

# **Pygmy hunter-gatherer egalitarian social organization: the case of the Mbendjele BaYaka**

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(Lewis, J., 2014. Pygmy hunter-gatherer egalitarian social organization: the case of the Mbendjele BaYaka. In Hewlett, B., (ed) *Congo Basin Hunter-Gatherers*. Pp. 219-244.)

## **The Pygmies of Central Africa**

The steady reduction in access to forest by Pygmy groups across Central Africa has resulted in most being more accurately called 'former hunter-gatherers' than hunter-gatherers. Today, the different Pygmy groups are characterised by great diversity (Bahuchet 2012). One small group in Cameroon, the Medzan, now occupy a savannah, many Twa groups in DR Congo, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda have sedentarised amongst farming communities, and increasing numbers of Baka in Cameroon and Gabon are becoming sedentarised and alcoholised, along roadsides (Agland 2012). All experience increasing pressure from rampant commercial hunting, artisanal and industrial mining and logging activities, protected areas encompassing good forest, and in some places warring militias, government forces and refugees.

Despite the great diversity of situations that many Pygmies groups find themselves in today they share some remarkable similarities. In particular, their egalitarian social organisation is bound up in a matrix with other key cultural practices. Hewlett identified some of these as spending at least four months a year hunting and gathering in the forest; strongly identifying with and preferring forest life; contrasting the 'forest world' to the 'village world'; having economies based on demand-sharing; practising important rituals associated with elephant hunting; having intimate parent-child relations; and diverse relationships with neighbouring farming groups (1996:215).

Ethnomusicologists working among Pygmy groups across the Congo Basin remark on similarities in their unusual highly integrated choral yodelled (alternating between chest and head voice) and polyphonic (multiple overlapping melodies) singing style among groups living very far apart (Arom 1978, 1981, 1985 on western Pygmies; Cooke 1980; Demolin 1993 on the eastern Pygmies; Furniss 1993, 1999, 2006, 2007 and Furniss and Bahuchet 1995 on western Pygmies; Kazadi 1981 on similarities across Twa or Twa groups in DRC; Merriman 1980 on similarities in DRC; Rouget 2004 on the Pygmy musical style; and others).

Bahuchet tabulated his observations of cultural similarities and differences between Kola, Bongo, Baka, Aka, Twa, Asua, Mbuti and Efe Pygmies stretching from west to east across the Congo Basin (Table 5.1, 1996: 109). Across the

region yodel and polyphony together are consistently associated with forest mobility, camps made of round leaf and liana huts, woven-handled axes, and an egalitarian political and economic social order. The greater the degree of acculturation to farmer and village lifestyles the less frequent is yodelled polyphonic music. Those groups Bahuchet identifies as no longer singing polyphonies (Kola and Bongo) are those that Verdu et al (2009) show to be the most influenced by outsiders' genes (figure S3).

The different Pygmy groups have been isolated from one another long enough to develop different languages, genes, technologies and techniques for exploiting forest resources. But there are underlying structural and cultural similarities in music, a predatory and mimetic language style (Lewis 2009), ritual structures (Lewis 2002), identification with a forest hunter-gatherer lifestyle, a gendered division of labour based on the symbolism of blood (Ichikawa 1987; Lewis 2008), economies based on demand-sharing, egalitarian social organisation, and their status as the 'first people' of the region.

These elements are too specific to emerge from convergent evolution and with genetic evidence proving a shared past, appear to be key components of a highly resilient and effective adaptation to forest hunting and gathering. I will elaborate on the political aspects of this adaptation using the Mbendjele BaYaka as an example of this egalitarian social order.

## **Mbendjele BaYaka**

Mbendjele living in the equatorial forests of northern Republic of Congo (RC) will be the focus of this paper since this is the group I know best<sup>1</sup>. Most Mbendjele spend about two-thirds of the year hunting and gathering in forest camps and some part of the year near agriculturalists' villages. Although continuing to hunt and gather, here they will also trade, labour or perform services for villagers in return for food, goods, alcohol or money. However, the situation varies. Some Mbendjele near the Central African Republic (CAR) are evangelised and although relatively sedentary do not farm. Those living near logging towns may spend long periods working outside the forest. Others further south spend most of the year in the forest, with some groups not coming out to villages for years at a time.

Just like people from other Pygmy groups that I have talked to, Mbendjele say that they belong to a larger group of forest people generically referred to as '*bayaka*' people. Indeed Mbendjele more often refer to themselves as *bayaka* than Mbendjele. 'Mbendjele' is principally used to distinguish themselves from neighbouring *bayaka* groups such as the Mikaya, Ngombe or Baka. While not concerned about height, *bayaka* is equivalent to the academic term 'Pygmy'.

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<sup>1</sup> PhD research was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, an Emslie Horniman Scholarship and the Swan Fund (1994-1997). I return regularly to the Mbendjele area.

The *bayaka* groups I will be focussing on here occupy forest west of the Ubangi River, in CAR, RC, Cameroon and Gabon. They are made up of Mbendjele (15-20,000), Baka (45-60,000), Aka (15-20,000) and several smaller groups such as the Mikaya, Luma, Kola, Gyeli, Bongo and others (maybe 10-15,000). Many still largely depend on hunting and gathering in an immediate-return society, though others, such as the Bongo, Kola, Gyeli, Luma and increasingly Baka too, are engaged in increasingly diversified economies. The term '*bayaka*' is contracted to different extents and used by Aka, Baka, Luma, Mbendjele and Mikaya, typically as *baaka*, or *baka*. Since the Baka are speakers of an Ubangian language, whereas the Aka and Mbendjele speak Bantu languages, I write the ethnonym as BaYaka to emphasise this dual classification. I shall use BaYaka to encompass all these western groups, but their individual ethnonyms when providing specific examples.

BaYaka groups claim shared identity based on common descent from the first forest hunter-gatherers, a shared history, some shared oral traditions (e.g. *gano* fables) and taboo complexes (e.g. *ekila*), an economy based on forest hunting and gathering, ritual and singing styles, and the possibility of marriage relations, but not on trading goods. This contrasts with BaYaka peoples' relations with 'village people' that are predominantly based on trading and exchanging goods. Most villagers refuse to marry BaYaka, many will not eat together with BaYaka nor allow them to stay in their homes or villages. Rivers divide the territories of different BaYaka groups so they do not overlap, however villagers superimpose their land claims over parts of BaYaka land.

## **BaYaka and Bilo**

The Mbendjele distinguish between themselves as 'forest people' (*bisi ndima*) with neighbouring farming groups who they call 'village people' (*bisi mboka*). The Mbendjele clans with whom we lived have exchange relations with four different groups of farmers, the Bongili, Kabunga, Sangha-Sangha and recently with the Bodingo. In addition to those just mentioned, I came across Mbendjele in relations with many different farmer groups: the Kaka, Ndongu, Ngando, Enyelle, Pomo, Yekinga, and Yasua. All these various groups are referred to using the ethnonym 'Bilo'. Bilo makes a meaningful distinction between non-BaYaka Africans and BaYaka (Pygmy) people that is based on perceived racial, ideological, knowledge, political and economic differences. Instead of Bantu, farmer or villager, in this chapter, as elsewhere, I follow their lead and use Bilo.

Mbendjele describe Bilo as recent arrivals in the forest who discriminate against them, attempt to exploit them, claim rights over their land and labour, and make aggressive claims to own farmland, rivers, forest and even other people. While Mbendjele resent these claims, Mbendjele elders often emphasise that it is their transience in the forest that makes Bilo claims vacuous and therefore not to be taken too seriously. Bilo are useful for providing Mbendjele with access to goods from outside the forest (notably iron and salt), and appreciated for their role in judging disputes between Mbendjele that the community is unable to resolve.

There exists a developed oral tradition that elaborates and entrenches cultural stereotypes differentiating BaYaka forest people from Bilo village people through accounts of the past. These numerous and widely told stories (*gano*) attest to the enduring and elaborate nature of the opposition between them. The cultural significance of the contrast between forest people and village people has been commented on by other ethnographers in Central Africa as one of the most fundamental markers of ethnic difference in forested regions (see for instance Turnbull 1966, Bahuchet and Guillaume 1982, Waehle 1986:392, Grinker 1994, Kenrick 2000, Lewis 2001, Kenrick and Lewis 2001, Köhler and Lewis 2002). Even where forest people no longer have access to forest, may even speak the same language and share many similar cultural practices and beliefs with their farmer neighbours, these oppositions do not break down. Indeed they can become more entrenched as segregation and discrimination increase, as has happened to the Twa Pygmies of the Great Lakes Region (Lewis 2000).

### **The egalitarianism of hunter-gatherer societies**

In the late 1970s James Woodburn developed his comparative analysis of the ethnography of hunter-gatherers to show that they could be divided into 'immediate-return' or 'delayed-return' societies (1982). Although taking economic activity as the starting point the implications of the difference between immediate- and delayed-return societies go well beyond economics to determine key aspects of social structure and political organisation. So, for instance, the sharing and immediate consumption of whatever has been hunted or gathered has political consequences because it ensures that individuals do not accumulate more than others. Individuals are therefore unable to use accumulated goods to exert authority or to oblige or influence others to do their will. Neither do people invest in long-term production strategies that would involve long-term binding commitments between them. People in immediate-return societies do not depend on specific others for access to food, land, resources or tools and so can move easily should they so wish. In these societies pressure is not put on people to produce, but on them to share whatever they have produced.

By contrast, people in delayed-return societies invest labour over long periods before a yield is obtained. Typical examples include farming, herding, or capitalist systems, but also certain hunter-gatherer societies that invest labour over time or store yields (such as the Kwakiutl and Inuit, and most Amazonian farmer-foragers, including the Ache). The requirement to manage labour during the period in which the yield is being produced result in relations of dependence and authority developing between people to assure that labour is put in at the right times and that those who contribute are recompensed when the yield is obtained, and so willingly provide their labour again. Control over the distribution of vital resources promotes political inequality and hierarchy through the emergence of elites. Whereas delayed-return societies are by necessity hierarchically organised with inequalities between peers, seniors and juniors and gender groups, immediate-return societies are politically and economically egalitarian. While both delayed and immediate return societies

exist among hunter-gatherers, only delayed return societies exist among non-hunter-gatherers.

In this paper I will focus on an immediate-return hunter-gatherer group to avoid the distorting effect of mixing delayed return hunter-gatherers into discussions of egalitarianism and inequality. By definition, delayed return societies can not be egalitarian, therefore the analyses of 'egalitarian' societies done by Alden-Smith et al (2010) which consider delayed return, non-egalitarian societies as comparable to immediate-return ones produces confused and ultimately arbitrary results, based on unreasonably forced categories of analysis such as 'relational wealth', 'grip strength' etc. that focus on individual variation rather than the social mechanisms (such as demand-sharing) that ensure individual variation does not result in inequality. Social mechanisms must override individual variation for a society to be egalitarian.

While individual variation in skill or ability will exist everywhere, immediate-return societies impose economically egalitarian relations through procedures that force sharing on anyone with more than they can immediately consume, and so prevent saving and accumulation. A range of mechanisms, notably demand sharing, but also gambling (Hadza), ritual (Pygmies) or gifting (San), ensure that valued goods circulate without making people dependent on specific other people. People are systematically disengaged from property and therefore from the potential for property to be used to create dependency. As a consequence, each member of such a society can freely move where they want, has direct individual access to the resources on which they depend for survival, and to the means of coercion. Such societies are politically egalitarian, since no one can force others to do their will. People who brag or try to assert their wishes or views on others are mercilessly teased, fought, avoided and if they persist even exiled.

Such societies are indeed rare today, but include some Pygmy groups in Central Africa (Aka, Baka, Efe, Mbendjole, Mbuti); Hadza in Tanzania, some San groups in Namibia and Botswana; several groups in India such as the Jarawa and Ongee Andaman Islanders, Hill Pandaram and Nayaka; and in south-east Asia, the Agta, Batek, Maniq, Penan, and others. Though numerically insignificant today, these societies are hugely significant for anthropology since their egalitarian immediate-return orientation represents such a radically different mode of social organisation to the numerous hierarchically organised delayed-return systems that currently dominate human societies.

Reviewing how his typology had stood up to the evidence from 30 years of new ethnography Woodburn (2005) noted that immediate-return societies have shown remarkable resilience over time. They are stable and enduring systems, internally coherent and meaningful to those who live in them. Despite the combined forces of government sedentarization and assimilationist policies, agricultural expansion, industrial exploitation and fortress conservation all putting huge pressures on these societies, they tenaciously cling to their immediate-return lifestyle. Rwanda's Twa Pygmies, for instance, are mostly denied access to forest and farmland. The majority work as itinerant day-

labourers, beggars, potters, bar musicians and in similar jobs that provide immediate remuneration (Lewis and Knight 1995, and Lewis 2000).

In northern Congo local Bilo perceptions of the differences between Mbendjele and Bilo people were once expressed to me with surprising similarities to Woodburn's distinction between 'immediate-return systems' and 'delayed-return systems'. A young educated Kabunga Bilo expressed it, unprompted, like this:

"Despite production being for subsistence, the Kabunga organise themselves to make reserves of food for the future. Using elementary conservation techniques, they preserve food from the harvest, fishing and hunting. In contrast, the *moyaka* [singular of *bayaka*] will always consume all the food he has before going to look for more. The BaYaka are most sociable people, their whole lives, and all activities, are carried out in groups. Their lives are in eternal communion with each other.

In contrast, the Kabunga, whose life has evolved, is inclined to a solitary existence: 'Each man for himself, God for all!' While the Kabunga wastes his time making politics, organising himself, seeking to uplift his land and village, the Pygmy is totally preoccupied with the politics of the bush. He searches to discover all the possible procedures to trap or capture wild animals. From the point of view of education, the Kabunga orientates his children towards schooling, the BaYaka, to the domain of the bush.

There is much conflict between the BaYaka and Kabunga. Most quarrels are caused by the BaYaka refusing to work. There are also quarrels caused by capricious acts committed by the BaYaka, such as theft, abuse of confidence, and refusal to honour debts."

*Moise Taito, Kabunga chief's son and 2nd year psychology university student, aged 26, 1996.*

Woodburn's distinction is valuable because of this correlation with academic and local perceptions. Moise presents the relationship between economic outlook, sociality and political relations with impressive clarity. Similar observations of the radical difference between immediate-return hunter-gatherers and their neighbours in other places have resulted in anthropologists elaborating distinctions of their own. For example, Barnard's contrast between the 'hunter-gatherer mode of thought' and 'accumulation modes of thought' (2001), Biesele's hunter-gatherer 'way of thinking' or 'imaginative substrate' (1993: 13) that persists even when hunting and gathering are no longer possible, or Lee's concept of 'communal foraging relations of production' (1981). Ingold argues that hunter-gatherer sociality is such 'a radically alternative mode of relatedness' (1990:130) that the term 'society' is inappropriate.

## **Demand-sharing and *ekila***

While I will outline the Mbendjele's system for distributing material property through demand-sharing, similar practices are well-known from the work of anthropologists such as Blurton-Jones 1987; Ichikawa 2005; Peterson 1993 and Woodburn 1982 and 1998. Demand-sharing is the core practice that ensures egalitarian economic relations. In contrast to the donor organized sharing familiar to most people, where the person owning the resource dispenses it according to their whim, demand-sharing is recipient controlled. Potential recipients constantly demand shares of things they suspect may be around. It is the donor's duty to give whatever they are requested, refusal is impolite even offensive. This is crucial to prevent sharing being manipulated to the donor's advantage.

For most material items need determines who can claim the item, especially when they are consumable (Lewis 2005 provides more detail). In this context, possessing something is more like a guardianship or caretaker role until someone else needs it. Certain personal possessions, such as a woman's basket, her cooking pots, and machete, and a man's bag, his spear, knife and axe, are recognised as belonging to named individuals, often the person who made, found, took or bought the item. These individuals have priority over others' claims to the item. But when not in use by them, any of these objects will be shared on demand with someone who needs it.

Mbendjele men and women share in different ways. This is related to gender roles and their different productive activities. Women's gathering activities are geared to exploiting labour intensive but dependable food sources for the regular provisioning of food for the family. These commonly include various wild yams, edible leaves and insects, ground-growing vegetables like mushrooms and certain fruit, small fish and crustaceans. When more than can be immediately eaten is gathered, the food is shared among all present in the forest before returning to camp. Once in the camp women prepare and cook the food and share it again by sending plates (*djalu*) to the men's area (*mbandjo*), and to their female friends and relatives at other hearths. Women's production is rarely shared out on arrival in camp, as the men's is.

Men specialise in obtaining foods with potentially large yields, like wild animals, honey, and occasionally large fish. If a hunter returns with a large animal, it is publically taken from him as he enters camp by other men. They supervise the butchering and ensure the sharing is done equitably before being cooked and further redistributed by the women as they do with other food. Since the meat of game animals, though unpredictable, may be obtained in large amounts, it must be carefully shared out among all present to avoid possible favouritism or manipulation.

Rules called *ekila* determine exactly how each species should be butchered and to whom different parts should go. The hunter's meat (called *ekila*) is the heart; the men get the liver and kidneys (*piko*); a dog that participated would get the lungs and so on. The remaining meat must be fairly shared amongst all present or the hunter's luck will be ruined. If sharing is not conducted according to *ekila* rules it jeopardises future success and the wellbeing of the camp. *Ekila* instils an

ideology of proper sharing that is the key to the safe enjoyment of forest resources and the guarantee of their continued abundance (Lewis 2008).

*Ekila* taboos serve to enforce and define proper sharing: By not sharing animals and meat properly among all present a hunter's *ekila* is ruined so that he is unsuccessful. If parents of infants eat *ekila* animals it can provoke illness and even death in their children. If either husband or wife inappropriately share their sexuality with others outside their marriage, both partners have their *ekila* ruined. A menstruating woman is *ekila* and must share her menstrual blood (also *ekila*) with spirits so that her male relatives continue to find food. Even laughter should be shared properly. Laughter shared between people in camp during the evening makes the forest rejoice, whereas laughing at hunted animals ruins the hunter's *ekila*.

Consistent with an egalitarian ethic that seeks to avoid singling out individuals for praise or condemnation, *ekila* provides a neutral medium for discussing success and failure. Thus difficulties in the food-quest or procreation are discussed in relation to *ekila* rather than to inadequacies in human skill or the environment's ability to provide. People recognise each other's skills but it is impolite to refer to them. Rather, success is talked about in terms of proper conduct in personal and mystical relationships, as defined by *ekila* taboos.

Sharing creates and sustains social relations of equality and affection. The importance of affection in defining sharing relations has consequences for spatial organisation. There are 'circles' of sharing depending on the quantity and type of food or other good, and the degree of affection between people. The Mbendjele household (*mongulu*) is the basic unit of sharing. Any household member consumes whatever enters the household freely and normally without restraint. A typical household might consist of a young married couple with small children, the wife's mother and unmarried younger siblings, all sleeping in the same liana and leaf house. Another common household type is based around a mature married couple living with a wide age range of children and sometimes grandchildren. The children will often include some of their own but also some of their siblings' and others' children. Children, like adults, value mobility and change their residence freely and easily should they desire to. In this way affection is vital to keeping members of a household together.

Normally only people who like each other live together in the same camp since avoidance is a common way of resolving disputes. In situations of temporary high population density (such as during dry season ceremonies, or when feasting on large game, or when visiting Bilo villages) Mbendjele often group their houses together with those people they particularly like and will tend to share more with them than those further away. When numbers get over about 60 people Mbendjele often make several separate camps close to each other in order to respect peoples' differences.

Sharing between camps is less frequent, but will occur when big-game is killed and during *massana* forest spirit performances. When an elephant is killed Mbendjele in the area go rapidly to where the carcass is lying. Large camps grow



and feasting and dancing go on until the elephant has been consumed. During lifting-of-mourning ceremonies (*eboka*), many *massana* spirit plays are performed, especially the three-day dance of *Ejengi*. People come from all around to join in. In addition to sharing out the euphoria of forest spirits, spirit plays share out prized consumables – meat, honey, wild yams, alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other goods, including money. Initiations often take place and initiation fees will have to be paid. These fees are immediately redistributed among all present. In the past people paid with coils of metal, alcohol and food. Now they also use money.

Everyone is encouraged to share according to ability, but if you are old, physically or mentally challenged in some way and only rarely contribute, your entitlement is *not* diminished. You have just as much right as anyone else to demand a share of whatever comes into camp. Living in such a society is like living in a place where goods are free. If you do not have what you need, you simply look around to see who might have it and ask them for it. If it is a tool or object, when you have finished they or someone else may ask you for the item again, and so it continues travelling around the community. If it is food, people will politely help themselves to the meal that you are eating.

The principle is that if someone has something that you need just ask them for it; and, as Mbendjele often say ‘since we have easy hands we just give it’. Mbendjele adults should epitomize this quality by being generous to a fault – so they will give away all that is asked of them even when this results in them having nothing left for themselves. They contrast this behaviour with the ‘hard hands’ of Bilo villagers.

Demand-sharing is not a form of tolerated theft, indirect exchange, or of generalised reciprocity as has been suggested (Blurton-Jones 1987; Peterson 1993). Hunters do not leave the carcass in the bush, but make the often major effort of bringing it back to camp in order that the men’s *piko* meat is shared so as to ensure future success. Additionally, it tends to be the same people provisioning the group most of the time (Woodburn 1998; and my personal observations). They are forced to share more than others, while being denied any recognition of their greater contribution.

The implicit valuation of equality between members of the group can result in some surprising behaviour from an economic perspective. Men are very sensitive to who is provisioning the camp with meat. Individuals who hunt a lot will become a target for teasing and mockery, even cursing, if people perceive that the group is eating their production too often. In contrast to models of economic behaviour that assume that good producers will get recognition, status and fame, here it is not the case. They rather stop hunting for a while, than be subjected to teasing, gossip and jealousy. I have described a man who was an obsessive hunter (Lewis 2003). Despite repeated calls for him to stop hunting so much he continued. Eventually the women of his camp formed a coalition that refused to cook any meat that he killed. This was so offensive that he left to live with neighbouring Luma Pygmies where he remains to this day. In effect, the women exiled him for producing too much.

While I have traced out the ways that material goods are shared on demand between Mbendjele, their behaviour towards certain types of knowledge is different. Knowledge, such as the rights to perform a particular ritual and certain medicinal knowledge or mystical techniques, are not shared on demand, but selectively traded. There is a cultural logic to this seeming incongruity between the way people transact intellectual goods and the demand sharing of material goods.

Komba, the creator and guardian of the world (*konja yombo*), made creation for all creatures to share. This is set out in *ekila* rules that organise sharing and are said to originate from this time. No individual or species has any greater right than any other to the forest and its resources. Once, when roared at by a silverback gorilla for camping too close, my Mbendjele companions were so annoyed that they shouted terribly rude insults back. It was unacceptable that the gorilla should claim part of the forest as his own. Similarly, they resent villagers' claims to own forest and fields, and often refer to villagers simply as gorillas because of this likeness. Since Komba created all material things for all creatures to share, anyone can take what they need, or demand it from someone who already has it.

By contrast, certain products of our own deductions, inspirations, dreams and discoveries can belong to us. They only exist because someone thought or dreamed them into being. While the material world that Komba brought into being is shared on demand as Komba wanted, people's ideas can be subject to exchange, negotiation and trade. It seems that because they are the product of a particular person's imagination, their creator can decide on how they should be distributed.

Many choose to share their herbal remedies freely on demand, others may only do so in exchange for something else. It seems to depend on the individual. It is similar for certain mystical procedures. For instance, the obsessive hunter had been cursed by other men to meet gorillas when he went in the forest. It was surprising how often he was charged by silverbacks. The Mbendjele healer who knew the remedy to this curse began by demanding several thousand francs payment to provide it. In the end he settled for a 1000 CFA and a handful of cigarettes on the day he made the special liana-string necklace to protect the hunter. Typically, once a payment has been made it is subject to demand sharing just like any other item. Only by quickly hiding the item will the recipient have any hope of keeping some for later.

### **Mobility, disputes and *moadjo***

As I hope my discussion of sharing illustrates, egalitarianism is not a passive state. It is an assertive, dynamic process that depends on a complex of interdependent practices that constantly resist the emergence of hierarchy, dependency or inequality. Like demand sharing, two key mechanisms that assure egalitarianism are mobility and 'avoidance strategy' (Woodburn 1982). Rather

than confront someone who is trying to oblige you to do something, or seeks to exert authority over you, or with whom you have a dispute – move away from them. Since an adult does not depend on others for access to vital resources they can simply and easily move away. If mobility is a leveling mechanism it depends on this absence of dependency. Mbendjele encourage mobility from an early age. Children that can walk can choose where they sleep, and some often spend the night with other kin or friends rather than with their parents. When people leave a camp they give no public reason. As they leave those remaining sometimes say '*duaké!*' – 'Go!'

In an egalitarian society no one can play the role of 'judge' since this would imply status or authority. Occasionally people may discuss a recurring problem and collectively suggest a solution, but no-one has the authority to impose it. Often one party simply moves away, without even acknowledging the dispute. While mobility and avoidance works well most of the time, sometimes, as when large ceremonies are called, individuals in conflict meet up again. Since both wish to remain for the ceremony their latent conflict may reignite, especially if alcohol is consumed. Although fighting is publicly frowned upon, it is seen as a legitimate means of expressing indignation or resisting others. Mbendjele theatrically structure fighting to minimise the potential for injury depending on the seriousness of the combatants, and their gender (Lewis 2002: 156-8).

Despite the availability of powerful weapons, including spears, crossbows with poisoned arrows, occasional guns, axes and the ever-present machetes, Mbendjele strongly dislike and disapprove of combat that draws blood<sup>2</sup>. It is *ekila*, and despite having witnessed numerous fights I have never seen an Mbendjele use such weapons against a person<sup>3</sup>. However, the theoretical possibility that someone could pick up a poisoned arrow and wound an aggressor when they sleep or are not paying attention is a powerful deterrent against pushing someone too far, no matter how weak they may physically be.

While arguing and fighting are immediate ways that people can deal with their differences, there is a more institutionalised process of shaming called *moadjo* that is the monopoly of elderly women<sup>4</sup>. Some time after an event in which someone behaved particularly stupidly or unacceptably, one or two women will rise and begin comically re-enacting the event. They will not say who they are mimicking but repeat the scene many times as an audience collects around them. The audience, amongst much hilarity, will begin shouting out comments to accompany the action. Although all are able to guess who is being ridiculed, their name is never mentioned.

By comically mimicking the wrongdoer, the women elicit a moralistic commentary from their audience that, by the end of the show, has served to communally map out the moral high ground. *Moadjo* educates those present

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<sup>2</sup> The early French military explorer, Captain Cottés was struck by this dislike or 'fear of spilling human blood' (1911: 105).

<sup>3</sup> In 2011 an Mbendjele shot another man in the forest when out hunting. The circumstances are unclear, but he was accused of murder and has been languishing in jail ever since.

<sup>4</sup> Men occasionally do this, but rarely as elaborately as women.

about Mbendjele values. Children and younger girls tend to be less vocal in their comments, but laugh loudly. Older women quickly become boisterous, supporting the actors by making jokes and offering explicit but humorous condemnation of mimicked behaviour. Mbendjele men only tolerate such explicit criticism from women. If men do this it easily leads to serious fights. Widows have a special place in this type of humorous but directed criticism and are expected to do this in front of the whole camp at moments of high tension or when someone has committed a grave error. A good performer will succeed in calming the atmosphere by allowing everyone to laugh at themselves. Indeed, if the person being criticised is present, the *madjo* will only end when they laugh publicly too. However, on realising that they are becoming the centre of the camp's mirth, the wrongdoer often flees and hides in the forest until things calm down.

### **Camp organisation - *mosambo***

When non-BaYaka strangers arrive at an Mbendjele camp they are often presented with a male *kombeti*. The term means 'elder' and this man often becomes the main interlocutor between the strangers and the camp. Outsiders often interpret this as a sign that the *kombeti* is a 'chief'. This is misleading. From an Mbendjele perspective whoever is the oldest in a group is the *kombeti* and their responsibility is to provide anything that younger members demand from them. This is as true for a group of playing children, as it is for a group of women, men, or any other group. Every camp therefore has many *kombeti* – ones for the women, for the men, for the young men, for the young women, for the girls and for the boys of the camp. Unaware of this plurality, outsiders often expect to make decisions with 'the' *kombeti*, and for these decisions to be respected by the rest of the group. This causes problems since nobody has the right to decide things on someone else's behalf, nor any authority beyond their individual charisma and skill at establishing consensus.

While I was visiting in 2012, an elder (X) - renowned healer, former elephant hunter and now a drunk - presented himself as the 'chief' of the camp to a newly arrived Bilo man. As they walked up the camp, the newcomer politely engaged him in conversation. X began insisting that he be shown 'chiefly' respect by being bought some alcohol (a common practice among Bilo). As his demands became increasingly insistent a group of boys playing nearby started to call out in Lingala '*X a di djoba*' (X is an idiot), '*a di faux mokondji*' (he's a fake chief)! He became embarrassed and, ignoring the children, moved the newcomer away from them and closer to the alcohol seller. They continued playing. Mbendjele recognise specialists but attribute them no authority and like these children, instinctively undermine those claiming status or privilege, regardless of age or gender.

Rather than depending on a recognised individual to coordinate activity, the camp is organised in non-hierarchic way through a public speaking protocol called *mosambo*. It is the means by which the camp communicates with itself, organises activities and resolves problems. It should be heard twice a day, in the morning and evening, but anytime somebody addresses the whole group it is

*mosambo*. Through *mosambo* camp members inform the camp of what they have done, express their opinions, advise camp members, share news of general interest, and seek a consensus, or not, about what the camp will do and who should do what. It also provides a forum for children to learn about social and moral values, and about the etiquette of public discussion.

Although the prospective speaker can be any member of the camp, some people are better at *mosambo* than others and they may be asked by others to speak for them. A 'good' speaker (*lipwete*) is not a persuasive speaker, but one who is able to express the main points of view in camp with eloquence and humour. Those who are too shy, unable, or risk provoking trouble if they speak, often approach such a person and tell them what they wish said on their behalf.

The person wishing to speak shouts '*Oka, oka, oka!*' (listen, listen, listen!) and only begins speaking when the camp is silent. Even toddlers and small children are expected to be quiet. During the full length of the speech no one should interrupt the speaker. Speech during a *mosambo* has a particular style. Words are stretched slightly, shouted rather than spoken and short intervals are left between subjects. Listeners use expletives to accompany key moments in the speech and express their reaction to what is said. Humour is an important component of a good *mosambo* especially when the orator is angry or upset. Once finished, the speaker says '*Angamu ncia*' (mine is finished), and anyone who wishes to speak may now begin.

The essence of *mosambo* lies in its role to advise, criticise and organise the camp. The individual speaking, especially during an evening *mosambo*, is expected to express what most people think or want to do anyway. Ideally, *mosambo* leads the group by consensus. People who do not agree may make this known by punctuating the speaker's speech with appropriate expletives. They may or may not choose to speak when the speaker finishes.

Nobody has the right to oblige others to do anything that they do not want to do. If individuals, families or groups do not agree with a *mosambo* they might not say so publicly. But the following day when everyone else leaves to a particular place, they go elsewhere. This will happen without remonstrations from others and their right to do as they please is respected. Sometimes, although the men may agree, the women do not. If the women act in solidarity and refuse to do what the men proposed in their *mosambo*, the men are forced to follow the women's decision.

The process by which the content of the *mosambo* is decided is relevant here. In camp men tend to congregate at the *mbandjo*. This is, at most, a simple lean-to where the young unmarried men (*ngendja*) of camp sleep. It is often only a couple of logs on the ground for seating where men congregate and take their communal evening meal. As men return from the forest they sit down here to chat. It is rude to ask questions, so a man is left his own time before beginning to speak. This comes easily as the men's conversations are dominated by the events of the day, by accounts of what people heard, saw and did. Those who went to

different places give their accounts and time is taken to allow women's experiences to be shared with the men.

A woman who wants to share something with the men walks close to the *mbandjo* and address another woman, or sympathetic listener in a loud voice so all can hear. If she is angry her *mosambo* may slowly increase in volume as she repeats her main point, often emphasising it with sweeping downwards arm movements and sung expletives. She may even begin moving around the central space in a parody of the recounted events. As different accounts and points of view on the day's affairs are heard men discuss them and slowly arrive at a consensus.

As the men discuss what they hear they add their own points of view. After some time one will suggest the *mosambo* to the other men. They listen and express agreement by exclaiming '*bonaape*', by repeating key themes and embellishing the details. If they disagree they remain silent until the *mosambo* is over and, waiting for a suitable moment, propose their own ideas or version of events that will in turn be discussed by the men present. The men may call certain individuals to the *mbanjo* to explain something in particular. When there is agreement on the subject of the evening *mosambo* one of the men, considered a good speaker (*lipwete*), will be proposed, or volunteer, to give the *mosambo*. In this way the *mosambo* should ideally express the majority view of the camp. It is in effect the camp talking to its members.

While evening *mosambo* tend to focus on advising people, the day's activities and what people should do the next day, morning *mosambo* often focuses on the camp's internal dynamics. This generally takes two forms, one *mosambo* that occurs very early in the morning and tends to be individual complaints, then another after dawn that reinforces the messages of the previous evening's *mosambo*.

Typically, in the twilight before dawn a speaker with a problem paces up and down the middle of the camp calling out their *mosambo* to the sleeping and waking occupants of the huts. Such speech often features an individual's complaints directed at a particular person (or group), though never mentioning their name, not even indirectly. General phrases will be used, such as 'people who do this sort of thing are bad', as the affair that caused conflict is explained, often with the talker becoming increasingly agitated. Sometimes such *mosambo* provoke arguments and even serious fights. But mostly, morning *mosambo* is used to make a point and get the annoyance off the speaker's chest.

After dawn, *mosambo* tends to focus on reinforcing the consensus expressed during the previous evening's *mosambo*. 'The young men (*boka*) should cut palm-nuts at that abandoned plantation so-and-so saw yesterday! You young unmarried girls (*bangondo*) must bring us back lots of *mea* (wild yams) from that place the hunters saw!' and so on. Rather than identifying individuals with authority or status, camp life is organised through the institution of *mosambo*.

## Specialist roles

This doesn't mean that Mbendjele do not recognise individual skill or expertise, but rather that such recognition is not associated with any special advantage or privilege. Specialist roles are held by both men and women, except for men's role as *tuma* (elephant hunter). While the titles *konja mokondi* (spirit guardian), *kombo* (song composer), *lipwete* (speaker) and *nganga* (healer) recognize that certain people are particularly skilled or knowledgeable about a particular activity, they get no privilege or special treatment from this recognition. Rather each role is recognized because the activities that they are associated with are potentially dangerous or stressful to the community as a whole. People described by one of these titles are expected to manage these stressful situations well for the benefit of all, so that they have a positive outcome.

During the lifting-of-mourning ceremonies (*eboka*) invited guests will expect daily high-quality spirit play performances. This places considerable pressure on the hosting community. On their behalf the spirit guardians must ensure that the appropriate clothing is obtained for the spirits, that proper procedures are followed, that singers are enthusiastic and so on. While the spirit guardian gets no more alcohol or smoke than anyone else and is not able to oblige anyone to do anything, they are expected to humorously cajole, persuade and encourage all to do what is necessary for a successful performance.

In contexts such as elephant hunting, childbirth, severe illness or during rituals, a particular individual may be recognized as having more skill or knowledge than others and is consulted for their advice when that area of knowledge is useful. But they have no ability to oblige anyone to do as they suggest, no recognition beyond this activity, and no privilege or lasting benefits from the role.

## Egalitarian Gender Relations

A society is not egalitarian if individual differences such as strength, gender or age confer any lasting status or authority. Mbendjele recognize, cultivate and celebrate gender differences, but value them equally. Just as to understand egalitarian societies it is necessary to understand that individual variation and equality coexist, so to understand gender egalitarian societies it is necessary to recognize that gender difference and equality coexist (Endicott and Endicott 2008: 8).

Mbendjele men and women spend most of their waking time apart; in the forest women gather and fish together with other women and children, men go looking for honey or hunting in smaller male-only groups. Sometimes couples go on romantic foraging trips but it is not the norm unless in a very small camp. In camp, men spend most of their time sitting at the *mbandjo* talking to other men and caring for children, while women sit at their hearths talking to each other in a particularly song-like speech-style (Lewis 2009).

Before today's society existed stories tell that women lived independently from men fishing and collecting wild yams. The men lived in another part of the forest hunting and collecting honey (Lewis 2002: 173-7). The gendered work roles in these stories are the actual work roles of men and women today. Their daily spatial separation into gendered groups and spaces reinforces the contemporary political significance of their original mythical autonomy.

I have mentioned how *ekila* defines proper sharing, other aspects of this important polysemic concept define the gendered division of labour as a natural consequence of gendered bodies (Lewis 2008 provides detail). For instance, menstruation (called *ekila*) is the focus of ideological elaboration that has important consequences on women's solidarity: The smell of menstruation (and pregnancy) is said to provoke dangerous animals to attack, so women walk in large noisy groups and often sing to warn the animals. This communalism in their daily lives cultivates intense solidarity so women quickly support one another in situations of conflict with men, and can resist men's decisions or demands should they wish.

An Mbendjele woman or man does not depend on anyone for direct and unrestricted access to food and their basic needs. Men cannot control women's labour nor the yield of women's labour. Neither can they control the destination of women in marriage since they cannot oblige a woman to marry anyone against her wishes, and a woman wishing to divorce a man simply leaves him without any requirement to justify herself. Such an absence of dependency is the necessary prerequisite for egalitarian relations (Woodburn 1982). A person can exert power over others only to the extent that he can withhold basic requirements such as food and shelter, access to key resources, or to marriage partners.

This degree of autonomy could imperil communal life if it were not for other areas of *ekila*. A complex ideological balance of difference and interconnectedness between men and women resists the tendency to fragmentation that each sex's potential for autonomy could lead to. Mbendjele often discuss this in terms of 'cutting' (*moena*) and 'tying' (*mokata*). Thus during *Yele* singing sessions, certain women enter trance and 'tie-up' the spirits of game animals in order for men to be able to find them. Men 'cut' the life of the animal and butcher it. Women's cooking 'ties' the meat back into the community. Men 'cut the moon' in order for women to become pregnant. Women 'tie-up' the man's semen to grow the foetus. Women 'cut' the umbilical cord at birth to separate baby and mother; later the father provides the name that 'ties' the baby into society and his clan. At death women are ritually concerned with cutting the spirit from the body (sending the spirit to *Komba*), the men with burying the body and ensuring the body is 'tied' into the earth<sup>5</sup>.

These dialectics of cutting and tying negate claims to higher status by either men or women, by attributing the valued production of one sex to actions by the other sex, so emphasizing the equally important contribution each makes to valued

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<sup>5</sup> I use italics to show where I have inferred, rather than heard, the use of these terms.



social production. Thus women grow men's children by turning semen into a foetus and men kill animals that women's mystical activities have made available. These ideological levelling mechanisms effectively cut each gender group off from the potential status derived from the high social value of the tasks they uniquely perform, while tying them back together for successful production and social life to occur.

### ***Massana* – the importance of play**

This ideology of gendered complementarity and difference is learnt and reinforced in activities that the Mbendjele call *massana*. *Massana* can be translated either as 'ritual' or 'play', Mbendjele do not make the distinction. Beginning with the casual play of children, *massana* activities develop as a person grows to involve a wide range of games including role-play games and spirit play rituals (*mokondi massana*) where forest spirits are sung for to attract them to dance in camp to share euphoria among all present.

*Massana* activities are based on the principle that the better the participants coordinate with each other the more pleasure they experience. They are the major social arena for learning gendered forest skills, cooperation and the group co-ordination crucial to the success of hunting and gathering. Mbendjele explicitly work to establish a certain quality of relations between participants during *massana*: no arguing or shouting, and all must contribute as best they can.

Doing *massana* educates and genders Mbendjele in particular ways that I cannot fully describe here, but Lewis 2002:124-195 and 2013 provide more detail. This is most explicit during initiation ceremonies into the ritual associations responsible for each of the spirit plays. Each association has its sacred path (*njanga*), secret lore, and defined group of initiates (*bangonja*) responsible for preparing the spirit play and calling the spirit out of the forest. Hidden knowledge is shared: among women this concerns catching the spirits of game animals so men can kill them, 'telepathy', using 'sexiness' to control and manage men, and maintain fertility, safe childbirth, and healthy child-rearing; for men, this concerns hunting, honey collecting, traveling in the forest (night-walking, high-speed displacement, invisibility, etc.), and making themselves 'awesome' - impressive, handsome, and fearsome.

Spirit plays occur often, sometimes nightly, sometimes weekly. Regularly performing them inculcates an egalitarian aesthetic of gendered interaction. As an example, the widespread spirit play called *Ejengi* combines the men's and women's groups together in a typical way for a wide range of *massana* that involve the whole community. Women's beautiful singing and sexual attractiveness lure and excite *Ejengi*, men's strength and fearlessness controls and manages *Ejengi* safely. By combining their differences they succeed in bringing him out of the forest into the human group, so all are able to share *Ejengi's* joy (*bisengo*). These gender roles structurally resemble those of hunting and cooking. Men bring in the raw meat. Women cook it and enable all to gain

energy from it. When men are with *Ejengi*, he is raw. Women's dancing cooks *Ejengi*, getting him hotter and hotter so his wild energy is enjoyed by all.

The different but complementary roles each gender plays during such spirit play instils certain ways of coordinating and structuring group activities. Participating in spirit play also inculcates distinctive ways for individuals to coordinate themselves. There is no hierarchy among singers, no authority organizing participation, but all must be present and give of their best to create a rich overlapping polyphony. Each singer must harmonize with others but avoid singing the same melody; if too many sing the same part, the polyphony dissolves. Thus each singer has to hold their own and resist being entrained into the melodies being sung around them. This cultivates a particular sense of personal autonomy that is not selfish or self-obsessed, but is keenly aware of what others are doing and seeks to complement this by doing something different.

This has organisational implications in a society where daily hunting and gathering activities are intuitively co-ordinated without someone telling people what to do. If too many do the same thing there may be nothing to eat, so being musically primed to do something different but complementary to others improves the chances that the camp will eat well without explicit coordination. Similarly, knowing a sufficient range of melodies and when to insert them into a song structurally resembles the way environmental knowledge is used to identify and extract resources from the forest efficiently (Lewis 2013).

Developing musical skill and regularly participating in musical performances seems to prime participants to culturally appropriate gendered ways of interacting with human, plant and animal others. People's everyday choices are rarely made explicit, but are instinctively understood by others, because they are based on this musically shared aesthetic sense of what one ought to do. This social aesthetic is the central dynamic silently organizing daily camp life in a society where no one, not even parents to their children, can oblige others to do their will.

Certain spirit plays such as *Ngoku* and *Yelle* for women, or *Sho* and *Niabula* for men, focus on celebrating and cultivating gender differences: *Ngoku* – fertility and child health; *Yelle* – abundance of meat; *Sho* – courage, strength, awe; and *Niabula* – invisibility and elephant hunting. During these gendered spirit plays, especially in sacred areas Mbendjele publicly elaborate on the particular qualities and strengths of the initiates' gender. Using song and dance, these gendered ritual coalitions communicate this with the rest of society.

During the women-only spirit play of *Ngoku*, for instance, the interlocked body of the singing women dances up and down the central area of camp. As more and more women join them they takeover the camp, and men politely retreat with their sons to bathe or rest in the shade. As they begin a new song, whoever stopped the last song sings out a line such as '*baito wonda to njombo, doto ba die ebe!*' (Women chase young men, old men are no good!), or '*Mapindi ma mu pola!*' (Their testicles are empty!), so all know which melodies to draw on to create the

appropriate polyphony. Dancing as one interwoven body, this is ‘Woman’ speaking to men.

Men, in turn, speak as ‘Man’ to the women during spirit plays, such as *Sho* or *Niabula*, as they stamp up and down the camp, bound together as one, they frighten but also attract, making themselves desired but respected. A pattern of assertion and counter-assertion is a central dynamic maintaining egalitarian relations between the sexes, allowing each group to publicly define, celebrate and express their value to the rest of society. Individuals passing through these institutions explore what these identities mean as they move through life. Crucially they do so without requiring explicit teachers.

By singing together each gender group reinforces its message to the other gender and repetition strengthens the point rather than annoying or tiring listeners as it would if spoken. The corporate body can speak and be understood without needing to single out a leader. The singing and dancing group can say things that no individual in the group could say without fearing repercussions. Strong, provocative, insulting or political statements can be made or enacted without giving the intended recipients space to respond or interrupt. Tensions inherent in gender relations are expressed and acknowledged even if not resolved. Indeed, these public assertions and explorations of gendered uniqueness and value are a key force in maintaining egalitarian gender relationships as Finnegan (2009; 2013) explores in more detail.

*Massana* celebrate gender and emphasise independence yet interdependence, antagonism yet desire, separation and unity, subversion and respect, and the management of gender relations by same-sex solidarity, by taunt and praise, or shaming and loving. These seemingly contradictory emphases are a critical dynamic by which the Mbendjele maintain relatively egalitarian gender relations. Relatively because at different moments, most obviously during *massana*, but at other times too, either men or women may appear to dominate the other gender group. However this appearance is transitory. Learning this begins early with the children’s spirit play called *Bolu*. Here, the children dominate the camp demanding, and mostly receiving, respect and obedience from the adults. The interplay between men’s and women’s groups is better represented as an egalitarianism that depends on each gender group asserting itself effectively in front of the other, and in spite of the other.

## **Reproducing an egalitarian society**

There is no explicit discourse on ‘equality’. Rather the implicit valuation of equality crucially underpins the cultural logic of complex cultural concepts such as *ekila*, and the modes of participation required of key activities such as *mossambo*, *moadjo* and *massana*. Establishing consensus, witnessing humorous re-enactments of unacceptable behaviour, participating in spirit plays or respecting *ekila* rules of sharing and behaviour exert an anonymous but pervasive pedagogic action that prompts each Mbendjele person to understand egalitarianism as a valued political, moral and economic orientation. These are

pedagogic processes that do not depend on defining any individual as a focus for Mbendjele to learn. Rather, they teach piecemeal over a lifetime, and to different extents in each individual, not through verbal exhortation, but by the communal experience of a series of bodily practices and proscriptions and the pleasure, curiosity and satisfaction these provoke.

The cultural instability of egalitarian societies that Brunton (1989) claimed is not so. Observing the inability of egalitarian societies to judge new innovations, Brunton reasoned that such societies are inherently unstable, their practices haphazard or accidental assemblages, and their continued existence fortuitous. But institutions such as *massana* or *ekila* show how values and meanings can be condensed to establish a cultural-store that ensures internal continuity between generations without attributing special status or authority to individuals. Their basically non-linguistic nature means that it is difficult to articulate them explicitly as a coherent body of ideas. This makes them difficult to manage by 'authority'.

The persistence of the cultural matrix remarked upon at the beginning of this chapter that connects up those Pygmy groups still able to hunt and gather in the forests of the Congo Basin is remarkable since certain groups have not had contact for many thousands of years. Yet their similar polyphonic yodeled singing style; their hunting-focused rituals; their preference for forest activities and living in forest camps of dome-shaped leaf and liana huts; for an economy organized by demand sharing; a division of labour based on the symbolism of blood; and an egalitarian social and political organization; remain so strongly associated together because they constitute an exceptionally resilient cultural adaptation to forest living in this region.

The sophisticated integration of this matrix of adaptations to the forest is currently menaced by the immense power of capitalism and modern technology to appropriate, transform and degrade the environment. Mbendjele were protected from Bilo accessing forest by their dependence on the Mbendjele to guide them. This was also true of other outsiders, such as loggers, until recently. However, now sophisticated navigation and positioning technology allows anyone independence from BaYaka. The ability of bulldozers to make roads and chainsaws to fell trees has accelerated turning the forest into cash. Large urban developments have mushroomed around the activities of logging and mining companies, road networks now spread throughout the forest and have opened up of previously inaccessible areas to commercial exploitation, often by professional hunters supplying urban dwellers with bush meat. Other outsiders, we call conservationists, seal-off large areas of good forest from local use and enforce seemingly arbitrary hunting restrictions in surrounding areas. The impact of these recent occupations of the forest is that local people – both Mbendjele and Bilo – see their autonomy and resource base diminishing.

Hunter-gatherers and former hunter-gatherers across Central Africa face similar situations. Everywhere they have great difficulty resisting their dispossession because their numbers are small, and because their egalitarian social organisation undermines anyone who emerges as a leader, rejects their

authority, and generally favours avoidance over confrontation, sharing over private property, individual freedom over organised representation and immediate over delayed returns on labour.

While there is a growing international indigenous movement in Central Africa they remain mostly marginalised from those they seek to represent, and from mainstream society and politics (Lewis 2001). At the local and national levels, the severe discrimination 'Pygmies' experience from many non-hunter-gatherers, their inexperience of the world outside the forest, and the huge profits to be made by commercialising forest resources makes these processes likely to continue without much regard for the future of forest hunter-gatherers. A major challenge is to find ways for their voices to have an influence on important decisions over their lives and resources while respecting their egalitarian principles.

### **Endnotes:**

1. PhD research was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, an Emslie Horniman Scholarship and the Swan Fund (1994-1997). I return regularly to the Mbendjele area.
2. The early French military explorer, Captain Cottés was struck by this dislike or 'fear of spilling human blood' (1911: 105).
3. In 2011 an Mbendjele shot another man in the forest when out hunting. The circumstances are unclear, but he was accused of murder and has been languishing in jail ever since.
4. Men occasionally do this, but rarely as elaborately as women.
5. I use italics to show where I have inferred, rather than heard, the use of these terms.

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