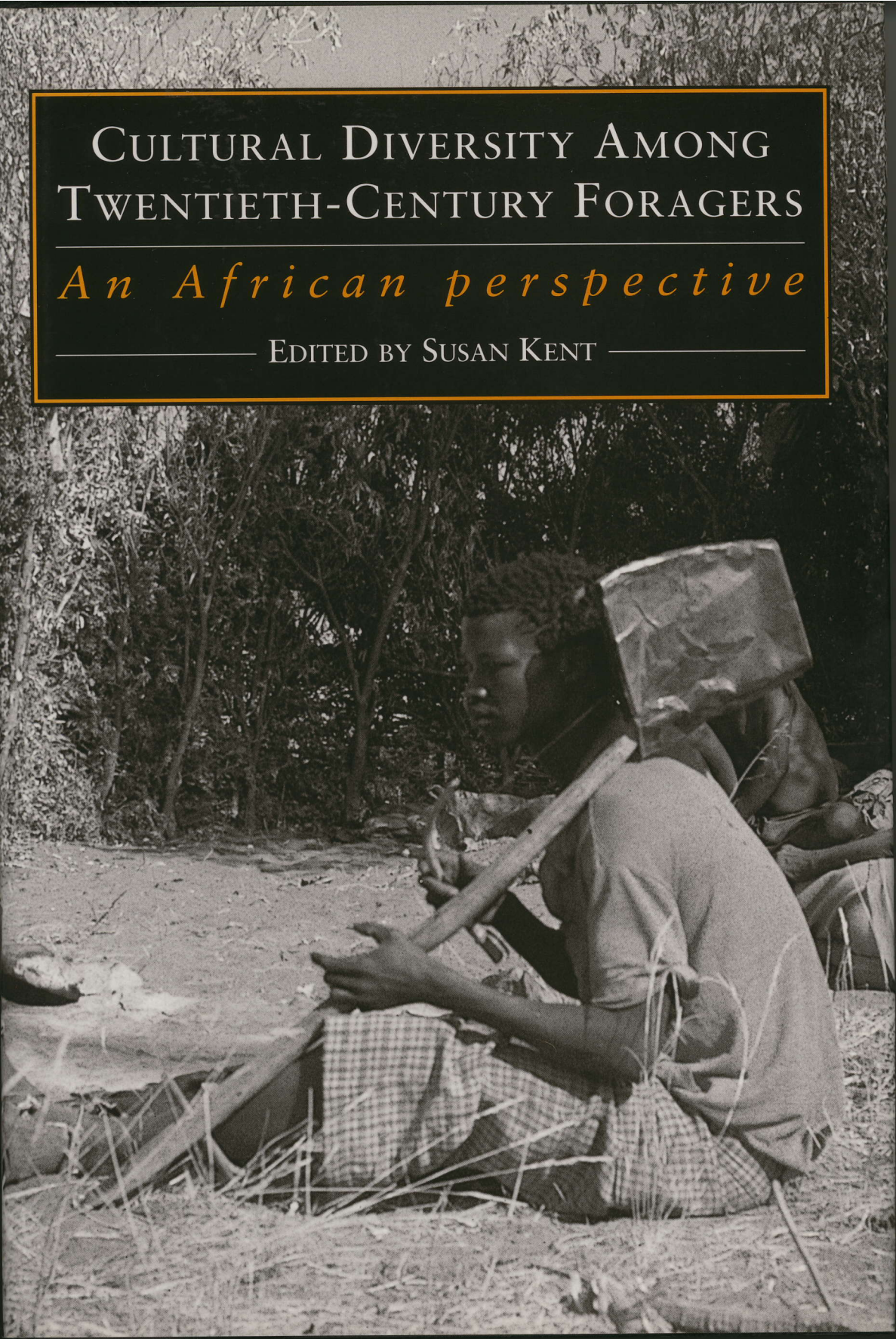


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An African perspective

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10 A comparative approach to hunting rituals among Baka Pygmies (southeastern Cameroon)

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1 Introduction

Integrating research on ritual practices in Pygmy societies within the larger debate about hunter-gatherer diversity is no easy task. While environmental and economic studies make it possible to compare modes of adaptation of the many groups of forest foragers, information is limited in all other areas of study. Those publications that mention the ritual aspect of social life are generally monographs or contributions to dictionaries and encyclopedias, whose sources are most often legends and song-story collections. Currently, studies of cosmogony and ritual practices are limited to three ethnic groups: the Zairian Mbuti (Schebesta 1952; Turnbull 1961, 1965a), the Aka from the Central African Republic (Bahuchet 1985; Motte 1980, 1982) and the Cameroonian Baka (Brisson and Boursier 1979; Brisson 1981-4, 1988; Higgins n.d. a, b, c; Dodd 1979, 1980; and Kilian Hatz 1989). The problems are compounded by the fact that the studies that do exist are often designed around particular anthropological theories. Thus, within the evolutionist, functionalist, and cultural ecological perspectives, available ethnographic data reveal more about the proponents' preoccupations than about similarities and diversity among Pygmies.

A second kind of problem arises from intracultural variability, which complicates the research process. Research data from one group tend to be taken as a standard for all groups until proved invalid. Sometimes such diversity can go unnoticed for a long time. For instance, my interest in the following comparative study developed when it became obvious that an important cynegetic ceremony, the *yeli*, as described in literature on the Baka (notably by Higgins and Dodd), was not observed in the Baka camps where I conducted my investigations. My observations further indicated that aspects of the hunt ceremony were prepared differently, and that the diverse rituals I observed were longstanding. Because data for comparison are limited, it is difficult to make definitive comments about such diversity. However, my hypothesis is that there is

pronounced intracultural variability among the Baka. Past research on the Aka, who populate an extremely large area in the Central African Republic and Northern Congo, indicates that their ritual practices also vary from one region to another (Bahuchet 1985:428-9; 1989). This diversity is linked to the fact that each of these societies is regularly exposed to non-Pygmy societies. The Baka and Aka alone are in contact with about thirty non-Pygmy ethnic groups (Bahuchet 1989:50). Considering the frequency of such contact, behavioral osmosis has undoubtedly occurred. The diversity among non-Pygmy groups would naturally produce further intracultural diversity among the Aka and the Baka.

A third problem for comprehensive research is that these are acephalous forest societies, characterized by organizational mobility and fluidity. Practices within groups consequently evolve continually and independently of other groups. Indeed, entire ritual practices may die out with a generation. Thus it becomes vital to understand the similarities and the differences in order to discover what cultural impetus lies behind behavior, rather than simply noting the behavior itself or assuming that all groups are basically the same.

These three factors – intracultural variability, inter-ethnic contacts and exchange, and organizational fluidity – are certainly not limited to religion. Nonetheless, they seem to present greater difficulties for researching aspects of religion because rituals are not easily observed in hunter-gatherer societies. For instance, hereditary ritual figures are often missing and there is no ancestor worship. In addition, there exists a plethora of private rites, which are both difficult to observe and difficult to categorize. There is also no regular schedule for ceremonies; one not performed for years may suddenly be organized repeatedly in a short period of time.

In spite of the problems, the best way to establish a foundation for further study is by focusing on a single aspect of a society at a time and building up a more comprehensive picture gradually. Thus this study begins with the specifics of a small part of the ritual life of the Baka groups of southern Cameroon.

The following intracultural comparative analysis of hunting rites finds its inspiration in Barnard's (1988, 1992a, 1992b) writings about Khoisan religion. The working hypothesis aims at underlying common factors in the religious system that are not apparent in regional variants. The analysis attempts to take into account intracultural variability as well as organizational fluidity. My objective is to reveal that certain ritual associations between individuals underpin social organization and perpetuate it, thereby contributing to the evolution of certain funda-

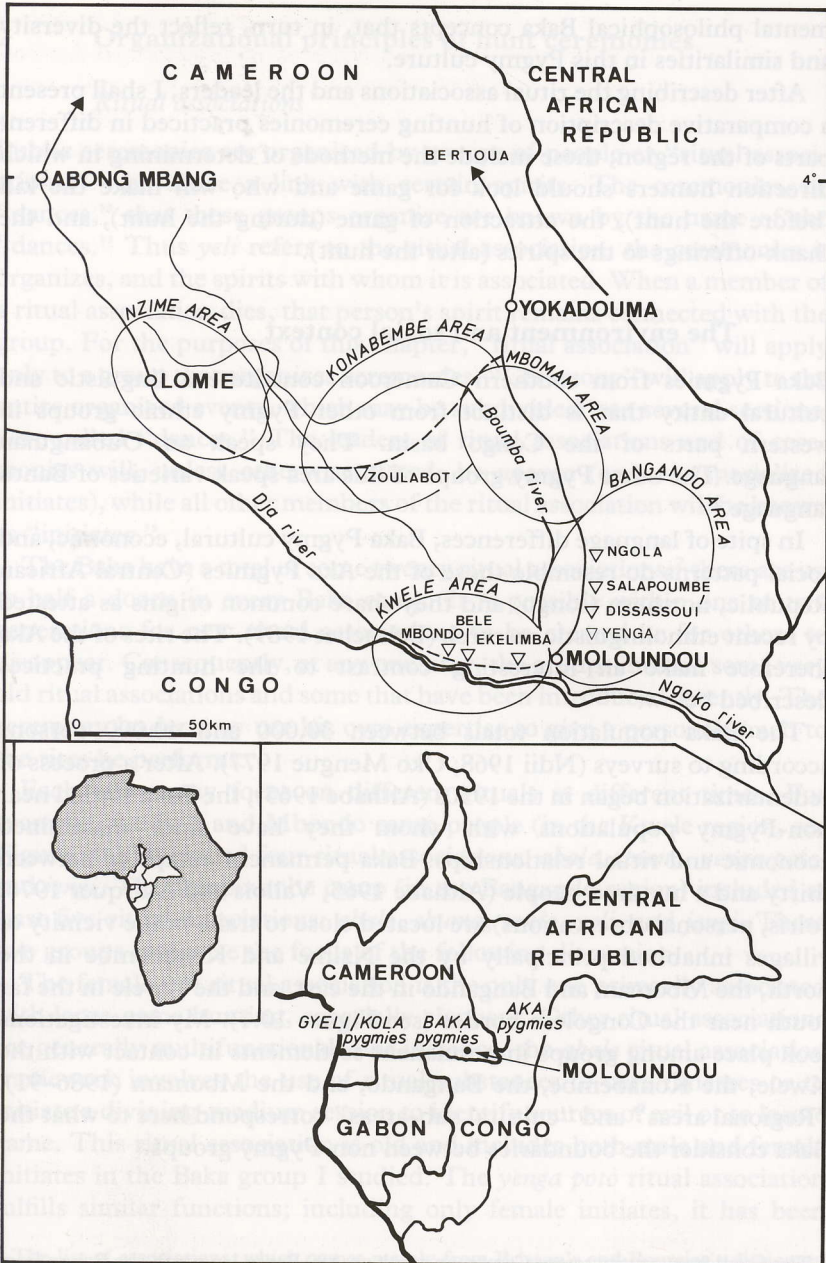


Figure 10.1 The Baka land and designated sub-cultural areas

mental philosophical Baka concepts that, in turn, reflect the diversity and similarities in this Pygmy culture.

After describing the ritual associations and the leaders, I shall present a comparative description of hunting ceremonies practiced in different parts of the region; these include the methods of determining in which direction hunters should look for game and who will make the kill (before the hunt), the attraction of game (during the hunt), and the thank-offerings to the spirits (after the hunt).

The environment and social context

Baka Pygmies from southern Cameroon constitute a linguistic and cultural entity that is distinct from other Pygmy ethnic groups in western parts of the Congo basin. They speak an Oubanguian language. The other Pygmy groups of this area speak varieties of Bantu language.¹

In spite of language differences, Baka Pygmy cultural, economic, and social patterns do resemble those of the Aka Pygmies (Central African Republic, northern Congo) and they share common origins as attested by recent ethnolinguistic research (Bahuchet 1989). The rites of the Aka therefore make an interesting contrast to the hunting practices described below.

The Baka population totals between 30,000 and 40,000 persons according to surveys (Ndii 1968; Oko Mengue 1977). After a process of sedentarization began in the 1950s (Althabe 1965), the Baka settled near non-Pygmy populations with whom they have since maintained economic and ritual relationships. Baka permanent camps of between thirty and a hundred people (Althabe 1965; Vallois and Marquer 1976; Joiris, personal observations) are located close to trails in the vicinity of villages inhabited principally by the Nzime and Konabembe in the north, the Mbomam and Bangando in the east, and the Kwele in the far south near the Congolese border (see Figure 10.1). My investigations took place among groups in permanent settlements in contact with the Kwele, the Konabembe, the Bangando, and the Mbomam (1986–91). “Regional areas” and “cultural sub-areas” correspond here to what the Baka consider the boundaries between non-Pygmy groups.

¹ The Gyeli from southwestern Cameroon speak an A80 Bantu language, the Bongo from Gabon a B70 Bantu language while the Aka from the Central African Republic and the Popular Republic of Congo employ a C10 Bantu language.

2 Organizational principles of hunt ceremonies

Ritual associations

Public ceremonies are organized by groups of people or "ritual associations," who share a link with certain spirits. The ceremonies, or "dances," that these groups organize are known by the name of the "dances." Thus *yeli* refers to the ritual association, the ceremonies it organizes, and the spirits with whom it is associated. When a member of a ritual association dies, that person's spirit remains connected with the group. For the purposes of this chapter, "ritual association" will apply only to a group that organizes ceremonies. "Ceremony" will apply to the entire organized events, which may be subdivided into several sections, here called "dances." The leaders of ritual associations and of ceremonies will, unless otherwise stated, be *nganga* (or main/specialized initiates), while all other members of the ritual association will be known as "initiates."

The Baka have a total of some twenty ritual associations;² there are up to half a dozen in every Baka camp. It is possible within one or two generations for new ritual associations to be created or for others to disappear. Consequently, at any one time, the groups include some very old ritual associations and some that have been introduced recently. The ceremony leader may use his own expertise to give a personal touch to the rites he performs.

Each camp may focus on different rituals at different times. For example, the Bele and Mbondo camp people (in the Kwele region, see Figure 10.1) included four ritual associations: *abale*, *ebuma*, *yenga poto*, and *jengi*. The Salapoumbe camp (in the Bangando region) included at least five ritual associations: *abale*, *ebuma*, *sonjo*, *yeli*, and *jengi*. These two groups comprise the focus of the following discussion.

The female *yeli* ritual association is the only one primarily associated with large-game hunting, especially elephant. Other ritual associations are generally multifunctional. For instance, the *abale* ritual association framework involves the use of ritual substances to cure illnesses or to initiate a divining-medium session to identify sources of evil or to locate game. This ritual association is old and includes both male and female initiates in the Baka group I studied. The *yenga poto* ritual association fulfills similar functions; including only female initiates, it has been

² The list of associations, which comes mainly from Brisson's and Boursier's dictionary (1979), is of great interest and merits being updated following future investigations into regional variants.

observed only in the Kwele region camps, where it apparently began around 1970. *Ebuma* ceremonies are very widespread as mourning dances (Brisson and Boursier 1979; Higgins 1981; Joiris, personal observations),³ but they also include ritual manipulations of a hunting character in which male and female initiates participate. The old and very widespread masculine *jengi* ritual association is indirectly concerned with hunting, although its main function is to establish protection towards the forest and to contribute to the preservation of peace and harmony in the community.⁴ It does so by acting against witchcraft and social conflict. The sixth ritual association, called *sonjo*, was remembered by only a few elderly initiates. It is closely associated with witchcraft. Last, *nabula* is a secret ritual restricted to master-hunter initiates (who have visionary power) as a secret ritual institution.

Hunting ceremonies are not identical from one subcultural area to the next, and can differ from one camp to the next. At the Bele-Mbondo camps (Kwele area), the ritual associations involved with hunting ceremonies are *yenga poto*, *abale* (or *nganga*), and *ebuma*; in the other sample camp, Salapoumbe-Ndongo from the Bangando-Mbomam region, hunting preparation involves *yeli* and *abale* (or *nganga*) ritual associations. Hunting rites, which constitute a major dimension of these four ritual associations, are part of other ritual systems. For instance, the *jengi* ritual association and the *nabula* master-hunter initiates do not organize hunting ceremonies as such, but their ritual powers contribute to the success of the organized hunting ceremonies and therefore of the hunt itself.

There is a great diversity in the performance of "dances" and the general organization of these ceremonies by ritual associations. Generally, however, they all include activities before, during, and after the hunt. Some rites may be practiced simultaneously or in sequence within the space of a few days. Four or five complementary or sequential ritual systems coexist in this manner; each is regarded as a part of a harmonious whole and is not in competition to establish authority over the hunt.

Among the ritual associations mentioned above, the following categories can be established (see table 10.1):

³ From the data I have gathered thus far it appears that it is not exactly a mourning dance but rather the overall organization of a dance to honor the initiates after they have passed away. A number of dances (*abale*, *yenga poto*, etc.) are performed in succession during the mourning ceremonies. It can be hypothesized that there are many *ebuma* initiates because the *ebuma* dance is often performed in these mourning ceremonies.

⁴ The *jengi* ritual association corresponds to the *ezengi* Aka dance. *Ezengi* seems to be less sacralized in the Aka framework. According to Bahuchet (1989:459), this spirit must have been a part of the ritual and symbolic corpus of an old civilization to which ancestors of the present Baka and Aka belonged.

Table 10.1. *Gender and ritual association categories surrounding the hunt in the Bangando-Mbomam region and Kwele-Konabembe region*

Ritual association quite similar in every camp	Bangando-Mbomam region	Kwele-Konabembe region
<i>Abale</i>	Male/female	Male/female
<i>Jengi</i>	Only male	Only male
<i>Nabula</i> (?)	Only male	Only male
Ritual association only performed in certain camps	Bangando-Mbomam region	Kwele-Konabembe region
<i>Yeli</i>	Only female	—
<i>Yenga poto</i>	—	Only female
<i>Ebuma</i>	—	Male/female

(a) those that are quite similar in every camp (same name, same kind of ritual practice, same function). This is the case for the *jengi* and *abale* ritual associations and may be the case for *nabula*;

(b) those that are performed only in certain camps. This second category includes intrinsically original and regional ritual associations.

During a public ceremony, all camp members may participate minimally by observing and singing. Those who manifest natural tendencies towards ritual substances or the interpretation of dreams (or other related spiritual awareness) undergo an apprenticeship to become specialized ritual agents. Children as young as 12 or 14 years who demonstrate singing and dancing aptitudes may be integrated into a ritual association after an informal rite, and thus become initiates. Generally, the initiation-apprenticeship⁵ is informal; however, the Baka practice more formal initiation rites as well. For example, there is the masculine ritual association of the *jengi* that involves a rite of passage for a group of prospective initiates.

The main initiates, or nganga

Camp members participate in rituals at several levels but those who become skillful may become *nganga*. The main initiates, or *nganga*, are ritual agents whose responsibilities are broader than those of the diviner-healers presented in literature on the Baka (Brisson and Bour-

⁵ According to the expression "initiation-apprentissage" used by Bahuchet (1985:442) for the Aka Pygmies.

sier 1979:335). They have a variety of functions besides those associated with healing and the hunt, including practicing various methods of divination such as interpreting smoke and reading fire. They also practice oneiromancy.

Nganga may be individuals of either gender; marriage partners frequently practice their skills together, although they perform different roles. The percentage of *nganga* to population varies but is important to the residents' well-being. Hence, a camp with a population of one hundred may have up to a dozen *nganga*.⁶

The term *nganga*, used by the Baka, is also common in Bantu languages.⁷ However, in the Baka Oubanguian language, the word resembles that for ritual associations in that it designates several different things. Thus *nganga* refers to the ritual agent (main/specialized initiate or leader), ritual power, ritual association (the *nganga* ritual association being equivalent to the *abale* one), as well as the dancing performance (in the *nganga* ritual association framework).

Nganga are the beneficial agents who may also act as sorcerers and witches (*wa-mbu*). This concept of the *nganga* is similar to that found throughout the Bantu world. The Baka distinguish those *nganga* who have become witches willingly and those who have done so unwillingly. An inadvertent misuse of a ritual substance could result in someone becoming an unwilling witch by spilling human blood instead of animal blood. Willing witches may perform witchcraft for a long period of time. On the other hand, *nganga* who are sorcerers are affiliated to *wa-mbu* sorcerer ritual associations such as that of the *sonjo*.⁸

Through their connections to the spirit world, *nganga* acquire a wealth of personal secrets. The most competent are called old initiates (*di-nganga*) and the least experienced are young initiates (*le-nganga*). Main initiates develop a network of privileged relationships with the

⁶ This subject is being developed in my dissertation.

⁷ The *n-gàngà* proto-Bantu radical designates the magic protective agent (de Heusch 1971:180).

⁸ According to Evans-Pritchard's classification (1937), Baka "willing *wa-mbu*" seems to be a witch even if he/she willingly performs witchcraft for a long period of time; see also Sevy (1960) and Motte (1980). In his article on Baka conflict resolution, Dodd (1980) makes reference to factors other than that of dispersion (meaning a "process of flux as conflict resolution"), which is often mentioned in literature about Pygmy societies, particularly by Turnbull (1968:135). Dodd underscores most notably the religious factor. It appears, however, that he opts to ignore the practices of witchcraft and sorcery because such practices might be regarded as a recent borrowing from farmer/villager ethnicities. While the confines of this chapter do not allow a more detailed analysis of these questions, it is important to emphasize that the increasing sedentarization dates only from the 1950s and that the ambiguity surrounding the *nganga* personality attests to a very widespread practice of witchcraft and sorcery within the Baka religious system.

game spirits who, as in many other hunting societies,⁹ are said to walk side by side with the game and thereby guide the hunters.

The power of the *nganga* and the respect accorded to them confer a political status which allows them to act as informal leaders (headmen and headwomen), maintaining harmony. They also give access to the forest world.

The guardianship of spirits

In most cases, Baka initiates or *nganga* share with their spouses the privileged relationship they enjoy with particular spirits; relationships are determined by membership in a particular ritual association. If the original ritual association is masculine, the husband will be the holder of the most important secrets (ritual substances or medicines), while sharing some with his wife; conversely, if the original association is feminine, the wife retains most of the secrets.

The *nganga* couple designated by the ritual status of spirit (*me*) guardians (*mo-me*), lead ceremonies organized by their ritual association. The wife leads the polyphonic "yodels" and the husband performs the rites (dancing, fire-divining, or other performances according to which ceremony is being performed) in the center of the camp. Many ritual associations are composed of at least one couple of *nganga* "specialists" initiates and a number of "minor" initiates. The "real" *nganga* are spirit guardians while the "minor" initiates are not spirit guardians. The real *nganga* progressively initiate followers, some of whom will in turn become real *nganga*, either through inheriting the guardianship of the spirits or through exchanging it for a close relative's life.¹⁰

Nganga spirit guardians are divided into different categories of ritual agents who maintain relationships with corresponding classes of spirits, as defined by ritual association. For instance, the lineage chief, or *kobo*, is often a former elephant hunter and is always the guardian of spirits from the *jengi* class. The *kobo* is therefore a *nganga* spirit guardian. He is less of a "chief" or headman than a camp (*bala*) guardian (*mo-bala*) (Dodd 1980) and uses his *nganga* or his master-hunter influence to act as a peacemaker. He keeps peace amongst the living as well as between the living and the spirits of the deceased, all within the general framework of maintaining harmony with the forest.

⁹ The South American Ashuars are an example (Descola 1986).

¹⁰ This type of widespread transaction is similar to that practiced by, for example, the Mbolia (de Heusch 1971:174), which is a clear example of sorcery. This recalls the ambiguity surrounding the *nganga* personality and highlights the relevance of considering the two categories of "witchcraft" and "sorcery" in Baka society.

Within a single camp there are sometimes several *nganga* presiding over one and the same ritual association, but in such cases only one couple officiates at a time. The absence of *nganga*, who often leave for extended visits like any other camp member, is no hindrance to the performance of rituals. Able initiates are always available to perform a ceremony.

Moreover, there is so much overlapping within the ritual and political spheres that it results in a selective sharing of responsibilities, a multiplicity of male and female actors, and an organization that is most notable for being flexible and fluid. Much of this is no doubt an extended expression of the individual mobility evident in the common practice of visiting; some visits between members of different camps are lengthy, a practice which modifies the sedentarization of the population.

Supralocal co-guardianship networks

Each permanent camp established along the track maintains special relationships with other permanent camps. Like the Aka who "travel great distances to visit relatives" (Hewlett *et al.* 1982:427), the Baka maintain regular contacts with others who may be very far away in a different subcultural area. These relationships, which exist within the framework of what could be called the regional band, are established through matrimonial links; they generally share economic, social, and religious structures. Large gatherings of such far-flung families are common. The result is a similar flexibility to that of the Efe Pygmies (Harako 1976:47-8): the band is gathered together while settled near the villages and is fragmented during the forest trips. This type of mobility offsets the isolation that can be associated with sedentary life.

The regional band of the Baka consists, then, of a set of permanent camps situated near different villages, but without any formal structure of relationships. Rather, various visits frequently take place between families. While visitors are in another camp, they become completely integrated into its social structure. No doubt behavior patterns are often introduced from one camp to another in this way, then are modified to suit the new system.

Camps of a regional band are often linked not only by family ties but also through co-guardianship of the tutelary spirits of the dead. This is a strong cohesive factor that stems from the familial ties, since families often share a ritual association membership linked to particular spirits. For example, the Bele camp share the guardianship of the *jengi* category of spirits with the Mbondo, Ekelimba (Kwele area), Yenga (Bangando area), and Zoulabot (Konabembe area) camps (Figure 10.2). In each

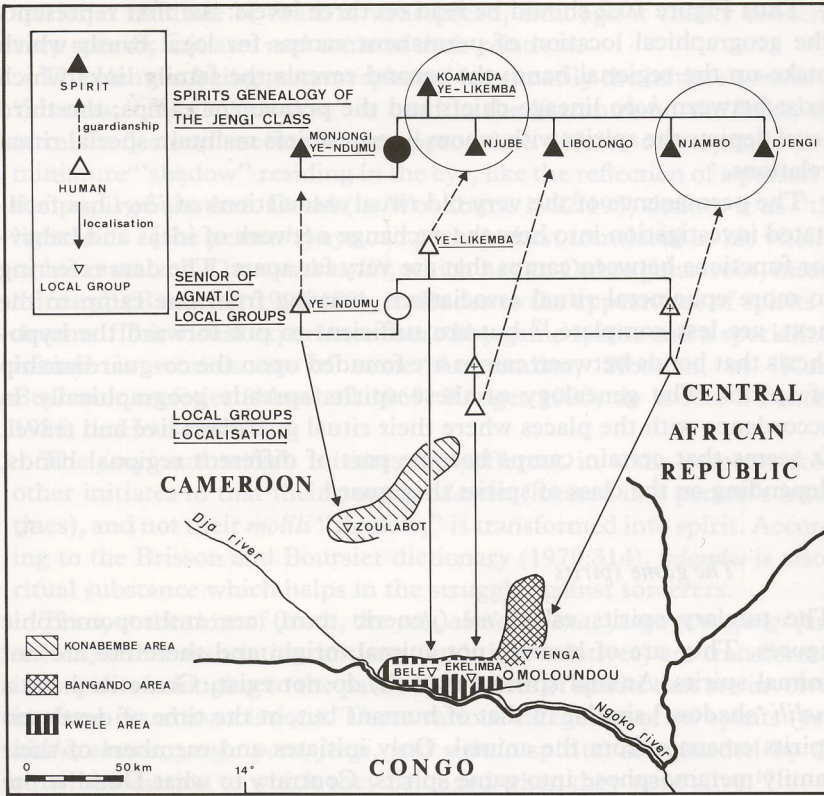


Figure 10.2 Sample of a regional band (set of Bele, Ekelimba, Yenga and Zoulabot permanent camps or local bands) sharing the guardianship of a genealogy of the *jengi* class spirits

camp, the *jengi* spirits are guarded by the lineage headman or camp guardian *kobo*. As shown in Figure 10.2, the *kobo* lineage chiefs are related to each other and usually belong to the same patrilineal group or *ye-*.¹¹ They perform rites together. Ritual relationships are usually maintained with spirits of the same patrilineal group.

¹¹ The Baka kinship system is patrilineal, at least in the way Baka transmit their clan identity, which is a kind of exogamous emblematic group called *ye-*. The nucleus of each camp consists of the descendants of one lineage or segment of a lineage and belongs mainly to a given *ye-*, whereas the wives and husbands of the nucleus and most camp initiates are attached to other *ye-*. About ten *ye-* are thus represented in the camps (Vallois and Marquer 1976:120-1; and Joiris, personal observations), they bear the names of animals, plants, or objects to which dietary or behavioral prohibition is often related. The composition of the local group is independent of the clan and we can find people belonging to different clans. The residence rule is either virolocal or uxoriocal

Thus Figure 10.2 should be read on three levels: the first represents the geographical location of permanent camps for local bands which make up the regional band; the second reveals the family links which exist between *kobo* lineage chiefs and the permanent camps; the third level depicts the spirits with whom lineage chiefs maintain special ritual relations.

The permanence of the very old ritual associations of *jengi* has facilitated investigation into how the exchange network of ideas and behavior functions between camps that are very far apart. The data referring to more ephemeral ritual associations, varying from one camp to the next, are less complete,¹² but are sufficient to put forward the hypothesis that bonds between camps are founded upon the co-guardianship of spirits. The genealogy of these spirits spreads geographically in accordance with the places where their ritual guardians live and travel. It seems that certain camps become part of different regional bands, depending on the class of spirits they guard.

The game spirits

The tutelary spirits called *me* (generic term) are anthropomorphic figures. They are of human, not animal, origin and therefore are not animal spirits. Animal spirits, as such, do not exist. Game do have a *molili* 'shadow' similar to that of humans but, at the time of death, no spirits emanate from the animal. Only initiates and members of their family metamorphose into game spirits. Contrary to what Dodd wrote on the subject (in Woodburn 1982), the concept of metamorphosis into

and every marital combination is possible with monogamous and polygamous families. The Baka kinship system needs to be analyzed further and is being addressed in my dissertation.

¹² The *nganga* are more difficult to identify than the *kobo*, not only because of the ephemeral quality of these ritual associations but also because they are very discreet in everyday life, and because the initiatory power somehow protects them. It is necessary to have the opportunity of witnessing the ritual performances of every dance in order to start investigation. For such opportunities to arise, given the abundance and mobility of *nganga*, the observer needs to be present over long periods of time. In a given camp, there may be ritual associations which do not organize ceremonies for months or even years. Ceremonies seem to come in waves: one ceremony which takes place may stimulate the organization of another. In 1987, a *nganga* and his wife traveled 100 kilometers from their camp in Zoulabot to Bele, where they stayed for several months. The *nganga* organized a number of fire-"divining" ceremonies (*abale*) at which all the Bele and Mbondo inhabitants were present. It seems the *nganga* transmitted the guardianship of one of his *me* to the Bele *kobo*'s sister's husband. When the *nganga* and his wife left, no ceremony was organized for the next two years (or perhaps I never had the opportunity of witnessing it), although the camp's ritual activity was intense and dances took place at least every third day.

spirits at the time of death is widespread, although it chiefly concerns very specific initiates and some of their relatives.

The element being metamorphosed is primarily the initiate's *molili* or "shadow." While "shadow" is used in the literature on the Baka, the term "reflection" seems more appropriate. *Molili* corresponds to a miniature "shadow" residing in the eye, like the reflection of a person in the pupil of another. Dodd (in Woodburn 1982:195) defines it as "the light in . . . [the person's] eye . . . perhaps best translated as his vitality or his essence." The word *molili*, which has an Oubanguian root, means "dream" (Bahuchet 1990:459); it alludes to the appearance of spirits in dreams. This visual experience shared by game spirits and a specialized initiate is reminiscent of some Amerindian, Siberian, or !Kung Bushman societies (Marshall 1969; Rouget 1990; de la fête à l'extase 1986; de Heusch 1971).

The *jengi* and *nabula* initiates are different in some respects from other initiates in that their power, *ndambu* (located in a person's intestines), and not their *molili* "shadow," is transformed into spirit. According to the Brisson and Boursier dictionary (1979:314), *ndambu* is also a ritual substance which helps in the struggle against sorcerers.

Thus, at the time of death, the *yeli*, *abale*, *ebuma*, *yenga poto*, *jengi* (and *nabula*) ritual association initiates (and their relatives) are transformed into spirits belonging to the particular classes of spirits that are involved in those ritual associations. These various categories of *me* spirits (*yeli*, *abale*, *ebuma*, *yenga poto*, *jengi*, and *nabula* spirits) are guarded by the ritual association to which they belonged when they were alive.¹³

Game spirits can be seen in the forest only by initiates but in camp they sometimes appear to non-initiates, wearing different types of mask (see Joiris, 1993a, 1993b). They are organized into families and the initiates, having contacts with the spirits, "guard" them, as the Baka put it, within the ritual association for the benefit of the whole community.

Most new "dances" or ceremonies are created in camp following the meeting of a spirit of a deceased Baka with a main initiate in the forest. The initiate offers a present, such as honey, to the spirit as an enticement to come back to camp. Often, the spirit presents the initiate with specific medicinal plants, dance costumes, songs, and dance steps in a dream. The initiate then organizes the first ceremony of the newly created ritual (or new version of a ritual), during which he uses his experience for therapeutic and cynegetic purposes.

¹³ *Abale* initiates will therefore be metamorphosed into *abale me* spirits called *mokondi* (in the Kwele-Konabembe area) and *kose* (in the Bangando region), *ebuma* initiates into *ebuma me* spirits, *yeli* initiates and their relatives into *yeli me* spirits, *yenga poto* initiates into *yenga poto me* spirits, *jengi* initiates into *jengi me* spirits.

Initiates have no trouble in identifying spirits of their own family; they belong to the same patrilineal descent group, *ye-*, as the deceased Baka from whom the spirits originated. Each spirit class consists of lines of ancestors linked to the living within their particular ritual association. The Baka know the spirits' names associated with their own camp and sometimes those of other camps within their regional band. The number of individuals in each family is much greater than the number of initiates in any ritual association, but initiates make contact with only a small number of spirits.

While there is no real ancestor worship within this Baka culture, it is clear through the ritual association tradition that the notion of ancestry-spirit links is well established. It is manifested by the special relationship that exists between initiates and the spirits of the deceased; all of these relationships are linked closely with the forest.

3 Intracultural variability in hunting ritual

In this section, I shall focus on the ritual activities of two sets of camps, one in the Bangando-Mbomam region and the other in the Kwele-Konabembe region.¹⁴ The hunt, and particularly the big-game hunt, is surrounded by rituals. Because the elephant is considered the acme of game animals, there is a rich symbolism associated with, as the Baka say, this "really enormous beast."¹⁵ The spear-hunt ceremony frequently refers to elephants and implies that long distances will be covered in the forest.

Even though rites differ from one ritual association to another, the ceremonies include activities with identical functions. Some rites are designed to locate and to attract game; others designate the hunters who will make the kill; others facilitate tracking and/or thank game spirits. Generally a hunt ceremony can be divided into three phases: the first takes place prior to the hunt; the second in the forest during the hunting of the beast; the last phase occurs after the kill.

Two ceremonies occur as ritual preparation for a hunt. Each involves divination by a main initiate, along with singing and dancing. The singing and dancing can occur simultaneously in different locations or in either order within a few days of one another.

The ceremonies may be prepared by the combination of two or three

¹⁴ A more detailed ethnography of the principal characteristics of these ritual activities (including the history of some ritual associations from their original "region" to their present area) may be found in Joiris 1993a.

¹⁵ The symbolic elements surrounding the elephant are developed in Joiris 1993b.

ritual associations. At Salapoumbe (Bangando region), these are the *yeli* and *abale*. At Bele-Mbondo in the Kwele region, they include the *yenga poto*, *abale*, and *ebuma*.

Ceremonies are usually performed in public, in the center of camp, although the *yenga poto* and *yeli* (exclusively female ceremonies) partly occur in private rituals reserved for main initiates. Individual rituals, such as the application of ritual substances to make hunters invisible, strong, brave, etc., apparently take place (Brisson and Bourisier 1979; Brisson 1988).

Rites preceding the hunt (table 10.2)

In the Bangando region, preparatory rituals in *yeli* and *abale* ritual associations occur in different places but at the same time. These rites are directed at locating and attracting game.

For divination,¹⁶ the *yeli* female initiate (who is a *nganga*) gathers ritual substances such as bark or leaves and rubs them until her palms stick together. The direction in which her hands point indicates where game is to be found (the other initiates repeat the same operation, each with her own ritual substances). The second ritual reinforces the first: the *nganga* burns young tree shoots and the direction in which smoke curves points to where hunters should aim.

The *abale* ritual reinforces the *yeli* by means of a mystical relationship between the *nganga* and spirits of the deceased.¹⁷ A *loko* ritual substance linked to clairvoyance is placed, drop by drop, into the *nganga*'s eyes.

¹⁶ If we accept the definition of Singzingre (in Bonte and Izard 1991), divination corresponds to a "culturally codified system of interpreting past, present, and future events" (my translation).

¹⁷ The ancient *abale* framework, called *mbomba* in both subcultural areas, seems to have involved divining techniques like hand rubbing and hearing the sound of the divining rattle (*ligbegbe*) until 1960.

The *abale* dance is the same as *nganga*, *mokondi*, and *kose*. They are said to have different names "because everybody has his own way." The dictionary, which includes vocabulary from the Salapoumbe and Lomié areas, confirms the nexus between *mokondi*, *abale*, and *kose*. According to Brisson and Boursier (1979:153-253), *mokondi* is a fire spirit (*me na wa*) whose dance is similar to *kose*'s dance. *Kose* is a spirit who presides over divining sessions (*me na nganga*) to cure people and prepare the hunt. *Kose* dances *abale*. The importance of the part played by these spirits to divining powers is attested on the one hand in oral literature, particularly in the *mokondi* song-fable which involves *sese*, the divining bird (Brisson: personal communication), and in the origin of the term *kose* on the other hand. The original **kose* was a kind of "trouble-making evil." In the old Baka society, the diviner looked for **kose* in fire. Bahuchet (1989:465) points to the meaning of the original **kose* which may explain the fact that the present Baka *kose* is a spirit who helps the diviner in his introspection.

Table 10.2. *Regional variations of the rites prior to the hunt and during yeli, ebuma, abale, and yenga poto ceremonies organized in their respective yeli, ebuma, abale, and yenga poto ritual association framework*

A1 = Bangando-Mbomam area

A2 = Kwele-Konabembe area

Rites prior to the hunt	<i>yeli</i> A1	<i>ebuma</i> A2	<i>abale</i> A1-A2	<i>yenga poto</i> A2
<i>Rites to locate game</i>				
Divining techniques (based on the interpretation of phenomena)	Hand rubbing Observation of smoke direction	Hand rubbing	Hand rubbing, in the ancient <i>mbomba</i> framework (A1, until 1960) Hearing the sound of divining rattle (<i>ligbegbe</i>) in the ancient <i>mbomba</i> framework (A1)	N.A.
Clairvoyance/mediumistic techniques (a visionary experience during which the agent enters into a trance)	—	—	Fire reading Reading in a civet skin <i>Divining rattle (ligbegbe)</i> associated with fire (ancient <i>Mbomba</i> ceremony A2)	—
Application of clairvoyance medicine	—	—	<i>loko</i> ritual substance put in eyes to look into fire (and to interpret dreams in which initiates and spirits also pass by)	Prepare a ritual substance for the reading in a civet skin by an <i>abale</i> initiate
Absorption of <i>medicine</i> producing powers enabling the initiates to locate wild animals	<i>yeli pot liquor</i> (kind of hydromel)	—	<i>Abangama</i> liquid (kind of hydromel) in the ancient <i>mbomba</i> ceremony (A1), borrowed by the <i>yeli</i> women initiates by 1960	—
<i>Rites to attract game</i>				
<i>Yodel songs</i> (and dance)	<i>yeli songs (ndando)</i>	<i>ebuma yeli</i>	—	<i>yenga poto yeli</i>
<i>Medicine</i> in order to improve song-dance and hunt	—	<i>ndambu</i> ritual substance	N.A.	N.A.
Absorption of <i>medicine</i> in order to reinforce the attraction effect of <i>yodel songs</i>	<i>yeli pot liquor</i> (kind of hydromel)	<i>njambu</i> liquid (kind of hydromel)	<i>Abangama</i> liquid (kind of hydromel) in the ancient <i>mbomba</i> ceremony (A1), borrowed by the <i>yeli</i> women initiates by 1960	N.A.
<i>Rites to designate the hunter(s)</i>				
Mediumistic rite to designate the master-hunter	Gift of the <i>mojuma</i> stick	—	—	—
Rite to designate all the hunters	—	Gift of the <i>mokobaka</i> ritual substance to be tied to hunt charms (<i>simbo</i>)	—	—
<i>Rites facilitating the approach to game</i>				
Application of <i>medicines</i> . . .	invisibility <i>medicine</i> , <i>luck</i> blessing	N.A.	N.A.	<i>Luck</i> blessing applied by the wife initiate to her husband (if no public ceremony is organized)

Table 10.2. (cont.) A1 = Bangando-Mbomam area A2 = Kwele-Konabembe area

	<i>yeli</i> A1	<i>ebuma</i> A2	<i>abale</i> A1–A2	<i>yenga poto</i> A2
Rites prior to the hunt				
Absorption of <i>medicines</i> including trance in the master-hunter or <i>nganga</i> when the game is nearby	<i>yeli pot liquor</i> (kind of hydromel)	—	<i>ndambu</i> ritual substance (also a master-hunter's vision power received by initiation)	—
Game spirits (<i>me</i>) intervention	<i>yeli me</i>	<i>ebuma me</i>	<i>abale me</i> (also called <i>mokondi</i> A1 or <i>kose</i> A2)	<i>yenga poto me</i>
Masked spirits	—	—	Couple of noisy masks. Chest covered up with a cloth, arms folded on the torso, long raffia fiber skirt under a short one	Two or three silent masks, dancing backward, bending forward. Chest covered up with a cloth, arms folded on the torso, short raffia fiber skirt worn over trousers, feet covered with cloth or banana leaves
Unmasked spirits	Said to dance around the camps when the <i>yeli</i> women initiates sing	Said to be present in the square dance while the ceremony has reached its climax	Said to be present but invisible, close to the <i>abale</i> initiate who reads in the fire	
Application of <i>herbance</i> <i>mbamba</i>	—	—	The spirit ancient <i>mbomba</i> form in the framework (A2) called <i>ala</i> did not have a mask, did not come to the camp to dance	—

Subsequently he can “read” a fire or civet skins¹⁸ or interpret dreams in which the spirit appears. The *nganga* goes into a light trance, when his gaze crosses that of a spirit or when he sees his *molili* “shadow” or that belonging to an animal. The initiate then indicates the direction hunters should follow either by speaking or by falling down in such a way that his body points in the right direction.

Two ritual techniques can be thus identified: the first, that of the *yeli*, implies divining techniques based on interpreting phenomena; the second, that of the *abale*, implies mediumistic techniques of vision (i.e. “inner vision”). However, in the ceremony to determine the master-hunter who will kill the game, the *yeli* uses a mediumistic technique and trance.

The *yeli* initiate takes a stick (called *mojuma*) with leaves tied to one end. It supposedly symbolizes the *molili* “shadow” of the game. The master-hunter crushes the leaves attached to the stick; if the *nganga* is thrown into convulsions and collapses, this indicates that this particular master-hunter will make the kill. The notion of vision is implied. The sequence utilizes the same *molili* “shadow” concept as the *abale* rite of reading fire or in civet skin.

Rites performed in order to attract game are very elaborate in the *yeli* ceremony. Powerful hunting prowess is attributed to the “yodel” polyphonies performed by the principal *yeli* initiate soloists. Some of the *yeli* songs, called *ndando*, refer to the first hunt as it is described in the *tibola* song-fable;¹⁹ that story explains the origin of this hunting power, by virtue of which *nganga* women then cooperate with the *me* spirits to locate and to call animals. These songs may also invoke the name of a renowned master-hunter recently deceased. The *yeli* spirits, according to the Baka, stay in the bush and start dancing when they hear women singing *yeli*. Meanwhile, the entire community partakes of a ritual substance called *yeli* “pot liquid” (a kind of hydromel made from water and a sweet honey-like substance); this community activity reinforces the “yodel” songs’ capacity to attract game. There is some evidence that in the past (until approximately 1960), a similar ritual liquid called *abangama* was used during the *mbomba* ceremony – an old form of *abale* in certain camps in the Bangando-Mbomam area. Although the *yeli* songs represent a very different ritual from the *abale*, there is some

¹⁸ Fire divining has been progressively abandoned in favor of civet-skin divining, which the Baka learned from the Bangando. According to the Baka, the Bangando use it in the sorcerer’s dance *bidi*, a “villagers” equivalent to the *nganga* dance.

¹⁹ I wish to express my sincere thanks to Robert Brisson who translated this song-fable which we recorded in Bele in 1990. This version corresponds to a variant told in Salapoumbe (Brisson: 1981–4) and to that of Kaloma in the vicinity of Lomié (Kilian-Hatz 1989:152–69).



Figure 10.3 *Abale* mask at a funeral dance (Mbondo camp, Kwele area, 1990)

indication that *yeli* initiates adopted *abangama* and incorporated it in their *yeli* pot liquid.

The *yeli* pot liquid also plays a role in attracting game. During a *yeli* ceremony, the initiate applies substances that make the hunters' bodies invisible and bring them luck. For the Baka, a state of balance is located on the forehead and is determined by the harmonious quality of relationships between people, as well as between people and forest spirits.

During the *abale* game-attracting ritual, the initiate drinks a ritual substance called *ndambu*, which causes convulsions when game is nearby. It seems that, following initiation, most hunters (or perhaps only master-hunters) receive a "visionary power" which bears the same name of *ndambu*. This power enables the hunters to have a close association with spirits who appear in camp. They dance in couples, shouting or uttering certain sounds. Their chests are covered with cloth, their arms are folded on their torsos; and they wear long raffia fiber skirts under shorter ones (see Figure 10.3).

In the Kwele-Konabembe region, hunting ceremonies follow different rites organized by representatives from the *ebuma*, *yenga poto*, and *abale* ritual associations. In spite of the differences, there are some



Figure 10.4 *Ebuma* dancers at a funeral dance (Bele camp, Kwele area, 1990)



Figure 10.5 *Yeli* initiation (Dissassoui camp, Bangando area, 1989)

Table 10.3. Rites performed during the hunt

Rites during the hunt	<i>yeli</i> A1	<i>ebuma</i> A2	<i>abale</i> A1-A2	<i>yenga poto</i> A2	<i>jengi</i> A1-2	<i>nabula</i> A1-2
<i>Rites to locate game</i>						
Divining rites (based on the interpretation of phenomena)	—	—	Hand rubbing (ritual substance given by <i>yeli</i> women initiate)	—	—	—
Mediumistic rites . . . clairvoyance/mediumistic techniques (a visionary experience during which the agent enters into a trance)	—	—	Fire and civet-skin reading	—	—	—
<i>Game spirits (me) intervention</i>	<i>yeli me</i>	<i>ebuma me</i>	<i>abale me</i> (also called <i>mokondi</i> A1 or <i>kose</i> A2)	<i>yenga poto me</i>	<i>jengi</i>	<i>nabula</i> (A1) or <i>pembe</i> (Konabembe area)
Announcing the fruitful beat (in the morning before the start of the hunt)	—	—	—	—	—	Shouts from the edge of the forest
Guidance on game and protection of the hunters	Anthropomorphous dwarf similar to traditional master-hunter (walks side by side with all kind of game)	Anthropomorphous dwarf similar to traditional master-hunter backward-forward motion in walk (points to all kinds of game, honey, and yams) Kwele area	<i>shadow molili</i> (only seen by <i>abale</i> initiate in fire or civet skin)	Anthropomorphous dwarf similar to traditional master-hunter	Anthropomorphous dwarf similar to traditional master-hunter (walks side by side with elephant, only seen by master-hunter <i>jengi</i> initiates)	Anthropomorphous dwarf similar to traditional master-hunter (walks side by side with elephant, only seen by hunters who have <i>ndambu</i> visionary power)

similarities to rites found in the Bangando-Mbomam region. According to the Baka of the Kwele area, the techniques used to locate games in the past included using of a divining rattle and fire reading. Otherwise, much of the ceremony is the same, with vision central to the activities and with the initiate thrown into a trance when his eyes meet those of spirits.

Although the *yeli* ritual has no adherents in the Kwele area, the *ebuma* rites have much in common with *yeli*. The divining technique for locating game is identical: *ebuma* initiates use the same palm-rubbing divining technique. The power of the *ebuma* songs to attract (called *ebuma yeli*) is as strong as that attributed to *yeli* songs, but here the dance comes into play as well. The song sung by the whole group in harmony with dance steps and tambourines, is necessary if the ceremony is to be successful (see Figures 10.4, 10.5). The *ebuma* women also make a ritual liquid, *njambu* described as a mixture of leaves, honey, and water (Brisson and Boursier 1979:355). They drink this liquid to assist with the performance of the *ebuma yeli* song. Even though it is prepared differently, the Baka say that *njambu* is the same as *yeli* pot medicine.

The *ebuma* designation of the hunter who will make the kill follows the same ceremonial lines as the *yeli*, but here the process is less personalized and does not require a mediumistic technique. The *ebuma* initiate distributes ritual hunting substances to all the hunters, who put them with their hunting charms (*simbo*). Finally, the *ebuma* spirits are present in the dance area during the ceremony but are visible only to the main initiates.

As noted, the powers of attraction of music are common to all the rites: *yeli*, *ebuma*, *abale*, and *yenga poto*. The importance of the song is stressed through the use of ritual substances (*yeli* pot, *njambu*, and *abangama* liquid; the *ndambu* ritual substance), all of which are supposed to improve both song and hunt.

Rites during the hunt (table 10.3)

In both regional areas, *jengi* and *nabula* master-hunter initiates intervene during the hunt, although they do not exactly organize ceremonies. Rather, they maintain privileged relations with those spirit classes that are intimately associated with the elephant. They also possess special powers such as the *ndambu* visionary power which guides and protects them.

Initiates of other ritual associations are similarly categorized according to their respective spirit classes, or, as in the case of the *yeli* which has only female initiates, according to the spirits who are visible follow-

ing the consumption of ritual substances during the preparatory ceremony. These spirits appear as anthropomorphic dwarfs similar to traditional elephant hunters – with loin-cloths, elephant spears, and *simbo* hunting charms. *Abale* spirits alone remain distant: only an *abale* initiate sees their shadow when repeating mediumistic rites of fire or civet-skin reading. In the Bangando-Mbomam region, this initiate guides the hunting procession with the help of the palm-rubbing divining rite and *yeli* ritual substances. He or she also selects places to camp by the same rite. Certain women thus participate indirectly in the grand hunt process, which is otherwise reserved to men.²⁰

Rites closing the elephant hunt (table 10.4)

Rites closing the hunt are generally of an expiatory nature, based upon relations with spirits. Generally, initiates offer raw or cooked food as gifts to the spirits for their protection and assistance. The symbolic treatment of the *jengi* spirit class, which is identical in both regional areas, is the most complex: the eldest spirit of the *jengi* spirit family attached to the local group of initiates is said to come close to the elephant's head. He belongs to the same patrilinear clan as the old lineage chief for whom the master-hunter directed the hunt. The building of sacred enclosures in the direction of the elephant's head marks the inauguration of a long process of initiation to the *jengi* ritual association.

4 Aka-Baka comparison

Similarities and differences in Baka and Aka hunting rituals are revealed, most notably, in Bahuchet and Thomas (1991), Motte-Florac (1980, 1982, 1992). This literature emphasizes a diachronic perspective. The authors each note a gradual disappearance of big-game spear-hunting, reduced human mobility, and an increased recourse to collective net hunting. These elements contribute to the erosion of rites formerly associated with the hunt. Nonetheless, present-day rituals occur prior to, during, and after the hunt for both Aka and Baka. An unchanging succession of rites – propitiation–purification–propitiation–expiation–giving (Bahuchet and Thomas 1991:189) – are also elements that are observable in both groups.

The master hunter (*tuma*) and the lineage elder (*mbai*) are responsible for the organization of the hunt. Given the decrease in large-game

²⁰ See Joiris: 1990.

Table 10.4. Rites practiced after the elephant hunt

Rites after the hunt	<i>yeli</i> A1	<i>ebuma</i> A2	<i>abale</i> A1–A2	<i>yenga poto</i> A2	<i>jengi</i> A1–2	<i>nabula</i> A1–2
<i>Game spirits (me) intervention</i>	<i>yeli me</i>	<i>ebuma me</i>	<i>abale me</i> (also called <i>mokondi</i> A1 or <i>kose</i> A2)	<i>yenga poto me</i>	<i>jengi</i>	<i>nabula</i> (A1) or <i>pembe</i> (Konabembe area)
<i>Signals the elephant's death</i>	Present but silent and invisible	N.A.	Present by silent and invisible during the day; shouts and turns around the cadavre at night)	N.A.	—	Utters thundering tones similar to those of the tusk elephant (close to the animal and around the camp)
<i>Get close to the elephant's head</i>	—	—	—	—	The eldest spirit of the <i>jengi</i> spirit family attached to the initiates gets close to the elephant head, he belongs to the same clan as the lineage chief	
<i>Expiatory rites</i>	<i>yeli</i> A1	<i>ebuma</i> A2	<i>abale</i> A1–2	<i>yengo poto</i> A2	<i>jengi</i> A1–2	<i>nabula</i> A1–2
<i>Building of sacred enclosures</i>	—	—	—	—	In the direction of the elephant's head	
<i>Songs</i>	<i>yeli</i> (<i>ndando</i>) song performed by women initiates	N.A.	—	N.A.	—	—
<i>Trance</i>	Performed by a woman initiate while an <i>abale</i> spirit turns around the camp at night	N.A.	—	N.A.	—	—
<i>Offering (likabo) to thank spirits for their protection and assistance</i>	Raw pieces of heart fat, heart, and ribs; <i>dandu</i> honey	Pieces of the game heart and ribs	Cooked sometimes seasoned and salted, ribs and heart pieces; <i>dandu</i> honey Ancient form called <i>ala</i> in the <i>mbomba</i> framework (A2) did not eat anything special	Pieces of the game heart	Cooked unseasoned ribs and heart pieces; <i>dandu</i> honey	Nothing, do not like to eat

hunting, however, the diviner (*nganga*) plays a more important organizational role.

Aka ceremony prior to the hunt (*nzoli*) takes place within the camp. Initiated men and women as well as non-initiates take part. The ceremony is led by the master-hunter, who appeals to the elephant spirit (*bomo* or *zoboko*) (ibid.:125, 127, 167) and to ancestor spirits (*dio*). Like the Baka, Aka believe that these friendly spirits “govern animal populations” (ibid.:172). The master-hunter is assisted by personal protective spirits, or protective powers (*kulu*), which are transmitted from father to son and from master to apprentice (ibid.:127, 188).

Unlike the Baka, the Aka seem to distinguish between spirits of human and animal origin, especially when it comes to prestigious animals such as elephants, gorillas or bongo antelopes (ibid.:127). Moreover, the existence of personal protective spirits underscores the privileged relation between a spirit category and some categories of initiates, usually elder sons. However, this is a symbolic system different from that of the Baka. Their (*dio*) ancestor spirits are not categorized in the same manner and these spirits do not emanate from particular initiates – the only exception here is that of a (*mbimbo*) deceased diviner’s spirit (Motte-Florac 1991:215).

Dio do not have specific names, nor do they belong to the clan of the deceased. But, just as with the Baka, these spirits manifest themselves wearing masks. The spirits wear raffia costumes (similar to the Baka *jengi* mask) (Figure 10.6) in the case of superior ancestor *dio* spirits (*zengi*); short leafy headdresses for other *dio* spirits, and leafy masks with elephant tusks for the elephant spirits (*bomo* or *zoboko*) (ibid.:167).

If it becomes difficult to locate game, the *nganga* diviner practices a divining rite (*bondo*) to complement the one preceding the hunt. He reads in fire while conversing with *dio* spirits. As for Baka, this contact may lead to a state of trance. A second ceremony (*zoboko*) takes place in the forest, away from the main camp. This rite is open to hunters only and is directed by the master-hunter, who appeals to ancestor spirits (*dio*). He causes the (*bomo*) elephant spirit mask to dance.

The close of the hunt is marked by the intervention of the *mbai* elder who offers the game’s blood and internal organs to the game spirits as a thank-offering. The master-hunter also makes an offering to his *kulu* which can be interpreted as a protective spirit or power.

There are four principal similarities between Aka and Baka hunting rites. First, spear-hunting rites, which are common to many ceremonies, including a major fecundity rite (*kondi*), are similar to the Baka *jengi* rite.



Figure 10.6 *Jengi* mask (Salapoumbe, Bangando area, 1989)

Such ceremonies involve the reestablishment of social harmony, male initiation, transmission of hunting power, and the privileged relations between the elder, the *zengi* spirit, and the *dio* ancestor spirits (ibid.:181).

Second, Aka ritual actors such as the master-hunter, diviner, elder, wife of the diviner, and the elder's wife correspond to those of the Baka even though the role of Baka women seems to be more developed than that of the Aka. However, certain elements of the Aka women's ceremonies are powerful. These include the female musical bow (*ngbiti*) with which women charm spirits in order to make them direct animals toward hunters; the *sapa* ritual, whereby women call back their men and thereby enable them to slay game quickly; the *zau* rite in cases of an unsuccessful hunt (ibid.:199); as well as the crucial role played by women during rites of passage (ibid.:202).

Third, ritual techniques used in spear hunting share some identical elements, such as *simbo* hunting charms or *loko* clairvoyance ritual substances (ibid.:203, 205). There is also comparable importance attributed to music for establishing contacts with spirits. Even in similarity, however, their lies diversity. Although the diviner enters into a state of trance, the Aka's spirit travels throughout the spirit world (ibid.:222), which makes him more of a shaman than a Baka *nganga*.

Finally, the supralocal network of relations developed with spirits is equally important in both ethnic groups, but the observation is academic with respect to the Aka. According to the seasonality of Aka rituals (ibid.:131, 132), the major fecundity rite (*kondi*), for example, takes place during large camp meetings when net hunting is also taking place – in January and February (ibid.:131, 132, 189). At other times, however, when the camps are dispersed (due to the well-established visiting custom among both Aka and Baka), local groups intermingle.

5 Conclusion

Baka identity is partly linked to ritual associations in which initiated individuals are involved. Ritual practices vary from one local group to another, and, at a different level, from one regional area to another. This variability depends on specific combinations of ritual elements. Such composite variability may be connected with what Pederson and Waehle (1991:79) claim in respect of the Bamgombi Pygmies: the Bamgombi “identify their local groups in relation to a name and to a number of rituals particular to each local group . . . [which] . . . has its own unique names for the *Edjengi* (spirits) father, mother and son.” Data on the Baka, however, indicate that their identity is based on a much wider ritual perspective that, characterized by fluidity and mobility, reaches as far as the regional band.

That regional band level is vital to Baka identity. It has been established that the guardianship of the same genealogical spirits of the deceased constitutes a very strong cohesive factor linking integrated local groups. These spirits, which are both socialized and naturalized, guide the Baka in the exploration of their regional band range. This facilitates, thanks to ritual procedures, access to the forest’s resources. Because the Baka camps are linked according to the class of spirits they guard, their relationships do not depend solely on economic and ecological adaptation, but also on social and religious structures. Consequently, religion extends well into the structure of entire social connections within the Baka culture, perhaps to a greater degree than subsistence or economic concerns. Certainly, then, this is an area that warrants additional research.

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