (1910), were made destitute by being relocated to land belonging to rival ethnic groups. This created land conflicts and disrupted traditional farming systems (Colchester 1994:16). Relocations were often coercive and justified with claims that they would benefit local people, making it easier to provide health care, education and other services. These

resettlement policies continued into the 1970s in the Congo and were aimed at both Bilo and Yaka populations of the north.

The continuity between the French and post-independence governments was clear in the 1970 Land Code. This law proclaimed all land to be the 'property of the people represented by the State' and abolished all titles and customary rights to land leaving only the ill-defined 'right to enjoy the use of the soil'. Only land that had permanent buildings on it or that was in active exploitation as farm could be claimed. This definition of land ownership effectively discriminates against Mbendjele land-use and claims over land, since the majority of their lands will appear unoccupied at any given time<sup>185</sup>.

As previously mentioned, the Mbendjele have been willing to share their forest with outsiders because of their strong ethic of sharing, but whether they will be willing to share in future remains to be seen. Those communities that have experienced loggers coming and going feel cheated – the huge machines and extensive infrastructure of towns, roads and slipways impress the Mbendjele but also raise their suspicions. How could so much power be used without huge profits?

Working for the loggers is seen as a means to share in these profits. But when they seek work they find that the vast majority of salaried jobs are being given to Bilo villagers, leaving them with only casual employment and low-paid piece-work. In the search for work they frequently experience discrimination in favour of others and if they get work are often verbally abused or falsely accused by their colleagues. Employers complain that they are unreliable.

The difficulties they have getting employment, the discrimination they suffer, and the visible success of the villagers getting the best jobs make many Mbendjele feel that they are the victims of a conspiracy between Bilo and powerful white people (*mindele*) to rob the forest of its resources without sharing with the Mbendjele. In many respects these Mbendjele are right. They express this by saying the '*Bilo bateka ndima na mindele*' (Bilo are selling the forest to the whites).

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<sup>185</sup> For a more detailed account of the relations between land law and hunter-gatherer land rights in Central Africa, see Barume (2000).

### **Loggers and conservationists**

Although Congo - Brazzaville was the fourth largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa in 1999, the country remains highly indebted to international financial institutions and debt arrears continue to escalate<sup>186</sup>. The country does not qualify for international debt relief, although international donors met in October 2000 to discuss the situation. They indicated that, if the country follows stringent macro-economic policies, including further privatisation, developing the non-oil sectors, particularly forestry, and fiscal management, as well as starting work on a 'Poverty Reduction Strategy', this would take the country one step nearer to qualification for debt relief.

Multilateral creditors have also been encouraging timber exports and such exports are now the country's second major source of export revenues after oil. Additionally, the forestry sector provides 10% of formal employment and forestry's contribution to GNP increased from 1% in 1982 to 5% in 1996 (Forests Monitor 2001). This explosion of logging activity in the forests began in the late 1970s.

During the late seventies and eighties the forest was divided into large concessions called UFAs (Unités Forestières d'Aménagement – Forestry management units) in order to attract investment from foreign companies willing to exploit forest resources. This strategy was effective. By 1988 60% of Congo's 13 million hectares of exploitable forest were under concession (Colchester 1994:38). As Colchester further points out, this system resembles the colonial concessionaire system, both in the scale of the areas involved and in the total disenfranchisement of local peoples' rights over their land and resources.

The northern forests cover 17.3 million hectares, of which 8.9 million are deemed exploitable. Before 1996, 2.1 million hectares of northern forests had been allocated as concessions. The relative isolation of the region previously limited forestry activities, but this has been changing rapidly. In 1996 alone, 3.2 million hectares were allocated for timber exploitation and, since 1998, President Sassou Nguesso has been actively seeking multinational logging companies to take over the exploitation of the remaining unallocated northern forests (Forests Monitor 2001).

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<sup>186</sup> This paragraph is based on Forests Monitor 2001.

Today all the UFAs have been attributed to multinational logging companies, except for the UFA of Nouabale-Ndoki that was given to the Wildlife Conservation Society and is now the Nouabale-Ndoki National Park. Before the outbreak of civil war in June 1997 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) was preparing to occupy the Lac Telle region and create a protected area. Like the logging companies the wildlife protectionists impose their presence on local people without meaningful consultations. Only Bilo communities are approached for their agreement and also occasionally to receive compensation.

Logging activity provokes conservationists to respond. When loggers get exclusive rights to cut trees in part of the forest, this has numerous other consequences. For instance, logging communities need feeding, supplying bushmeat to the salaried workforce becomes a gold rush attracting professional Bilo trappers who can hunt out a whole zone of forest using hundreds of wire cables. The roads used to remove the logs also serve the bushmeat traders. As the roads reach remote villages, their inhabitants flock to the logging town to seek their fortune or begin intensive hunting to supply the town with meat, and so on. The opening up of the forest also attracts the attention of international environmentalist organisations which take an interest in the impact of logging on forest resources. The impact is great, and these organisations quickly begin to seek funds for the urgent conservation needed. Images of a dire threat to 'pristine rain forest' are effective for raising funds and are a popular banner for many conservation organisations. There is clearly a serious threat to the environment, but by mythologizing the forest and failing to recognise the role of peoples' long-term presence in it, conservation NGOs have tended 'to ignore or misunderstand the social realities of African rainforest environments (and this) serves the interests of no one in the end.' (Burnham 2000:51).

Within the mythologized wilderness of the pristine rainforest logic, local people must be excluded. Only government officials, privileged non-African conservationists, or the occasional high fee-paying western tourist may now enter protected areas. Commercial bushmeat traders and farmers can go elsewhere, but for Yaka people it is much more difficult since each zone will have important seasonal wild resources not necessarily available elsewhere in the territory they normally live and travel in.



Loggers and conservationists each use the other to justify their activities and obtain funding to develop their activities. Loggers are able to divert attention from the impact of their activities with reference to efforts being made in conservation areas. Conservationists justify the draconian repression of local peoples' traditional rights, in addition to their exclusion from huge areas of forest, by referring to the destruction caused by activities associated with logging. Despite claiming to support the conservation of Central African forests, the major international funding institutions supporting the development of the logging industry with huge loans, justify doing this by simultaneously providing grants to conservationist organisations<sup>187</sup>.

The implications of this dual occupation of the forest by loggers and conservationists are potentially very serious for the Mbendjele and other Pygmy groups. Their forest is becoming increasingly accessible using modern technology. Outsiders can now enter the forest independently of them using compasses and geographic positioning systems (GPS). They can dissect it on maps made using aerial photography and satellite imagery. Decisions taken in offices thousands of miles away can be instantly communicated using mobile communications equipment and are then enacted by the chainsaw and bulldozer criss-crossing the forest with grid-works and roads. As international capital draws more and more of the forest's resources out of the forest, international conservation organisations will isolate increasingly large areas of forest.

If conservation organisations continue excluding local inhabitants from areas they occupy, local peoples, particularly Yaka people, will become victims of both those outsiders extracting resources and those protecting resources. Each will continue to use the other to justify their activities. In the meantime the real causes of the long-term abuse of resources remain unaddressed. The central issue in the unsound management of Congo's forest resources is not technical but political.

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<sup>187</sup> This link may be far more significant than is generally realised, as Polly Ghazi (1992) has noted. She describes how the World Bank, despite a 'green forestry policy', offered commercial rate loans to boost Congo's timber exports. 'To help tempt the government of the Congo, which already owes the West huge debts, the loan offer is being linked to a free UN grant for setting up protected conservation areas. The \$10 million grant will come from the new Global Environment Facility, raising fears that the much heralded green fund could be misused to damage rather than protect rainforests...'

### **The problem of discrimination against Mbendjele**

Despite the Mbendjele always being tolerant and sharing their forest with outsiders, they are outraged that no one seems in the least concerned to respect their rights. Mbendjele strongly resent this lack of reciprocal respect for sharing, but remain unconvinced that anyone is interested in their opinions about recent imposed changes in their forest<sup>188</sup>. They regard themselves as powerless to oppose the will of the state or the multinational companies whether at local or national level. This dominating world – the village world – intimidates the Mbendjele due its ability to unleash excessive violence against people. The recent intermittent civil war of the 1990s continues to reinforce these stereotypes of village people and village places.

Although in national law the Mbendjele are supposed to be equal to other Congolese citizens, in practice this is not the case. The discrimination they are subjected to by village people<sup>189</sup>, their lack of northern style education, their attachment to an ‘immediate-return’ economy and lifestyle within the forest, their mobility, egalitarianism and small social groups, together make effective representation or protest difficult. Most Mbendjele simply adapt to recent changes, by hunting in different areas, or by seeking employment with the loggers and the communities that spring up around their activities, or by working with commercial hunters and so on.

The lack of official recognition of Mbendjele ownership of forest is compounded by the government’s seeming lack of interest in the Mbendjele’s right to represent themselves in the same way as other communities in the Congo, namely through their own ‘village committees’. Despite Mbendjele having some permanent campsites with mud and thatch

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<sup>188</sup> Their difficulties in representing themselves begin at the local level and extend outwards to national and international levels. The problems are similar at every level due to the basic assumptions about people that participants in these various institutional structures make. These assumptions are clearly biased in favour of village people. Place is a clear indicator of this. Meetings and other forums where Mbendjele might, in theory at least, be able to present their concerns are typically based indoors in urban or village environments, and with a heavy bias in favour of written forms of communication. Effective representation at these levels demands a northern style education – the ability to read, write, to understand number systems, to interpret maps, to be aware of current affairs, to understand hierarchical structures of authority, the dress codes and etiquette of formal meetings, public presentation styles and many other skills that are particular to institutional structures. See Lewis (2001a) for more details.

<sup>189</sup> Discrimination against forest hunter-gatherers is widely reported (see Luling and Kenrick 1998; Barume 2000; Kenrick 2000; Lewis 2000:13-19 and 2001a; Kenrick and Lewis 2001 for some examples) and is part of wider, and very serious, discrimination against hunter-gatherers throughout Africa as Woodburn (1997) has clearly shown.

huts that have been occupied for over 30 years, none of their communities are officially recognised by local authorities. This is demonstrated by the total absence of any recognised Mbendjele village leaders (*Président du village*) or any attempts to conduct elections to establish officially recognised village committees, as is done in every Bilo village.

This situation is endorsed and reinforced by official attitudes to Pygmy peoples that tend to treat their hunting and gathering way of life as primitive and shameful to the national heritage, yet celebrate their extensive knowledge of plants for healing and magic, and their incomparable skills as singers and dancers. This contradictory perception effectively devalues the very process by which Mbendjele maintain the celebrated and special knowledge derived from a forest lifestyle. On the rare occasions that governments have taken an interest in Pygmy people, it has been to enforce sedentarisation programmes and assimilationist policies.

Since the enforced '*villagisation*' programme of the 1970s most Mbendjele will claim allegiance to particular villages regardless of whether or not they have a hut there. Two permanent Mbendjele villages, Mombangi and Djello, were established around 1955, though most are more recent. The population and number of long-term structures vary greatly over time as well as between places. Even those Mbendjele who invest in building substantial mud and thatch houses at some of these sites do not live there continuously. It is not unusual to find villages almost deserted and overgrown with tall grass.

Despite the relatively long history of some of these villages, none have officially recognised village committees, as do all Bilo villages. Without recognition for their villages, outsiders coming into their areas – such as foresters, official government missions, medical or electoral campaign staff – will go directly to consult with any Bilo village in the area and ignore the Mbendjele. When these visitors are offering benefits, these are easily monopolised by the Bilo.

The lack of representation of Mbendjele at the local and regional level reflects the perception common among non-Pygmy groups that the Mbendjele are the property of Bilo villager masters (*konza*) and do not qualify as real people worthy of independent recognition. The Bilo villagers' traditional structures that justify and encourage this

situation are not questioned or criticised by the regional authorities; rather they are supported since many officials come from local villages. This is most apparent in relation to access to justice. It was widely claimed by local Bilo with whom I discussed the matter that Mbendjele can only file formal complaints against Bilo if another Bilo represents them. For this reason many Mbendjele have nowhere to seek redress when Bilo wrong them. Another example is education. Despite most Bilo being literate in French and Lingala, no Mbendjele can speak French and none are literate.

As Woodburn (1997) argued, ethnic distinctions based on economic practice are the basis for serious discrimination against hunter-gatherers in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is certainly the case in the Congo. The widespread similarities across sub-Saharan Africa in the types of discrimination practised by agriculturalists and pastoralists against hunter-gatherers are striking. Woodburn characterises these as negative stereotypes, denial of rights and segregation.

The situation of the Mbendjele fits this analysis well: As described in the previous chapter Mbendjele are considered chimpanzee-like, backward, impoverished, lazy, gluttonous, disgusting, dirty, stupid, childish, and uninterested in change. They may not eat or drink together with their neighbours, marry them or even have sexual relations with them, or sleep in the same houses, and, as briefly mentioned above many Bilo deny that Mbendjele have any basic human rights, frequently describing them as their 'slaves'. The Mbendjele reject these derogatory characterisations of themselves, and deny the fictional kinship links that underpin Bilo claims to authority over them.

Due to the political and discriminatory nature of Bilo attitudes and behaviour towards the Mbendjele and other Yaka people, it is unacceptable to most Yaka that they be represented by them, except in the potentially dangerous village world. The Mbendjele experience of the village world has been one of frequent violence. Slave-raiding and warfare characterised inter-villager relations in the pre-colonial period, then came the brutal colonial regime of pacification and forced labour, punctuated by the First World War when Germans killed French soldiers stationed in Mbendjele forest. Recent history has continued this trend with a long period in a one party state followed by intermittent, but serious, civil war in the 1990s.

For Mbendjele, local and national government, and state administrative structures are village people structures that are simply extensions of the village world. Since most Mbendjele experience the village world as one of huge potential violence, whether from Bilo villagers, soldiers, militias or local authorities, they consider it safer to leave the Bilo to deal with the world outside the forest. Bilo use this to their advantage and manipulate the fact that, without identity cards or officially recognised communities, Yaka people are effectively denied any independent representation.

It is rare that either resident non-Africans or Congolese question this discrimination practised against Pygmy peoples. Indeed many seem to treat it as understandable if not acceptable, since it is mostly unchallenged in public by Pygmy peoples. It is also more convenient for international organisations such as logging or mining companies, animal protectionists and safari hunters to think they only need be accountable to Bilo communities in their spheres of influence. Only Bilo communities get the benefits of any consultation and compensation payments. International organisations conveniently ignore Pygmy communities and are frequently encouraged to do so by local Bilo claiming to represent the Pygmies and who always resist efforts to deal directly with Pygmies. I have seen threatening letters written by workers' union representatives in a logging town to expatriate staff of the logging company who were said to be employing too many Pygmies, or paying them too much. Some even received letters from local government officials admonishing them.

Increasing respect for international human rights laws relating to indigenous peoples has provoked many conservation organisations to try to show that they are undertaking activities directed towards supporting indigenous people. A recent, and growing, trend is to create 'village environmental management committees' in villages in or around areas under some form of environmental protection. The formation of these committees is intended to demonstrate that the organisation is inclusive and is allowing local people to participate in managing their environment. However these committees are actually serving to reinforce Pygmy marginalization and dispossession of their rights to forest land because they are only being created in Bilo villages, with Bilo leaders and predominantly Bilo membership. There is no recognition of Pygmy traditional rights to their forest.

Investigations of local peoples' traditional territories often exclude any consideration of Pygmy groups' traditional forest and land use patterns. Researchers simply ask Bilo with whom they can converse and whom they can find relatively easily. Whilst in Congo in early 2001, I met experienced conservationists mapping out local land use and 'traditional territories' who had completely ignored Mbendjele land use and traditional areas. When I asked, an American conservationist told me, 'Aaa, but they are everywhere in the forest.' These attitudes at once discriminate against Mbendjele land rights by not marking them out, while also drawing on basic Mbendjele assumptions about their ubiquity in the forest which in Mbendjele eyes guarantees their right to the forest and obviously ought to in everyone else's as well.

The current lack of respect for Yaka forest rights is linked to the confusion surrounding their status as 'Indigenous People' who can benefit from the international human rights legislation supporting Indigenous People. The problem stems from the development of the indigenous rights movement in opposition to European colonialism, notably in the Americas and Australasia. There, criteria such as maintaining traditional links with the land and specific cultural traits are sufficient to distinguish indigenous people from migrants coming from other continents. Applying these criteria to Africa serves to exclude European, Asian and other 'blue water' migrants, but ignores the complexity of Sub-Saharan Africa's long history of internal migration and conquest preceding the colonial period.

The focus on white – non-white distinctions in definitions of indigenous peoples has confused many commentators in Central Africa. Thus Burnham scorns the perception of Pygmies as indigenous people of the African forest. To illustrate his claim that such concepts are controversial in Central Africa, he proceeds to describe the Beti (a Bilo group) as fulfilling the criteria for an indigenous people of the Cameroonian forest. He goes on to describe how Beti will claim ownership of land as ancestrally theirs, as if they were indigenous, yet in the next moment emphasise their colonising status as having arrived from the savannah with superior civilisation to dominate the more 'backward indigenous inhabitants of the zone.' (Burnham 2000:48).

These are the colonial discourses of Bilo, not of an indigenous people. Such a lack of historical depth when considering indigenous land rights fails to recognise the priority and permanence of Pygmy peoples' occupation of the forest in contrast to Bilo or Europeans. As such it fails to address the Yaka contention that they are a colonised people<sup>190</sup>. Mbendjele, like other Yaka groups, continue to be treated as inferior citizens, unworthy of the same rights as other people. Using Woodburn's concept of 'First People' (2001) instead of 'Indigenous People' would avoid such controversies and confusions in the Central African situation and has the great advantage of being an important local category recognised by the ethnic groups of the region. Being first inhabitants of an area of land is locally recognised as significant.

Although the Mbendjele are widely recognised as the first peoples of their area of forest, all later comers have failed to recognise Mbendjele rights in all but vague and ambiguous ways that do not interfere with their own intentions and interests. Later comers have imposed themselves in similar ways on the Mbendjele, mostly by force and then later with paternalistic ideologies designed to make Mbendjele more available for work.

The Mbendjele describe these black and white outsiders as arriving with anger and saying they own things. The Bilo came and took what they wanted with anger and said they owned things like forest or rivers. The Europeans did the same. They came with anger and said they were the owners and took everything from Bilo. An angry person is on the verge of violence, and for Mbendjele doing things with anger is synonymous to doing things with violence.

Until recently these various 'angry' claims had no impact on the Mbendjele's ability to maintain their sense of independence, their ability to withdraw into the forest when pressurised. Now, however, with the increasing ease of access for outsiders into Mbendjele forest, this has begun to change as some areas become hunted out. Thuret (1999) describes a community of Mbendjele near the regional capital, Ouesso, whose forest is no longer productive enough for them to remain for long periods away from the Bilo village. As a

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<sup>190</sup> For instance Suke (page 232) expressed this in the following way: "The Bilo don't like us Yaka at all. Bilo are bad people. The Bilo saw the places we stayed, places for Yaka people; they just came and took our places."

consequence they have become more and more sedentary, and increasingly depend on farmed foods and participation in the cash economy of Ouessou for their livelihoods.

The parallels between Bilo colonisation of Mbendjele forest with nineteenth and twentieth century French colonisation of the same area are astonishing. Bilo continue to regard Mbendjele lands as empty and unused, following the colonial definition of state lands. Bilo want Mbendjele to settle in villages and to farm so they will provide a more accessible labour force. The Bilo now occupy the authority structures left behind by the French, and emulate their perception of the colonial authorities' activities – corruption, personal gain and the exercise of arbitrary authority. Government and bureaucratic structures – notably the police and civil service - are still similar to those of their colonial predecessors, with many officials enforcing the will of local big men and protecting their own interests, rather than serving the public good.

Colonising structures have twice sought to dispossess the Mbendjele of their forest rights. First the Bilo tried to impose their claims to total rights over forest land and forest resources. Then the colonial government and now the national government sought to dispossess both the Bilo and the Mbendjele of their forest rights. This has had few practical consequences for Mbendjele until quite recently. But now these rights are being sold and traded to multinational companies as rights to specific resources: trees for loggers, minerals for miners, game for conservationists and safari hunters, etc. The Mbendjele, the original holders of these rights get no recognition or compensation and only gain minor incidental benefits as workers. It seems that benefits in the forest are hierarchically distributed with those most recently involved in colonisation getting most benefit. Expatriates earn most from logging and mining, then the Bilo (from work, etc) and lastly, if at all, the Mbendjele.

Donor organisation pressure on companies, NGOs and governments to respect indigenous rights is at last beginning to force some reconsideration of the place of local people. Responsible loggers must develop management plans that show concern for indigenous peoples' rights, yet in practice they tend to only consider and consult Bilo communities. Safari hunters redistribute tiny fractions of their earnings to local Bilo communities. International environmentalist NGOs demonstrate their 'inclusiveness' by creating local environmental management committees in Bilo villages. Maps of traditional territories only



label areas with Bilo ethnic names, and only mark in Bilo villages. Yaka people are not consulted, nor is their presence in the forest throughout known history officially acknowledged.

Actions aimed at benefiting local people only go one layer of colonialism down – to the Bilo level. Yaka people are rarely considered. These activities both reinforce and strengthen Bilo colonisation of Yaka forest and critically further marginalize Yaka people from effective participation or representation in the global processes now dramatically affecting their forests.

### **Conclusion**

For the Mbendjele and the Yaka more generally, unlike more recent comers, the value of the forest is immeasurably more than an issue of rights to valuable resources, or of accruing benefits from their exploitation. In presenting key collective representations of the Mbendjele here, I hope to have shown some of the ways that the forest is central for Yaka physical and cultural reproduction over time. The forest is not only the source of Yaka sustenance and well-being, but also the source of their identity.

This identification begins with Yaka peoples' creation myths, which emphasise that *Komba* (God) created the forest for Yaka people to live in. *Komba* created Yaka people, told them how to live properly in the forest, and intervenes from time to time on their behalf. *Komba* is said to have the appearance of a Yaka, to be a hunter-gatherer, and to love Yaka people and their egalitarian values of sharing, and of modesty; for their love of walking in the forest, of laughing, singing, dancing and calling forest spirits to them. *Komba's* love for the forest and Yaka people is clear in the depiction of his camp in the afterworld as existing in an abundant forest without sorcerers. This ideal situation is momentarily achievable in this life, such as when an elephant has been killed and during certain *mokondi massana* ritual performances such as *Ejengi*.

In the present thesis I have examined Mbendjele ethnic stereotypes and classifications of other Yaka groups, of their non-Yaka neighbours and how they describe their forest home. The Mbendjele conception of themselves as forest hunter-gatherers is not unique. Other

peoples' stereotypes, like expatriate and Bilo stereotypes of Yaka people, also cast them as archetypal hunters and gatherers. This forest hunter-gatherer lifestyle is so central to their identity that even when they speak the same language as villagers, as do the Ngombe Yaka and the Bomassa Bilo, they do not identify with each other. The Ngombe identify with the forest lifestyle and other Yaka people.

The concept of being Yaka depends on certain features, or indicators, which Yaka groups possess to varying degrees. The forest is central to all these indicators. The most important indicator is a known present or past forest-orientated hunter-gatherer lifestyle involving regular movement, a pride in hunting and gathering wild forest products for consumption, and a complex of beliefs and rituals designed to regulate the human group's relations with animals, and those between the sexes, as well as to enlist the support of forest spirits. The secret knowledge of the ancestors is believed to endow the Yaka with great spiritual potency. Following in the ancestors' path produces a distinctly Yaka aesthetic, particular speech, singing and performance styles, a particular oral tradition, a taste for forest foods above all other food, and a love for the cool, shady forest over the hot, open spaces of rivers, fields and villages.

The forest is idealised as the perfect place for people to be. Yaka babies should be born in the forest just outside camp. Everyday conversations are preoccupied with the forest, with what was seen or done, with techniques for finding wild foods, with stories of past hunting, fishing or gathering trips, or of great feasts and forest spirit performances. The forest connects people to their past. Different areas in the forest are talked about in terms of the remembered ancestors who spent time there and the events that occurred there. Mbendjele believe that when they die they go to another forest where *Komba* (God) has a camp. They will remain in *Komba's* forest camp until they are told to take another path and are born into this world again.

Yaka people's identification with the forest is so intimate, dependent and integrated that they cannot conceive of themselves as existing without being in the forest, whether they be alive or dead. Their proverb '*Moaka a mu dinga ndima bibi ya njo angwae konja*' (A Yaka loves the forest as s/he loves her/his own body) expresses this very powerfully. The forest

inhabits the Mbendjele as much as they inhabit the forest. They are inseparable, part of each other, an organic whole.

As the chapters on *ekila* and *massana* activities have demonstrated, the Mbendjele's positively valued religious representations are derived from the forest and are related to forest concerns. Their religious activities are aimed at enhancing life in the forest, whether this is by tying-up elephants for hunters to kill or by bringing together widely dispersed groups. The ritual associations such as *Ejengi*, *Niabula*, *Yele*, are forest-centric. They celebrate gendered relations with the forest, and school participants in specific skills geared towards success in forest activities. *Ekila* beliefs and practices ground gendered relations with the forest in bodily processes and inevitable experiences.

Chapter Seven showed how the metaphorical and analogical reasoning that Mbendjele use to discuss, understand and analyse new experiences are based on their experience of a forest-orientated lifestyle. The striking use of imagery from the forest to describe and discuss novel experiences and the robustness of collective representations based on a forest-orientated lifestyle demonstrate the vitality and flexibility of Yaka culture to interpret, accommodate and adapt to new circumstances and opportunities without renouncing their fundamentally forest-centric culture, economy and religion.

In the context of the extreme discrimination Yaka people face in their daily dealing with non-Yaka people, the forest is the only context in which they can show themselves to be much more skilled than other people, and in which other people recognise them as masters. It is a source of pride, of self-confidence and of identity, and most-importantly in today's political and economic situation, of their current and future livelihood.

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## **Film**

*Baka: People of the Rainforest.*

1987 Phil Agland. DJA Rivers Films for Channel 4, 104 mins.

*A Caterpillar Moon.*

1996 Director Julia Simmons. Anthropologist Barry Hewlett. 'Under the Sun' for BBC: 48 mins.

*Congo. The River That Swallows all Rivers (part 1),*

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2000 Neil Nightingale (executive producer), written and produced by Brian Leith. Scorer Associates for the BBC and Discovery Channel.

*Massana. Moments in Yaka Play and Ritual,*

1998 Ingrid Pfrang-Lewis and Nicolas Lewis. Jerome Lewis, anthropologist. Distributed by Survival International, 6 Charterhouse Buildings, London, EC1M 7ET, UK; 36 mins.

## APPENDIX ONE

### Ngombe *mokidwa* elephant-men in the forest

This appendix provides a case study of what Mbendjele believe was an attack on their camp by an Ngombe Yaka (Baka Pygmy) transformed as an elephant (a *mokidwa* or *mokidwakidwa*). Mbendjele say that the Ngombe Yaka are experts at shape-shifting. Reports of similar beliefs among Baka in Cameroon and Congo (Joiris 1998: 147-182 describes *mokela*; Köhler 2000 *mokila*) provide many surprising and interesting similarities with the views expressed to me by the Mbendjele. Descriptions of how to identify transformed Baka by their human smell and human faeces, the lack of depth to their tracks and so on (see for instance Joiris 1998: 166) accord systematically with what Mbendjele told me. The most significant difference is that whereas Baka do not kill *mokela* elephant men, since they are really Baka, Mbendjele actively try to kill Baka *mokidwa* and elders will instruct young men in techniques to do this.

Both Joiris and Köhler compare the *mokila-mokela* phenomenon with slave raiding practices of the Atlantic Trade era and Joiris also to certain Bilo warriors' secret societies that involved shape-shifting. There is a clear parallel between the way Baka and Mbendjele describe *mokela* coming to kill men, and take women and children back to their *mokela* communities, and Bilo descriptions of inter-group raiding and warfare during the pre-colonial period. Indeed some Bilo claimed to Joiris that their relations with Baka people were instigated in order to prevent *mokela* from attacking the Bilo village (1998: 272-4). Interestingly, as will be detailed in this case study, the Baka and Mbendjele attempted to make peace around the same time that the Bilo Joiris talked to established relations with Baka.

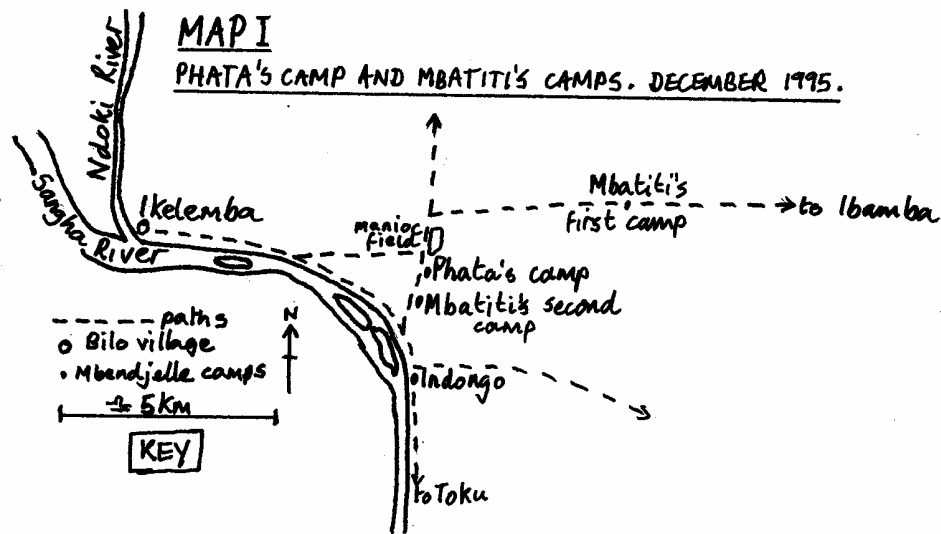
Whereas Joiris analyses *mokela* within the context of Bilo warrior-rituals, Köhler adds a moral dimension to his analysis by linking such beliefs to the context created by the excessive elephant hunting that occurred in the late nineteenth century as a consequence of the demand created by European ivory traders. Baka elephant hunters are reported to have



decimated local elephant populations during this period and Köhler argues that *mokila* beliefs are a moral discourse resulting from communal guilt over this episode in Baka-elephant relations. These interesting theories require further analysis that is beyond the scope of my presentation here, but will be the subject of future work.

The present case-study is here used to illustrate how the Mbendjele remember the history of relations with other Yaka groups in detail, particularly the Ngombe Baka. This contrasts starkly with their denial of a history with Bilo groups that is a crucial aspect of contemporary Bilo claims to authority over Mbendjele. Additionally the case-study provides a window on some of the ways Mbendjele react in an emergency.

**16<sup>th</sup> December 1995.** I was sitting in Phata's camp resting in the warm afternoon sun. People were returning from their day's food collecting and men were starting to assemble under the *mbanjo* (men's meeting place). Phata is one of the most respected *kombeti* (elder, spokesperson) in the whole area. His skill as a hunter, healer and spirit-controller have attracted many to stay with him and his group can sometimes exceed 100 people, though generally remains around 60 or so. Relations with local Bilo have been very strained since 1990 and the majority of Mbendjele avoid, if at all possible, going to the Bilo villages. Some Mbendjele have planted small fields of manioc or banana at various popular sites in the forest. This camp of Phata's was located six kilometres from the Bilo village of Ikelemba, one kilometre from the Sangha River and was close to Phata's manioc field (see map I).



As we sat discussing the day's activities, we suddenly saw people from Mbatiti's camp, mostly women at first, arriving with all their belongings. Their camp was not far away and it was strange that they should arrive so late in the day. As people began asking what had happened, suddenly a huge cry came from the women "ekiti ua ngombe!" (tracks of Ngombe Yaka). Everyone began talking and shouting across each other. The camp was in chaos for ten minutes as people shouted excitedly. The men from Mbatiti's camp arrived and sat down with us to explain what happened. Mbatiti began to talk as the others fell silent.

That morning Mbatiti's camp had been preparing to go elephant hunting much further into the forest. Before dawn two elders had gone to Ikelemba to collect tobacco from the Bilo who had given them an elephant gun and bullets. Everyone else in the camp was expected to get their things together and be ready to go when the elders got back. A group of hunters was to leave ahead of the main party, in order to avoid the noisy women and children. When the two elders returned in mid-morning, they were surprised to see all the hunters just sitting around the men's area (*mbanjo*).

One of the elders, Moanja, shouted at them, "Why aren't you out hunting? We have far to go today." They sat there saying nothing, and continued eating a meal that had just been brought to them. Leme (Moanja's six-year-old nephew) asked his uncle to come into the forest with him. "That's fine," answered Moanja "but where are your mother and sister?"

At that moment Ngwenye (Leme's mother) and her daughter arrived in camp with their eyes cast down. They did not respond to people's greetings. The men began quizzing them in loud voices, "What's going on? What news have you got? Where have you been?" The two refused to answer for a long time. Eventually Ngwenye responded. "We were breaking *peke* when we came across the fresh tracks of an elephant quite close to the camp. We were very surprised and looked around. We found this *bomba* (leaf parcel)." And she put the parcel on the ground before the men.

People immediately suspected that this must mean that the Ngombe were attacking [since elephants do not make leaf parcels]. People became worried and afraid. One woman went into a trance, "The Ngombe have come to kill us. The Ngombe have come to kill us." she wailed, then suddenly pounced on the leaf parcel and handed it to the men, demanding that they open it. They opened the parcel, smelt it and identified it as human excrement<sup>191</sup>. 'Very, very strange', agreed the men. They decided to go to investigate, and took Ngwenye with them to show them the place. Four men took a gun and set off.

The place was not far from the camp. But they were gone for more than two hours. The people back at camp became worried by their delay. Eventually Ngwenye returned alone. Everyone demanded to know what had happened. She refused, saying "I will not say anything because you men will only insult me, claiming that that women don't say things properly." Ten minutes later the group of men returned. Yanga, a reputed *tuma* (elephant hunter) and spirit-controller, had led them, and Moanja demanded of him: "Speak and say what you have seen. Time is passing and we should move camp today. So speak clearly."

Yanga recounted that, once at the *peke* tree, the men had seen the tracks of a small elephant. As they followed these tracks, they suddenly became larger and wider, to the size of those of a large male. [The implication was that the two women had disturbed the Ngombe shape-shifter just as he had finished his toilet. They had caused him to immediately transform into an elephant and flee. As he fled his size increased.]

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<sup>191</sup> Mbendjele adults defecate onto a large marantaceae, or similar, leaf. Soft, non-hairy leaves, *doto* are good, serve as toilet paper. When finished, the lot is tied into a neat parcel and discreetly deposited in an inaccessible place.

They followed the tracks. After some time they realised the tracks went nowhere, just circled around. As Yanga finished, the women let out long “eeeeeeeeeeee’s” of fear. As if they were one person, the women rose, hastily packed their baskets, put them on and began walking to Phata’s camp. The men had no choice but to follow. They returned towards Indongo to one of Mbatiti’s abandoned camps in order to put Phata’s camp as a barrier between them and the *mokidwa* (elephant men).

Phata is the *kombeti* (elder-spokesperson) of a large clan, the Bopanja, and the son of Mosanya “the one who made animals laugh”. Phata, like his deceased father, has proved himself to be a great spirit-controller in mystical-physical battles with the Ngombe. Though not the oldest man, Phata is considered to be the most powerful *nganga* (healer) in the area, is an important spirit-controller with more *mokondi* (forest spirits) than anyone else, and is known to have inherited powerful mystic skills for combating *mokidwa* (Ngombe elephant men). For this reason Mbatiti (Phata’s elder) and Moanja, both important *kombeti* of large clans, had come out of the forest to hide from the Ngombe behind Phata.

The effect of this information on the majority of people in our camp was immediate and powerful. Suddenly people (especially women) began wailing and shouting in tense, strained voices. A generalised panic had seized the camp. Lots of references were made to a boy who had mysteriously disappeared recently from the local logging town, Pokola. This had coincided with the arrival of some Ngombe men looking for work.

The initial hysteria eventually subsided but the camp remained tense. Fear pervaded the women who now refused to go outside the camp, even to collect the firewood necessary for the evening. Phata tried to reassure them by boasting about his mystical exploits in battles with the *mokidwa*. He explained that the Mbendjele’s mystic powers - invisibility, transformation into a dry leaf and whirlwind (so as to instantly travel huge distances) and their ability to metamorphose into flying squirrels or birds - are far more effective in combat than the Ngombe’s ability to transform into elephants. The women responded that this was all very well but women had none of these skills and so were still terrified. Eventually Phata persuaded two women to go to get firewood by agreeing to accompany them. Some other women joined them as they left camp.

At dusk Phata began a *mosambo* (public speech). He described the events of the day. How Mbatiti's camp had come out of the forest, and the fear this had instilled in our camp. Unusually for Phata, he seemed to be lost for words. He recounted how he had had to accompany the women to collect firewood. Then in an angry voice shouted "seerian!" (from the French 'c'est rien'- it's nothing, but is used by the Mbendjele to mean the opposite of this). There were a few moments of silence.

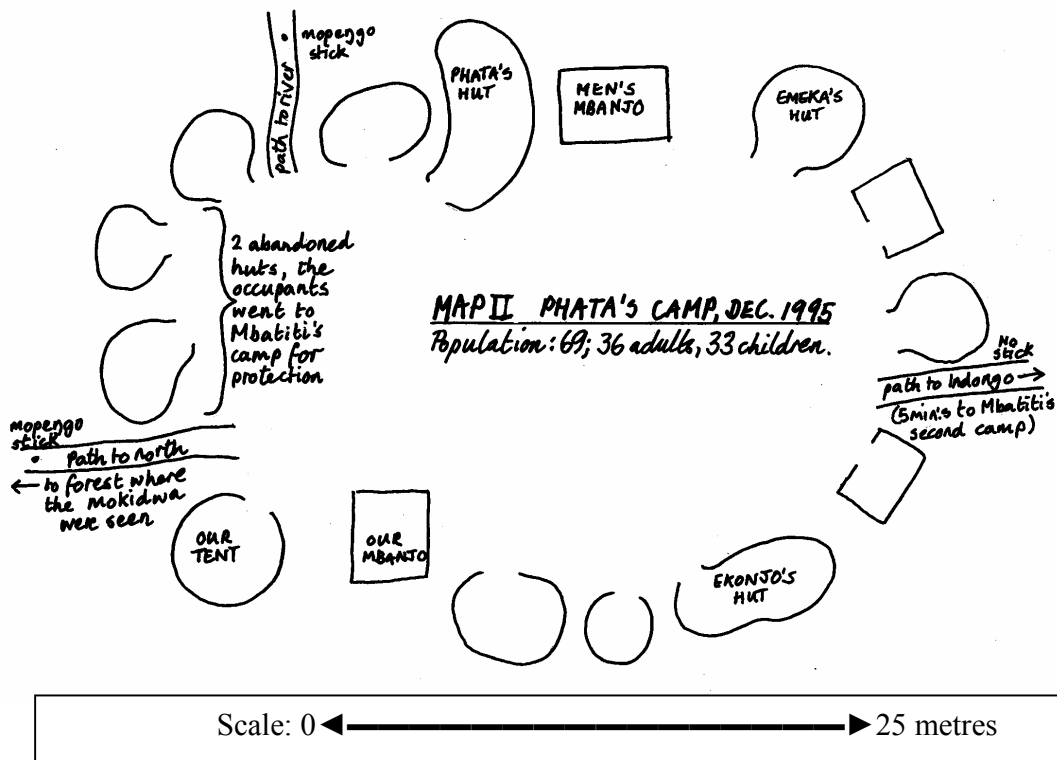
Then Ekonjo, a gifted public speaker, broke in speaking Lingala so that the Ngombe could understand. He shouted towards the direction they were assumed to be in: "You over there, if you are close go far, because you will die (much repetition on this theme). You are cunts! Go away with your evil sorts! We will kill you immediately if you come here. Go far. We will kill you if you are close." The people around, especially the women, accompanied his *mosambo* with sung sounds of agreement like *bonape* (that's right), *tobonaa* (just like that) and so on. Ekonjo continued in this style at the top of his voice for several minutes more, then slowly wound down and stopped.

The women all sat huddled together with the small children in the middle of the camp. The huts at the extremities of the camp were abandoned. One family had even left for Mbatiti's camp to live there instead of in our 'front-line' camp. The atmosphere in camp was nervous and agitated. The women, uncharacteristically, were not talking much. The elder men boasted in loud voices of past battles and techniques to outsmart the *mokidwa* elephant-men. The young men were very boisterous, excitable and clearly nervous. Every half-hour or so, some men would come to borrow our torches and walk around the extremity of the camp armed with a gun looking for *mokidwa*. One of the men encouraged the boys to start singing and beating the drum doing a Pikounda Bilo dance in an attempt to improve the atmosphere.

At 10.30p.m. I went to bed. The men said they would stay up all night to keep watch, but I think that most of them eventually went to bed and one or two of them got up from time to time to check the camp.

The next day the women hardly went into the forest. They just hung around camp or went into the safe but over-frequented forest towards Indongo. People were now not just afraid. They were also hungry. Emeka returned from fishing the whole day without success. His wife Mambula had not even got a piece of yam or manioc for him to eat when he returned. He was ravenous after more than 24 hours without a meal. The argument quickly deteriorated into a fight. Normally this couple never row and their fight expressed the extreme tension in the camp. A Bilo bushmeat trader, Kibino, had arrived that afternoon to get meat and had killed a duiker on the way. None of the Mbendjele hunters had got any meat that day. Kibino's duiker lay on a smoking rack. He refused to share, not even eating any himself. The sight of the smoking duiker added to the misery created by the hunger.

At dusk Phata took me with him to place *mopengo* (mystically powerful sticks) on the paths leading into camp from the forest believed to be occupied by the Ngombe. The sticks, he emphasised, do not kill people. They simply make them go the other way, in this case making the Ngombe turn and walk around the camp. Before placing them in the ground he spat on them (*bokabe matai*) in order to make them mystically powerful and then whipped them in the air from side to side.



Phata explained further: “The Ngombe come to look at the camp in order to find people to kill or steal, especially women and children. They come as people but when they detect other people coming they transform themselves into elephants and hide. If you try to shoot these elephant-men with a gun, they take the bullet and the elephant turns into an Ngombe man. They have always been frightened of me, so they run away. I have often caught them out. Once with Ekonjo we caught them because they had just been smoking marijuana. We smelt it, in the middle of the forest like that! Ekonjo shot a large male. Baauum! [sound of the elephant falling]. The others took flight, but kept looking behind them [fleeing elephants never look back]. One was really stoned because he kept falling all over the place as he ran! My forefathers were always being followed by the Ngombe and they fought a lot – it is *bita* (conflict).”

It strikes me as rather odd that a people normally pragmatic and expert at reading and following tracks should say the tracks change size. I had asked to be taken to see the tracks, but no one would take me. Later the Bilo meat-trader, Kibino, told me about a test that the Mbendjele use in order to find out if the tracks are real elephant or Ngombe. A certain leaf when dropped on the fresh dung of the elephant will cause an effervescent reaction if it is really an Ngombe *mokidwa*<sup>192</sup>. Kibino claimed to have seen this done on the tracks of an Ngombe elephant and observed the effervescence. However, he remained sceptical. Some time later he again saw fresh elephant dung and he asked if it was that of an Ngombe. He was told it was not. He demanded that they test it. There was no reaction when the leaves fell on the dung.

When Phata and I returned to the camp the men had begun *mosambo* (public speaking). They were complaining about how much fear the women had brought into camp, and linking this specifically to the extreme hunger everyone was experiencing. The women simply responded “But we are too frightened.” Implying by this that it was the men’s fault for not protecting them well enough.

As there was no solution to this, the men decided to call *Malobe* (a popular forest spirit who brings food) and called the people from Mbatiti’s camp to come and join the singing

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<sup>192</sup> Joiris (1998: 167) describes exactly the same technique for recognizing the tracks of a *mokela* among the Baka in Cameroon.

and dancing. As will shortly be explained, *Malobe* was bought from the Ngombe four generations ago and this may have influenced the men's choice. By calling *Malobe* they reminded the Ngombe of the Mbendjele's power. All the women and small children huddled in the middle of the camp and began to sing in an attempt to attract *Malobe* into the camp. As the energy and beauty of the singing started to reach a crescendo, the *mokondi* (forest spirits) began to enter the camp. For a few hours everyone forgot their suffering and a good atmosphere returned.

The next morning, however, was stressful with lots of tense arguments about who should go where and to get what. Everyone was starving, but hardly anyone was prepared to leave camp. Two men and their courageous wives took two guns and left to go six kilometres to Ikelemba (the nearest Bilo village) to collect palm-nuts from abandoned Bilo plantations. Two other elderly women followed closely behind them in order to dig manioc and collect manioc leaves from Phata's manioc field nearby.

After a short time, and carrying only manioc leaves, they returned saying that they had seen strange tracks and thought they must be the Ngombe. Phata and I went to investigate. One of the *mopengo* sticks he had placed on the paths into camp had fallen down and Phata became clearly anxious. However, after we had gone quite far, it became clear to Phata that there were no unusual tracks or signs. We returned to make our report at camp. Once back at the camp he told the women "We saw nothing unusual between here and the turning to Ibamba, but we will continue to keep our eyes open." As we had seen no further evidence to suggest anything suspicious, he sensibly omitted any mention of the fallen *mopengo* stick.

The women seemed reassured and a small group left camp escorted by some men to go and dig manioc and collect leaves. The people who had gone to get palm-nuts returned, but without meat. An Mbendjele *kombeti* called Tato was accused of sorcery by other Mbendjele and had taken refuge with the Bilo of Ikelemba. When he heard the news of Ngombe *mokidwa* elephant-men, he had fled with his family onto an island in the middle of the wide Sangha River.



Despite having no meat, at least there was now some food in camp and I expected the atmosphere to improve. However at around 5.30 p.m. the women started getting very angry. One of the women had just returned from Mbatiti's camp and was furiously repeating "They're speaking your name over there! They're speaking your name over there!" addressing Phata's sister, Ban̄geke, [this means that the women were insulting her]. Ban̄geke had earlier been arguing with some women of Mbatiti's camp. She and another woman had been saying that Phata's camp should move back close to Indongo behind Mbatiti's camp so that the Ngombe could get the people they were hunting in the forest and then go away to leave us in peace.

Unsurprisingly the women in Mbatiti's camp were furious and a huge row had ensued which had led to blows being exchanged. The noise came and went in waves as different women arrived at our camp from Mbatiti's, or left our camp to go there. Some blows were exchanged and it seemed that the fight might become very serious as some women started picking up large pieces of firewood to beat each other. The elders had to get involved, separating and disarming the women and then persuading them to return to their respective camps with assurances that Phata's camp would remain where it was.

The men were clearly very disturbed by the tension in the community. The women's fight demonstrated how serious the crisis had become. Some action had to be taken. All the men were called to the *mbanjo* (men's area) to discuss what to do. After criticising the women's behaviour at some length, the men began to fall silent. The Bilo meat-trader Kibino was desperate to get some meat since soon he had to leave for Ouesso. He saw his chance and taking Phata aside quietly suggested that the men should go on a *mwaka*. The *mwaka* is a men's hunting trip that may last several days. Phata persuaded Kibino to supply some bullets for the community and he agreed. He returned to the *mbanjo* and suggested in a loud voice that the men take a *mwaka* around the forest thought to be invaded by the Ngombe *mokidwa* and spend the night there before returning to camp with the meat. The idea was applauded by the men. The camp had been without meat for three days and it was felt that this would calm the women's fear sufficiently for normal life to resume.

Early the next morning Phata, Emeka, Kibino and I left with three young men to go into the forest. We walked from 8a.m. until 4p.m., occasionally stopping to hunt. We saw nothing

unusual. We returned to camp at 3p.m. the following afternoon with sufficient meat for the camp and Kibino had some duikers and monkeys to take to Ouesso. Phata made a short *mosambo* describing our uneventful *mwaka* and called for *Malobe* to be sung that evening. Phata's report had the desired effect and people were clearly relieved. The young children took out various plastic containers and began banging rhythmically and dancing in anticipation of the evening's activity.

As the young men butchered the meat, Emeka supervised them and divided it up by carefully placing it in portions on large marantaceae leaves. When each household head had a portion, Emeka called out their name and a small child darted forward to take the meat back to the hut. The men began to assemble at the *mbanjo* in anticipation of the *mondjendje* (the meat for immediate roasting) and chatted in loud voices. That evening everyone from both camps assembled in Phata's camp and a great dance took place. Nine *Malobe mokondi* (leaf-covered forest spirits) danced and whistled into camp.

The following day was much less stressful, but people remained vigilant. The women still avoided going out alone and never ventured into the area where the Ngombe *mokidwa* had been seen. But the tension had almost gone.

That morning the men discussed the history of their relations with the Ngombe. They talked about the way the Ngombe prefer the dry season when walking is quicker and easier (the 'attack' just described occurred in the early dry season). During past attacks some Ngombe and some Mbendjele were killed and so the fighting continued. They spoke about a visit by the Ngombe, as men, when they sought to achieve peace with the Mbendjele. This extraordinary meeting took place at Malose, on the edge of the Likouala swamp between Ibamba and Minganga. The Ngombe *kombeti* was called Amata and a descendant of the first Amata to lead attacks on the Mbendjele. This Amata was a 'real' *kombeti*, he wanted to end the conflict with the Mbendjele. He and five Ngombe *kombeti*, Mbato, Mopakunga, Behelo, Minguendja and Mopande went to Malose.

The Ngombe also talk of the following events but, as I have not heard it directly from them, I will give the version told by Moanja, a sixty-year-old man to the men assembled together on that morning, December 20<sup>th</sup> 1995.

Moanja began by recounting the names of the sixteen Mbendjele *kombeti* who assisted in the agreement to end hostilities with the Ngombe. Interestingly these men include Dito Djele, the first Mbendjele encountered by the Bongili Bilo when they had settled in the Ibamba area. Dito is the great grandfather of 45-year-old Emeka. This suggests the events to be recounted occurred between eighty and a hundred years ago.

Of the sixteen Mbendjele, five were from the Ibamba area and eleven from the Terres des Kaboungas situated to the north of Malose. From Ibamba:

Dito Djele	Kiba clan
Mosanya	Bopanja clan
Ndaango (the elder)	Monjali clan
Manyaka	Kiba clan
Mobou	Yemusenge clan

From the Terres des Kaboungas:

Kongo	Yemusenge clan
Molondo	Ngando clan
Ndaango (the younger)	Monjali clan
Mandio	Monjali clan
Bomoongo	Mosele clan
Bosopo	Monjali clan
Mboka	Monjoli clan
Ngbembe	Ngando clan
Moyoko	Mosele clan
Kamo ya	Mosele clan
Katango	Bopanja clan

These sixteen Mbendjele men went to meet with Amata and the five Ngombe men at Malose. In their forest camp Amata made the purpose of their visit clear. In his *mosambo* Amata explained that the Ngombe were tired of the killing. It had gone on long enough. Now the Ngombe want to live with the Mbendjele peacefully, they should marry each other properly and respect their in-laws.

Mosanya, even though he was young, was chosen to speak for the Mbendjele as he had inherited great powers from his father. Mosanya agreed with Amata but insisted that Amata do something to prove his integrity to the Mbendjele. Amata proposed that they do the clan ritual (*monganda* or *likanda*) together. The essential component of this ritual is the mixing of blood between the participants. By becoming one clan, Amata and Mosanya would become kin. However Mosanya insisted that Amata must do more. Amata hoped to avoid giving more, and so persuaded Mosanya to first do the clan ritual together, before going further.

They performed the clan ritual before those present. After mixing their blood and sealing their bond with speeches about how close they had now become and the importance of respect for clan brothers, Amata said to the men “This work has made me tired. Nothing can rival what we have just done. Now we are brothers, let us tell our families and live in peace together.”

“No!” responded Mosanya quickly, “I must have more. You have *Niabula* (the forest spirit most closely associated with elephant hunters). You must give me those secrets if you really want us to live without fighting.” Amata was ‘tied up’ [forced because refusing would jeopardize the peace he was trying to make]. So he agreed.

The men began singing and dancing. Amata and Mosanya separated themselves and went far into the forest. Amata then gave Mosanya the secrets of how to make the *mopango*, *ngbaa* and *mokodi*. Amata ended saying “Here is your ‘elephant’ and now I’ll show you how to displace yourself from here to the camp.” Amata asked the men to sing even louder. Amata, Mosanya and the ‘elephant’ went towards the group. They entered and danced. Thus the whole group was initiated, but only Mosanya was a *Niabula* spirit-controller (*konja ya niabula*). *Niabula* is never danced in public and only the initiated can participate.

Eventually the dance came to an end. Amata then demanded payment from Mosanya for having given him the secrets of *Niabula*. He demanded a huge payment (*mboongo ibele*) - many *minjoko* (copper, brass or iron coils), *njondo* (the anvil), *ngbamba* (hammer) and *mokelo* (chisel for cutting red-hot iron). After Mosanya had satisfied Amata, the men returned to the main camp where they sang and danced showing the good will that now

existed between them to the rest of the community. At this time Dito Djele demanded another *mokondi* from Amata because he was the Mbendjele elder. He got *Malobe*. *Malobe* (called *boobe*, *bolobe moobe* or *maobe* too) is now a very popular dance in the southern part of the Mbendjele region.

After further dancing and celebrating, Amata gave a *mosambo* (public speech), “We, the Ngombe, will never fight with the Mbendjele again. We have given the elders’ everything they wanted. We will live together without *bita* (conflict). To make this last any young Mbendjele men or women who want to marry an Ngombe should do so. Now we will live without *bita*.”

After some more time together the six Ngombe began their return journey to bring the news to their families of what had happened at Malose. However the five other men were angry with Amata for having given away so many big secrets and did not support what Mosanya had forced him to do. They saw Amata’s selling of *Niabula* as weakness. On the way home they killed him. As they buried him they said “Go with your blood pact and stay away. Never come back. Now, because of your weakness, we have to get *Niabula* back.” In this way they destroyed the peace Amata had given so much to achieve. And so the conflict continues.

After Moanja had finished, Ekonjo spoke about two Ngombe graves he had discovered when he cleared a small area for manioc three kilometres east of Phata’s camp. Around 1977 they were returning from a dance at Busende. They came across a large herd of elephants on the path. Realising, by their uncharacteristic behaviour and human smell, that they were Ngombe *mokidwa*, they shot two of them. They never found the elephant’s bodies. But when clearing Ekonjo’s small field in the forest more than thirteen years later, they realised these overgrown graves were Ngombe ones because of the way they were made and linked the two events together.

While the Mbendjele men obtained enormously powerful secrets from the Ngombe, the Ngombe got none from them. For this reason the Mbendjele men consider themselves more powerful than the Ngombe. However Mbendjele women and children do not know these

secrets. They do not know how to protect themselves from *mokidwa* and, as they are most frequently the victims of Ngombe attacks, they therefore remain very fearful.

That evening (December 20<sup>th</sup>) Emeka made the last *mosambo* addressed to the Ngombe. His speech emphasised how well everyone in our camp was (I summarise):

“We are here eating well, even smoking cigarettes! We have meat, we have *koko* (a wild edible leaf), we have yams and manioc. We even have a Bilo and three whites (my wife, our son and me) in our camp. We are living well here! We have all we need. Be careful we are very strong, our medicine is stronger than yours! We will kill you if you come too close! We are well and we are strong, be warned! When Amata came we met him (he listed the sixteen names). We agreed to all that was done. It is you who have not accepted it. So remember, it is you who changed your minds, so remember it is us who are right! You are bad! We are strong! Be warned!”

After this *mosambo* and the uneventful hunting trip the women seemed satisfied that there was no longer any threat and camp life began to return to normal. People remained careful. Women went out in groups, but the fear that had gripped the camp was now gone.

Not all Mbendjele groups I met are still in conflict with the Ngombe. In villages north of the logging town Kabo, Mbendjele and Ngombe live and intermarry together and share the same forest camps. They say the *bita* is something of the past and that they get on fine nowadays. The Mbendjele in my research area are renowned for their interest in mystical practices. This led the Bilo meat-trader, Kibino, to comment that the *mokidwa* were probably other Mbendjele whose grandfathers had learnt the practice from the Ngombe. Now, when they kill, they blame the Ngombe.

## APPENDIX TWO

### *Plate 15. Sandjima demonstrates Yaka sign language*



101/kema/monkey



103/mboko/buffalo



108/jongi/aardvark



110/bongo/antelope



114/mokwake/crocodile



116/bemba/yellow backed du...



118/embongo/leopard



124/njoku/elephant



127/sumbu/chimp



129/ebobo/gorilla



131/ngwai/pig



133/mbomu/red marsh duiker



134/mosome/bays duiker



135/kalu/(colobus)monkey



136/kalu/colobus monkey