# THE BAKA:

# A PEOPLE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

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A Research Project Submitted to the Faculty of

PROVIDENCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF GLOBAL CHRISTIAN STUDIES

1997

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The analysis presented in this paper owes much to the invaluable help of a number of people. The entire Baka community of Ndjibot has been extremely warm and patient with me and provided much of my information. I'm particularly grateful for Papa Albert, a Baka elder, who, since my arrival, committed himself to help me and my family adjust to village life and learn the Baka language and culture. I also owe much to Miss Kath Higgens and Daniel Boursier whose insightful research on many cultural and linguistic aspects made my own research possible. To all of these people, I would like to express my deep appreciation.

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

Who are the Baka? What transformations are taking place in their culture? These questions are the focus of this paper. The Baka adapted long ago to the rain forest of Southeast Cameroon and find their identity and worldview solely within the context of the forest. **Komba** is known as the loving God who gave them the forest. Their ancestors' spirits live in the forest, and the Baka themselves are constantly involved in it, whether it is to hunt, gather food or find medicine. Every ritual and activity involves the forest.

However, in today's shrinking world, even those living in the deep tropical rain forest of Africa are affected by modernization. Three important change agents are at work among the Baka. First, the forest is rapidly shrinking as lumber companies make new roads and cut many square kilometers of the forest each year. Where animals and certain food items used to be abundant, now they are sparse. The deforestation affects every aspect of the Baka culture: from their eating habits and their daily activities to their religious system, they are touched by the transformation of the physical world around them.

Second, the growing population in the area forces them to interact more and more with the ethnic groups surrounding them. As they interact with these ethnic groups, they change many aspects of their culture in order to incorporate the new relationships into their daily lives. In order to work in the Bantu plantations, they settle near the Bantu villages for longer periods and travel less. As a result, they often live two lives: they

maintain a more traditional life style in the forest, and in the village they compromise between their traditions and what the outsiders expect of them.

Third, the presence of expatriate missionaries and other benevolent workers has both positive and negative effects. Through external forces as well as government efforts, most Baka families now have their own plantations. The maintenance of their plantations is perhaps the strongest motivation for the Baka to adopt a more sedentary lifestyle. These plantations provide them with more food and even a cash flow as they sell food items. This helps them to incorporate into the more modern society which is closing in on them. Some are now able to buy food, medicine, clothes, and tools. Since the Baka are concerned more about the present than the future, they often use their money to buy alcohol, drugs and cigarettes instead of to take care of their families. Therefore, cash flow is only beneficial when the benevolent workers help the people spend their money wisely and plan for the future.[1]

Other expatriates have had a clearly negative impact by communicating to the Baka that they are poor and deserve to receive money and various goods free of charge. Unfortunately, well-meaning workers have not understood how rich the Baka are in resources, knowledge of the forest, and culture. They have also not understood that any positive, lasting change that builds on a culture's strengths can only come from within the culture and cannot be imposed by the outside world. As a result some Baka now expect all foreigners to give them what they ask and in return they will say what the foreigners want to hear.[2]

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[1]In an African context, planning for the future is quite difficult as money not spent is money available to any other member of the extended family. Any money, therefore, must be spent rapidly or else it will be used by others.

[2]For example, a Baka may say that he has worked in his field or prayed to the Christian God or encouraged people to go to chapel in order to gain the favor of a Catholic missionary.

Change rarely comes easily, and the Baka people are no exception. Change is frequently the cause of strife among them. The young people have experiences unique to them in a more modern world and are often not understood by their parents, who want to maintain the traditions. The elders equate traditions with the will of **Komba** and the ancestors and see neglecting them as the death of their people. A good example of this is the initiation of Jɛngì [3] which is sometimes questioned by young Christians. To reject this initiation means to turn away from the deep secrets and powers of the forest and the Baka traditions. Although the elders are not aggressive, they look down with grief on those forces that suppress tradition. Today, many young people find themselves caught between these two worlds. Out of respect for their traditions and their ancestors, they obey their elders. On the other hand, their appetite for new excitement leads them to want to know the world outside the forest.

In the last forty years, which represents about two generations among the Baka, the Government, surrounding ethnic groups, and missionaries have put pressure on the Baka to leave the forest and adopt a more sedentary life style. The pressure continues to grow. Although today an anthropologist may still learn the traditional Baka way of life, that situation may change within the next two decades. As the forest disappears and the elephants and other animals can no longer be found, many Baka traditions involving dancing, singing, the spirit world, hunting, and fishing are transforming or vanishing altogether. Also the prestigious roles of the women who build **mongulu** (traditional leaf hut) and sing the **yéli** (rite performed before a hunt) as well as the roles of the elite dancers, singers, and hunters are changing.

What are the long term ramifications of these changes? Should these traditions and values be replaced? If so, how? How will Christianity affect the lives of the people? Will

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[3]All Baka words are written in the international phonetic alphabet.

missionaries succeed in preserving the self respect and dignity of the Baka? How will the people's short stature be accepted by the outside world and even by themselves? Although these questions will not be answered in this paper, they must now be addressed when studying the Baka.

Although much cultural and linguistic research has been done among the Mbuti and the Aka Pygmies, considerably less has been published on the Baka. Fortunately, some of the research done on other Pygmies is also relevant to the Baka, contributing valuable information and helping workers understand current changes. The best of the research on the Baka has been conducted by Catholic missionaries and by SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) members, but remains for the most part unpublished. Only a few insiders, such as SIL researchers and Catholic missionaries, have access to the information. However, the new Catholic Baka literature center in Yaoundé may soon change this situation.

The research of two people in particular, who have most contributed much to my understanding of Baka culture, is used in this paper. They are Kathleen Higgens and Daniel Boursier. As a member of SIL, Higgens lived and did anthropological research among the Baka of Yenga, near Moloundou, with her partner Kathleen Phillips between 1979 and 1983. Her works, which remain for the most part unpublished, include studies in sickness, ritual, religious beliefs, death, **Jɛngì**, time expressions, dances, food, and marriage. Daniel Boursier is a Catholic missionary who lived in Salapoumbé, only a few kilometers from Yenga, from the late 1970s to 1994. His many papers, which are also unpublished, include the **ngàngà** rite, kinship, biographies, other writings in anthropology and a wide range of descriptive linguistic analysis. As a researcher and member of SIL, I have access to all the writings of Higgens and the most important works of Catholic missionaries.

One of the goals of this paper is to summarize Higgens' and Boursier's most important works and one article from the anthropologist Robert Dodd. At the end of each summary, I compare the author's notes with my own observations and experiences in Ndjibot, where I, with my wife and three children, have lived and worked since January 1996. Ndjibot is a large Baka camp situated at the opposite end of Baka territory from where Higgens and Boursier lived. I gathered nearly all my data between February 1996 and March 1997. This comparison gives us an idea of the unity and differences between the Baka living on the Lomié road (Dodd and myself) and those on the Moloundou road (Higgens and Boursier). The Baka described by Higgens and Boursier are generally more traditional than those on the Lomié road and especially Ndjibot, situated only 20 kilometers from a big town (Abong Mbang). The Baka on the Eastern Road (Salapoumbé-Yenga-Moloundou) represent approximately 55%[4] of the population in the area, while the Baka on the Western Road (Ndjibot-Lomié) represent about 30% of the population.

Because of its location near a large town, Ndjibot is not the ideal place to study the traditional life of the Baka. However, it is perhaps the best area to study in order to gain a perspective on how the more remote Baka, in light of the fast changes, may soon live. In Ndjibot animals are already scarce. Hunters must often walk more than two days through the forest to reach elephants or gorillas. They also spend more time with the Bantu, and many of them now venture to Abong Mbang. Ndjibot is one of the camps most affected by the three change agents mentioned above. This comparison between the more and the less traditional Baka is important to our understanding of today's young people and the future generations. Foreigners who come to work among the Baka in literacy, agriculture,

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[4]J.-F. Loung and G. N. Mawoung, Rapport d'activités pour l'exercice 1983/1984, (Yaoundé: Institut des Sciences Humaines and Centre de Recherches et Sciences Sociales, 1984), 15.

ethnomusicology, community development, evangelism, or church planting, must gain a vision of what the real needs of the Baka are in light of the fast changes occurring around and among them. The goal of this paper is to contribute to this understanding.

Of course this research is far from exhaustive on any of the topics addressed. Serious students will also study other works on the Baka and other Pygmy groups. The attached bibliography may serve as reference in seeking additional documentation.

My data is primarily descriptive of my own observations. However, on some occasions when I was not able to witness an event, I depended on my informants. Although I tested my information a number of times with both young adults who speak some French and the elders who speak little or no French, some of my notes may not be completely accurate. Getting facts was not easy, as my informants were often describing rituals in the form of stories, with little concern for chronology, or telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. For example, they could either give me a Christian answer (especially when talking about spiritual belief) or a description of how they did things years ago, making their answers prescriptive instead of descriptive. I am nonetheless confident that my data portrays, with a high degree of accuracy, life today as seen mainly by young adults. This research does not compare any other Pygmy groups with the Baka, although the changes taking place are often similar.

## CHAPTER 2

## WHO ARE THE BAKA?

Today between 150,000 and 200,000 Pygmies live in the tropical rain forest regions of Africa.[1] This is difficult to verify because of their semi-nomadic lifestyle. They are divided into many groups who share great similarities in culture but are diverse in language. However, they share many similar words to describe "forest" activities. As a result, some linguists believe that at one time all Pygmy groups formed one linguistic group called *Baakaa*, and that, throughout history, their travel and co-existence with others forced them to adopt different languages.[2] However, this remains only a theory.

All Pygmies live in at least seven African countries. The Aka (also known as Bayaka, Biaka or Babinga) are situated in the Northeast of Congo as well as Southwest of Central African Republic. The Bongo live in East Gabon and Congo, while the Mbuti, with its three sub-groups, the Efe, the Aka and the Sua, dwell in the Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). The BaTwa Pygmies form three sub-groups in Zaire with one covering parts of Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda and the Republic of Congo.

We find three additional groups living in Cameroon. The Bagieli (also known as Lolodorf Pygmies), who live near the coast with a population of about 2,200.[3] The Tikar,

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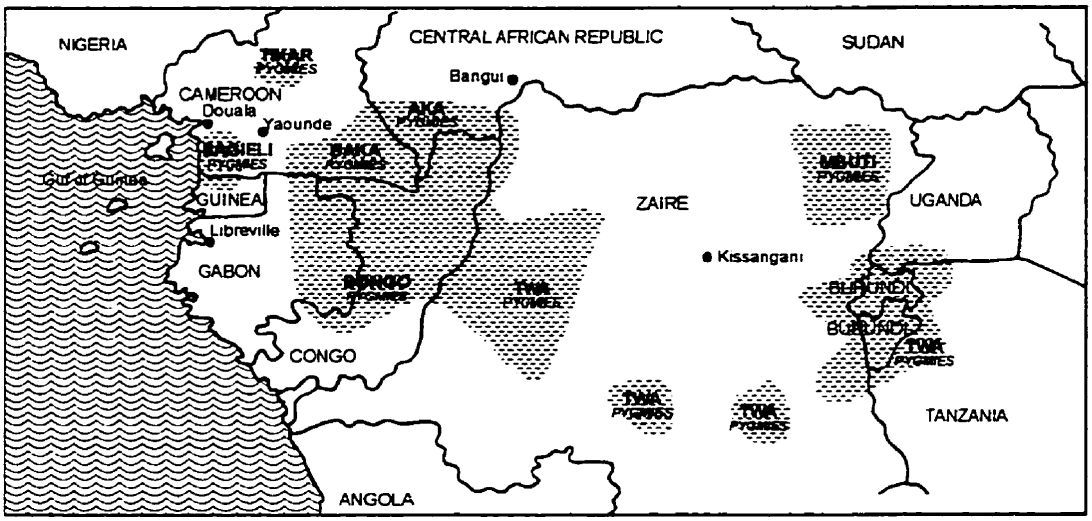
[1]Robert C. Baily, The Efe: Archers of the African Rain Forest, National Geographic, vol. 179, No. 5 (Nov. 1989): 665.

[2]Lisa Silcock, Baka: People of the Rainforest, (London: Channel 4 Television, 1988), 24.

[3]Robert Brisson and Daniel Boursier, Petit Dictionnaire Baka-Français (Douala: Collège Libermann, 1984), I.

who live among the Tikar people in the Northwest province with a population of only 241.[4] Finally we have the Baka, the subject of this study. Both the Bagieli and the Tikar groups were originally living with the Baka in the Southeast region. They migrated away from the Baka during the first half of the 18th century.[5]




It is quite possible that other groups of Pygmies, such as the Béné, Beko, Bakwe, Holo, Beka and others, live in the countries mentioned above as well as other surrounding countries. Because they are not well documented and because some of these names may actually refer to groups already mentioned, they are not here listed.

Of all the Pygmies, the Mbuti and the Aka are by far the most studied groups. However, as mentioned above, a significant amount of research has already been done among the Baka as there is high interest among many religious, social, and government

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[4]Ministère de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique du Cameroun, Les Pygmées de la plaine tikar au Cameroun (Yaoundé: 1977), 1.

[5]Ibid., 4.

organizations as well as linguistic and anthropological researchers for working among the Baka.

The Baka population is found primarily in the Southeast region of Cameroon and extends across the borders of Gabon, Congo and Central African Republic. The people call themselves **baka** or **6aka**. Although the neighboring Bantu groups refer to them as "Pygmies," they rarely use this term to refer to themselves . The word "Pygmy" came about 2,450 years ago in the time of Herodotus, a Greek historian and traveler who saw these short people,[5] and means "tall as a forearm." Fortunately, few Baka know the meaning of this word.

It is difficult to establish how many Baka there are because of their nomadic life style. Past research has made different claims. For example, Higgens claims that there are 23,000 Baka in Cameroon alone[7] while Brisson, also a long term researcher among the Baka, claims 35,000[8] and the Government claims 40,000.[3] However, after speaking with many people in the area, it would appear that the higher estimates are more accurate.

In Cameroon, the Baka cover an area of roughly 80,000 $km^2$, and are interspersed among 20 to 25 Bantu groups. In spite of the large territory and the Baka's close encounters with other linguistic groups, their language is still strongly unified. However, there are economic and cultural differences.

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[5]H. V. Vallois and P. Marquer, Les Pygmées Baka du Cameroun : anthropologie et ethnographie avec une annexe démographique (Paris: MNHN, Mémoires Série A, Tome C, 1976), 5.

[7]Kath Higgens, "Baka Personnel Completion Report" (Yaoundé: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1990), 1.

[8]Robert Brisson, Contes des Pygmées Baka, livret 1, (Yaoundé: Inprimerie Saint Paul, 1996), 5.

[3]Cameroon Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Social affairs, La sédentarisation des Baka (Pygmées) dans la Province de l'Est, (Yaoundé: 1982), 9.

Although Southeast Cameroon is a strongly Bantu zone, the Baka speak an Adamawa-Oubanguien language (ALCAM no. 309). Because of its great similarities to the Ngbaka language spoken in Central African Republic, and the evidence that the two groups might have lived and traveled together at one time, anthropologists S. Arom and J. Thomas and other researchers believe that at one time, the Baka adapted the Ngbaka language.[10] This theory also holds that the two groups split and the Baka traveled to Cameroon a number of years ago, where over a period of time they developed the Baka language as we know it today.

Over the past 30 years, the Baka have moved from a traditional hunting and gathering society to an inter-dependent relationship with other groups, and many have become plantation owners. Now their economic system depends on both working as field laborers in their own fields and those of the local Bantu as well as hunting and gathering.

The more traditional Baka live in small groups of 30 to 150 people and dwell in leaf-huts. They are nomadic and live in the forest and often settle near Bantu villages to work in plantations. Most Baka still look down on village living (sedentary life) and see the forest as a better place to live. Although on the Lomié road most Baka live in large camps alongside the road with a population of 60 to 300, many still live as much in the forest, on their own plantation, as they do in their "village-camp," near Bantu villages. Years ago, the Baka spent much more time in the forest than they do now. They have changed and are becoming more and more sedentary. As a result, they are now obliged to create a meaningful identity in a situation of social change.

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[10]Arom, Simba and Jacqueline M. C. Thomas, Les Mimbo, génies du piégeage et le monde surnaturel des Ngbakamabo (Paris: SELAF, 1974), 44-45.

## Life in the forest

The Baka is the only group culturally adapted to the Southeast forest of Cameroon. They are rightly referred to as the "people of the forest". Only 50 years ago, this territory was mainly virgin forest with countless elephants, gorillas and other endangered species. Few others, beside the Pygmies, knew and traveled the deep forest.

The Baka are so much at home in the forest that they were not long ago considered mere animals by many Bantu groups. They were (and still are) thought to transform themselves into various animals that could kill others. The Baka have medicine and special ceremonies to obtain this power to transform themselves. They are extremely agile in the forest and can walk long distances very rapidly without making any noise. Their incredible skills and endurance in the forest make them successful hunters. They know every plant and recognize every animal track no matter how small, even turtles. Using traps, dogs, spear and crossbow (although disappearing) they hunt nearly all animals. When someone is sick, they make medicine from roots, leaves, plants, barks and trees which successfully cure many sicknesses. They also use plants to make their poison arrows, which gives little chance for the animals to survive. Their knowledge and adaptation to the forest surpasses the villagers who hire the Baka to hunt for them. Dhellemmes, a Catholic priest who lived among the Baka for many years noted that, "The intimacy this people has with the forest is so deep and so sacred that at times, it seems wonderful and magic."[11]

The Baka live in small hunting groups and hunt in areas of the forest assigned to each group. These lands are defined by natural borders such as hills and rivers. A hunting group can split into smaller units. Their grouping is complex as it includes people from many family groups. Each core group comprises siblings and cousins with the people

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[11](R. P.) Dhellemmes, Le Père des Pygmées (France: Flammarion, 1974), 67.

classified into four basic age groups: the children, the young men and women, the adults who hunt and gather, and the elders. Each category has its own sphere of authority and responsibility, and each one's contribution to the economy of the society depends on his or her age and sex.

The livelihood of each group depends on hunting and gathering. The forest provides an abundance of animals, fish, honey, mushrooms, fruits, and nuts. Honey is especially valued by the Baka. They often reserve the best honeycomb for the elders. When they have too much food, they either sell it to the Bantu, smoke it to preserve it, or give it to other groups as gifts. When an elephant is killed, everyone in the surrounding area comes to get some meat. Most often, the men are involved in hunting and the women in gathering. In preparation for a hunt of either an elephant, gorilla and sometimes a wild pig, the rite **ngàngà** (divining where the animals are by reading in the fire) and the **yéli** (the calling to the animals) play a crucial role. For the Baka, the forest is living and communicates with them. Instead of domineering nature, the Baka's goal is to live in harmony with it.

The Baka society is egalitarian. Authority in the hunting group may depend on age but even more so on skills. Anyone can have "authority" in a field he or she has mastered, but no one can claim to be the leader of the group. The best hunter is usually more respected, but the people will oppose him or anyone else who tries to accumulate power or manipulate the group. One can be rejected by the group if he tries to impose his way. The Baka will say that he acts like the villagers (the Bantu) who have no respect for the forest. Decisions supported by everyone are pleasing to the forest. The group will attempt to discover the forest's will by reading and interpreting natural signs such as the winds and storms. Only a unanimous decision can be the will of the forest. The prolonged noises of a dispute are offensive to the forest. For this reason, they often use jokes and ridicules to communicate or settle their disagreements.

In the same way, no particular person has authority over religious rites. Every Baka must submit to the traditional rites, such as the initiation to **Jɛngì** and other rites related to hunting and to taboos related to these rites. Each one must value his role (as a diviner, healer, etc.) without over-powering the others. Cooperation is one of the most important aspects of this culture. When there is unity, the forest is at peace and can bring blessing on "the people of the forest".

**Komba** is the God of the Baka who created the "people of the forest" and everything else. The Baka know little about **Komba**, but they believe that he is good because he gave them the forest. He not only cares for the Baka, but also for all the animals of the forest. **Jɛngì**, the chief spirit of the forest, is more involved in the daily life of the Baka as he brings blessing, healing, protection and helps find animals.

In the **likànɔ̀** (chantfables), **Komba** is described as an old man, full of wisdom, yet a great hunter. He lived a long time ago with men, but became annoyed by the noise they made, their dances, and their constant insults. It is then that he decided to change some of them into animals. These were the first animals created. After that he left for the sky and no man or beast has ever seen him since. However, he still loves the people and provides for them. The forest is living and in a sense it is an extension of **Komba**. One Baka said that the forest is like a father and a mother who carefully look after their children. When the hunt is bad or someone is sick, it may be because the forest is sleeping. Singing and dancing help to wake it up and make it look favorably on the people.

The **likànɔ̀** tell us that in the beginning of time, man lived with **Komba** and his family. Life was easy then, as **Komba** shared all his possessions with the people. These stories also tell us that even today **Komba** is very interested in all details of their lives, including their success in hunting and their health. Dodd notes that, "Kumba is providential and lives 'somewhere in the sky'; he will 'keep a Baka well' who follows the

basic social rules but he is not directly punitive nor does he offer or promise life after death. There is no formal worship of Kumba nor are there any ceremonies of praise."[12]

The Baka believe that all men are composed of flesh and blood, a breath, a shadow, an image and a spirit. When a man dies, his body, breath and shadow leave. His spirit, free from the body, enjoys much power over man. He nonetheless lives a similar life but remains invisible.

Through rites, invocations, symbols and rituals, the Baka try to influence the forest. As they do this, they may ask either **Komba**, the spirits, or the forest to bless them. Their singing and dancing play a crucial role in their rituals and in their daily life activities. Through singing, the women can please the forest and even call in the animals in preparation for a hunt. Not a day goes by that the women are not singing at one time or another. Ethnomusicologist Simha Arom describes the beauty and complexity of the Aka music, which is much similar to the Baka music, saying, "...as I was listening to them, there, at the edge of the deep equatorial forest, I realized that I was witnessing some of the most elaborately complex music, polyphonically, contraputally and rhythmically, of all the non-written music in Africa or elsewhere."[13] Although the Baka do not have the word "music" in their language, their singing and musical instruments[14] are at the very center of their culture.

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[12]R. Dodd, Some Preliminary Notes on the Sociology of Baka Religious Thought (Yaoundé: MINREST, 1979), 3.

[13]Encyclopédie des Pygmées Aka, eds. S. Bahuchet and J. M. C. Thomas, Présentations personnelles (Paris: SELAF, 1983), 29.

[14]Drums (**ndùmù**), wood guitar (**ngòmbi**), harp (**língbidi**), harp (**aita**).

## Life in the village

The life of the Baka is now divided between the forest and the village. They have been in contact with the Bantu for many generations. In the past, they would only see the Bantu to trade their meat for metal and food. Today, however, the Baka usually build their camp-villages within a few kilometers of the Bantu, where they provide cheap labor for the Bantu's plantations. Change among the Baka intensified in the 1960s, after the independence of Cameroon, with Government programs and with the arrival of the Catholic mission. Roads were fixed and enlarged, which made transportation by vehicle possible for the first time in some areas. The government created programs to bring the Baka out of the forest to settle by the road, help them become sedentary and enroll the children in schools. However, their limited budget did not match the task. Today, the Baka villages are not well developed, as they still spend half of their time in the forest. They do not fully participate in the social structure of the area which includes schools, clinics, markets, and national holidays, and less than 1% are literate. The few children that go to school are the first generation students and are taken out after one or two years to help the adults in the search for food and to care for the younger children. The greatest influence toward the partial sedentarisation of the Baka was the white Catholic missionaries[15] who designed programs to help create and supervise Baka plantations and teach the people to cultivate in groups.

In Ndjibot, nearly all families have their own plantations. Some are near the village, while others are as far as seven kilometers away in the forest. Those who stay near the

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[15]There are a number of Catholic missions among the Baka. On the Lomié road the Lomié mission as well as "Le Bosquet," 65 km past Lomié, have immensely contributed to lasting changes. Their work started in the early 1970s and they have developed a number of cultural sensitive programs related to literacy, education, music, health and agriculture. However, the Catholic Church has no unified strategy for working among the Baka.

village can easily sell some of their extra food from their crops, but have less access to the forest's goods, such as honey and meat. Most people have two homes, one in their plantation and one in the village. In Ndjibot there are 28 houses, three **mongulu**, one Roman Catholic chapel, and one school. The number of houses shows clearly that a large amount of the 200-250 population stays primarily in the forest. This indicates that what outsiders may consider as "sedentarisation" can simply consist of having a village house, which does not mean that the owner lives there all the time. When away from the village, either in a plantation or on a hunting trip, the Baka live primarily in **mongulu**. In the village, their Bantu style mud houses are not as big and strong as the Bantu's houses, but are, however, far bigger and durable than the **mongulu**.

Today the relationship of Baka with Bantu goes far beyond economics. Friendships and intermarriages are more and more frequent. However, many relationships are painful. Often, in exchange for protection and a few gifts, the Baka provide labor and let the Bantu dominate them. A number of Bantu claim to actually *own* the Baka of Ndjibot. They claim superiority and state that the Baka ought to follow their own Bantu traditions, which they consider a better way of life. The Baka do not accept the Bantu's values, especially when it concerns the forest, gender equality, and child raising,[16] but they tolerate the relationship as long as they can benefit materially from it. Although they make alliances with the Bantu and participate in their social and economic structure, once the relationship is no longer advantageous to them, they may leave for the forest without warning, for an extended period of time. Although they can speak or act like "villagers," they remain at heart "the people of the forest."

Although the Baka seek unity among themselves while in the forest, in the village they act more independently, like the Bantu. They live two lives, one in the forest and one

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[16]The Baka rarely punish or beat their children.

in the village, each one seemingly conflicting with the other, but they do so out of willingness and not out of obligation. Their way of life is changing rapidly. Today, few young people can relate to their elders. These young men and women are more and more attracted by the Bantu's possessions, and although they love the forest and find their identity in it, village life by the road is also exciting. On the one hand, in the forest they find tranquillity, tradition, and peace with **Komba** and with one another. On the other hand, in the village they find new excitements and a faster pace of life. The Baka are pulled in two different ways and are learning two different lifestyles.

# CHAPTER 3

## CULTURAL ANALYSIS

**Higgens, Kathleen. "Time Reference Among the Baka." Yaoundé: Summer Institute of Linguistics archives #1514, 1985. 10 pp.**

As a member of SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics), Kathleen Higgens lived from 1979 to 1983 among the Baka of Yenga, near Moloundou in Cameroon. She wrote this particular work to explain the concept of *time* in Baka culture. Her paper was inspired by Evans-Pritchard's article on "Nuer Time-Reckoning" and like Evans-Pritchard, she identifies two types of time: ecological time, based on seasonal occupations, and structural time, based on social activities.

The Baka refer to themselves in time as **wà-mbèlio** (the first people). They lived on earth with **Komba** (God) and they describe this age in their **likànɔ̀** (chantfables) as **sɔkɔ̀-likànɔ̀** (season-chantfables), which is the time when the first legends were being enacted. Today, when referring to events that took place a long time ago, the word **mbèlĭ** (first state; a long time ago) is used.

The Baka word for time is tie, but this can also refer to "place, height and dimension." For example, it can be used to say, "I have no place to sit;" "this man is tall;" or "I will come some other time." However, the phrase **à 6o makà tie** is ambiguous and can mean either "at what place or time?"

The Baka recognize three main climatic seasons, specifically related to hunting and gathering. These are **sɔkɔ̀-mà** "the rainy season", **sɔkɔ̀-yaka** "the dry season," and **sɔkɔ̀-lànga** "the short dry season." Time is also described by what the season produces. For

example, **sɔkɔ̀-bàndi** (termite season) can substitute for the term for dry season. Or again, **ma na lékà** is the flower that the bees will visit when it grows after the March rain.

They use words to describe parts of the day such as the early morning, about 7 a.m., 8 a.m., midday, late afternoon and early evening. Words for week and the days of the week are borrowed from the neighboring Bantu. As in many languages, the word for month (fɛ) is the same as for moon. Although the Baka, like other hunters and gatherers, have little interest in the moon's activity, they recognize its cycles.

The sun (**bàkɔ̀**) is extremely important to the Baka for keeping time. By describing the position of the sun from early morning to sunrise, they have a precise reference to time. Other time words are **làkpe** (day), **makàlà** (today), **dukpe** (morning or tomorrow), **ngili** (yesterday), **mbilimbìlì** (early morning), **dakalà** (evening), **fìtìmà** (late evening, at dark). The only word to refer to a vague, distant future is **bike** (one day). This is not surprising for such a *present-oriented* society.

One important consideration in the life of the Baka is the gathering of honey, which is the favorite food of the Baka and even of **Komba** himself. Consequently, the Baka divide the day in terms of the bees' activities. There is a word to describe the humming of the bees irrespective of time (**mùlì**), but it is also common to describe the humming of the bees by reference to the time it occurs. A daily schedule may look like this: **màkelo**, humming of the bees about 5-6 a.m., **mòngombe**, humming of bees about 3-4 p.m., **dakaà na mòjɛ̀mbɔ̀**, humming of the bees about 5-6 p.m.

## Comparative Notes

Higgens' description of time is also true for the Baka of Ndjibot. My language assistants told me that the humming of the bees can even be heard a long way away, and they pointed to trees about 25 meters away. They recognize different kind of bees and are quite preoccupied with their activities.

All time words described by Higgens are used in Ndjibot, but some have a slightly different pronunciation. In addition to Higgens' time words, actual numbers can describe the hours. However, this method is not precise, as no one in the camp has a watch. Instead, the day is normally divided as follows:

**mbilimbìlì** (6-7 a.m.)

**njángà** (8-12 a.m.)

**to njángà** (noon)

**kɛ to njángà** (1-2 p.m.) (lit: after/in/day)

**dakalà** (3-5 p.m.)

**fìtìmà** (6-10 p.m.)

**mbɔli tɛ to bìtì** (11 p.m.)

**to bìtì** (midnight)

**kɛ to bìtì** (1-2 a.m.)

**'elembe lembe** (3-5 a.m.)

**Higgens, Kathleen. "A Purification Ceremony. - Some Funeral Rites Among Baka Pygmies in Cameroon." Yaoundé: Summer Institute of Linguistics, n.d. 33 pp.**

Higgens' article gives a fascinating account of funeral practices among the group of Baka of Yenga, near Moloundou. Her description begins at the time of death and extends to the end of the mourning period and is well supported by linguistic evidence. A great deal of her material is not recorded anywhere else.

When a Baka dies in the camp, she explains, the Baka mourn and show their sorrow through wailing and crying. The wailing is done mainly by the women. People from the camp are sent in all directions to call in those members of the group still in the forest. Although traditionally dead bodies were left at the base of the **kùngu**[-] tree (known as the tree for hiding things) and covered with leaves, today sick people are taken to the village to die. This way the authorities cannot accuse the Baka of murder.

Death evokes great fear of the departed spirit. The spouse of the deceased must take precautions to assure that the spirit will not return to trouble him or her. One of the

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[-] piptadeniastrum africanum

ways to do this is to paint around the eyes of the spouse, children and parents of the deceased with white kaolin or charcoal.

The death of a child especially brings fear. Rituals must be performed to protect the other children, especially the young ones. Often the slings made with the kió[2] bark (put over the mother's left shoulder to carry her baby on her right hip) are beaten out of bark in order to reinforce their protective power. In addition, they may paint the slings with charcoal and white kaolin and mark the children's foreheads[3] with charcoal for several days. Quite often the cause of death is attributed to disputes. Therefore, one causing trouble may be accused of murder. Peace and unity, as well as avoiding undesirable noise, are therefore important among the Baka.

The Baka believe that when a person dies, his spirit leaves the body but remains near the camp for a few days. However, the spirits may return later on, either to help hunters find game or to trouble the camp. In order to ensure a good future relationship with a spirit, a mourning period of three nights of story-telling and dancing is organized. The whole community is expected to participate at one time or another and all must be done according to tradition to ensure that the spirit goes peacefully away and does not return to trouble the camp. The spirit observes from the forest nearby to see that these ceremonies are done properly.

During the first night everyone meets outside the deceased's house. Often leaving the body in the main room of the house, they tell traditional stories until morning. These stories have the power to hypnotize animals for the hunters to kill. The only other time these stories are told is in the evenings in their hunting camps in the forest . They are very entertaining and often funny with erotic details. The whole camp joins in singing as the

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[2]cleistopholis patens

[3]The forehead is the place where the people receive good luck.

stories also contain choruses. In between stories, the buffoon dance (**mbòàmbòà** ) is performed. This is a very comic dance, with the dancers, fully clothed, calling out "comments of a suggestive nature and making movements imitating the sexual act" (p. 10). In the midst of all the laughing, dancing and singing, it is hoped that the mourners might forget for an instant their sorrow. On the second night, the people might chose the **ɓùmà** dance and on the third the **kòse** (also known as **jesa**) dance. The spirits of the forest (the spirits of the first ancestors) are said to be present in the dancers (men initiated into those spirits) during these nights. At the final dance, the **kòse** spirit spits on everyone in order to give them strength. By that time every member of the camp has come to the ceremony, at one time or another, in order to please the spirit.

Many Baka believe that after the death of the body, the spirit leaves for a better place. Some claim that one can hunt and fish there. Others believe in heaven, as the Catholic missionaries taught them. One can describe a dead person by saying that "he has gone to Komba's home," or "gone up above," "gone to the big city," "gone downstream," "gone ahead," or "gone to wait for me."

The grave of the deceased is often dug behind his house. The people dig ledges across the two long sides of the grave in order to lay logs above the body later on. Higgens describes the burial as follows.

> The body, wrapped in a new cloth and sometimes in a woven mat, is carried out with the head uncovered. A man who is not a close kin of the dead person (that is, not his son, daughters' husband or sibling's son), stands in the grave, about 5 feet deep, to receive the body. The man lays the body full-length facing upwards, then puts the logs in place and covers them with large strips of bark which are handed down to him. He then tramples a layer of earth down hard, so that the rats will not eat the body. He emerges from the grave and mourners each take a handful of earth, spit in it as a final blessing, throw it in the grave, then turn back to the house of mourning. There is no wailing round the grave, no prayers and no invocations. Other males then cover the grave with earth. The grave remains unmarked and is soon reclaimed by brush.

> Those who dig the grave and carry the body are regarded as ritually unclean. As compensation, the mother of the deceased must give them chickens, spears or fire-making kit bags. After the burial, they go down to the stream to cleanse themselves. The dead person's mother's brother accompanies the group to point out different leaves and barks the men should use as medicines. They then wash, and rub these medicines on themselves, or have them sprinkled on their heads. (p. 11)

Two or three days after the burial, the immediate family of the deceased need to purify themselves. Without drawing any attention to themselves, they leave for the forest. Through a complex ritual of passing through an arch into the water, washing with some bark medicine and standing in the smoke made by burning fifi[4] leaves, the mourners cleanse themselves. The ritual is symbolic of their separation from the deceased. However this is not the end of the separation ritual. A son of the sister of the dead person attaches a piece of the arch to his roof. Years later, in a final separation celebration, he will take this piece and will mix its remains with the hair shaved from the heads of the nearest relatives.

After this begins the rite of transition. The mourners must learn to live without this family member and therefore face new responsibilities. At this stage, people give the mourners gifts that symbolize food acquisition and preparation or the construction of forest shelters, thus acknowledging the changes in status and responsibilities the mourners experience through the death of a family member. A woman may receive leaves, firewood, or food, while a man may receive meat, a spear or other hunting weapons. The women are encouraged to take up once again their important roles of cooking and building the family camping hut. All this is done without any singing or dancing. If the deceased is a man, it is up to his senior brother's wife to take the lead in these rituals.

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[4]microdesmis puberula. In today's Baka orthography it is spelled **pípi**. The "p" (or "f") is actually a voiceless *bilabial fricative*, or in Greek, the "Φ" sound.

## Comparative Notes

A good part of what Higgens wrote in her article also describes my observations in Ndjibot, although the areas are separated by more than 350 kilometers of forest. I have nonetheless noticed many differences, as well as elements not mentioned in her writings. Although I have many times attended burials and death ceremonies in the Ndjibot, I have never witnessed a purification ceremony.[5]

In Ndjibot, as in Yenga, the deceased is genuinely mourned. If the person is not well known because he or she lived mainly in other camps, few people will show grief. Also, when an old person dies and his death was expected due to his old age, few people might cry. However, when a loved one dies for a cause other than old age, the mourners may scream and cry and even roll on the ground, throwing dirt in the air and letting it fall back on their heads.[6] They may show such grief even days after the burial, especially if the person is young. The children may express their sorrow in the same manner as adults. When one's grief is too great, a close relative may come to comfort him or her for a while by embracing the person. Contrary to the **Məkaa**, the surrounding Bantu group, the Baka feel no shame in showing such strong emotions. The death ceremony, which may last up to six days, is extremely important for the relatives, as it provides a proper place for mourning.

Today, at least in Ndjibot, the sling (**kíyò**) made to carry babies is no longer made of bark or animal skin as the elders did when they were younger. Instead they are made of

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[5]The elders told me that only the mourners were permitted to come.

[6]I have seen this at the death of two children. One which was attributed to witchcraft, and the other to a longterm sickness. I suspect there was also anger added to the grief because the people were so young. This anger might have been the source for such behavior.

cloth. The beating of the sling as described by Higgens is therefore known only by elders.[7]

The burial is quite similar to that described by Higgens. It most often takes place in mid or late afternoons. Only the very old people or the young children are buried early in the morning. No children may attend the burial of a very old person. If a child breaks this taboo, he will get sick or even die. Before the burial, the body is washed by the closest relatives, and is normally wrapped in the person's usual clothes and in a sheet. His family may also provide additional clothes. Sometimes, it is the **Məkaa** of Ntimbé (2 km away) who dig the grave for the Baka. They may come on their own initiative. The Baka do the same for them; however, they usually wait until the Bantu ask them to come. Both groups see this as a sign of friendship. However, the grave described by Higgens, which also fits my observation in Ndjibot, is not known to the Bantu of Ntimbé. Therefore, when the **Məkaa** dig a grave for the Baka, they do it differently, usually digging graves which have another room at the bottom of the hole where the body may remain either in a sitting or lying position. The Baka don't seem to mind this, but when they dig their own grave, they do it, at least to my knowledge, as described by Higgens. All the deceased's possessions including extra clothes, machete, and hunting weapons are passed on to the mother's brothers (**títà-lé** ).

Graves are rapidly claimed by the bush. In spite of pressures[8] from the Bantu to maintain the graves, I know of only one grave (of an old and prestigious woman who died one year ago) that is maintained in Ndjibot. Graves may be dug in the back of the house

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[7]Although all young adults have seen slings made of skin, no one to my knowledge has seen any made of bark.

[8]This pressure is largely unspoken. However, it is often present and strong as many of the **Məkaa** and other Bantu groups believe that the Baka must learn from them how to better care for their dead.

or in the forest and are usually kept for a little while and then forgotten. After the immediate death ceremony or after the one day ceremony which comes one year later, the Baka will no longer mourn. The Bantu, however, often make expensive graves in front of their houses to keep a constant reminder of their ancestors and to pay them proper respect, as well as to protect them from sorcerers.

The cleansing ritual for the diggers is the same as witnessed in Yenga, except that their payment is either palm wine, chicken, plantains, salt, ground nuts, or soap.

During the death celebration, the mourners, especially the mother and father, will not usually dance. During the entire ceremony, it is the responsibility of other women in the camp to feed and entertain the mourners, especially the closest relatives. The people may keep feeding a mourner even days after the ceremony, depending on the needs of the person. For example, an old widow may need more help from the community than a young one who can hunt or gather food. In contrast to the Məkaa tradition, where it is the mourners' responsibility to provide food for all the guests during the death ceremony, the Baka community takes full responsibility to feed those who hurt. As a Baka young man told me, "how can they be expected to do anything when their courage is gone and they live in sadness".

The death ceremonies[3] in Ndjibot are not three days long but six days, and the elders claim it has always been so. This is the time from the first night of celebration to the washing ceremony at the end, although not every night includes festivities. Whether a child, an adult, or an important elder dies, there are normally three to five nights of celebration with dancing and singing. These nights occur at the beginning of the six day ceremony and may be separated by one night of rest. The amount of participation in a ceremony often depends on the importance of the deceased.

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[3]Refer also to appendix A.

As soon as a person dies, the paternal relatives apply **kembe** (kaolin, a white clay found in the swamps) on their foreheads and sometimes cheeks, and cover their heads with a cloth. It is normally the duty of the wives of the deceased's sons to rub this clay on their husbands. The relatives often do not wash away the clay until the purification ceremony on the seventh day. Starting the day after the death, the relatives will wash each morning in a stream, with a strength medicine, during the entire six days of the ceremony.

On the first night of the ceremony, a number of dances are performed such as the **likànɔ̀**, normally danced at one time or another during the night. Every one who knows the **likànɔ̀** can join in and follow the lead dancer, who is dressed with raffia ornaments around his waist. Also, the young people perform a series of dances and sing songs that **Jɛngì**, the spirit of the forest, likes. These dances are usually short and the people move quickly and smoothly from one to the next. In this paper I call *the young people's dances* any dance performed by these young people,[10] including the **membáá** and **basuka**, as well as about 10 other dances. They are used throughout the ceremony as "fillers" at the beginning of the evenings and sometimes between events.

Throughout the ceremony and especially during the first two nights, the elders may lead the people in the telling and singing of their traditional stories, also called the **likànɔ̀**. This is not to be confused with the **likànɔ̀** dance. These are stories which usually requires the participation of everyone. One or more elders may start telling a story, and the people, who already know their parts, respond in the appropriate places.

Around 2 or 3 a.m., when everyone is tired, they stop to give place to the **'embɔ̀àmbɔ̀à** , the ancestors' spirits. As a few men bring fire to the forest (they run in all

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[10]The Baka, and especially the girls, start dancing during ceremonies at around the age of eight. They learn to dance by watching adults and by practicing during their frequent dance nights before going to bed. Few adults participate in *the young people's dances*.

directions with burning wood into the forest), the **'embòàmbòà** spirits come out of the forest. At the rhythm of the drum and the singing of the women, they start dancing the **láàlà** dance. The spirits are hidden behind palm branches or banana leaves and speak in strange voices. For about an hour, they perform dances and skits on many different kinds of song and music. If a death is caused by anything other than old age, the **'embòàmbòà** will ask the people why they allowed the person to die. They may at the same time reveal what medicine could have saved his life. The knowledge of important medicine is shared in this way. In contrast to what Higgens has witnessed in Yenga, the **'embòàmbòà** do not call out suggestive comments while imitating the sexual act. Also, Higgens never mentioned that these are spirits of ancestors, which makes me wonder if what she describes is actually another dance called **'embòàmbòà** and not **láàlà**, which is performed not by the spirits but by the young people, who mimic and make fun of the **'embòàmbòà** .

Often the spectators only see images passing before them and hear words they cannot fully understand. For many days my informants insisted that no actual people were dancing. "No one is dancing behind those leaves but those *feared* spirits," they would say. Only the night before I actually observed this ritual did one of them admit that people from other camps[::] joined Ndjibot to perform these dances. Only certain men are allowed to take this role. If these spirits disturb the peace by making undesirable noise, an elder may come with some medicine and chase them away.

When the **'embòàmbòà** have finished dancing, either the **ngájɛ** or the **móngelebo** spirits may come to perform their own **láàlà** dance. However, unlike the **'embòàmbòà** , who come without being asked, the other spirits must first be invited. If the elders have not called them, the people are free to dance the **lìkànɔ̀** , the **esonjo** and the *young*

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[::]Cyrie, situated ten kilometers away from Ndjibot, and Kwamb, situated at nine kilometers if walking through the forest.

*people's dances* until dawn. This ends the first night of a strength-testing ceremony as the people ought not to sleep during these festivities.

The first night is the fullest and perhaps the most important night of the ceremony, and the activities are basically the same whether a child or an elder has died. While the other nights are intended primarily for the mourners, the entire camp is present on the first night. If someone drinks too much and causes trouble during these nights, the people may catch such a person and tie his hands and feet and leave him in a closed room until morning.

On the second night of the ceremony the people may join in the **lìkànɔ̀** dance. Some may wear raffia ornament around their waists and their feet. The night will stop early, somewhere around midnight.

On the third night, the people may either rest or perform the young people's dances and either the **lìkànɔ̀**, the **ɓùmà** or the **esɛnjɔ̀**. People often prefer the **esɛnjɔ̀** dance, which is traditionally performed only by certain men. However, now when there is a lack of male dancers, certain women may dance. They wear raffia ornaments around their feet, calves and heads and dance on the tips of their toes.

When the deceased has been buried for two full days, a chosen hunter (often one who has a hunting dog) will prepare to go hunting at dawn. The father's sister (**kàà-lé**) who was the closest friend of the deceased prepares the **ŋgɛlɛ** (powder made from the mahogany tree[1]) which is mixed with her own saliva and sand. If no **kàà-lé** is available, the **títà-lé** (mother's brother) who is the closest friend to the deceased will prepare the **ŋgɛlɛ** and use his own saliva. When the **ŋgɛlɛ** ball has become hard (after sitting in the sun a few hours), the **kàà-lé** rubs it on the hunter's forehead, the back of his right hand,

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[1] pterocarpus soyauxii

and his hunting weapon. He is now assured to have good luck in hunting. He is expected to return on that same day with meat.

On the fourth, fifth and sixth nights the people may either rest or perform the young people's dances, the **likànɔ̀**, the **ɓùmà**, and the **esɛnjɔ̀** until about midnight. Contrary to what Higgens witnessed in Yenga, the **kòse** spirits never come at a death ceremony in Ndjibot.

Early in the morning of the fifth or sixth day (around 6 a.m.), the women prepare the meat which the hunter brought. While they do so, a man plays the drum and others dance. This is one of the rare occasions when the Baka dance in the day time. The meat is eaten only by the older men and women. No children or anyone young enough to produce children can eat this meat. Informants told me that eating the meat will keep one from having children. The sauce remaining from the meat is poured all around the grave of the deceased. This is an important ritual to keep the spirit (**mólili**) of the deceased from coming back. Also at that time the **kàà-lé** of the deceased applies the **ngɛlɛ** mixture on the foreheads, the right upper arm, and the tools and weapons (such as machetes and spears) anyone in the camp may bring. This gives the people good luck. The remaining **ngɛlɛ** is mixed to the sauce from the meat and poured around the grave. At around 7 a.m., the meal is all finished.

If it rains, there is no celebration. Therefore, when clouds threaten, the **kàà-lé** or the **títà-lé** of the deceased must stop the rain. To do so, the person takes a broom made of raffia (**yáwɔlɔ̀**), stands it in a hole on the ground and puts cold ashes all around it, with one palm nut on the ashes. This is done just beside the dancing area, and it will keep the rain away until at least 4 a.m.. Instead of this **yáwɔlɔ̀** ritual, the person may take a certain vine, cut it in a particular way and wear it around the head. The person may end up performing both of these rituals if the threat of rain persists.

Tiredness is also a problem as the people dance during the nights and often work during the day. To give strength to everyone, a medicinal powder is made from the bark of the mèlɛá tree.[13] At the nearest water source in the forest, someone builds a dam and an elder pours the powder in the water. The women come first to wash themselves, then the men follow. An appointed person who has waited until the end then washes himself and destroys the dam. He will not look back at the water flowing away with the medicine, for if he does, he will have bad luck.

In addition to this six day ceremony, a one night celebration must take place about one year later. If a mother survives her child, she must wear a kú (braided piece of vine) around her left shoulder in the same position as a sling. This vine is treated with a medicine which makes it black. The color reminds her of her dead child. She wears this from the time of the death of her child until this ceremony. To prepare for this day, the family of the deceased accumulates money (each member of the family may give about 200 CFA), meat (which may be smoked in order to be preserved), plantain, yam, and palm wine. During the short rainy season when they have enough food, the word goes out proclaiming that the celebration has come. It starts at about 9 p.m. and ends just before dawn. Any dance may be performed and no spirits are invited. Neither the mother nor the father will participate in the dancing. At about midnight, the food and wine are shared with everyone. At the end of the night, the mother takes off the vine from her shoulder and hides it in the forest in such a way that the rain will not fall on it. This completes the mourning process.

If the mother is married to a Bantu,[14] this celebration may take place in an area closed in with palm branches and may even be covered by a raffia roof. Such a nice building is made because the Bantu is expected to invest more money in the celebration

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[13]desbordesia glaucescens

[14]I estimate about 1% of Baka women marry a Bantu.

than the Baka normally do. Inside the building, there may be another small room from which they will play a "boom box" stereo. The people will sing and dance inside. Often, the "boom box" and the people's traditional singing go on at the same time.

If the mother has not survived her child, the ceremony will be prepared by the sons and daughters of the deceased. Everything will be the same except that no one will wear the vine.

According to my informants, the mourners follow most of the old rituals of purification. However, there is no immersion and no arch as described by Higgens. A **kàà-lé** (father's sister) or if none, a **títà-lé** (mother's brother), prepares medicines with which every adult washes his body, the women first and then the men. Afterwards they wash themselves with water. This ritual protects them from sickness and gives them strength.

Throughout the entire ceremony the spirit of the deceased remains near the camp. At the end the **mólili** may either go back to **Komba**, if the person has lived a good life, or become a **mɛ** (spirit of the dead). The **mɛ** spirits live in the forest and must be kept from coming back and troubling the camp. In addition to the rituals done during the death ceremony, some medicine can be made to keep the spirits away. For example, if someone sees the image of the deceased while he sleeps, he will then apply the **lìbabà**[15] medicine all over his house and roof. When the spirit comes, he will smell the medicine and turn away. However, the **mɛ** spirits are not all evil. Some are good and desire to help; therefore, the elders often call on them to provide healing medicine or help hunters find animals.

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[15]powder of santiria trimera tree

**Higgens, Kathleen. "Ritual and Symbol in Baka Life History." Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly (December 1985): 100-106.**

The Baka are in a period of transition from hunting and gathering to a sedentary and agricultural way of life. They are beginning to live in villages alongside the main road. In her article, Higgens shows that the Baka still have an important relationship with the forest, which provides a basis for their worldview.

> While the initiation ritual of young males is the principal means whereby both, Baka men and women, are brought into an alliance with the forest, the Baka tie to the forest begins before birth and continues after death. Consequently, the following descriptions follow the Baka life trajectory as it leads up to and then away from the Jɛngì ceremony (p. 100).

A Baka, while still in his mother's womb, is exposed to the forest's protection. To ensure a safe delivery and a healthy baby, one rubs the stomach of the expectant mother with a red paste made up of ngɛlɛ, a powder made from the mahogany tree. When the baby is born, the ngɛlɛ is applied to the umbilical cord. This way, the baby begins its first days under the continuing protection of the forest. When a baby is two days old, the father makes protective charms from a special type of wood which the child will wear around his wrists and ankles. The father must also make a carrying sling for the child, which has protective powers.

Many other natural resources are used to ensure that the child grows strong and healthy. As with the Mbuti child,[16] for the first three years of his life, the Baka child is rarely put down and almost always remains in physical contact with mother, father, or sister. In this way the child enjoys total security. However, although very young, a child has as much autonomy and personal responsibility as do older individuals. A child learns skills, not by formal education, but through imitation. The learning is his own responsibility. This is also true for the learning of rituals, singing, and dancing. The child

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[16]Colin M. Turnbull, The Mbuti Pygmies: Change and Adaptation (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), 39.

learns quickly to make his own decisions. For example, at about the age of eight, he may decide whether or not to have his teeth cut to a point in the traditional Baka way.

In pre-adolescence, the children's imitating becomes more serious. The boys build their own house and live together until they marry. Some plant their own "practice" plantations and start killing larger animals. Rituals are important, as they bring each one closer to and in harmony with the spirits of the forest.

"Girls, when they become young women, must be fully adept at the ritual form of singing that provides an accompaniment for the hunting rituals. This special singing, similar to yodeling, is called yéli and its power 'weakens the forest' or more specifically, 'weakens the hearts of the animals,' and this ensures that the men can kill them" (p. 101). When a few young women between 18 and 20 years of age can be found in the camp, an initiation can take place. In preparation, older women gather leaves and other necessary ingredients to make medicine. During their initiation, girls are given a drink of medicinal leaves, water, and honey. Each is taken to a pathway leading into the forest where the spirit of **Jɛngì**, the chief spirit of the forest, will give her a new power and ability to sing. Higgens describes this spiritual experience saying that, "There, while she is alone, the spirit (literally: 'the forest person') holds a cup for her while she drinks. The spirit teaches her to sing the song that 'calls' the animals, and she yodels well" (p. 102).

**Jɛngì** is the chief spirit of the forest, specific to the Baka people, and sent to them by **Komba**. While **Komba** is for the whole world, **Jɛngì** is for their territory. The following is the myth that tells the origin of **Jɛngì** as recounted by Higgens.

> In the beginning **Jɛngì** belonged to **Komba**, who kept him in a box because he was so dangerous. One day, when **Komba** was off collecting, a man came and persuaded **Komba**'s son, who had been left with strict instructions not to open the box, to let **Jɛngì** out so that he could see him dance. **Komba**, away in the forest, heard the sound of the dance and returned to see **Jɛngì** free, whereupon he was very angry, because **Jɛngì** was so dangerous. So, since man had brought this on himself, **Komba** said, 'Alright, you can have him,' and he left **Jɛngì** with men and went away.

> That was the time when **Komba** and man separated. **Komba** has hidden himself and no one sees him, but **Jɛngì** is now everywhere in the forest. **Jɛngì** therefore has much closer contact with men than **Komba**, and it is **Jɛngì** they call upon in time of need (p. 102).

While the girls come to adulthood through this ritual, the young must be brought under the protection of **Jɛngì** through another ritual. Every five to seven years, **Jɛngì** comes to receive the young males, who range from about 12 to 20 years old. The initiation takes months of preparation by the whole camp. Although most of the activities involving the initiation take place in the camp or village, the initiation itself always takes place in the forest. In every camp, Higgens explains, "**Jɛngì** is 'kept' by a certain man, who is called 'master', or 'chief,' or 'father' of **Jɛngì**. Each camp also has a 'spokesman,' chosen by **Jɛngì**, who transmits **Jɛngì** words to the rest of the camp" (p. 102). **Jɛngì** must never be seen or heard by women. Therefore, the women in particular are dependent on the spokesman to receive **Jɛngì**'s instructions. In order to hide himself, **Jɛngì** appears enveloped in a two-story raffia covering that can be extended or compressed. At full height, it can reach over three meters. This covering is made of fresh raffia and is woven by the young initiated boys.

At the edge of the camp, near the forest, a two meter wide screen made of raffia is tied between two trees. Other screens are ahead leading into the forest, where **Jɛngì** lives in a leaf-hut without his covering. Before the initiation,

> The eldest sister of each young man who is to be initiated shaves the head of her brother in elaborate patterns. The candidates are liberally covered in oil and **ngɛlɛ**, all of it accompanied by the blessing with saliva. **Ngɛlɛ** in this context is said to be Komba's blood, which will keep the candidates' bodies "soft." The candidates, each carrying a walking stick, then disappear behind the screen. Each is accompanied by a kinsman or guardian, for otherwise he would be too frightened at the point when he is killed (p. 102).

Meanwhile, the initiated men, hidden behind the raffia screens, clap their hands and scream and then thrust long sticks through the screen in the direction of the camp.

> Then each guardian emerges with his candidate's stick. Its tip is covered with blood. This signifies that Jɛngì has put the initiates to death. How this happens has been described to me as follows: Jɛngì cuts the candidate's throat, throws his body to the ground then cuts it up--the latter word being the same term used to refer to the butchering of animals. Jɛngì then takes out the initiate's liver and eats it. It is this that subsequently enables him to recognize one of his own "children" in the forest, and he will come to their rescue when they call his name (102-3).

Jɛngì then puts the parts back together and blows into the initiate's nostrils, so he receives life again. He is now under the protection of Jɛngì who has "saved him." Meanwhile, the women sing particular songs. The eldest sister or the mother of each initiate holds his stick and with the help of a leaf, keeps the flies from touching the blood. Should she fail, the initiate would die. Then,

> Old women shout pleadingly, "Treat them gently!" The initiate's paternal aunt spits, and in great fear she shouts loudly in the direction of the screen, "Be saved, don't kill him forever!" She takes medicine she has prepared and sprinkles it in the direction of Jɛngì, saying, "Don't be angry; be at peace!" The group of women swing their breasts with their hands, and they wrinkle their noses, saying, "Let him be saved; let him live!" They clap their hands and stamp their feet. After this the guardians return through the screen to take the sticks and food and water to the newly resurrected initiates (p. 103).

Finally, the initiates come out from behind the screens and people take off their own bracelets and necklaces and give them to the young initiates. Then the women sing and dance while the initiates sit in a row, crouched in the fetal position. Many times, Jɛngì comes from behind the screen to dance, then exits again. It is a time of joy, festivity and excitement.

When the ceremonies are over, those who have just been initiated spend three nights in a special leaf-hut so that Jɛngì can give them medicine to make their bodies strong and protect them from sorcerers. The initiates believe that now that Jɛngì has killed them and brought them back to life, he will do so again if they are killed. This gives them courage to face danger in the forest. Jɛngì is beneficial only to the men, as he will not protect the women and children. Higgens quotes Robert Dodd who suggests that Jɛngì has an

equalizing role for the Baka sexes, since in several ways the woman has a dominant position in Baka society.[17]

Now roles and expectations are redefined for those young men and women. They will soon face full adult responsibilities, as they move toward the establishment of a family. Men will go on hunting and women gathering. The performance of the appropriate rituals is the responsibility of all adults and assures success in hunting. These rituals include the weakening of the animals by the women singing **yéli**, the imparting of blessing through **ngɛlɛ** and saliva, and various forms of divination that reveal where to hunt.

Older people become **kobo**, which means "elder," "wise man," "senior," or "ancestor." As they retire from hunting and gathering, they stay in the base camp and become respected advisors. Their primary role is to settle disputes, watch their grandchildren, and pass on legends and rituals.

Death of old age is considered normal. If a younger person dies, there is something wrong. His death may be attributed to the breaking of taboos (as in the case of a newborn girl who people said died because her mother walked in damp places), sorcery, adultery, neglecting his wife, or disturbing the forest (such as creating undesirable noise).

Death ceremonies are not only important for the people, as they mourn, and for the spirit of the deceased, so that it may leave peacefully, but also to bring harmony between the forest and the Baka. As Higgens points out:

> The ceremonies following death bring out two of the main purposes for Baka ritual. Throughout life, and especially after the death of a family member, rituals and the application of symbolic substances are vital to "keep a person's body strong so that he will be well on the earth." The other major purpose for ritual, especially for ritual dances, such as those danced after a death, is to bring joy to the forest, because

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[17]Robert Dodd, "Field Report Number 1: Baka Hunters and Gatherers of South-East Cameroon" (Field notes, 1978), 9.

if the forest rejoices, animals will come close to the Baka, and the people will have meat (p. 105).

## Comparative Notes

Although the Baka of Ndjibot live in the forest, they are not as close to the *deep* forest as those in Yenga. The few who still hunt elephant and gorilla must walk two or more days just to reach the territory of these animals. The forest is shrinking extremely fast as loggers claim more and more of it each year. The Baka of Ndjibot have a relationship with the forest that is different from that of the Baka in the Yenga area, partly because of the lack of deep forest and the greater Bantu influence. However, it appears that those living on the Lomié road have developed, throughout the years, cultural differences. These many differences between the Baka on the Lomié road and those on the Moloundou road are generally few and subtle and are probably the results of being separated by a large forest. Few Baka travel back and forth between these two areas.

Unlike in Yenga, in Ndjibot the belly and the umbilical cord are not rubbed with **ngɛlɛ** to protect mother and child. The **ngɛlɛ** medicine, which can usually be found at any time in the village, is only used to rub the mother's belly on the day of delivery when she gives birth to twins. When the umbilical cord falls off, the mother takes it and plants it with a new banana tree. It is a symbol that the child will grow as quickly as the banana tree. Only the grand-father (**títà-lé nà mókɔ́sɛ̀** ) and the grand-mother (**títà-lé nà wósɛ̀** ) will later eat the first bananas produced. This new custom has been borrowed from the neighboring Bantu groups during the last generation or two.

Although taboos surrounding a pregnancy and birth are not as many as in the past generations, they are still astoundingly many. A complex list of do's and don'ts weighs heavily on the conscience of the mothers. These rules include a strict diet, rituals, as well as many activities, which unless conducted according to tradition may bring bad luck, sickness, or even death on the mother and child. In her biography written by Boursier,

Poli, an elder Baka woman, talks about her intense struggles with these taboos saying that, "We, the women, have suffered because of the taboos related to the child. Do you think we enjoyed this? We respected these taboos, where as now, the young women of today give birth without following them. Yes, we suffered because of these taboos!"[18]

Twins are feared as they are said to have special powers. After their birth, both twins are given raw meat (of any animal) from which the babies suck the blood. I am told that the babies will identify with the animal and will exercise some kind of power over it. That animal will be attracted to them because of the blood they ate, which means that the twins will be successful hunters and will always have plenty to eat of that animal. For as long as the mother cooks for the twins, she will use only **pándɔ** wood[19] to feed the fire. When the children are big enough to crawl, the parents will apply **ngɛlɛ** mixed with a powder made of the back of the **kúlò** tree[20] on the children's forehead. The words pronounced by twins are powerful. If they speak even lightly against someone, this person will suffer from a headache. Fortunately, twins are rare.

The use of charms are quite similar to the practices of Yenga . A **ngba** (charm) on a string is put around the neck of a baby or toddler to provide him or her with strength and protection. In order to put the **ngba** on a string, one must heat the wood in the fire and then pierce it either with a piece of metal or, in a more traditional fashion, with a sharp piece of **pípi**[21] (an extremely strong wood).

Sometimes the **ngba** is put on a string made of **baàlà**,[22] which will eventually break. When it does, no one must look for it as it means that the child is now strong and no longer needs the **ngba**. Otherwise, one may wear a **ngba** until the age of about six.

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[18]Daniel Boursier, "POLI" (Salapoumbé archives, presently being published, n.d.), Chap. 3, p.1.

[19]tabernaemontana crassa

[20]ceiba pentandra

[21]microdesmis puberula

[22]acacia pennata

Other protective charms are used; however they are not specifically for children. For example, teenagers and adults can wear the **ngbi**[23] (a string skillfully made with the inside of the ngbi bark) around their wrists. Often **ngɛlɛ** is applied to the string to add to its power. This string medicine will protect against danger and spirits and is most often used when traveling. A criminal will not succeed in killing someone who wears this string. This practice is used even by the young people, although not as much as in the past generation.

Because a pregnant woman brings bad luck, a different string is attached to the husband's ankle to assure him good luck in hunting. He will wear it from the beginning to the end of the pregnancy, removing it only when the baby is born. A husband who does not wear this string while his wife is pregnant will surely bring disaster on himself and everyone hunting with him. The same applies whether one hunts with traps, a spear, or a gun. Although only the husband may wear this string, other hunters in the camp may seek good luck by asking the expecting mother to apply her **ngɛlɛ** (mixed with her own saliva) on them.

The parent-child relationship is extremely strong among the Baka. In Ndjibot, as well as among other Pygmies,[24] the child almost always remains with his mother or father during the first three years. Children are born two to four years apart. This way, the parents can give themselves entirely to their child. During this time, the child sleeps with the mother until he or she is weaned (at about three years of age). The parents sleep in separate beds, as the husband is forbidden to have intercourse with his wife. This sex taboo will last until the child is weaned, able to walk and eat, and knows his way around in the camp.

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[23]dicranolepsis spp.

[24]Colin M. Turnbull, The Mbuti Pygmies: Change and Adaptation (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), 39.

During this time, the husband and wife are not to have affairs with others. If they do, the child will get sick and even die. If the husband has an affair and the baby gets sick, he may save the life of the child by washing him or her in some medicine. In a small tub, the father will wring some **túkusà**[25] (a kind of vine) leaves in the water, which will then become thick, and will bathe the baby with his right hand while his mistress washes with her left hand. Turnbull witnessed the same sex taboo among the Mbuti Pygmies,[26] but points out that it is often a time of conflicts because the men seek to have affairs with other women.

In Ndjibot, the initiation of the young girls to the **yéli**[27] (pronounced **yéyi** on the Lomié road) is different from that described by Higgens. The women eventually learn to sing the **yéli** but without the intervention of **Jɛngì**. Instead, they are taught by the elder women over a long period of time as the **yéli** is difficult to learn. Secret medicine known only by elder women plays a vital role in the acquisition and the performance of the ritual.

The young women do play an important role in the singing at all sorts of rituals. They join the adult women in dancing and singing whenever they are ready. The community itself exerts some pressure on the young women to become singers, able to carry on the traditions. The parents and the elders, especially the best dancers, play an important role in teaching the children to sing and dance. However, the success of a child depends primarily on his or her own efforts and natural abilities. Often, after the evening meal when enough children are together and it is not raining, they dance and sing for at least an hour. The children, primarily girls, make every effort to perform well, although they do it with laughter and amusement. The parents may apply some medicine (made

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[25]roureopsis obliquifoliolata

[26]Colin M. Turnbull, Wayward Servants: The Two Worlds of the African Pygmies (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1965), 122-3, 130.

[27]This ritual is described under **ngàngà**.

with a leaf or a bark mixed with oil) to the skin, in incisions made on the lower back. This will help the child later on to perform dances such as the likàndɔ which require that one moves his lower back very quickly. Other medicines are used to help the dancers and singers perform well during rituals.[28] However, there is no magic or formula that can replace the children's duty to learn by imitation and practice.

Physical appearance is very important for the Baka. Therefore, the children between the age of 10 and 20, male and female, must decide whether or not they will have their teeth cut into a sharp point. For the Baka, this sharpening of teeth is one of their most attractive characteristics. This is an important decision and the majority of the youths choose to have the operation done. Only male elders can perform the operation and it rarely takes more than one day. The practice requires a large amount of courage as it is extremely painful. With the help of a knife and a piece of metal used as a hammer, the elder man cuts only the front teeth. During the operation, the young person keeps a piece of wood across the back teeth to keep his or her mouth open. It is totally free of charge and there is no overt pressure from the elders to have the operation done. However, traditional stories claim that uncut teeth travel in the night while the person is asleep and eat excrement.

In addition to teeth cutting, scars on the forehead and cheeks are made by elder women for esthetic reasons. Many women and a few men choose to have such scars. It also takes a lot of courage as it is a painful operation. The elder woman opens the skin with a razor blade and inserts a choice of certain leaves in the open wound to assure that the scars will always remain black. The men consider the women with marks far more

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[28]For example, the women may insert a certain medicinal leaf into incisions made on the back of their neck to allow them to sing for long periods of time without pain. Also, dancers may drink a medicinal leaf which will make their body feel light, allowing them to dance more intensively.

attractive than those without. Today very few people have their nose pierced as their parents or grand-parents did. However, many women still pierce their ears. This is again a decision the young men and women must make. It is done not only for esthetic reasons but also for practical ones. On their frequent fishing trips during the dry season, the women insert a medicine in their pierced ears or nose which helps them find fish.

Young boys are initiated to **Jɛngì**, who comes to the camp every few years. I am told that he last came about seven years ago. This is difficult to verify as the Baka do not count the years. **Jɛngì** actually came two years ago, but he left without initiating anyone when someone committed murder in Ndjibot. **Jɛngì** often comes during the dry season, as it is difficult to dance during the rainy season, and usually stays three to four months. The elders determine where and when the ceremony must take place. The preparations are important and involve nearly everyone as the camp must be cleaned, medicine prepared, and raffia clothing made.

Jɛngì is the chief **mɛ** (spirit) and has power over all the **mɛ** (Baka ancestors) in the forest. He is considered good as he looks after the welfare of the Baka. If any of his children (those initiated) are in danger, they may call his name and he will deliver them. If an injustice is done, a Baka can also call on **Jɛngì** as well as any other **mɛ**, to punish or even kill a criminal. However, none of the spirits would ever accept to harm an innocent person.[29] In every Baka camp there is a man who plays the role of **Jɛngì**, but he may never represent **Jɛngì** in his own camp. A **Jɛngì** on the Lomié road may travel very far away, even to Batouri[30] and Bifolone,[31] on the invitation of another camp, but rarely

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[29]Traditional medicine also play a similar role. It is used to find and punish criminals only.

[30]Over 400 km from Ndjibot, near Central African Republic.

[31]About 150 km from Ndjibot toward Gabon.

travels to the Moloundou area. Performance of **Jɛngì** thus creates an exchange network between camps among older males.

When **Jɛngì** comes he stays in the forest near the village. The people spend many nights singing and dancing, and **Jɛngì** himself often dances[32] among them. Every two or three nights, depending on the elders, the celebration pauses to give place to one or more nights of rest. During the first few days after his arrival, **Jɛngì**, with the help of the elders, puts a medicine powder (made of bark) on the head of everyone in the village. This ritual is also performed by the elders at the beginning of every year, however, using a different medicine, which gives the people protection and strength.

After a few days a team of hunters, followed by a team of porters, go hunting for a number of animals, usually including elephant, gorilla, wild boar, and other small animals such as the chimpanzee and antelope. The elephant hunt is the greatest of hunts for the Baka. Although today the Baka only hunt this animal when a rifle is lent to them, it remains one of the most dangerous and exciting experience for the hunters. Elephant hunting, however, is quickly disappearing in Ndjibot as no one is willing to hunt with a spear, and guns big enough to kill the elephant are hard to find. **Jɛngì** does not go with the hunters as he sometime does in the Salapoumbé area. The **ngàngà** ritual, usually performed before an important hunting trip, takes place the day before the hunters leave. The **ngàngà** diviner tells the hunters where to find the animals and how long the hunt will last. Depending on which animal they hunt, the hunt may last from one to six weeks. The initiation ritual takes place shortly after they return. Sometimes **Jɛngì**, the elders, and the initiates, with their mothers or wives, will move into the forest and perform the ritual away from the village. At other times, it all happens partly in the village and partly in the forest

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[32]Refer to appendix B for a fuller description.

nearby, as described by Higgens. However, the actual initiation always takes place in the forest.

Once the hunters are back, the **mbonio** (initiates) stay together in a big **mongulu** built just for them, in the village. The elders feed them with the food that each one's mother or wife has prepared. **Jɛngì** also makes frequent visits during the night to give them medicines (which are known only to him) while they sleep, to ensure that they are in good health, and to ensure that there are no sorcerers who may kill someone and then blame **Jɛngì**. At dawn **Jɛngì** leaves for the forest with one or two elders who will keep him company near a fire. **Jɛngì** always sleeps in the forest, away from the people. The morning before the initiation, **Jɛngì** and the people perform more dances while the initiates stay in their **mongulu** and are fed by their relatives. Then the elders trim the hair and eyebrows of every initiate in a specific shape and cut their eyelashes. They replace their pants with a skirt made of raffia, attached in between their legs, or with shorts. This is all that they may wear. Then they cover their entire body with black palm oil and with **ngɛlɛ** made with Jɛngì's saliva. The **mbonio** are now getting anxious, as **Jɛngì** will soon perform the initiation.

In early afternoon[33] each **mbonio**, guarded by an initiated man, is led to the first **kpànga** (long logs of about three meters long on which the initiates sit), facing Jɛngì's hidden home in the forest. The raffia screens as described by Higgens are many, leading into the forest. The first screen, nearly two meters wide and tall, is tied between two trees at the edge of the camp. As **Jɛngì** dances toward his home, the elders tell the **mbonio** to take the **kpànga** (there may be three or four) and move closer to **Jɛngì** 's home. Slowly, as **Jɛngì** dances around them, they continue to make their way closer and closer to his

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[33]Starting at this point, in Chapter 9 of her bibliography, Poli gives an excellent detailed account of the initiation.

home. The initiates, dressed only in their raffia skirts or shorts, pour more palm oil and **ngɛlɛ** all over their bodies. This time the **ngɛlɛ** is made with their mother's saliva. During the ritual, the women sing a number of songs. Then as **Jɛngì** dances very near them, they sit with their heads between their knees. They must not look at **Jɛngì**. Now the people are extremely afraid and may even try to run away. Each guardian stays near the young **mbonio** he must protect and keep from fleeing because of their fear. Then the guardians ask the **mbonio** to close their eyes and quickly take each one in their arms and run into **Jɛngì**'s house. This is where *the miracle of Jɛngì* (as they call it), which is carefully kept secret from outsiders, takes place. Somehow **Jɛngì** kills the youths and eats their livers. The women who were singing and dancing, stop suddenly.

Moments later **Jɛngì** gives the guardians small sticks of wood with a piece of raw liver on each one. These come from the initiates' livers, so there is one stick for each initiate. The guardians pass them on to the **mbonio**'s mothers, who must place the sticks upright into the ground. Each mother is responsible to guard her stick, and by moving a leaf on the meat, she keeps the flies from landing on the blood. Failure to do so may result in her son not healing properly. After a little while, the guardians gather these sticks and return them carefully to **Jɛngì**, who will use them to heal the initiates. It is important that the guardians do not drop them. **Jɛngì** then repairs the bodies and breathes into the initiates' nostrils to give them life again. Because of his great power, no one feels any pain for a number of days.

The newly initiated men stay with **Jɛngì** for a while to talk with him. They are no longer afraid, as **Jɛngì** tells them that they are now his friends and are under his protection. They swear to never reveal to any non-initiate the secret of **Jɛngì** and the hidden initiation. When they return to the village, **Jɛngì** takes each initiate to his own home. There he asks one of the parents, "Have I harmed your son?" When the person responds "No," he moves on to the next home. If the ceremony takes place in the village,

the **mbonio** never need to sleep in the forest. However, if it takes place at a forest camp, they may come back only two or three weeks later.

Before the initiation, the hunters give their meat to the women who prepare it. On the following day of the ritual, the women serve the meal to **Jɛngì** and everyone in the village. In addition to the meat, they prepare plantains and other products they have cultivated and gathered. After they eat, the initiates take a small piece of meat and hook it to the roofs of their houses. This teaches them self-control and assures that they will not become gluttons.

Later, each initiate is given two medicine-coated strings which he will wear over each shoulder like slings. Attached to one of these strings is a horn of an antelope or other small animal. It is cut about three centimeters long and is filled by **Jɛngì** with a healing medicine made of ashes and oil. When the newly initiated man feels pain in his liver or stomach, caused by the initiation, he may apply the medicine. The **mbonio** must wear the strings all the time, except when sleeping, until they fall off on their own. When this happens, it will mean that he is completely healed. In addition to these strings, they may wear modern necklaces and bracelets bought at a nearby town. A few days after the initiation (some say the fifth day), the youths go back to **Jɛngì**'s house to receive a small stick with leaves attached to it, which will serve them as healing medicine. They will hang them in their **mongulu** for one day, after which they must return them to **Jɛngì**, who will hide the sticks in the forest in such a way that the rain cannot touch them.

The following day or some days later, the initiates go through a washing ceremony. They wash in water which already contains medicine that **Jɛngì** has added to it. When they finish washing, **Jɛngì** pulls them out of the water one by one, with the help of a small stick treated with medicine. After this washing ritual, each initiate exchanges his raffia skirt or shorts for a pair of pants belonging to an old initiate. Between rituals and

festivities, many people work in their fields and carry on their daily responsibilities. If the people were at a forest camp, they now return to the village.

**Jɛngì** always appears covered in raffia and although no woman can ever see him, the men can. To everyone, however, he is not a man, but the *spirit* of the forest. The identity of **Jɛngì**, along with many other aspects of the initiation, is a secret that belong only to the Baka.

The festivities continue for many more nights, while **Jɛngì** comes to dance and to take care of the healing youths. When the initiates see him, they line up before him. Every now and then, as he dances, **Jɛngì** pushes and shakes them violently. This is the final test to see if they are strong and healing well. This ritual is repeated during many nights. As he gets ready to leave, he admonishes the parents to care for the youths and gives them recipes for healing medicine. Once **Jɛngì** is gone, the young men feel that they belong even more to the forest and share its deepest secrets.

**Boursier, Daniel. "Enquête sur l'anthropologie baka." Salapoumbé archives, 1984-1985. 28 pp.**

Daniel Boursier is a Catholic missionary who worked in Salapoumbé (70 km from Moloundou) for many years. In a study of key words related to the human body, he reveals many important concepts of the Baka culture. His work is well backed up by linguistic data and proves to be an excellent tool for learning the Baka language and culture. A proper understanding of these key words is also crucial to the task of Bible translation.

♦ **ngòbò** "body; self." The semantic domain of this word is complex and difficult to understand. The word can refer to the body and its senses, as well as some ethical/emotional values. However it always speaks of the whole visible person. It may be used to describe physical conditions as well as physical activities in sentences such as:

**ngòbò-lè ɓà kè** : /body-me/asp/to suffer/: *I'm sick*
**ngòbò-lè palùpalù** : /body-me/lightness/: *I'm skinny*
**'é à mɔkɔ̀ ngòbó-è** : /he/asp/to move/body-him/: *he moves*
**'á tukò ngòbó-ɛ tɛ la** : /he-asp/to overturn/body-him/with/sleep/: *he's falling asleep*

However, it may also communicate feelings as in:

**ma à tɔ pɛ́ ngòbò-lè** : /I/asp/to give/to-him/body-me/: *I give him my trust*
**ngòbò-a tɛ́ mò kɔ̀ kpóde** : /body-us/with/you/only/one/: *we're friends.*

♦ **lenge** "image." Closely related to **ngòbò**, yet much more restricted, is the word **lenge** which refers to the external appearance. This word is usually positive, describing one's beauty. A person can see his **lenge** on a picture or may see the **lenge** of a spirit as he sleeps. Although the **lenge** is actually visible, it also refers to the inside . Perhaps it can be defined as the physical image of one's personality. Someone who has **lenge** is beautiful, while one with little **lenge** is sick. At death this image dies with the body.

♦ **mólili** "spirit." The word describes the intellectual and spiritual aspects of the person. It is invisible. When someone sleeps, dreams, is in a coma or is dying, the **mólili** is active and free to travel. In one passage Boursier says that at death, the **mólili** returns to **Komba** . However, in another he claims that the **mólili** becomes a **mɛ** and is able to visit men during special occasions.

♦ **mɛ** "spirit." When someone dies, the **mólili** becomes **mɛ**. The spirits of the dead play an important role in the lives of the Baka. They have the power to bless people and, during a hunt, to show them where to find the animals. Proper respect and sacrifices must be given to them.

♦ **búmá** "heart; self; life, feelings, unity." In addition to referring to the physical heart, **búmá** refers in a figurative sense to the source of life, emotions and desires. Feelings like madness, peace, worry, anger, goodness, pity, contentment, courage, love and jealousy are states of the heart. For example, a "hot heart" means anger, a "flaming

heart" means fuming anger, and a "heart refreshed" means being at peace. Also, if "my heart wants you," I love you, and to "share the same heart" is to be strong friends.

Because the heart is also a symbol of life, through witchcraft one may attempt to eat up or destroy someone's heart in order to take life from him. Because of the power that comes from the heart, hunters may use the blood from an animal's heart to attract other animals of the same species.

● **njɛ** "blood; life; strength; unity." Someone is said to be of the same blood as his biological parents and those of his father's lineage. Also, two people, in a ritual called **mboni**, can be joined in an unbreakable union or friendship by mixing and drinking each other's blood. If someone says that his blood is clean, he means that he is healthy. If his blood is dark, he is sick. When someone is sick, the healer may make an incision to see the color of the blood. Cursing someone may be done by cursing the blood. The concept of **njɛ** is well known in witchcraft whose goal is not only to eat up the heart of its victim, but also to drink the blood.

The **ngɛlɛ** (powder made from the mahogany wood) is, in Baka tradition, **Komba's** own blood. To have good blood is to have good luck. Consequently, the Baka mix their saliva with the **ngɛlɛ**, which results in one of the most powerful medicines that gives life, blessing and protection from **Komba**. It may be said of this practice that it is **Komba** who gives his blood. This medicine is frequently used on the sick (administered on the forehead), on sterile women (on the belly), and during the initiation to **Jɛngì**. When twins are born, **ngɛlɛ** is put on everyone in the camp, including the twins. Since twins have special powers which cause people to fear them, this blessing ensures peace and harmony between the twins and the rest of the people in the camp.

♦ **ngúsó** "saliva; blessing." Saliva coming from anyone, even a sorcerer, is a source of blessing. As seen already, saliva plays an important role in the use of **ngɛlɛ**. Saliva is a powerful tool, and this is especially true when it comes from a woman. A

woman has the power to bless, give life and success, or to withhold any blessing or even to curse certain members of her family, such as her son-in-law. She is therefore greatly feared by some. In traditional stories (**likànɔ̀**), the woman is portrayed as the carrier of life. As a result, the Baka have great respect for women and rarely neglect them.

The giving of saliva must always be done with an empty stomach, usually early in the morning before eating. A spontaneous prayer is offered with the saliva benediction. Such a prayer speaks directly to God (**komba**) or to the ancestors (**mɛ**) and requests their intervention. Thus the action of blessing always requires the participation of men and the spirits or God.

When one dies, a close relative takes some saliva from the mouth of the dead person, mixes it with coal powder (**mbili**), and wraps it in a leaf. The following day, the family will rub some of this powder on their foreheads, which will help them find food during the death celebration. Saliva and blood play the same role, as they are both associated with family ties, life, and blessing.

♦ **libànjò** "forehead; good luck; blessing." In addition to its literal meaning of "forehead," this word can also mean "good luck" or "blessing." The forehead is the common place where someone can receive blessing and good luck. The forehead plays a major role in hunting. The hunter is concerned daily with having good luck, for he can never be successful without it. One may describe a hunter who has good luck by saying that "he has his forehead" or that "his forehead is well," or even that "his forehead is waking up." Blessing is not just for hunters. Everyone seeks it. It provides good food to the gatherers and may bring all sorts of gifts to those who stay in the camp or village. No one can fully control blessing. It comes even to those who have not sought it and leaves without warning. However, one will most certainly lose his blessing if a close relative dies or violates a taboo. For example, if a hunter eats an animal he himself has killed, he will surely lose his good luck.

When a father dies, the son will take some saliva from the corpse to assure him of his blessing. If he is unable to do so, he may ask his **kàà-lè** (father's sister) to give her saliva while praying to the spirit of the father. Otherwise he will suffer bad luck.

Blessings and curses can be given simply by speaking a few words. The effect one's words have on someone else depends on the relationship between the two people. The closer kin they are, the more they can curse or bless each other. Therefore a husband who has been deserted by his wife can, with his word, make her sterile.

A pregnant woman brings bad luck on the entire family. Again, the extent of the bad luck depends on kinship relations. So a close family member, and especially the men, will be more affected than a distant member. For this reason, during the first half of the pregnancy family members come to the expectant couple to seek their blessing. During the first few months of the pregnancy the parents will not suffer bad luck, but as the pregnancy progresses, bad luck will come. Toward the end of the pregnancy, it is the family members who give their blessings to the expectant couple. Good luck will return to the couple with the birth of the child.

♦ **là-bo** "eye; face; life." This word can be used in many different literal and figurative ways. For example, those who see into the future (the diviners) are said to have "eyes that see in the dark." However, one who is drunk or is angry or is working excessively hard is said to have "red eyes." Also, shame (**nyómó**) is always seen through the face. **Là-bo** also means "life," therefore one who has no eyes is dead (or sleeping) and one who has eyes still lives. One may curse someone by speaking against his **là-bo**. Actually, many well known formulas exist for this such as *may your eyes die, may your eyes become one with the dirt, may your face be eaten up by termites, may your eyes close*, and so on.

♦ **mò-bo** "mouth; speech." This word contains a varied semantic domain. It may be used to describe the physical mouth, as well as the action of speaking, and even speech

itself. For example, to "send mouth" is to send a message, to describe one's "mouth" is to describe his speech, and to repeat or nag is to have a "child's mouth." In addition, to stop speaking is to take away the "mouth," to make something clear is to tighten the "mouth," while to speak with ease, one must have a sharp or loose "mouth." If your "mouth" surpasses you, you are boastful, and the "mouth" of a woman is a powerful tool that can curse and even kill.

♦ **bu-bo** "stomach; abdomen; belly; womb." In addition to its literal sense, this word, with the help of adjectives, can describe quite precisely one's state of hunger. A Baka can therefore communicate how much he has eaten or not eaten. For example, one who is satisfied has a belly like a hill or is blown up. Witchcraft is also described in terms of the belly. A sorcerer has witchcraft in his belly because he "eats" people. If a person's belly is "empty" or "innocent," he has no witchcraft in him. The victim of witchcraft is always hit in his stomach, the center of his being. Perhaps there is even an etymological relation between *witchcraft* and *stomach*, which in Baka are homophones. Curses against one's belly can be done in the same way as against the eyes.

The word *belly* is also used to describe one's responsibility for someone else. Therefore, one under your belly is one under your authority and protection, and one who comes from the same belly is your brother or sister.

♦ **sɛ̀-bo** "human odor." The odor of a Baka is always important, especially when hunting. For example, in order to approach an animal without emitting his human odor, which would frighten the animal, a hunter may rub his body with certain plants or even elephant excrement. **Jɛngì** doesn't like the smell of the non-initiated, but recognizes the smell of each of his children. A Baka child is said to recognize his parents by their smell. The child most often sleeps with his mother and father while he is little, so that he can learn to recognize their particular smell. Two people who are close friends are said to

have the same smell. In the same way, enemies have no smell in common. A person's odor is an important characteristic of his personality, and he can be identified by it.

## Comparative Notes

Boursier's linguistic notes are quite consistent with my own research. This gives strong evidence that from one extreme of the Baka territory to the other, the language is, to a high degree, consistent. The following are notes not found in Boursier's research.

● **lenge** "image." This word can also be pronounced **'elenge**. Interestingly, one's reflection in the water as well as the image one may see of a spirit while sleeping may be called either **lenge** or **mólili**. In these contexts both words refer to the same image.

♦ **mólili** "spirit; image." As Boursier points out, the **mólili** may go back to **Komba** at death. However, not all of them do. Only those who have lived a reasonably good life and were honest may return to **Komba**, who created them. Those that have gone to **Komba** will never come back to the camp or village, and no one can ever see them. Those who have committed crimes become **mɛ**. The people sometime call these spirits **mólili**, which can be confusing to an outsider. When one has committed a crime he is sure to become a **mɛ** since no forgiveness can be obtained and no sacrifice made to take away his sin. Even those who profess to be Roman Catholics have little or no concept of God's forgiveness. To have faith in God is not enough. If anyone wants to see **Komba**, he must live a good life, they say. When a person is alive it is normal to talk about what will happen after his or her death, so when the person dies the people know where he or she is. People have told me that they will and want to become **mɛ**. They know very well the power they will have over men, but have little concept of how it is to live with **Komba**.

♦ **mɛ** "spirit." These are the **mólili** of those who have not gone back to **Komba**. After their own six day death ceremony, the **mɛ** leave for the forest where they will live

with the other spirits. They are often feared because they can return to the camp or village and cause trouble. During and after the death ceremony, medicine is made to keep them away. However, not all of them are trouble makers. Those who want to help are frequently called upon. For example, during a death ceremony or a hunting trip, the elders may ask them to come and give advice, provide healing medicine or reveal in what direction hunters must go. They play an important role in passing on rituals and knowledge of traditional medicines. In order to visit the spiritual world, elders may roll a certain leaf, known only by them, which they put in their eyes as they fall asleep. During the night, the medicine enables their **mólili** to travel far away to the spirit world and to other camps. In this way they are kept up to date on the latest important events, such as deaths. No one can ignore the spirits. As Poli points out in her bibliography,

> The Baka people believe that the spirits are real people. At death each one becomes a spirit. Yes, spirits are humans! It is the spirits of those who have already died. And why not? Otherwise, where would they come from? We have spirits right here who live near the people. They work for those who are not yet dead. Myself, I have a sacred area. One day, we, who are still among the living, will make them a costume with leaves, and they will come dancing. Just like real people! They dance in the yard, and we offer them food, and then they leave. (POLI, Chap. 12, p. 4).

The **mɛ** can also do evil among the people by bringing sickness on them. When this happens, the elders make medicine in an attempt to reverse the damage done and to chase away those evil spirits.

There are at least nine different kinds of **mɛ** active in the lives of the people on the Lomié road. Most of them are well known, even by the young people. These are the **mòkondi**, **'embòàmbòà**, **'embòàndà**, **ngájɛ**, **móngelebo**, **nyaɓòlà**, **wùngà**, **kòse** and **jòɓòkò**. All of these spirits seem to fit John Mbiti's definition of the "leaving-dead."[34] However, as Mbiti points out, it is not always easy to categorize spirits. **Jɛngì** is the only

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[34]John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 97-118.

one to my knowledge that fits Mbiti's category of "divinity" spirit. Although the Baka are aware that many other spirits live in the forest (often introduced by neighboring Bantu), I have not seen any evidence that the Baka ever call on them. The spirits play an important role in the lives of the Baka. They constantly seek their blessing during a hunt or any other activities and present food offerings.

• The **mòkondi** are considered good spirits who like to live near the people. The elders may ask them to come either when someone is sick or when they see that the whole village can use strength and medicine. I witnessed their coming in October 1996 after two people had died and many were sick. Because they usually stay for two or three weeks at a time, the women must build them one or more **móngulu** near the village. While the women sing something similar to the **yéli**, the **mòkondi** dance something similar to the **likànɔ̀**, but always keep their backs to the people and the elders are free to join them in the dance. They are covered from head to toe in raffia. Because they dress and dance somewhat like **Jɛngì**, they are sometime called the *sons of Jɛngì*. As they dance, they rub their hidden faces on children and sick people to give them healing strength. During the many days they are in the village, they reveal the traditional medicine the people need at that time. These spirits also play an important role in hunting. At their forest camp, the hunters frequently call on them to reveal where the animals are. When the hunters have killed animals with their help, they give them the hearts and livers in return. The hunters throw the raw hearts and livers cut in small pieces all around them. The mɛ catch and eat them.

• The **'embòàmbòà** (also called **mbòàmbòà** ) are buffoon spirits which make people laugh at funerals. They come to every death ceremony, where they may perform the **láàlà** dance on one or two nights. During this comical and diverting performance, they dress in leaves or palm branches and speak in deep growling voices. This is not to be confused with the **'embòàmbòà** dance, which is not performed by **'embòàmbòà** , but by the young

adults who, before the **'embòàmbòà** come, laugh and mimic them. The **'embòàmbòà** always perform on the first night of the ceremony at about 3 a.m. They may arrive naked from the forest and steal clothes and other items from the people's homes in the camp or village which they leave in the forest at the end of the ritual.

• The **'embòàndà** (also called **mbòàndà**) spirits are similar to the **'embòàmbòà** but with a different role. They do not come during a death ceremony and, like the **ngájɛ**, they are called upon to bring healing and give medicine when someone is sick. They may also come, sometime early in the morning, to prepare the hunters for a hunting trip. They dance directly on the hunting weapons the hunters bring before them. They will do so without ever cutting their feet. This ritual assures that they will kill many animals on their hunting trip.

• The **ngájɛ** spirits, like the **'embòàmbòà**, come only to perform the **láàlà** dance during the death celebration. Places near the village are selected where people may leave some clothes for them to wear. If there are not enough clothes, they do not come. Their faces are uncovered, but no one recognizes them, as they are strangers. They speak like the **'embòàmbòà** and shake hands with the people very hard. However, unlike the **'embòàmbòà**, they are quiet and do not run all over the place. If there is too much noise (often made by the **'embòàmbòà**), they will not come. They live far away in the forest, as they dislike the noise of the villagers.

• The **móngelebo** spirits can only come during a death ceremony. The **móngelebo**, with the **'embòàmbòà** and the **ngájɛ** all dance at the same time. Like the **'embòàmbòà**, they steal clothes in houses when the people are gone. They only wear these clothes during their performance. No one can recognize them as they are strangers. They usually come at about 4 a.m. on the first night of the ceremony, after the **'embòàmbòà**, and may dance until dawn. They perform the **láàlà**, but do it differently than the **'embòàmbòà** and **ngájɛ**. They never speak, but only whistle.

• The **nyaɓòlà** spirits come only when an elephant has been killed. They dance and celebrate with the people and accompany the hunters back to the village. The **nyaɓòlà**, the **mòngeleɓò**, as well as the **wùngà** spirits who come during the **ngàngà** ritual, are rarely active and are not well known by the younger generation. It appears that soon no one in Ndjibot will know them.

• The last two spirits, the **kòse**, who come during the **ngàngà** ritual, and the **jɔ̀ɓɔ̀kɔ̀**, who come during the **yéli** ritual, are only known by the elders, as they are the ones who control these two important rituals. It is difficult to tell at this point if these rituals are passed on to younger generations with the same intensity as it was in the past.

♦ **njɛ** "blood; life; strength; unity." The **mboni** ritual, although not often performed, is an important aspect of the culture. This alliance is made only between men. Through such alliances, men can build sure relationships which they can fall back on in case of sickness and tragedy. They do not drink each other's blood as such. Instead, they dip either plantain or yam or other food in the mixed blood of the two people and share the food. They cannot eat meat in this ritual as it already contains blood. When such a covenant has been performed, the two people become kin. Therefore, even when involving a Bantu and a Baka, intermarriage within their families is forbidden and considered incest.

♦ **ngúsó** "saliva; blessing." Saliva can never be applied by itself. It is always used mixed with **ngɛlɛ** (**Komba**'s blood) or coal. If a hunter has misfortune and hears either his wife, his mother or his father's sister speak about him, he may go to her and ask for her blessing. She will then take her saliva, mix it with either **ngɛlɛ** or coal, and apply it on the hunter's forehead. She may also give a prayer, but if she does she may or may not address it to **Komba** or the spirits. Her words alone have the power to bless.

♦ **lìbànjò-bo** "forehead; good luck; blessing." The concept of good luck is still strong among the Baka, especially the hunters. There are countless do's and don'ts related

to diets, habits, rituals, sexual activities and formulas which can bring good or bad luck. However some people, especially those who labor in their plantations two or three times per week, realize that hard work, not only luck, contributes to a good harvest.

The Baka on the Lomié road may never under any circumstances take the saliva from a deceased person. The giving of saliva to make the **ngɛlɛ** is done by the **kàà-lé** (father's sister) or as a last resort the **títà-lé** (mother's brother) a few days after the burial of the deceased.

**Boursier, Daniel. "Le Rite ngàngà dans la vie des Baka." Salapoumbé archives, n.d. 13 pp.**

In his article, Boursier describes the **ngàngà** ritual he witnessed among the Baka near Salapoumbé. He probably wrote the article in the 1980's with his many other unpublished writings.

The term **ngàngà** can mean many things. Most importantly it refers to two ritual dances. One is used in preparation for a hunt, and the other during a healing session. The term also refers to the people who have been initiated into divination, either to read in fire, to heal people or to determine who committed violations. In his article, the study of the rite **ngàngà** is limited to the preparation dance for a hunt and to the selection of diviners who read in fire.

After a day's work, while the women prepare the evening meal and the men prepare themselves and their weapons for a hunt, young boys play the "male" drum, keeping the **wà** rhythm to announce to all the Baka nearby the **ngàngà** dance. After the meal, an elder asks a young hunter to start the **ngàngà** fire. The hunter then enters a few selected houses and collects from their fires pieces of burning wood with which he will start the **ngàngà** fire.

The people start singing, and as the night progresses they add two other drums to make a total of three. These are the male drum (**mɔ́kɔ́**), the smaller female drum (**wósɛ̀**),

and the child drum (**yandɛ́**), smaller yet. People form a huge circle in which each age group stays together around the fire. The drums are part of the circle: those who sing soprano are on the right, and those who sing alto are on the left of the drums. The space between the fire and the people is kept for the dancers. The hunters make their appearance. The drums and the singing take on new life as the men participate. At this stage, other participants from neighboring camps join their age groups around the circle. As long as non-Baka neighbors are present many people stay home, and the singing and dancing lack enthusiasm. Once they leave, the Baka sing insults at them and accuse them of annoying the forest.

When it is night and no one but the Baka are present, dancing and singing in all sorts of canons take place. Then the hunters and other young men enter the circle to dance in harmony with one another. Dressed with leaves fixed to their lower backs and hitting the ground as they make small steps, they walk behind each other while going around the fire. Everyone looks at the fire. Later on in the night, the dancers, touch the fire with their hands and then touch their foreheads. This they do many times while making loud noises. At the same time the singing of the women intensifies. After a few minutes, the men start dancing behind each other, making a circle around the fire. Sometimes a woman will speak to the forest, telling it to weaken and to be annoyed by the singing. Slowly, people start retiring to their huts, and soon only the drums are heard in the night. When people are gone, the lead dancer stops dancing and commands the drums to stop.

At about 10 p.m. the same dancer starts singing again and urges every one to come back to the fire. Soon every one is back in a circle. The dancer sits on the ground a few inches from the fire and stares into it. Other **ngàngà** (people who read the fire) join him near the fire. They see the animals the hunters will kill and all the dangers they will encounter. After reading in the fire for a while, the **ngàngà** discuss what they have seen. Meanwhile, all the others dance and sing intensely as they come to the climax of the

ceremony. When the **ngàngà** have come to a consensus on what the fire reveals, the lead dancer asks every one to stop and listen. Then in a melodious voice he tells the story of what he has seen. He circles the fire telling about his "vision," while looking into the fire to find the most revealing place. His story sounds like this: "People, people, hear the forest. The forest wants to do good things. I see animals, all sorts of animals in the forest..." As he tells his story every one has a part to play in it. Some dance, some sing, others respond to the story by saying "heo," while other **ngàngà** participate in the telling of the story. They discuss some of the specifics of the hunt. After this, some continue to dance while others go to their huts. As they leave, they touch the embers of the fire with the right hands and mark their foreheads. They also bring a piece of ember to their own fires in their huts. Then at 5 a.m., the people start singing and dancing again until the hunters leave at about 7 a.m.

## Comparative Notes

The people of Ndjibot perform the **ngàngà** ritual, but not as often as those who live deeper in the forest. The word **ngàngà** refers to both the ritual and the dancer. At present, there are three elders and one young adult who perform the **ngàngà** in Ndjibot a number of times each year. These people are a new generation of **ngàngà** (diviners), since the two most important **ngàngà** dancers died within the last year. These four **ngàngà**, two men and two women, normally perform the ritual together, although the oldest **ngàngà** usually acts as the main diviner. The **ngàngà** ritual always involves reading the fire and is used to either heal the sick or in preparation for a hunt.

In January 14 1997, I saw an elder woman who accepted payment from a Bantu couple to perform the **ngàngà** in an attempt to heal a sick person. In the midst of dancing and singing the woman read the fire which revealed to her the cause and the remedy of the sickness. The healing process started as the **ngàngà** rubbed her hands and face all over

the patient's body, applying the heat of the healing fire by reaching to the flames and bringing handfuls of fire heat to the patient's body. After the two hour ceremony, the **ngàngà** woman knew what medicine could save the life of the Bantu. The following day, she left for the forest to gather the plants necessary for the cure. Soon after the patient received the medicine, he became healthy again and is still strong today.

The **ngàngà** is also used to prepare for a major hunt which involves either the wild pig, the gorilla or the elephant. The healing of sick people and the preparation of a hunt can be part of a single **ngàngà** ritual. Normally, when **Jɛngì** comes, the people go on an important hunting trip to kill a number of big and small animals, including wild pig and the gorilla. This is the context in which I witnessed the **ngàngà** ritual on January 22, 1997.

This three hour ritual is performed in Ndjibot in a similar fashion to what Boursier described. However, the **ngàngà** is not usually performed unless the hunters already have a gun in their possession. When a large crowd of over 50 people is present, they may use three drums, but with a small participation, they only use one drum, forming a small intimate circle around the fire. An adult starts the **ngàngà** fire and the people who arrive add one or two logs from their own house fire.

Every **ngàngà** wears a special tiger cat skin (**sini**), often on their head. The main **ngàngà**, the one who actually reads the fire, spends most of the time holding the skin and moving it often in and over the fire in an attempts to tame the fire and to read the flames. The people sing story-like songs which are not **likànɔ̀** (chantfables). The **ngàngà**, who may have very little space to dance around the fire, moves gently and carefully, singing, dancing, and concentrating on the fire. Sometimes standing, sitting, or even kneeling, always holding the tiger cat skin, he reads the message of the fire. If the **ngàngà** has wine, he may pour a small quantity on the fire to activate the flames and make the fire speak. Every few minutes, the **ngàngà** tells what the fire reveals and everyone listens with great attention and curiosity.

Similar to a death ceremony or a **Jɛngi** visit, the singing and music take many different forms. Throughout the evening, 10 to 15 different songs and rhythms are used, which are only performed during the **ngàngà** ritual. While some are calm and gentle and story-like, others songs are intense, loud and climactic. One song in particular, which is similar to the **yéyi**[35] but can easily be performed even by the young girls, always leads to a concentrated time of excitement.

The **ngàngà** tames the fire and makes of it a powerful tool. He moves the small logs to get better flames as no one else can touch the fire. At one time or another during the ritual, as the fire speaks, the **ngàngà** goes into a trance which lasts only a short time. Then in the form of an animated, descriptive, and exciting story, he gives captivating details of the future hunt. He recounts where and how the hunters will find certain animals and how they will pursue them and finally kill them. At times he describes the hunt by acting out the details. Many times in the evening, he goes back to reading the fire, singing and dancing and recounting the story, each time giving new information. As the **ngàngà** describes the hunt, every one is captivated by the story and kept in suspense by the many dramatic details. To all, these stories are a true reflection of the events that will actually take place during the up coming hunt.

To add dramatic effect, the **ngàngà** may disappear in the dark while playing a rattle and reappear in other places. While still in the dark, unseen by all, he tells the hunting story. Joined by the drum and the singing, the participants give the impression that they have rehearsed for weeks. The Baka are excellent actors, story tellers and musicians. The **ngàngà** ritual brings all of their skills together to make an entertaining and fascinating performance.

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[35]It is pronounced **yéli** in the Salapoumbé area. The term refers to the type of singing, the ritual, as well as to the group of women that performs the singing.

Every **ngàngà** has a specific role, whether as a dancer or lead singer, but only the main **ngàngà** reads the events in the fire. Two or three times throughout the evening, each **ngàngà** rubs his or her tiger cat skin on the head, shoulders, or back of every adult present. The healing power of the **ngàngà** brings strength and health to all.

At the end of the ritual, the small fire is well tamed by the **ngàngà** who still reads it. Then the ritual reaches a new climax as the drum intensifies and women sing again something similar to the **yéyi**. In addition to the drum and the rattle, a few men join in the concert by hitting small sticks on a long piece of bamboo. As with all Baka music, this is performed with precision and beauty in harmony with the drum. After the elders announce the end of the ritual, everyone, starting with the elders, puts their hands and sometimes even their whole body in the fire. Parents may also bring their sick children passing them quickly in and over the flames of the powerful **ngàngà** fire. The fire, which has accumulated its power throughout the ritual, has the ability to heal anyone who touches it.

Although no **mɛ** (ancestor's spirits) were involved in the ritual, there are three **mɛ** that often play a role during the **ngàngà**. These are the **mòngeleɓò**, the **wùngà**, and the **kòse** spirits. The young adults, however, are not very familiar with these spirits, and they seem to be fading out. When the **ngàngà** is performed in the forest during a hunt, these spirits play a much more prominent role than in the village.

The **ngàngà** is most often performed the night before the hunt. It may happen, if the hunters are not ready to leave after the first **ngàngà**, that a second and even a third **ngàngà** ritual be performed. It is also possible that the **ngàngà** ritual may be postponed or repeated because of a death, either in the camp or nearby, such as at Ntimbé. Death in the camp not only keeps the **ngàngà** from reading in the fire, but it also brings bad luck on the hunters, who are forced to postpone the hunting trip.

The ngàngà is not enough to prepare the hunters for the task before them. In the middle of the night and in the early morning before the hunters leave, the women sing the yéyi. This singing ritual is performed to call the animals and make them weak. In this way, the hunters will only cover a short distance to kill the animals as they also travel toward the hunters.

The yéyi is perhaps the most beautiful Baka music and is certainly one of the most prestigious activities that the women do. Through this ritual they exercise power over the animals. The women may sing the yéyi during their daily activities such as when they go fishing, gathering, or working in their plantation. Under these circumstances however, it is not meant to affect the animals. The actual yéyi ritual is always performed in connection to a hunt. It is a concentrated effort to assure a quick and successful hunt. Few women can sing the yéyi as it is extremely difficult to learn. When the time comes to initiate the women to the yéyi ritual, the elder women gather medicine from the forest. They make incisions in the neck of the women, insert medicine, and make a leaf medicine which the women chew and then spit in the forest. Both medicines, known only by the elders, help the women learn the yéyi. In addition to these medicines and in preparation for every yéyi ritual, the women who are able to sing the yéyi drink a liquid medicine made out of some leaves, honey and other products, which clears their throat and gives them a strong voice that travels far in the forest.

The initiation takes place in the forest and the women may sing a good part of the night. Each time the women sing the yéyi, they hold their head with either one or two hands. In her biography, Poli points out that they do so to celebrate the return of the hunters.[36] The men who come back from the hunt with a heavy basket full of meat on their back, strapped to their forehead, must hold their head with their hands to help

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[36]Daniel Boursier, "POLI" (Salapoumbé archives, n.d.), Chap. 5, p.3.

support the weight of the load. In a similar way the women hold their head when they sing. The elders confirmed to me that this is also true for the Baka of Ndjibot.[37]

**Dodd, Robert. "Field Report Number 1: Baka Hunters and Gatherers of South-East Cameroon." n.d. 27 pp.**

In 1977-78, Robert Dodd, an anthropologist, lived with and studied the Baka near Lomié. His research focused on structural organization, leadership and authority, marriage, and the affinal relationship among the Baka. I have not been able to locate any published reports of his studies. These notes are a summary of some of his unpublished field notes found at the SIL center in Cameroon.

I here include Dodd's findings because, although they describe a more traditional setting, it is amazingly similar to life in Ndjibot. The greatest difference is probably the size of the camp and the absence of plantations. While in Ndjibot we find six clans representing a population of 200-250 people, Dodd's camp is composed of only 60 people. In my summary of his field notes, I have rewritten the Baka words, using the established Baka orthography as well as the spelling as found in the Boursier/Brisson Baka dictionary. For the most part, Dodd's notes are well supported by linguistic evidence. However, I did not include his kinship terminology, as my own research contradicts his.

In order to do his research, Dodd sought a *purely* traditional Baka camp. He settled near the village of Barakok, about 75 km southeast of Lomié. The people form a traditional clan unit who live in dome-shaped leaf shelters (**mongulu** ), a sign of their continued mobility and semi-nomadic way of life. They have no plantations and no domestic animals of their own and live mainly from their own efforts as hunters and gatherers.

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[37]Young adults did not know of this ritual.

There, mainly the women work in the Bantu (Konsimé) plantations. Their wages are plantains and macabo. This accommodates everyone well since cash cannot be easily spent in this area and the excess produce would be left to rot. The men clear the plantations and sell meat to the villagers, receiving cash incomes. The relationship between the Baka and the Bantu can be complex. The Bantu give small gifts such as alcohol, clothing and **jàmà** (something like marijuana) in order to have access to the labor, meat, and other goods of the Baka. Through an accumulated debt, the Baka are manipulated into satisfying the Bantu's various demands. The system leads to many misunderstandings and disputes, as both sides seek to extract the maximum benefit from the other. Often both parties are left feeling cheated.

Although the staple diet of the Barakok Baka is based on village foods, particularly plantain and macabo, they are not dependent on these foods. The Barakok Baka can also obtain groundnuts, manioc, maize, and sweet potato, although these should not be regarded as staples. The Baka supplement their nutritious diet with the fauna and flora of the nearby forest. Various species of antelope, porcupine, tree sloth, salamander, scaly anteater, small birds, and fish are prolific. The Baka women also gather a wide variety of nuts, fruit, edible leaves, mushrooms and tubers. Wild honey is an important food and the people are rarely short of it. When the Baka go deeper into the forest, their meat sources also include monkey, gorilla, wild pig, chimpanzee, and elephant. When compared to their Bantu neighbors, who do not access these riches of the forest, the Baka have a superior diet.

The Baka encampment of Barakok consists of a family of three brothers and their wives and children, their married sons and their wives and children, and four married daughters and their husbands, who are working for their in-laws. All the people in the camp are members of the same clan (**yèe**), except for the sons-in-law who will eventually move back to their own clans. On average, there are between 55 and 60 people in the

camp, which is close to that of the traditional group. The camp, which is set in the forest away from the road, is composed of 11 **mongulu** grouped in a semi-circle. The center of the camp is an open space used for dancing. There is also a small thatched-roof, open-sided rectangular structure (**mbanjo**) containing a fire. This is the men's meeting place.

## Structural Organization

The basic residential unit among the Baka is the clan (yèe). The Baka say that all members of a yèe belong to the same family. Interestingly, the word for love is the same as for clan, which makes the clan members the "loved ones." An encampment is usually formed around a core group of brothers and their families. Each clan has a name taken from either a natural or cultural object. Membership in a yèe is determined by patrilineal descent, and marriage within one's own clan is prohibited. The main characteristic of the yèe is that it is exogamous. A traveler may arrive at any camp where his clan is represented, and although he may be a complete stranger, he will receive hospitality and be treated as a member of the family.

Although the traditional Baka way of life forbids polygamy, now some Baka value having a second wife, because she can help with the work. However, the few polygamists rarely live with more than one wife at a time. Usually, the other one stays with her parents or elsewhere.

In addition to kinship divisions, the Baka have eight categories of people, classified according to age and status. Each category is associated with a social role and economic activity. These are:

(1) **díndó**: Small baby.

(2) **yandé**: Children up to about 10 years old. They play around the camp but also help with the work. The girls go fishing and fetch water, while the boys learn basic skills and are circumcised.

(3) **sia na wósɛ̀** : Young girls of 12 and 13 years old. They learn adult responsibilities such as caring for children, building **mongulu** , cooking, and gathering food. They may start having sexual relationships, and when they marry (usually around 14), they will most likely remain matrilocal for the first few months.

(4) **wanjɔ**: Young males of 12 and 13 years old. They now begin to kill their first animals, but they have to borrow weapons as they do not own their personal spears or machetes. After his first "big" kill (usually an antelope), neither his father nor his mother nor any of the women in the camp will eat the meat. The hunter never eats the meat of an animal he kills himself. Their abstinence will help the **wanjɔ** become a good hunter and have lots of luck in finding animals. Later on the mother may start eating his meat, but it will take longer before his father does. It is at this age that the boys go through the **Jɛngì** initiation ceremony which admits them to the world of the forest people.

(5) **mbotàkì** : A man in his prime, a hunter. After a youth has proven himself as a hunter and the women have started to eat his meat, he must continue to kill lots of animals before his mother is allowed to eat it. After a number of kills, the father makes a secret remedy from leaves in the forest and cooks a portion of meat in the mixture. Having eaten this, the father is then free to eat his son's meat. Thereafter the hunter in the forest always carries his own spear and other hunting equipment. The hunter never eats his own meat, but must give it all away. If he kills an elephant neither he nor his father or mother may eat of it.

(6) **wósɛ̀**: A married woman, usually with children. She is an expert gatherer, fisher, and **móngulu** builder. She works in plantations and plays a major role in providing and preparing food for the men.

(7) **kobo**: A middle-aged man or woman. They may be considered elders, but they still have roles as hunters or gatherers. However, their trips into the forest are less frequent.

(8) **gbekòà**: An old man or woman. These people have retired from hunting and gathering and stay in the village camps year round. They look after children and are kept by the rest of the camp. They continue to participate in camp discussions and negotiations.

## Leadership and Authority

Traditionally, the Baka have no chiefs. However, today chiefs are appointed. This new practice was borrowed from the Bantu or was forced on the Baka so that neighboring Bantu chiefs could speak with only one Baka "leader" and not the whole camp. A Baka chief usually has no special authority over his people. His role is mainly limited to welcoming strangers and representing the view of the camp to the outside world when needed. A chief can be any adult male and does not need to be either a great hunter, dancer, or diviner. It could be that one is chosen simply because people like him. Probably his ability to speak well and his knowledge of Baka traditions also play a role in the people's decision. Even in their village camps, they have not forgotten their egalitarian traditions. When there is a problem, they listen not to the chief, but to the elders, men and women, to those known to be wise, and to the great hunters and diviners. Advice is often given by speaking loudly so the whole camp can hear. Often the one with advice will go to the open place in the camp and speak out his or her advice. These are not orders but advice. If a problem persists, for example in a marriage, both parties will have a chance to state their cases, but the final decision will be made by the elder men. The people are still free to reject and disobey the advice of the elders.

No one in the camp has the right to impose his ways or to order others into action. In fact, even a powerful man in Baka society cannot be certain that even his own son will obey him. On the question of advice, the Baka are usually ready givers and ready

receivers, and such counseling is there either to take or to leave. The chief himself may at any time seek counsel.

A Preliminary Note On Marriage and the Affinal Relationship

Marriage among the Baka is marked by no ceremony, and it is therefore often difficult to know exactly when a marriage has begun or ended. As mentioned before, the clan system is an exogamous unit: one must marry outside his own clan, as well as his mother's and his father's mother's. A man seeking a wife must travel to another clan. He will start his new relationship by offering a gift to the girl's parents. This could be meat, cloth, machete, or cash. After this, he is referred to as son-in-law (**kɔ-là a lè** ) by the older generation and as brother-in-law (**mbɔyi** ) by the rest of the camp. The girl then builds a **móngulu** and the couple settles down together. The marriage is considered permanent once the couple has children. Until then wives are free to come and go as they please or even leave her husband permanently. In this case, if it is not the husband's fault, he will be able to get back the gift he has given for her and thereby be able to seek another woman. If a husband lacks respect for his in-laws, they may call their daughter to leave her husband and to come back home.

Boys seem to marry at the age of about 16 and girls at about 14. A single man in the camp is not well accepted because of the danger that he may steal another man's wife. Divorced men must quickly find another wife as the other men in the camp see him as a threat. Beyond the rule of exogamy, marriages are usually not arranged, although from time to time, the men may attempt to make such arrangements for the girls when it is convenient for them. Of course they can never force anyone into marriage. After marriage, the son-in-law will spend the first few years working for his in-laws. Often the most dangerous and difficult tasks, such as climbing trees for honey or cutting trees, are given to him. Even rituals which are strenuous and exhausting such as the **'àbàleè** dance

can be performed by the brothers-in-law. Dodd further describes the relationship between the husband and his in-laws (gílí) by saying;

> In his behavior in his gilli's camp, the son-in-law must be respectful, particularly towards his wife's mother. Whereas all other men in the camp sit in the mbanjo in the early evening and are served food by the women, the son-in-law must eat only the food prepared by his wife, and in the privacy of his own mongolu .....The son-in-law must never enter the mongolu of his wife's parents, and he must never utter the name of his brother-in-law. This last prohibition is strictly obeyed.... (p.20)

For the rest of his married life, the son-in-law must be ready to obey and serve his parents in-law. They may call on him to help with the work or go on a big hunt. He must also give gifts regularly to his mother-in-law, particularly on ceremonial occasions. These gifts are counted as payment for the wife, and he will keep track of all his gifts. In the event of a marriage breaking up, all these gifts could be demanded back. No one can refuse any request from his mother-in-law, as she has the power to curse and to make someone ill. If she is too unreasonable, however, one may send his wife back to her family.

## Comparative Notes

### Structural organization.

Dhellemmes claims there are approximately 30 clans among the Baka,[38] and Dodd claims about 25.[39] When a family arrives from a long stay either in the forest or from another camp, the man builds a house among his own clan in the village. Each family unit lives among the other members of the same clan. There are six clans represented in Ndjibot: the yè-ngòtò (a kind of vine); the yè-sìlò (a kind of vine); the yè-likèmbà (a kind of mushroom that grows independently); the yè-mbodo (refers to the yɔmbɔ, a drug

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[38](R. P.) Dhellemmes, Le Père des Pygmées (France: Flammarion, 1974), 125.

[39]R. Dodd, Some Preliminary Notes on the Sociology of Baka Religious Thought (Yaoundé: MINREST, 1979), 3.

leaf which they smoke); the **yè-njèmbè** (refers to the **kusa**[40] vine which leaves a mark on you when you touch it); and finally, represented by only one family, the **yè-yànji** (which refers to the smoking leaves used to guard against the bees when getting honey).

Polygamy is rare. Only three men in Ndjibot have more than one wife. Rarely do two wives live with their husband at the same time. A wife normally stays with relatives in Ndjibot or in another camp while the other lives with the husband. One year ago, the chief had four wives. He was constantly traveling to far away camps, trying to bring back the wives that refused to live with his other wives. Now, two wives are living with him, and he finally gave up on the two others. Often when one of his wives is in Ndjibot, the other stays at the plantation in the forest. Although the chief's desire to have many wives is exceptional, it is well accepted by everyone in the village. Many testify that his polygamous lifestyle has brought him many problems, yet no one judges him or considers him a bad person. "It is within his rights to have many wives," the Baka say. Although the Baka have been known for their monogamy, now with the introduction of plantations, some of them are attracted to the idea of having more than one wife in order to produce more crops.

Many monogamists in Ndjibot tell me that it is not desirable to have two wives, because such marriages are filled with conflicts and jealousy. One must also keep in mind that the more wives he has, the more mothers-in-law he must please. However, others tell me that they would like to have another wife, or that they have already tried to marry someone else. Trying to have more than one wife is not exceptional, but those who succeed are rare, because the second marriage must always be accepted by the first wife. If the wife opposes the idea it is doomed. Some resisting women have even resorted to burning their stubborn husbands with boiling water. My language assistants tell me that it

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[40]manniophyton fulvum

is impossible for a man to take another woman while his first wife lives in the same camp. She will resist him in words and actions, day and night, until he gives up or leaves.

Few are the women who want to share their homes and husbands with someone else. The only exception is when a women does not produce children. When a woman has not given birth after the first few years of marriage, the husband will tell her to find him a second wife. It is her responsibility to find someone for him. She will often find him another wife within her own family (such as a sister) in order to avoid future jealousy and competition. Although the husband may reject his wife and send her to her parents, most often he will keep and love her in spite of her barrenness. However, if she refuses to seek him another wife, he will divorce her.

## Marriage

As Dodd mentioned, there is no marriage ceremony. When two people love each other, they prepare for marriage. The man gives gifts to his mother-in-law, and, if they live in the village, he builds a mud house for him and his future wife. If they live in a forest camp, the woman builds a **mongulu**. When the time has come to be united, the man, during the evening, goes to the girl's parents' house to talk with her. After spending a short time there, he tells her that she must come with him. They both go to their new home where they spend the night. The next day, they are considered married and will continue to live together. As Dodd pointed out, not until the couple has children will they be considered a permanent couple. Until then the marriage is in a trial period. A number of marriages do not last beyond this period. Dodd is not entirely accurate, however, when he says that the new wife, until she has children, is free to come and go. Actually, she is expected to remain faithful to her new husband and to make her marriage work, but is free to live in both her parents' home and her husband's. If a woman does not become pregnant after some time, she may go to her **kàà-lé** (father's sister), who will give of her

own saliva mixed with **ngɛlɛ**, in exchange for a small gift. The barren woman will then apply the **ngɛlɛ** to her belly in order to become fertile. In addition, the husband and wife may wear strings carefully made out of certain forest plants around their waists. These and other traditional medicines can help the couple to bear children.

Like all other Pygmy groups, the Baka are patrilocal. However, they spend an initial period of uxorilocality during the first few years of marriage. The system is quite flexible, though, as some males prefer to live with their in-laws and stay in their camp. Normally, their stay with their in-laws will vary from six months to six years, although the two extremes are rare. Not only will the husband not pronounce the names of his brothers-in-law, as Dodd mentioned, but neither will he pronounce the names of his sisters-in-law, his wife's parents as well as grand-parents. The husband can, however, use the names of the children. A family may try to keep their son-in-law in their camp indefinitely. Although they rarely succeed, some people from Ndjibot who have gone elsewhere to marry have not come back, even after 12 years. When the **gílí** love a certain son-in-law, they may make some medicine with a special wood called **ngbé**[41] and rub it or pound it onto the seat where he frequently sits. This will assure that he will not leave the camp to go back to his own family.

Because Ndjibot is a large camp containing members of many clans, marriage within the camp is possible. In fact, although many still travel to other camps, the majority of the youths marry in Ndjibot. Whether the husband is an outsider or not, his relationship with his **gílí** is similar. There are advantages as well as disadvantages to marrying within Ndjibot. On the one hand, a young man is able to marry a girl he knows well, so he does not need to travel far away and spend many years away from his home. On the other hand, he must always live with his often demanding mother-in-law (**gí-lè nà wósè** ). For

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[41] anonidium mannii

some this is not easy. She may ask him for some honey, meat, pɔsè (white worms found in raffia), fire wood, money, or to fix or build a house.

The gí-lè nà wósè exercises much power over her kɔ-là a le . If he does not perform as expected, she can easily curse him simply by speaking words against him. If he does not give enough gifts, she may threaten him by saying that her daughter must return home. This happens frequently, and when it does, the husband may bring back his wife home only after he has given gifts to his mother-in-law.

However, the relationship with one's gílí need not be negative. The mother-in-law has not only the power to demand, but also to help, to bless and to give good luck. The mixture of her saliva with the ngɛlɛ will assure the kɔ-là a lè good luck in hunting. The goal of every husband is to maintain peace with his gílí, and of course it can be achieved when all parties are reasonable. The Baka have a strong sense of justice. If one's gí-lè nà wósè makes unrealistic demands, the kɔ-là a lè may speak up, involving the elders in the camp. If the young man is right, they will ask the mother to ease up on him.

Today there are pressures to keep the Baka from taking wives far away, leaving the village for any extended period of time. Now that many Baka have their own fields, it is sometimes difficult for them to leave their fields in order to live elsewhere. This limitation does not apply to all. Many young men, who do not yet have their own plantations, are free to travel. In addition, men who have a wife, sister or mother who can take care of their fields, are free to travel. This is sometime the case when a married man seeks a second wife from another camp.

There are also pressures from the neighboring Bantu that keep the Baka from marrying far away. The Bantu do not favor the semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Baka, including their stays at their gílí's camps, because they often rely on Baka labor to cultivate their fields. The Bantu who has trained a Baka to work for him and has given him gifts, will oppose his plan to travel or move elsewhere. However, the Baka's freedom

and their obligations toward their gílí seem, so far, stronger than the Bantu's efforts. I have never seen or heard of someone keeping a Baka from moving away. I suspect nonetheless that, with time, both the internal and external pressures will effect the semi-nomadic lifestyle and the marriage tradition among the Baka.

## Divorce

Divorce for the Baka is simple and easily obtained, as long as the two parties agree on the separation. If a wife desires to divorce her husband, she may leave him and go back to her parents. If the husband wants her back, he must address his gílí as well as his (ex) wife. This process often takes many months, during which the husband lives with the in-laws. The gílí must be satisfied before they let the girl go back to her husband's village.

On the other hand, if the husband wants to divorce his wife, he will ask her to leave. If she leaves, they are considered divorced. If she does not consent, they will normally stay together and work out their problems. The elders often get involved and play an important role in the settlement of marital disputes. They help the younger couples by giving them advice and solutions.

## Economy

The Baka of Ndjibot are far richer than the Baka of Barakok described by Dodd. The average family has a lantern, two or three pots, two and even three shirts and pants per adult, and a regular cash flow of 200 to 4000 CFA ($0.50 to $10) per month. Money, usually acquired by selling bush meat, plantains, macabo, coffee and labor, is spent quickly. When a Baka travels to Abong Mbang (20 km away) it is often to buy soap, salt, dried fish, clothes, cigarettes, and alcohol. The elders rarely travel to the big town, leaving the thrilling adventure to the younger generations. Like the Baka of Barakok, the

Baka of Ndjibot depend on the cash economy of their neighbors and have a similar relationship with the Bantu.

The Baka of Ndjibot spend a high percentage of their time working in plantations, usually their own, and searching for food. They spend approximately the same amount of time for gathering, hunting and fishing. The search for honey and larvae is done primarily during the dry seasons.[42] A smaller quantity can also be found during the rainy seasons.[43] The search for mushroom, most fruits, and plants takes place only during the rainy season.

The men hunt with the spear, gun, dog, trap, and crossbow (which is now almost non-existent). They do little hunting during the dry seasons because the animals live further in the forest in search of water and because the hunters make too much noise when they travel on dry leaves. Although Dodd said that no hunter could eat an animal he himself killed, Baka in and outside Ndjibot, who have well traveled the Baka territory, assure me that all Baka hunters are allowed to eat all small animals they killed themselves. A hunter cannot, however, eat the meat of a big animal he has killed, such as the wild pig, the gorilla, the chimpanzee, and the elephant. This taboo related to big animals only applies for a specific time established by the elders who tell each hunter how many of each animal he must kill before he is allowed to eat of it. For example, when a hunter has killed five gorilla, or whatever amount the elders decided, the elders prepare medicine which the hunter eats with the gorilla meat. From then on, this hunter is free to eat of that animal, but must always do so with that medicine which cancels out the taboo. The number of kills differ for each animal and for each hunter.

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[42]The duration of the long dry season is from November 15 to March 15 and the short from June to August 15.

[43]The duration of the long rainy season is from August 15 to November 15 and the short from March 15 to the end of May.

Although the Baka eat less meat during the dry season, it is not completely absent. Fortunately, the dry season is an important fishing period. During that time, the women live in the forest, about six kilometers from Ndjibot, and fish nearly every day. School attendance during these dry months is low as the mothers leave the village with their young children, and the young girls follow them to help and to learn the fishing skills.

Today most Baka have their own plantations and spend on average 10 to 15 hours per weeks cultivating them. They grow plantain, macabo, coffee, groundnuts, manioc, and a few other things. Coffee is the only cash crop, and few Baka grow it. At the end of the dry season when they have finished cultivating their fields and the rain tarries, the Baka will call the rain by making a certain medicine which they put in water.

Exchange with the Bantu is also an important economic activity. The Baka work in their plantations for money ($0.50 per day) or goods, and buy from them alcohol, tobacco, petrol for their lanterns, and a few other items. The Baka also borrow their guns in exchange for either meat, bullets, or money. Most often, someone's motivation to lend his rifle is to get prize meat such as wild pig, gorilla, chimpanzee, and elephant.

# CHAPTER 4

# CONCLUSION

## Summary of Baka Identity and Cultural Change

This research partly answers the questions: one, who are the Baka and, two, what transformations are taking place in their culture? It also shows that many cultural differences exist between the Eastern road area (Salapoumbé-Yenga-Moloundou) and the Western road area (Ndjibot, Lomié), as well as between Ndjibot and the Lomié area. These regional differences may or may not manifest the cultural changes, but clearly important changes are taking place among the Baka. The comparison of the notes of Higgens, Boursier, and Dodd with my own observations in Ndjibot reveals the process of change.

I have not been able to establish all the reasons for the regional cultural differences. I suspect, however, that these differences are not a result of clan distinctions, but simply a difference in location. The Baka territory covers a very large area. Travel, whether to intermarry, visit relatives, or to hunt, is still done primarily by foot, which makes each area somewhat isolated from the other. In Ndjibot, three of my informants who come from far away camps (Le Bosquet at 165 km, and Lomié area at 100 km) claim that the rituals performed at a death ceremony in Ndjibot differ from their rituals simply because of the change in location. However, it is possible that location may not be the entire reason for all the differences. The changes taking place among the Baka as well as the regional differences between Baka are far too many to be listed here. Besides, many of them are too subtle and too complex to be treated in this paper. Further research is therefore necessary to fully understand the nature and cause of these changes and differences.

Today the elders are not passing on to the younger generation all the knowledge they themselves received: such knowledge as how to perform some dances, the preparation of traditional medicines, information concerning taboos, and the roles of ancestral spirits. Most of these omissions on the part of the elders are transforming the culture. These changes are at a beginning stage and hardly affect the daily life of the Baka. On the other hand, changes such as the settlement of the Baka into a sedentary lifestyle, deforestation, and the growing Bantu population, challenge the core identity of the Baka and their worldview. On the progress and nature of these social changes, Higgens writes,

> The outside world, however, is, in its inevitable manner, impinging upon the Baka. The main changes are those caused by the gradual transition from a society based on semi-nomadic hunting and gathering to a sedentary one based on horticulture. Sedentarization means less time spent on hunting. Women are no longer free to leave the plantation work, so stays in the forest have to be regulated around new conditions.... The hunt is less frequent, so women's influence there is lessened. Women no longer build the family home or control the family possessions.[1]

Certainly the greatest single change is that of becoming sedentary, and the women are the most affected by this change as Higgens points out. The women still hold a lot of power and prestige in the Baka society. However, as they build less and less traditional leaf-huts which are giving way to the men's mud houses, and as they sing less yéyi due to fewer big hunting trips, they lose their prestigious status.

On the Moloundou road many women are still monolingual, and although on the Lomié road more women speak the neighboring Bantu language, very few speak any French. The men, who speak better French and Bantu than their female counterparts,

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[1]Kathleen Higgens, "Ritual and Symbol in Baka Life History," Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly (December 1985): 105-6.

often deal with outsiders without involving the women. Already in villages, more and more decisions are made without consulting the women.

According to government statistics, the Baka and Bantu population in the East Province doubles every five years.[2] This population growth makes the search for food more and more difficult for the Baka. The forest is shrinking as roads and trails multiply with the growing population and the steady work of logging companies, as well as the making of new plantations each day. As a result, animals are going further into the forest and are less accessible. In addition, with the growing use of guns, elephants, gorillas, and other species are disappearing. Meat shortage is only at its first stage, but it is nonetheless a reality, not only in the Ndjibot area, but in the Lomié and Moloundou areas as well. The destruction of the forest not only affects the meat supply, but also other edibles such as fruits, nuts, plants, and honey. Many Baka still do not see the purpose of having a plantation, but soon, everyone will have his own plantation, not of choice, but of necessity.

The Baka find their very identity and worldview in the context of the forest. As the forest disappears, they not only need to find food elsewhere, but must also adapt to new people surrounding them with their rules and values. Government statistics show that the Baka dislike village life.[3] They find plantation related work boring in comparison to hunting and gathering activities, and the Bantu often ridicule them and consider them as inferior. Yet, a more sedentary lifestyle is inevitable.

Intermarriages with the Bantu occur more and more frequently. The non-aggressive and gentle nature of the Baka women is attractive to Bantu men who seek submissive wives. Although marrying a Bantu means to become "richer" and wear nice clothes, it is

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[2]Cameroon Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Social affairs, La sédentarisation des Baka (Pygmées) dans la Province de l'Est, (Yaoundé: 1982), 15.

[3]ibid., 33.

rarely considered a good thing. The Baka perceive the Bantu as proud people who "annoy" the forest and show little respect for the Baka and their traditions. Baka men do not marry Bantu women because they are passive and small in statute, and do not meet the "strong leader" characteristic the Bantu women seek in a husband.

This relationship with the Bantu, along with its pressures and opportunities, will continue to bring about changes. Some of the symptoms of non-adaptive changes include violence, marital problems, increased incidence of theft, alcoholism, and drug use.[4] These symptoms are much more apparent in the life of those who spend much time in the village. Those who live in small family groups on their forest plantations are generally more free from such problems.

Although changes are clear and irreversible, they are not taking place as quickly as estimated by Althabe and Higgens. Althabe studied social change among the Baka in the Yokadouma area north of Yenga in the 1950s and anticipated that major changes would take place right away with the introduction of plantations.[5] However, 40 years later we still find Baka groups that maintain their relationship with the forest. Higgens, who also studied in the same area wrote, "...only the future will tell us if Baka girls born in the 1980s will sing the yéli to 'weaken the forest,' or if Jɛngi will come to devour their brothers so that they will be reborn under his care."[6]

In 1997, even in Ndjibot, one of the camps most affected by change, Jɛngi still plays a central part in Baka culture and the yéyi, although disappearing, is still performed. The

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[4]Kathleen Higgens, "Baka Personnel Completion Report" (Yaoundé: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1990), 1.

[5]G. Althabe, "Changements sociaux chez les pygmées Baka de l'Est Cameroun," Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines V, no. 4 (1965): 561-592.

[6]Kathleen Higgens, "Ritual and Symbol in Baka Life History," Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly (December 1985): 106.

Baka of Ndjibot have moved from a strictly hunting and gathering society to a more sedentary one with plantations. However, the Baka still spend much of their time hunting and gathering in the forest. They still maintain, some more than others, a deep relationship with the forest. For example, during the dry season, the camp is nearly empty for about two months as the people fish in the forest. In the village, the young girls still make small **mongulu** as play houses. Even the very young ones can build a strong one rapidly. If this is true for Ndjibot, it is even more true for the more traditional Baka on the Eastern road. Although the culture is changing, it may still take a few generations before they are truly sedentary. And even then, they will have learned to maintain many aspects of their colorful culture.

This present study provides little understanding on what these changes really mean to the future of the Baka. However, Colin Turnbull, in his book The Mbuti Pygmies: Change and Adaptation, addresses similar changes among the Mbuti Pygmies and provides a much deeper and insightful understanding of these changes. In addition, the Bagieli[1] and the Tikar[2] Pygmies of Cameroon are good case studies showing similar changes for a number of years before the Baka. For example, each of the three groups are known to have exchanged their inter-dependent relationship with the village people for a dependent one. If the Baka are to have a healthy relationship with their neighbors and not one of dependence, those who work among them must learn from the experiences of these other groups and provide clear means for healthy development in a new world.

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[1]Véronique Joiris, Eléments de Changements Techno-Economiques des Pygmées Bagyeli, (Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1980).

[2]Ministère de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique du Cameroun, Les Pygmées de la plaine tikar au Cameroun (Yaoundé: 1977).

## A Missiological Response

In light of these cultural transformations taking place among the Baka, how can the Christian Church respond in an appropriate manner? For a number of years, and especially since independence, the government and different Christian missions have tried to bring about positive changes among the Baka. In one of the latest government reports,[3] the goal of the government is to make the Baka citizens fully participating in national, social, economic, and political programs, which include school, hospitals, national holidays, identity cards, tax paying, and voting. These goals as well as the Christian missions' goals of church planting, evangelism, and community development, must be reached through culturally appropriate means which valorize the Baka culture and worldview. In fact, in order to obtain effective and lasting change, one must build on the culture's strength. Therefore, the following are some basic culture elements which must be carefully thought about when planning changes among the Baka.

Time Orientation. The Baka are concerned about today and very little about tomorrow. I have seen strong evidence of this during my stay in Ndjibot. For example, when I hired people to work for me but did not pay them immediately after their work, they left and completely forgot about my debt to them. They always look for an immediate return for their work and efforts. This is a reason why the introduction of plantations was accepted so reluctantly and still is. Whether pertaining to the economy, kinship, marriage, religion, or property, the Baka desire an immediate return on their efforts. Christianity is therefore often irrelevant to them when the emphasis is only given on "eternal life" which comes after death. Leaders of Bible studies or programs such as

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[3]Cameroon Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Social affairs, La sédentarisation des Baka (Pygmées) dans la Province de l'Est, (Yaoundé: 1982).

agriculture, education, or literacy must always make efforts to find what the benefits are for the people, *today*.

Group Dynamics. The Baka have always subsisted in small groups and find it difficult to adapt to much larger groups. Program leaders must take this important factor into consideration in order to achieve the best results. An ideal group may consist of many clans but should always remain small and without heavy participation of Bantu. If the Bantu are involved, the Baka might either withdraw entirely or let the Bantu dominate. For this reason, the Baka camp or village is the ideal location for these gatherings. Baka-only groups are especially important for schools and churches in that small Baka-only schools, such as we find on the Lomié road,[10] can be flexible, allowing its curriculum to follow the seasons and needs of the people. For example, it can allow more free time during the fishing season or even include fishing in its curriculum. In small Baka-only churches such as we find on the Lomié road, the language and culture, including music, can be better used and promoted. In schools and churches mixed with Bantu, such as we find on the Eastern road, the Bantu language and music often dominate.

Language Use. Despite the cultural changes and diversity from one area to another, the language is strong and unified and is most likely to remain so for a longtime. Many Baka are still monolingual, and the home language is always Baka. Community development material as well as the Scriptures must be available in Baka, the only

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[10]There are three distinct strategies used among the Catholic missions. In the Lomié area, under the direction of Father Paul and Sister Marie-Anne, the Baka culture and language is heavily promoted with a number of culturally sensitive programs. In the Abong Mbang area a stronger and earlier emphasis is given on learning French. Both areas have Baka only schools and chapels. On the other hand, the strategy on the Eastern road is to integrate the Baka with the Bantu. Schools and chapels include both Baka and Bantu, and little or no emphasis is given on language development.

language all Baka understand well. Integrating the Baka with the many Bantu ethnic groups will probably lead to a dependence on these groups. However, by grouping the Baka together and encouraging the use and development of their mother tongue, the Baka will most likely desire progress and will gain confidence that their culture and language are just as legitimate as the Bantu. Many of the Bantu groups have their own language development programs; so should the Baka. We can never expect the Gospel to have any lasting and positive impact on the people unless it is communicated clearly in their own language. Until then, the Bible will always remain the book of French foreigners.

Literacy programs will provide an opportunity for Baka adults to gain skills, such as math and French and other language skills, which would enable them to interact more successfully with the dominant society. A large amount of literacy and other material has been developed which can be obtained through SIL, the Catholic mission, and the new Baka literature center in Yaoundé.

Music. As this research demonstrates, music is at the very center of Baka rituals. In Le Bosquet, Lomié, and Salapoumbé the Catholics have seen the need for the Scriptures in oral forms. They prepare scripture based songs using indigenous music. Now with the help of an SIL ethnomusicologist, the traditional music can take an even more prominent place in worship in the Church and be a channel for Christian truth. The **lìkànɔ̀** (chantfables) play an important role in the education of children. The rules governing sex, marriage, sharing, hospitality, **Komba**, the forest and so on are found in the **lìkànɔ̀**. With the help of an ethnomusicologist the adaptation of **lìkànɔ̀** can be a possible means to communicate Christian truths, values and information.

Rite. The forest is the center of the Baka religious system. As the forest disappears, the Christian Church has a one-time opportunity to replace some of the dying values, symbols and rituals with Christian ones. However, the task is a difficult one.

The worship of ancestors and the initiation into **Jɛngì** are elements of the culture that clash with Christian teaching. But can the Church replace **Jɛngì**, and if so how? To the Baka, it is normal to pray to both **Komba** and **Jɛngì** at the same time. In fact, **Komba** and **Jɛngì** have always worked together to bless and protect the Baka. However, the Christian God, also referred to as "**Komba**," is described in the Bible as a jealous God who could never agree to share His glory with a mere created being. At present, however, the Christian faith and the animistic tradition coexist without any contradiction to the Baka. Just as **Jɛngì** is the friend of **Komba**, so is Jesus. Many Baka now seek the protection and blessing of all three. In this culture as well as other African cultures where it is common to seek blessing, strength, and power from many ancestors and spirits, it is quite easy to add the worship of Jesus and even the Holy Spirit to the already existing list. So when I told the elders of Ndjibot that I could not be initiated into **Jɛngì** because I am a Christian, they could not understand. They responded that Jesus and **Komba** desire that I also become the son of **Jɛngì**. This response is understandable in light of the precedent of the Catholic priest Dhellemmes who was initiated in Ndjibot only a few years ago. The main issue for Dhellemmes was not how to replace **Jɛngì** with a Christian equivalent, but rather, "How can we help the Pygmies in their change toward progress without taking away from their ancestral activities..."[::]

Not all Christians believe in a complete separation from animistic religion, especially when that religion and people are as attractive, charming, and friendly as the Baka. For this reason, Christianity today is not strongly accepted or rejected. However, the emerging evangelical missions who now come among the Baka and preach complete alliance to **Komba** and total separation from spirits and ancestors will surely meet a new resistance.

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[::]R.P. Dhellemmes, Le Père des Pygmées (France: Flammarion, 1985), 209.

# APPENDIX A

## Case Study of a Death Ceremony

The following is an account of a death ceremony I witnessed in Ndjibot. All the most important parts are described, except for the purification ceremony as it is strictly for the mourners.

At 1:30 a.m., I'm awakened by the sound of the drum and singing. I know it cannot be the children dancing, because it is already so late in the night. As I approach the area of festivity, I notice the drum rhythm is different from that which I usually hear. A few women elders are dancing the **esɛnjò** and then the **lìkànò**, also differently than I had seen before.[1] Upon my arrival, one male elder leads me into the main room of the house. There, on a bamboo slat bed lay the body of an old man who just died minutes earlier. He was the oldest and most prestigious elder in Ndjibot--his claim to fame being he was a powerful **ngàngà**.[2] The elders tell me he was 100 years old. My estimate is between 60 and 70 years of age.

During the following two hours, the women elders continue to sing and dance a variety of dances near the fire just outside the house. There is a small crowd around the fire who are all quietly enjoying the dancing. Some of the dances are comical, others are meaningful and precise, while others are like skits. At least two dances are farces of the

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[1] I later learnt that there are many variations of those songs and dances.

[2] A diviner who, by reading the fire, can predict details of a coming hunt and know which medicine a sick person needs. He also has the power to heal. See Boursier's paper, Le Rite ngàngà dans la vie des Baka.

actual **láàlà** dance performed by the **'embòàmbòà** spirits. In the first one, two women are hiding behind small branches, and in the second, the dancers are running and winding in a snake fashion as do the **'embòàmbòà** . Every now and then they all stop to discuss what they should do next.

Two women wear raffia ornaments around their waists while another wears a beautiful tiger cat (**sini**) skin, about 60 centimeters long, on her head. This and other skins were used by the deceased during the **ngàngà** ritual and have just been passed on to his son's wives. Another woman dances with long leaves hooked to her lower back as well as in her hands. No one cries or wails.[3]

A 1.3 meter tall drum is laying down on the ground with the drummer sitting on it. Often a dancer sits on it behind the player to modify the sound. They rotate drummers about every 30 minutes. The first drummer is a prestigious dancer and one of the few **ngàngà** .

Any death ceremony is important and this one is even more so as it involves an elder. Written and verbal messages are sent into all directions to advise the relatives, some of whom are important elders in other camps. Within hours or days many of them will arrive in Ndjibot. Other less pressing events which were planned to take place are now postponed to give place to this ceremony.

At 3:40 a.m. the music and the singing come to a stop.[4] After this until dawn, we could only hear the sorrowful pounding of the drum announcing death.

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[3]Very little expression of grief is done during the entire ceremony. I attribute this to two things. First, the death of the elder was anticipated. He was very old and ready to die as he could no longer participate in any activities. Second, nearly all his close relatives were either far away or had already died.

[4]I have witnessed the death ceremonies of a woman where many more people were present and danced much more intensively until dawn.

First day.[5] On and off during the day and until about 10 p.m., people dance and sing. Sometimes, a whole hour can pass between dances (**likàndɔ**, **esɛnjɔ**, **mɛmɓáá** and **basuka**). However, from 5:30 p.m. onwards, the dancing intensifies and the time between them becomes shorter. At 10 p.m., a crowd of people gathers in front of the house of the deceased with their bamboo beds to sit or sleep on. There are at least 40 Baka elders at the ceremony which makes it a very special event. Many Bantu from two nearby villages are present as well. At 11 p.m., the brother of the deceased (an elder from Cyrie) speaks to the crowd for nearly five minutes saying that the children must not see the deceased because he is so old. Therefore, he must be buried at sunrise (a **mbilimbili** ) when the children are sleeping.

There are now over 250 people present, including about 40 Bantu. The women are always very active in the dancing while the men only come and go. However, when a man is present at the **likàndɔ**, he usually becomes the lead dancer. The **likàndɔ** and especially the young people's dances (the **mɛmɓáá** and **basuka**, as well as about 10 others dances) are still the most popular dances. The Baka are extremely precise in their dancing and singing. This particular evening the dancers are directed by Papa Albert who regularly informs the dancers as to what dance they must perform. He does this by either addressing everyone or by singing the first stanza of the song. I would describe the entire evening as a remarkable work of art.

The Bantu are observers of this ceremony. However, during the course of the evening, a few Bantu join in the young people's dances. There are actually very few dances in which they can participate. Some of the Bantu seem to pay little respect and have little appreciation for the ceremony. They drink alcohol and dance out of harmony with the others. When a young Bantu is approached by an elder about her dancing, she

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[5]In my description, a day goes from dawn to dawn.

screams back at him and continues as if nothing had happened. While the Baka sit quietly all around the dancing area, the few Bantu present are loud and stand in the way, between the crowd and the dancers. Some of them are selling palm wine and cigarettes.

The body of the deceased is entirely covered with a blanket and is lying on a bamboo bed outside near the house. Beside the bed, the only living daughter of the deceased cries quietly. She wears a string around her head in order to keep the rain away. Every few minutes and throughout the night, the dancers, often only one at a time, dance over the body and the crying daughter.

They dance vigorously. Those who perform the **likàn**ɔ must move their lower back fast enough to shake the raffia skirt attached to their waist as well as a rattle made of small rocks in a tin attached to the raffia. This shaking adds to the drumming and singing. When one becomes tired, he or she passes on the raffia skirt to another dancer. In the same way, the drummer, when tired, is replaced.

At 11:30 the dancing stops for a half hour break. At midnight, about 50 Baka start again performing the young people's dances. Soon after, Papa Albert speaks to the crowd encouraging everyone to dance properly and have a spirit of unity. I noticed a definite improvement after his short speech. The youths perform three different dances within 30 minutes, taking a one or two minute break between each one. All three are quite entertaining. In one dance (the **sakoba**), the young people made up of girls only, make a circle. Then one dances all the way to someone who in turn dances to someone else and returns, while still dancing, back to her original position. Meanwhile a girl leads the singing with the other girls responding. This dance is more like a game and is often performed in the evenings.

Following these three dances comes the **basuka** performed by the young people. Approximately 24 girls and two boys follow two leaders, forming two long lines. They most often move in some kind of circles having one or two focus points. This dance is

sexual in nature with two beautiful young women as leaders. They slowly dance toward a focus point (the drummer or someone else) by opening and closing their legs and saying "**àmi kàlò** " (up and down). As they dance their knees are bent and their feet do not leave the ground. They come only inches away from the person focused on. Once they pass the person they move more quickly to the next focus point.

At this point the spirit of festivity is suddenly interrupted by a young Baka man wielding a machete, who in a rage attempted to attack another man. Apparently, he was forbidden to see his ex-wife and is venting his jealous rage upon her new husband. The dancing comes to a halt and the singing is replaced by outcries of protest by everyone. At the command of the elders, the man is apprehended and tied up by the hands and feet. He is then left on the ground near a fire until morning. Minutes later, the ceremony resumes as if nothing had happened.

Now at 1:30 a.m. the drum begins a new rhythm. For the next hour, many different dances are performed by the adults and elders. The Bantu are gradually leaving the camp to return to their two villages nearby. Meanwhile, the dances become more precise and seem more meaningful. Some of them are fast, others are slow or intense or comical, and most of them eventually reach a climax. Sometimes as few as six adults are dancing, and at other times there are as many as about 40. The singing varies from one dance to another: sometimes it is intense, other times soft, or in the form of a story, similar to the **yelí** (with many canons), or with a responding crowd. Needless to say, every minute is entertaining and filled with ritual, meaning and precision. The drum is sometimes accompanied by a **ligbégbé** (rattle) and a small plastic container on which someone beats with a stick. All instruments are played faultlessly.

Afterward, on a still different rhythm and singing, many Baka join in the **'embòàmbòà** (spirit of buffoon) dance. Dancing in circles, the people act like buffoons while sometimes mimicking the funny voice of the **'embòàmbòà** .

At 2:45 a.m., the evening is approaching its climax. The singing and dancing is at its best. With about 15 adults dancing in circles, I witness the most beautiful dancing and singing of the evening. I am later told that this dance and song, called the **mòkìlà**[5] is a prelude to the **láàlà** which is the dance of the **'embòàmbòà** spirits. The elders sing and the crowd responds. The song which lasts between 10 and 15 minutes, tells the people that they must all transform themselves into elephants and be mighty and powerful.

Now the singers, made up of almost only women, divide into two groups. On one side sit the sopranos with the altos on the other. When the moving around ends, I find myself sitting between the two groups, giving me the best stereophony. Before long, Papa Albert interrupts the singing to encourage everyone to perform as they should. All the Bantu have now left as well as a few Baka adults and children. As the singing resumes, someone tells me that the women are calling the **'embòàmbòà** and the fire, while others dance the **bolingo**. The people dancing wear no ornaments or special clothing. Elders, for a short while, call the spirits by saying "come, come and dance quietly and do not cause any trouble."

Suddenly, as the people are singing and dancing, glowing red embers appear from the forest, and rushing on all sides of the area of festivity, bringing a high level of excitement, they disappear again into the forest. Those running fast with red embers leave behind them long pronounced red trails into the dark night. For nearly five minutes, fires enter the forest in order to call the **'embòàmbòà**. Soon, shadows appears in the dark. The **'embòàmbòà** spirits have finally come to perform their **láàlà** dance.

Now at 3 a.m. and as the drumming and the singing continue, the **'embòàmbòà** slowly approach the silent and staring crowd. Still at about 60 feet away, with the

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[5]The **mòkìlà** are people who transform themselves into animals, such as elephants, gorillas, and others. The **mòkìlà** singing refers to this metamorphosis.

glowing red embers continuing to run in and out the forest, we can hear the **'embòàmbòà** groan. At 30 feet away, the approximately 12 **'embòàmbòà** start whistling while dancing their way closer. Only the men can impersonate the **'embòàmbòà** spirits. Their leader, decorated with leaves and holding a one meter stick, dances separately from the others and has his back to the crowd. The others dance behind tall palm branches so that no one can see them, and are for the most part forming a straight continuous wall with the branches. The leader dances constantly, while the others only dance for short periods of time. The crowd and especially the young women, are singing.

This **láàlà** dance is also like a skit. At times the drumming and the singing stop at once, and we can hear the **'embòàmbòà** speak to each other in a low, growling voice[7] (sometimes it sounds like they are arguing). These parts are extremely funny. As they dance the **'embòàmbòà** question the people about the death of the deceased and claim their own innocence in his death. Sometimes, they run all over the place and towards the watching crowd. They dance so near the people that the palm branches touch them. The music plays a crucial role in this act. At times it stops in calculated places of the act, and other times it builds to a captivating climax where everything is fast and intense. Not just anyone can perform the **láàlà** dance. They are specially gifted dancers who are able to give an excellent performance.

The **'embòàmbòà** are frequently called bad spirits because they enter houses and take food and clothes. Because some of them arrive naked from the forest, they steal clothes and other items which, when the ceremony is over, they leave anywhere, even far off in the forest. For this reason, a few people are sitting with bags of their belongings which they protect by keeping with them. Now as they dance, I'm told that some

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[7]The voice is similar to that of the TV personage of "Animal" in Sesame Street.

**'embòàmbòà** are still naked behind their palm branch while others, are dressed in other people's clothes.

At 3:30 a.m., the **'embòàmbòà** leave for the forest (they actually hide on the road 30 meters away). However, the women's persistent singing soon brings them back and everything starts again. As before, it is funny and very well performed, and this part in particular is amazingly well organized. The elders direct the events by saying a word or short sentence which triggers a new song or part of the ritual. I have seldom heard a Baka whistle before tonight, but during this dance they do it quite well. It is now 4:15 and suddenly, the **'embòàmbòà** leave again for the forest. As they run away the music intensifies. Many glowing red embers appear again all around us, leaving a trail like fire works, and disappear into the forest.

Now as the dancers are coming back, the music softens while the **'embòàmbòà** chant the word **'embòàmbòà** many times with a funny voice. Then they themselves start a song, and the people join in with much enthusiasm. It seems to be a story, perhaps a **likànɔ**, well known by every one. It becomes animated and intense at the end, involving the young singers in a complex and fast rhythm. There are many parts to the singing and every young girl knows her part. During this time, the lead dancer dances with great intensity. As soon as this comes to an end, Papa Albert sings the first line of a new song and then after 10 minutes of singing, he introduces the last song. His leading is always done in a gentle manner and is well calculated. Everyone sings and dances with such precision and ease.

At 4:50 a.m., the **'embòàmbòà** make their final retreat into the forest and the singing rapidly fades away giving place to the distant growling of the **'embòàmbòà** . The concert ends suddenly and now the people are getting up, stretching their legs and making their way home. Now the relatives of the deceased must prepare for the burial, which will take place in one hour.

Second day. Throughout the day with frequent breaks, a man played the drum. At 11:30 p.m. the celebration started but ended prematurely at about 1:30 a.m. because of the rain. I was later told that the evening started so late because the **'embòàmbòà** came again. I did not attend this night's festivities.

Third day. Again, throughout the day with frequent breaks, a man played the drum. Early evening, at about 6:30, the celebration starts. Under a clear sky with no moon and lit with countless stars, *the young people's dances* are performed for hours. They dance the **basuka** and sometimes still forming two rows in a dance similar to the **basuka**, they come to the open door of the house of the deceased[8] and dance for about one minute and then return to the center place. Tonight the ceremony is attended mostly by the relatives and there are no Bantu. At 8:20 I count about 20 adults and 35 children. In addition to a very dim fire, there are three lanterns. There are no beds outside, a sign that it will end early. As in the first night the elders encourage the young people to perform well. The dances performed are quite similar to those of the first night, but now a few elders are participating in them. While the young people and a few elders dance in the center place, a man dances at the door step of the house what seems to be an important ritual filled with purpose and meaning. I was later told that this special dancer was putting medicine on the ground in front of the house as he was dancing to keep the **mólili** (spirit of the deceased) from coming back. At 9:30 p.m., the children are filled with laughter and it is obvious that they are enjoying themselves. Their playfulness does not, however, interfere with their precision in these demanding songs and dances.

Now the evening comes to a climax. The girls are moving under the small verandah, near the house, made of traditional raffia mats where they all sit. Then the most beautiful Baka singing of the evening, a yodeling similar to that of the yéyi, takes place. All

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[8]The dancers perform this dance only when the person died in his house.

lanterns are extinguished and the dancing area is vacated. The singing is intense for about 20 minutes as it is calling the **'embòàmbòà** spirits. The children are stretched to their maximum in this performance, there is a strong spirit of joy and celebration. Now that the deceased has been buried, there are no glowing red embers running into the forest.

One **'embòàmbòà** is now approaching. He is the leader with palm branches attached to his arms and head. As he slowly comes closer, the music stops. He dances alone in complete silence. The effect is poignant. After a couple minutes the music starts and then the singing. Ten minutes later, other **'embòàmbòà** make their appearance. There are four **'embòàmbòà** beside the leader, and each one dances completely hidden behind a palm branch.

As in the first night, the whole **láàlà** presentation is at the same time serious and funny. During certain dances and when they speak in a strange voice, the crowd laughs. Their dances in the form of skits are different than those of the first night. Sometimes they make a straight wall with the palm branches while the lead dancer dances all around it. Other times they sing with their rough voices or whistle. There is always a precise harmony between the dancers, the singing crowd, and the drum.

At 11:40 p.m. the singing lacks enthusiasm. Minutes later, the music stops and the **'embòàmbòà** quickly disappear in the forest. Immediately following, the people return to their homes as they are tired.

The young girls had an important part in this evening. Actually, they provided 100% of the singing and about 80% of all the dancing. These girls, who ranged from about 10 to 20 years of age, had an incredible responsibility to perform complex singing as well as all sorts of dances.

Fourth day. A number of times during the six day ceremony, a ritual of washing takes place in order to give strength to all the mourners. This morning I am able to witness the event. We leave the camp at 7:45 a.m., because an early morning rain made it

impossible for us to travel earlier. With all the relatives, children and adults, I walk to the nearest river, two kilometers away. On the way, a woman elder, with the help of her machete, scratches the bark of a **kùngu** tree[9] to fill a large leaf with its powder, a medicine that gives strength and healing. A little further, she does the same with the **lìbabà** tree,[10] which medicine provides good luck. A young Baka man tells me that the **mèlɛa**[11] or any single one of these medicines would suffice for the washing ritual. However, the old medicine woman decides that both medicines are necessary this time.

Many people are looking at me and talk about me as we walk. The elders had told me that I could go to this ritual and even take pictures, but I now wonder if their decision is approved by all. As usual, the young people play and tease each other all the way. At the river everyone is excited. The water is high and flows rapidly as it is the peak of the rainy season. Before we left, the people decided that instead of building a dam and having two washing rituals, one for each the men and the women, every one would bath together in the fast flowing river.

With their lower half covered, they all enter into the river. While the older people carefully and quietly wash themselves near the bank, the young people play enthusiastically, letting the strong current carry them further, under the heavy canopy of the exotic rain forest. Meanwhile, a woman elder standing at the shore throws the medicinal powder a little at a time into the water. After less than five minutes the people begin to come out of the river. As they reach the shore, the woman elder and a young man, put some of the remaining **kùngu** medicine on each one's head, making a straight line from the neck to the forehead. The remaining of the **lìbabà** medicine is only applied to the forehead of some of the people. When everyone is out of the water, the woman elder

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[9]piptadeniastrum africanum
[10]santiria trimera
[11]desbordesia glaucescens

goes into the water up to her knees and washes with medicine as well. When she comes out the young man puts some **kùngu** powder on her head. Everyone, young and old, is now under the protection of the medicines enabling them to carry out the death ceremony without getting over-tired or sick. Two elders take the left over medicine from the woman elder saying they will wash later. At 8:15 a.m. the washing is finished and we start walking back.

Shortly after our return to the village, a young man is ready to go hunting to provide meat for the feast of the elders. The Baka community borrowed a gun from a nearby Bantu, and the relatives of the deceased bought five bullets. As a payment for the gun, some of the meat will be given to the gun owner. Contrary to what they normally do, no **ngɛlɛ** is applied to the hunter's forehead to provide him with good luck. Although the people played the drum a number of times for a few minutes throughout the day, there is no celebration tonight. The Baka tell me that the ceremony is extremely demanding and now the people must rest.

End of death ceremony. Very little dancing takes place on the fifth and last day of the ceremony. Because of the rain, the purification ritual of the relatives takes place only three days after the ceremony. An elder tells me that it is not appropriate for me to attend this. I do not insist.

The feast of the elders is also postponed until the fourth day after the six day ceremony because of the rain and problems in obtaining the meat. On that day, at 6:20 a.m. a man starts to play the drum while the women cook antelope meat on a fire inside the house, and yam on a fire outside. As the food is cooking, a woman elder pours some of the meat juice around the tomb to please the spirit of the departed. At 7:15, with about 40 people present, the singing and dancing start. While the women adults are singing, Camille, a key **ɓùmà** dancer in Ndjibot, dances solo for the most part and is occasionally

accompanied by another man. Wearing raffia ornaments around his feet, legs and waist, Camille executes this difficult dance performed on his toes.

Now the daughter of the deceased stands near the door of the house with ngɛlɛ,[12] mixed with her own saliva, in a leaf. Every few seconds someone comes to her to have the wet ngɛlɛ applied to their forehead, upper right arm and to their machete or spear if the person brought one. Sometimes, the daughter spits in the ngɛlɛ to make it more muddy. At 7:50 a.m. the dancing and singing reach a climax and then stop. Many people are leaving while the elders wait to be served their meal. Soon, the women bring a plate of pieces of meat covered in sauce and a plate of yam to the elders. All sharing the two plates, eight men in total, eat the meal. The women elders eat inside the house.

According to tradition, no young people can eat of this meat, for doing so would surely keep them from having children ever again. However, two young male adults joined the elders to eat the meat. Both men are newly-weds and have no children. They later told me that they do not believe in this old tradition.

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[12]Powder made from the mahogany tree mixed with sand and saliva, which gives good luck.

## APPENDIX B

### Pre-initiation contacts with Jɛngì

On January, 1997, Ndjibot is filled with joy and excitement as **Jɛngì** arrives to initiate the young men. He lives 500 meters into the forest, away from the camp, and will remain there for nearly four months. No **móngulu** or any other shelter is built for him, which leaves him with only the trees to protect him from the rain. For this reason he normally comes during the dry season. The day after his arrival, the children, while singing the **Jɛngì** songs, gather all the raffia necessary to make his costume. In the nearby swamp, they cut the top part of the raffia palm tree, using the soft part to make long strips of one centimeter wide. They then give the strips to the already initiated men, who make **Jɛngì**'s beautiful raffia covering. Each of the two sections of this **ndimba**[1] (raffia string covering) looks like a closed umbrella made with 1 1/2 meter long raffia strips. The two golden colored coverings fit into each other so that **Jɛngì** can stretch into a three meter giant or shrink to less than one meter tall. Whether tall or short his covering always fits perfectly. As he turns around the raffia strips swirl around him to make an impressive and majestic effect.

At his arrival, **Jɛngì** instructed the elders to make a white powered medicine which they applied to everyone's head in the camp. This ensures that the people will have strength and health during the long **Jɛngì** celebration.

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[1]This word is only used to refer to the covering of **Jɛngì** and the **mòkondi** spirits. Other raffia ornaments used in dancing are called **'atu'a**.

Tonight on January 15 at 7:50 p.m., three drums are standing up. These are the **wàdíi** (the small one) about one meter tall, the **wàngbu** (the short one) 1.3 meter tall, and the **wàgèngɛ́lɛ́** (the long one) 1.4 meter tall. These drums were made just a few days ago. This important time of festivity is the main reason for replacing the old single drum they have used during the last six years. Only men play the drums. Every few minutes each drummer interrupts his playing to adjust the sound of his drum. With the help of a solid stick, each one hits pieces of wood placed around the skin forming the drum head to tighten it, making it a sharper percussive sound.

Every one takes **Jɛngì** seriously and respects and fears him, even the few professing Roman Catholics. For each one he is the great *spirit of the forest* and the chief over all Baka spirits. He is more feared than **Komba** (God) and is much more involved in the lives of the Baka as he protects them from the dangers of the forest, gives them strength medicine, and helps the hunters find animals.

At 8:15 p.m., the men lay the drums down. The player and two men sit on each of the two largest drums and the player and one other man sit on the small drum. This gives much more bass resonance to the sound. All three drums are played in harmony with each other. The women start singing a song only used to call **Jɛngì**. There are many **Jɛngì** songs, and each one is used in its proper context. The song has very few words, but the harmony between the singers who sing in canon and the drums makes a powerful concert. Everyone stares at the forest and the trail where **Jɛngì** is expected to come out. The scene takes place in the middle of the camp in front of their mud houses and leaf-huts. The drummers are the closest to the open place where **Jɛngì** will perform his dances. Behind them the singers, composed of women, young and old, are sitting together. The majority of these singers are 12 to 14 years of age. Behind the singing women, a few elders, men and women sit on the ground or on bamboo stools. I am invited to sit with them, near a fire to keep warm. About 20 adults and 30 children are present.

At 8:20 p.m., after only five minutes of this high quality concert, **Jɛngì** appears at the edge of the camp. Dressed in his two-storey **ndimba** and surrounded by three men who make high pitch sounds to announce his coming, he approaches the crowd. The drummers leave their drums and join the crowd behind. Only the three lying drums and the men surrounding **Jɛngì** separate the crowd from the *feared spirit*. Then **Jɛngì** leaves rapidly from the center place, walking all the way to one end of the camp then to the other end and finally returns back to where the crowd awaits him. The men resume their drumming and the women sing a different song. Only **Jɛngì** dances, pivoting on himself and stretching and shrinking his **ndimba**, making the raffia sway in all directions. The men surrounding **Jɛngì** make different sounds, often in reaction to **Jɛngì**'s actions such as when he stretches to become three meters tall. **Jɛngì** himself is completely silent during the entire event.

After 15 minutes, the drumming and singing suddenly stops and **Jɛngì** quickly disappears back into the forest. Seconds later, the men play their drums while the women clap their hands following a new rhythm. **Jɛngì** comes back and dances more intensely than the first time. The women sing more intensely to bring new life to the celebration. Now eight people surround **Jɛngì**. Suddenly, **Jɛngì** tries to come near the singing women but the surrounding men interfere. From now on, every few minutes **Jɛngì** tries to reach the singing women. My informants tell me that if he succeeds, he may harm or even kill the women.[2] Therefore, the men surrounding him protect the crowd by standing in **Jɛngì**'s way. Each of **Jɛngì**'s attempt is done gently and non-aggressively, in rhythm with the music. Now everyone, except the elders, stand ready to run for their lives in case **Jɛngì** succeeds in passing the guarding men.

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[2] As far as I know, no woman has ever been known to have been killed by **Jɛngì**.

The drums intensify as they change rhythm and the women start clapping their hands again. The men surrounding **Jɛngì** make sounds similar to war cries. Suddenly, for a second time, the singing and drumming stop. There is complete silence as **Jɛngì** leaves again into the forest. These times of rest can be called by either **Jɛngì** himself, the male elders, the female elders who direct the singing, or even the drummers who may need to rest their hands. It is however, difficult to determine who calls the time of rest. In any case, the transition is smooth and testifies to their great musical skills. In contrast to the surrounding ethnic groups, the music and dance of the Baka command the very center of their culture and identity, taking a major part in most of their activities.

After a five minute rest, drums, hand clapping and soft singing come to life again. In response, shouts echo from the forest. The singing and drumming stop again, leaving the camp in complete silence. As shouts from the forest intensify **Jɛngì** approaches and the women suddenly pick up their singing with a new enthusiasm, joined by loud drumming. In a canon style similar to the **yéli**, they sing a new **Jɛngì** song. A new life and determination stronger than the first two appearances takes place.

Now 10 men surround **Jɛngì** forming almost a complete circle around him. **Jɛngì** tries more intensely to reach the singing women and the men increase efforts to stop him. Each time the men interfere, he rolls gently over them, making his **ndimba** swirl on them. This adds great suspense to the evening. However, **Jɛngì**'s actions are still performed gently. Now even the elders stand.

It is a time of great excitement. Every aspect of the celebration is accomplished with remarkable precision and control. The perfection and intensity of the music, the singing and dancing and the harmony between all of them confirm the important role **Jɛngì** plays in Baka culture. **Jɛngì** is now surrounded by 16 men and the intensity of the singing continues.

Then, once more, all of a sudden, there is complete silence and Jɛngì returns to the forest. The Baka music is at once replaced by another concert, one provided by the forest's birds and animals. This short rest which is part of the ceremony allows each one to get in touch with reality. The evening is cool and fog settles on the forest and camp. The stars and a small moon provide just enough light to distinguish the people. A few elders roll up cigarettes and a mother leaves to her nearby house to put her young child to bed. Now only a few children remain leaving adults and babies sleeping on their mother's backs.

At 9:12 p.m., after 10 minutes of rest, the women call Jɛngì again by singing one of the many Jɛngì songs. The men stand the two tall drums upright while an elder woman drags the small drum behind the scene. This small drum will no longer be heard tonight. Jɛngì arrives only moments after the singing begins. Soon a high level of energy and enthusiasm, even greater than the times before, is displayed. The half sleeping children, awakened by the excitement, re-enter the festivity. A few young boys of about 12 to 18 years of age wear a simple hat made of two pieces of raffia, one circling the top of their heads and the other hanging behind their head. This proclaims them as those who will be soon initiated.

Twenty men now surround Jɛngì and about 80 people, mostly adults, are present. Five Bantu are observing the event. The men dance around Jɛngì and about two thirds of the crowd also join the dancing. However, the crowd is keeping a safe distance from Jɛngì.

Behind the singing women, a key elder in the planning of the coming of Jɛngì sits quietly on a log. A young adult male dancer comes before him and performs a dance as a sign of respect and to bless him. There is a great time of festivity and rejoicing as more and more people join in the dance.

At 9:40 p.m. the drums stop but the singing continues very softly. An elder[3] comes face to face with **Jɛngì** as the men surround both of them. The elder, while looking at **Jɛngì**, tells the people the message **Jɛngì** told him during the day in the forest. After each short phrase, the surrounding men respond with a loud enthusiastic shout. The message told is an encouragement to all and especially to the women to sing well and carry out the rituals they ought to do. After this short message the festivity resumes. For the next 30 minutes, the singing, the drumming and the dancing is loud and alive and with no breaks. Then, at 10:10 p.m., the music stops for the last time. Everyone, quickly or slowly, retires to his or her home. They need a good night of sleep as many will need to leave early to hunt, fish, gather, or work in their plantation.

This same ritual with minor variations is performed during many of the following nights until the actual initiation which takes place two months later. It is not unusual for the people to pray to **Jɛngì** and seek his blessing as well as to Jesus and **Komba**, as the Catholic missionaries taught them. Sometimes, only minutes separate the Christian from the animistic rituals.

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[3]Papa Albert is a key figure in nearly all traditional rituals in Ndjibot. Added to his knowledge is his deep burden to be faithful to traditions and to pass them on to the younger generation. Many other elders share his knowledge, but remain most of the time in the forest.

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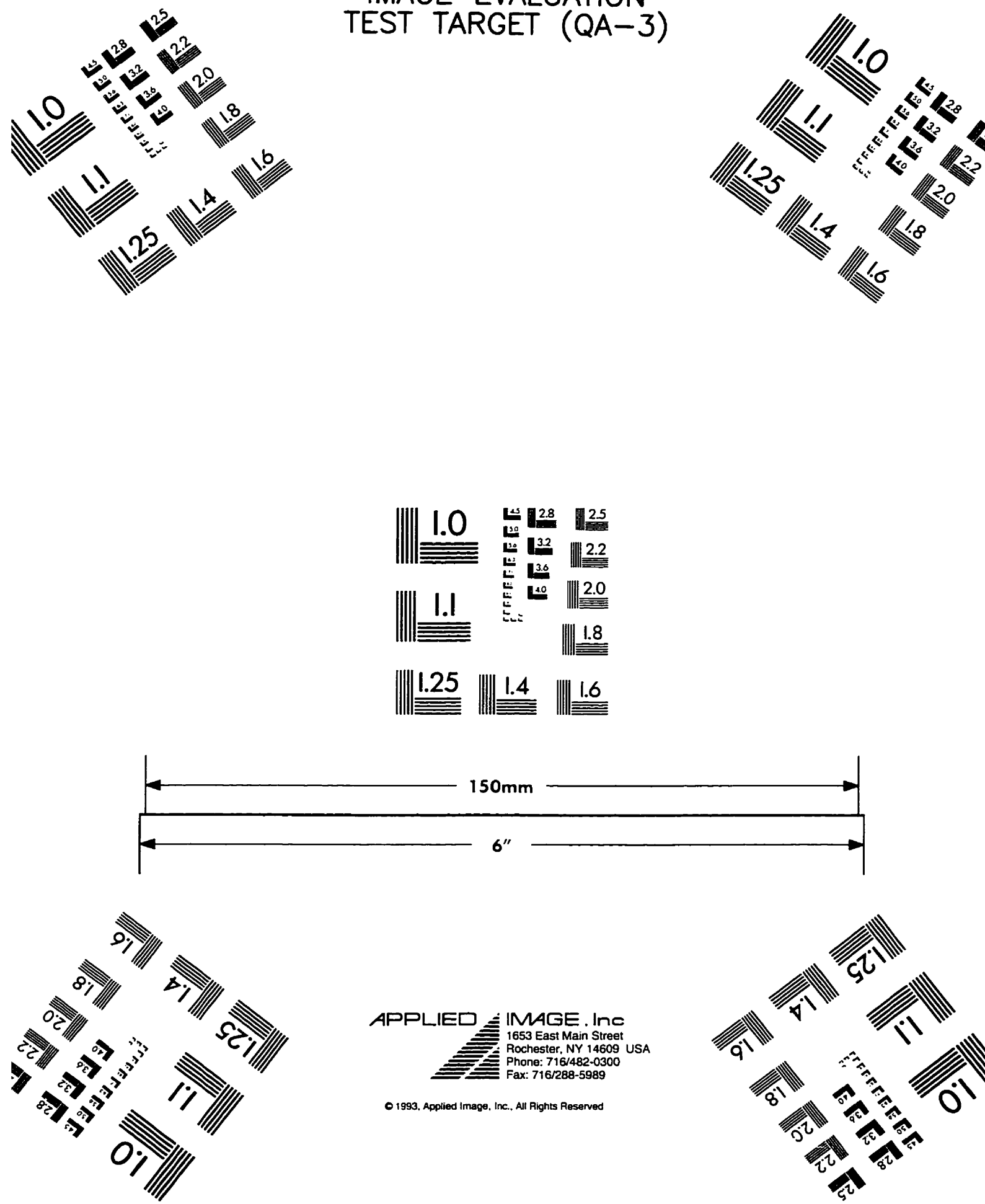
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