

Where goods are free but knowledge costs¹

Hunter-gatherer ritual economics in Western Central Africa

Jerome Lewis

Anthropology, University College London, 14 Taviton Street, WC1H 0BW, UK
jerome.lewis@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract: Forest hunter-gatherers in Western Central Africa participate in an unusual economic system that transacts material production in a very different way to intellectual production. While material goods, such as food, tools or clothing, are generally freely given when demanded, intellectual goods, such as the right to perform specific rituals or to receive certain remedies, are exchanged for goods and money. These hunter-gatherer groups trade certain types of knowledge for material goods with each other, but never trade material goods for other material goods with each other, despite doing so with neighbouring farmers. They simply demand them from one another. The distribution of key aspects of this economic system across linguistic and international frontiers suggests that it is likely to have great antiquity. The hunter-gatherer ritual system is valued for immediately producing goods. This contrasts with cult associations among farming societies in Central and West Africa that focus on ensuring that goods will come in the future.

Keywords: religion, ritual associations, property rights, intellectual property, sharing, Aka, Baka, BaYaka, Bongo, Luma, Mbendjele, Mikaya, Pygmy

1. What to share and what not to share

1.1 *BaYaka and Mbendjele*

A wide range of Pygmy hunter-gatherers living in the Western Congo Basin participate in the ritual economy that is the focus of this article. These groups include Aka in Central African Republic (CAR) and Republic of Congo (RoC); Baka in RoC, Cameroon and Gabon; Bongo in Gabon and RoC; Luma,

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Mbendjele, Mikaya and Ngombe in RoC; and probably others. Participation in this ritual economy is an important emic marker identifying 'Bayaka' (forest hunter-gatherer) people as opposed to 'Bilo' farming people. Bilo also means 'the uninitiated' in Mbendjee. Although the Bongo are not BaYaka and not active in the ritual economy I describe, they show key features of this economy in their interactions with neighbours.

Mbendjele living in the equatorial forests of northern RoC provide the ethnographic focus here since I have been working with them since 1994. Similarly to other Western Pygmies, Mbendjele say that they belong to a larger group of 'forest people' (*bisi ndima*) generically referred to as Bayaka (often contracted to Baaka and Baka depending on the speaker). Bayaka people are said to share the same forest hunter-gatherer ancestors, and to share the same economic, ritual and musical systems. Mbendjele more often refer to themselves as Bayaka than Mbendjele. Mbendjele is used to distinguish themselves from neighbouring Bayaka groups such as the Mikaya, Ngombe or Luma. Since some of these groups speak Ubangian languages (eg, Ngombe and Baka) while others speak Bantu languages (eg, Mbendjele), I write this regional ethnonym as BaYaka.

BaYaka groups still able to access good forest are well described as 'immediate-return hunter-gatherers' (Woodburn 1982). Immediate-return hunter-gatherers achieve relative equality between camp members by demand-sharing excess production from each other, through direct individual access to the means of production and coercion, by valuing mobility and by employing levelling mechanisms such as teasing and avoidance to deal with attempts by others to claim status or impose themselves.

Despite language differences and their dispersal in small camps or settlements for much of the year, some BaYaka people, most notably young men, visit other BaYaka groups to explore, find work, participate in commemoration ceremonies (*eboka*), establish friendships, meet potential spouses or purchase a spirit-play. Their similar oral tradition, ritual and singing styles, sharing economy, forest hunting and gathering and egalitarianism make such voyages possible. While there exists the possibility of marriage relations between BaYaka groups, they do not trade goods with one another. This contrasts with BaYaka peoples' relations with Bilo farmers or 'village people' (*bisi mboka*) 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 ensuring they do not overlap, however villagers superimpose their land claims over parts of BaYaka land.

There is much variation in the living conditions of BaYaka groups today. Industrial, road and market expansion into remote forest areas has drawn outsiders in to exploit resources. Discrimination by majority groups has led to no recognition of BaYaka land and resources, violent exclusion from large areas of forest by conservationists, and persecution for hunting. Many now do some farming and serve as a labour force for other groups, often in return for alcohol and food. These forces combine with aggressive government sedentari- sation policies since the early 1990s, and earlier in Cameroon and Gabon, to have a negative impact on the ability of many BaYaka groups to maintain their autonomy, hunting and gathering lifestyle and culture.

Although there are important cultural differences between BaYaka groups (eg, Bahuchet 1996; 2012), differences also exist within each of the constituent groups depending on where they live. Some Mbendjele near the Central African Republic are evangelised and although relatively sedentary do not farm. Those living in or near logging towns may spend long periods working outside the forest and practice regular farming. Others further south spend most of the year in the forest, with some groups not coming out to villages for years at a time. But in general, most Mbendjele spend about two-thirds of the year hunting and gathering in forest camps and some part of the year near agriculturalists' villages or the activities of logging companies. Although continuing to hunt and gather, here they will also trade, labour or perform services for villagers and others in return for food, goods, alcohol or money.

The ritual and economic system that I discuss here is similar enough, even across ethnic and linguistic boundaries between BaYaka groups, to justify using the Mbendjele case to elucidate the system.

1.2 An introduction to Mbendjele economics

Although familiar to hunter-gatherer anthropology, I begin by briefly outlining the system of sharing that distributes material goods so as to contrast it with how the ritual economy distributes certain types of knowledge whose use produces desired goods such as food and drink, and prized social products such as music, dance and joy.

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, 1998. Demand sharing is widely recognised as a core value and practice of egalitarian hunter-gatherers. In contrast to the donor-organised

sharing familiar to most people, where the person owning the resource dispenses it according to their choice, demand-sharing is recipient controlled. Potential recipients constantly demand shares of things they suspect may be around. It is the possessor's duty to give whatever is requested of them, rather than being entitled to refuse the request.

For most material items, need determines who can claim them, especially when they are consumable. Possessing something here 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, or bought the item. These individuals have priority over the claims of others to the item. But when not in use by them, any of these objects will be shared on demand with someone who asks.

Certain foods, such as the meat of game animals that may be obtained in large amounts, must be carefully shared out (*bwedye*) among all present according to very specific rules called *ekila* (Lewis 2008). These determine exactly how each species should be butchered and to whom different parts must be given. So when a pig is killed, the hunter gets the heart, the men get the liver and kidneys, 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 these rules it jeopardises future success.

Unlike meat, gathered foods such as wild yams, honey, vegetables, fruit and small fish are dependable food sources that regularly provision camp. 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 (*djalo* or *gabo*) to the men's area in the middle of camp, and to their female friends and relatives at other hearths. By contrast meat is always publically redistributed on arrival in camp before being cooked and redistributed by the women's *djalo*.

In such a society all people are encouraged to contribute according to their ability, but if you are old or 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 a share of whatever comes into camp. In this sense 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 the Mbendjele saying translates, ‘we have easy hands so we always give’. Mbendjele adults should epitomise 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 their villager neighbours.

Demand-sharing is not a form of tolerated theft (Blurton-Jones 1987) since hunters voluntarily bring the meat back to camp. Nor is it indirect exchange or generalised reciprocity (Peterson 1993) since it tends to be a limited number of individuals that consistently bring meat back to the group most of the time (Woodburn 1998). Such individuals are forced to share more than others, while being denied overt recognition of their greater contribution.

Their high valuation of equality between members of the group can result in some surprising behaviour. Men are very sensitive to who is provisioning the camp with meat. Rather than men who hunt a lot gaining prestige or girlfriends, they become the target of teasing and mockery if people think that the group is eating their production too often. In contrast to models of economic behaviour where it is assumed that those who are good producers will get recognition, status and fame, here it is not the case. They will rather stop hunting for a while; otherwise they risk being cursed, or exiled if they persist. I observed this occur in the case of a great elephant hunter (Lewis 2003). Despite repeated calls for him to stop hunting so often, he continued. Eventually the women of his camp exiled him by refusing to cook any meat that he produced. He now lives with the neighbouring Luma Pygmies.

1.3 Intellectual as opposed to material property

While I have traced out the ways that material goods are shared on demand between Mbendjele, their behaviour towards certain types of knowledge is quite different. Intellectual property, such as the right to sing certain songs or perform a particular ritual, or certain medicinal knowledge or a mystical procedure, are not necessarily shared on demand, but may be selectively traded.

There is a cultural logic to this seeming incongruity between the way people transact certain intellectual property and the demand sharing of material property. Komba, the creator, made the forest for all creatures to share. The rules of *ekila* that organise sharing are said to originate from this time. No individual or species has any greater right than any other to the forest and its resources. So, on being roared at by a silverback gorilla for camping too close,

Mbendjele men got genuinely annoyed and shouted insults at the silverback. To them 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 become subject to exchange, negotiation and trade. It seems to be that because they are the product of a particular person's imagination, their creator can decide on how they should be distributed.

Most chose to share their herbal remedies freely on demand, but some may only do so for a fee. It seems to depend on the individual. Certainly in cases of serious illness, the main concern is to help the patient and they will not be refused because of a lack of funds. It is similar for certain mystical procedures. For instance, the elephant hunter who hunted too much had been cursed to meet gorillas when he went in the forest. I was surprised at 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. Interestingly, once a payment has been made it is subject to demand sharing by those present just like any other item. Only by quickly hiding the payment will the recipient have any hope of keeping some for later.

The most valued and highly appreciated knowledge that BaYaka trade are the ritual procedures, song repertoire and dance styles associated with a particular forest spirit (*mokondi*), generically referred to as *mokondi massana*, literally 'spirit-play'. Only a spirit guardian (*konja mokondi*) has the right to call a spirit to play, and if you are not the founder you can inherit or buy this right. Other types of knowledge that are sometimes traded are herbal remedies, particular mystical techniques and procedures such as divination or purification procedures, but this is not systematic. Only spirit-plays are rigorously traded.

2. Technologies of enchantment

Each spirit-play (*mokondi massana*) is in effect a ‘technology of enchantment’ in the sense meant by Alfred Gell (1999). Following a set structure they deploy specific techniques whose overall aim is to enchant, seduce or otherwise cast a spell over the camp and the forest. There are many different ways of playing with spirits, but each is capable of producing the kind of wonder that we experience as aesthetic appreciation in a similar manner to that which Gell so insightfully observed in our reaction to great works of art:

the difficulty I have in mentally encompassing their coming into being as objects in the world accessible to me by a technical process which since it transcends my understanding, I am forced to construe as magical. (Gell 1999:169)

When the techniques associated with a particular spirit-play are performed faultlessly, they produce this mystified sense of delight and wonder. However they also build on this to go further at peak moments during the ‘play’ to produce euphoric, trance-like states in participants. It is the euphoria or joy (*bisengo*) of these moments that people value so highly and are concerned to freely share, but not the techniques employed to produce them.

From this perspective each spirit-play is a set of techniques which combine to become a technology of enchantment: a skill-set that once understood and mastered enable participants to establish a situation in which all experience joy and communion. Each spirit-play contributes to an economy of joy – a system distributing practices and knowledge that ensure particular euphoric states are repeatedly produced and available to all present. Spirit-plays serve the whole community in this way. Like ‘love’, the English word ‘joy’ covers a wide range of emotional combinations and conditions. *Bisengo* does too.

Each spirit-play has its own characteristic style that creates a different quality of joyful experience. During the total darkness of no-moon *Malobe*, for instance, fires are put out and torches forbidden, participants huddle together in the middle of camp with their legs resting on their neighbours’, and their voices intertwine in complex polyphony until tiny luminous dots float into camp producing a calm, wondrous and expansive joy. In the pitch black participants melt into one another and the forest. During *Sho* by contrast, the joy is more insular, remaining with the male initiates who make the ground shake as they stamp and dance in tight formation up and down the camp. Joy is very masculine, powerful, strong, fearless, earthed and bassey. Although frightened, women are pleased that their protectors are so impressive and fearsome. *Ejengi* is quite different. *Ejengi* produces the ‘frisson’ of feeling safe in the presence

of a frightening and dangerous animal, together with an erotically charged joy generated by sexy symbolism and dancing, gendered exhibitionism, seductive playfulness and excessive consumption. Other spirit-plays, such as *Enyomo* or *Monano*, produce a relaxed joy by blending clowning humour with virtuoso singing and dancing. When witnessing these rituals as an uninitiated person, the wonder so central to enchantment can be strongly experienced.

From the inside, initiates know when to deploy the various techniques of enchantment once the spirit guardian has called the spirit to play. These techniques include specific secret lore, songs, dances, drum rhythms, choreographies and costume styles and are jealously guarded. They are techniques of enchantment in the way Gell intends because when performed well they leave the uninitiated wondering how the forest spirit and its attendant rhythms, songs and dances manage to create such exquisite beauty and joy.

But spirit-plays are also different from the paintings and sculptures Gell discusses. They go beyond the object of the spirit's clothing or mask, and seek to enchant many senses, using strange sounds, stirring sights, beautiful songs and dance movements, humour and parody, touch and smell, emotions and desires, of trance and overlapping percussive rhythms. I think the translation 'spirit-play' is apt because these rituals seduce non-physical entities (spirits) from the forest in order to establish something non-physical (spirit) in the sense of an uplifting or joyful atmosphere. Mbendjele say people, animals and the forest will feel this.

These technologies of enchantment are by far the most valued and expensive items that BaYaka will spend money on. Returning from a long journey in distant parts of the forest as the guardian of a new spirit-play is highly appreciated. While Toma's younger brother was working for a logging company prospecting for trees he bought the spirit-play of *Enyomo* for an anvil (costing about 120 Euros) and cash equivalent to about 150 Euros from another Mbendjele co-worker. When one considers that these men probably earned 70 or 80 Euros a month, the price paid represented four months' worth of wages. The only other item of such value that Mbendjele would consider buying would be a shotgun, then costing around 150 Euros. But since shotguns can be borrowed from other people fairly easily Mbendjele men prefer to spend their hard-won earnings on the rights to perform a ritual.

3. A regional ritual economy

Trading in the rights to perform these spirit-plays has set up a ritual economy that stretches across Mbendjele forest, and beyond it to other Western Pygmy

groups in Republic of Congo (RoC), Cameroon, Gabon and the Central African Republic (CAR). Like other BaYaka, Mbendjele love to discuss which spirit-plays different groups have, comment on the specific techniques of enchantment employed, and compare each other's performances. Every Mbendjele clan dances ancient forest spirits (*mokondi*) like *Ejengi*, *Niabula*, *Ngoku* and *Yele*. The majority of BaAka clans dance *Ejengi*, *Ngoku* and *Yele*, most Baka clans dance *Ejengi*, *Niabula* and *Yele*, Mikaya dance *Ejengi* and *Yele*. Luma dance *Ejengi*.

Among the Southern Mbendjele, I collected information on over 20 different spirit-plays, each with its specific songs, dances and secret knowledge. Tsuru describes 53 spirit-plays among the Baka living along the Yokadouma – Mouloundou road (1998:54–5). While the Baka tradition is possibly the most creative, the Mbendjele system seems the most conservative because it continues to dance all of the most widespread spirit-plays: *Ejengi*, *Niabula*, *Ngoku* and *Yele*, and is especially appreciated. In CAR, Kisliuk (2001) describes how BaAka walk to northern RoC to buy spirit-plays from the Mbendjele. Louis Sarno (personal communication 2014) explained that Mbendjele in Lobaye CAR visit Mbendjele in RoC to buy spirit-plays, and loved to watch footage of spirit-play performances he filmed in RoC. They integrate what they see, and revive forgotten elements to enhance their own performances.

In Cameroon, building on Joiris's work (1996; 1998), Tsuru (1998; 2001) describes the key elements of this ritual system among the Baka. Authors working with Baka refer to the spirit-plays as cult or ritual associations. They describe almost identical structures around each spirit-play – the forest spirit, initiates, their secret path (*njang'a*), the spirit guardians and modes for transacting spirit-plays by purchase or inheritance. Using their own and Tsuru's work, Furniss and Joiris (2011) describe the process by which Baka re-combine key musical and costume elements in the generation of new spirit-plays in a constant but structured innovation process. Although Baka in Gabon participate directly in this ritual economy, Gabonese Bongo are not reported to do so. However, the ethnography suggests they value these forms of intellectual property in a similar way to BaYaka. They copy, adopt and adapt other people's ritual and song repertoires while jealously guarding their own repertoires for themselves (Bonnehomme et al 2012).

The following map shows the minimum area in which forest spirit economies operate.



Figure 1 Map of the area where spirit-plays are traded

Barnard's (1988) analysis of Khoisan religion in Southern Africa described a structural similarity across the region despite great diversity in content. As described here for the Mbendjele, and by others for the Baka and BaAka, the forest hunter-gatherers' ritual system becomes apparent at the regional level. While the rules of participation, dancing and singing styles, songs and the clothes given to the forest spirit may all vary, the underlying structure of spirit-guardian, forest spirit, initiates, secret area and musical performance remains remarkably stable, crossing linguistic and international boundaries. This wide distribution is testimony to substantial networks of interaction between diverse BaYaka groups that goes so far back in time that participating groups now speak different languages and interpret the same spirit-plays differently.

4. The social organisation of BaYaka spirit-plays

4.1 Spirit-plays (mokondi massana) and spirit guardians (konja mokondi)

I am initiated into the spirit-plays practiced by the Mbendjele I have been visiting since 1994. In 1997 I became a spirit guardian of *Ejengi*, and Ingrid, my wife, became a spirit guardian of *Ngoku* and *Yele*. Since then I periodically coordinate the initiation of young Mbendjele boys into the *Ejengi* spirit-play. While being a spirit guardian (*konja mokondi*) is one of the most difficult things I have ever done, it has given me privileged insight into the way the Mbendjele speak about and participate in the ritual economy existing between BaYaka groups. Here I present the ritual economy, as much as possible, in their own terms since I am familiar with a wide range of their forest spirits, the diversity and creativity within each spirit-play, and as I participate over decades in the same spirit-plays, also the durable structures organising them despite innovation and change.

Every spirit-play is based around a forest spirit (*mokondi*) who must be called out of the forest to a secret path and seduced to dance among people. Some *mokondi* are given clothing so that they can materialise in public before the uninitiated (eg *Ejengi*), some are simply embodied by the initiates (eg *Ngoku*), others only heard (eg *Niabula*). Each forest spirit is of a particular named type and associated with specific ritual procedures, rhythms, dance styles and songs that it finds irresistible and serve to draw it to the initiates. The forest spirit must be cared for appropriately by the initiates. This always involves song and dance and sometimes preparing clothing for the forest spirit. The initiates must ensure that the ritual follows the correct procedures in order that the forest spirit is drawn into the human group and so generates the pleasurable-euphoric states associated with its spirit-play. Access to the spirit-play's secret path is governed by initiation for a fee paid in consumables such as honey or alcohol, and often just money, though metal items were used in the past.

Each class or type of forest spirit is named. Thus *Ejengi* refers to the class of forest spirits called *Ejengi*, the society of initiates who call and organise an *Ejengi* spirit-play, and the ceremony in which *Ejengi* is called to play. Each clan has its own named *Ejengi* and so there are many individual *Ejengi*. Each individual *Ejengi* is named and has a recognised spirit-guardian (*konja mokondi*) who is responsible for calling it from the forest. For instance, my *Ejengi* is called Mikana and only I can call him from the forest.

The spirit guardian oversees the work of the initiates to create the spirit-play and sustains its performance over the required period. Tsuru describes the

spirit guardian's role among Baka as denoting 'the personal right to keep a special relationship with *me* and to organise a ritual association for the spirit. This right can be shared with other persons through inheritance, gift exchange and even by purchase' (1998:54). This applies equally to other BaYaka.

Though the spirit guardian is generally a clan elder she or he has no authority beyond the immediate task of organising the spirit-play. Even here, their role is to encourage, never to coerce. Initiates in the spirit-play association constrain the spirit guardian with mockery and outright rebuttal if she or he is unreasonable. In addition to their ceremonial tasks, spirit-guardians organise much of the economic activity around the ritual. They negotiate for alcohol, food, tobacco and marijuana from whomever they can on behalf of all participants, and share it out appropriately. They oversee practical tasks such as preparing drums, ritual medicines or costumes. Becoming a spirit guardian, as I know, is a burdensome and challenging role that is considered more of a chore than a privilege. Of course when the spirit-play goes just right and the joy spreads amongst all, it is very satisfying to the spirit guardian and initiates that made it happen.

Although the spirit guardian receives initiation fees, she or he is obliged to share these items out with all the initiates present, including the neophytes that just paid it. So although the spirit guardian gets a fee for the use of his or her intellectual property, as soon as the fee is received it becomes subject to the rules of demand sharing and is distributed among all present. In this way the fees serve to fuel the celebration by being spent immediately on consumables. This may be similar to Hadza gambling or San *xharo* gifting which both serve to circulate valuable objects among the broader community. The past focus on iron objects suggests it may have served to circulate them among BaYaka. Today initiation into spirit-play serves to 'pull out' money hidden in people's pockets so that it can be converted into consumables to fuel the celebration.

4.2 Forest spirits (mokondi)

Mokondi are a type of forest spirit that normally remain in the forest. Human and other spirits are generally referred to as *molimo*. Uncaptured *mokondi* are wild, temperamental and potentially deadly. They have mostly humanoid forms, from tiny pale gangly creatures to weird monstrous beings with feet facing backwards and wild hair. *Mokondi* can be found and captured physically in the forest, or in dreams (Tsuru 2001 reports similar methods among Baka). Once a *mokondi* is captured and its songs discovered, it can be shared with other



Figure 2 A painting of the forest spirit Ejengi by Mongemba, Indongo 1999.

Mbendjele through initiation, passed on by inheritance or sale, or even stolen. The following ethnography will provide examples.

Spirit-guardians buy, ‘capture’ or ‘find’ and make pacts with *mokondi* that ‘eat’ singing and dancing in return for helping people. Such *mokondi* can assist in the food quest, protect their initiates from harm and danger, transform negative emotions and tension in the camp into laughter and co-operation, cleanse bad luck, protect from sorcery, and bring people together in extraordinary harmony to generate euphoric states. A lively 40 year-old family man, Minjembe, explained to me some of the ways that different spirit-plays help the Mbendjele.

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

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

Ejengi is different; he’s not the same. If they dance him, maybe they’ll kill meat.

Really its when they have already killed lots of food. Then yes, they dance *Ejengi*. When people are joyful because of food ... *Ejengi* gives thanks for things that have come, when a joy of joys overwhelms you. When people from far hear *Ejengi* they know things are there at that camp. 'We'll eat food today, let's follow them!' (Minjembe, 40-year-old Mbendjele man from Ibamba, May 1997)

The initiates ensure the *mokondi* are treated correctly and in return enchant participants. All the important preparation for spirit-play takes place on the secret path (*njannga*) where great attention is paid to detail, procedure and best practice. It is to the *njannga* path that the *mokondi* is called from the forest by its spirit-guardian to be prepared for the public performance. The secret path is exclusive to the initiates, and they are prepared to violently protect their sacred space.

4.2 The neophytes (mboni) and initiates (bangonja)

The initiates are crucial to each spirit-play since they make all the necessary preparations for the *massana*. All initiates had first to be neophytes (*mboni*) and pay to be initiated. Each *massana* has its own procedures and requirements. There is no fixed time for initiations to occur, it depends on an individual's circumstances at the time of a ceremony. Since the different spirit-plays are danced at very variable intervals, neophytes may be of varying ages.

Initiation into spirit-plays is seen as necessary for learning about men's or women's specific powers and abilities in relation to society, spirits and the forest. Thus *Ejengi* initiation, among other things, gives the neophytes *Ejengi's* eyes (*diso ua Ejengi*) that help initiated men to see trails, tracks and animals in the forest, and gives them the ability to avoid large charging animals such as buffalo or elephant. Similarly young women who get initiated into *Ngoku* will begin learning about sexuality, feminine power and how to control Mbendjele men.

Initiations can occur whenever a spirit-play is performed. This will always involve a fee to be paid to the spirit-guardian and generally an initiate to vouch for the neophyte's ability to handle the initiation. Fees can be paid in kind (alcohol, meat or honey for men, and stingless bee honey (*koma*) and wild yams for women) or in cash. Part of the fee is given to the forest spirit and the rest is shared and/or consumed by all initiates present. The Mbendjele are proud of their ability to make such fun produce so many desirable goods.

To ensure the correct atmosphere is created for the forest spirit to come among them, the initiates begin by vivaciously animating the singing and

dancing to build enthusiasm among participants. This is a skilled task and people good at it are appreciated. The *mokondi* will not come until its preferred rhythms and songs are being performed faultlessly. The polyphonic Mbendjele singing style demands a high degree of co-ordination. If one section falls away or loses time it immediately spoils the song.

When done well, the music takes on a life of its own as the co-ordination between the singers reaches astounding synchronicity. The effect is synergistic and euphoric. People dance out from the group and trance-like states begin to engulf participants. It is at this stage that the forest begins to yield its charms and small leafy parts of it begin to enter into the horseshoe-shaped group of singers in camp. As the forest spirits repeatedly move into the horseshoe of singers and back out into the forest again it is as if the forest is making love to the camp. It is at this stage that the distinctive euphoria of the spirit-play is most strongly experienced.

The trance states of *mokondi massana* do not produce the violent shaking or loss of control reported among !Kung healers (eg Katz 1982; Low this issue:27–57). Instead they are more euphoric or ecstatic, producing exuberant and spectacular dancing or singing that can last many hours or even days. This is referred to as '*bisengo*', which I translate as 'joy'. Initiates enable the joy produced by the forest spirits to be shared with the whole community in this way. With so many different forest spirits each with the potential to provoke euphoric states, each spirit-play constructs a particular economy of joy – a unique means to produce and then distribute joy among participants.

5. Mokaba and Monano

Although the most important and widespread spirit-plays, such as *Ejengi*, are said to be as old as society, many minor ones have been more recently acquired. The history of *Monano*, the most recently captured *mokondi* in my research area, illustrates the life-cycle of a spirit-play.

Mokaba was a fifty-year-old man from Ibamba. As a small boy he got poliomyelitis that severely wasted both his legs. He walked on his hands, with his stunted and bony legs crossed tightly together dragging under him. Despite this, Mokaba travelled widely in the forest, swimming across the numerous marshes, and speared trapped animals. He was widowed three times in his short life and is survived by one remaining daughter. Mokaba was a great singer and song composer (*kombo*), as well as the most respected Mbendjele craftsman and blacksmith in the area.

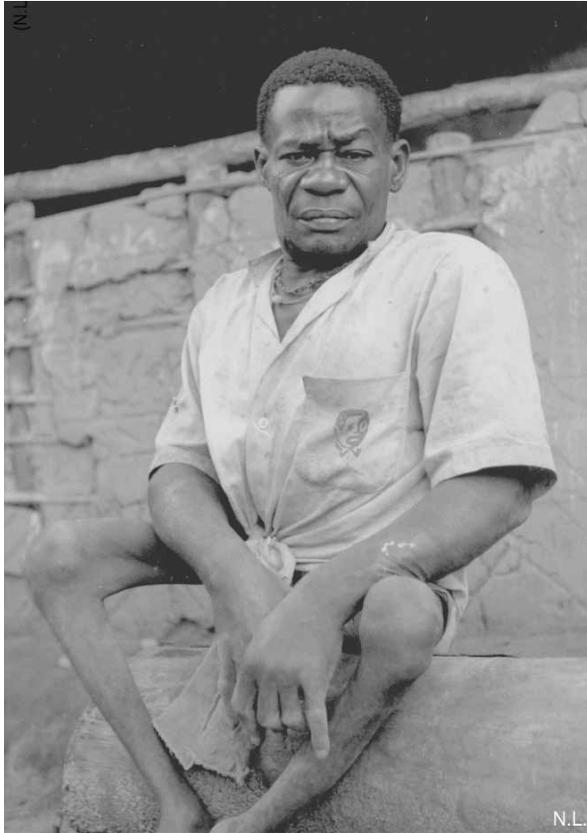


Figure 3 Mokaba

Whilst camping in deep forest around 1985, Mokaba captured a forest spirit called *Monano* using a special fibre string (*mokodi*). He showed *Monano* to the other men in camp. *Monano* was an instant success. When the uninitiated see *Monano* dance his body is covered in cloth, he wears socks on his feet, has no arms and his face is a wooden mask. Like all spirit-plays, *Monano* has his own secret *njangga* path and access is governed by initiation.

Over the next few years *Monano* was often danced and many were initiated, including Mbendjele visiting from other regions. One such man, Samba, stayed in Ibamba forest for several years doing brideservice. When Samba returned to his home area of Minganga his good friend Njulle, the elder of a big group of Mbendjele from Minganga, had to organise a large commemoration ceremony (*eboka*). As the guests arrived and time went on, Njulle (the spirit guardian) found it difficult to produce enough drink and food to fuel the ceremonies. People were complaining. Samba came to Njulle's aid by announcing that he

had captured a new forest spirit called *Ekatambili*. But *Ekatambili* was exactly the same as *Monano* despite its changed name.

By launching *Ekatambili* during a major commemoration ceremony Samba generated enough money to buy food and drink to sustain many days of spirit-play. Every eligible man present who wanted to participate needed initiating. This 'pulled out money' (*ulua mbongo*) hidden in peoples' pockets. This is the key method by which spirit-plays generate goods.

When the Mbendjele of Ibamba heard the news they were furious. Samba and Njulle had stolen their *mokondi*! As *mokondi* thieves, any insult or wrong done to Mbendjele of Minganga was now justified. Insults flew! When Njulle heard these he composed a *Malobe* song to insult Mokaba: '*Mokaba a mu tonga ye, a pia mambi na mabo!*' (Mokaba got pierced [by sorcery], he takes faeces in his hands!). Since Mokaba walks on his hands, so he must put his hands in faeces.

Mokaba was on a long journey in deep forest when he heard the song during a *Malobe* spirit-play. Mokaba was shocked 'He sings about me like this! We are both invalids! So, they shall sing further!' Since Njulle was born with a tiny malformed right arm attached to a full hand Mokaba responded with another song. '*Njulle a bukia obo na mitambo a bunjia*' (Njulle broke his arm in a fibre trap).

Njulle was infuriated and threatened Mokaba and his group with violence. The song battle continued and the two groups insulted and offended each other whenever possible. In 1995 a large brawl took place in the main logging town, and another potentially more serious affair, involving dozens of men on either side, was narrowly averted by my intervention a year later. Some of Mokaba's kinsmen were travelling with me while I did censuses in the Minganga area. They used Njulle's secret *njanga* path as a toilet. Njulle demanded they pay a fine. They refused and explained the problem to me. As aggressive shouting of claims and counter-claims increased the tension, mass violence seemed imminent, so I paid the fine.

When I returned to Mokaba's home area in 2000 I was very sad to learn of his death from food poisoning in 1999. His two brothers inherited *Monano*'s leather bag (*ngamata*). As they moved between forest camps they carried the bag with them and carefully kept it out of the rain in their huts.

Returning again in 2003, we performed *Ejengi* and people came from all around. On the third day, towards the end of the ceremony, the men summoned Mokaba's brothers onto the *njanga* path. News had come in from the forest that *Monano*'s leather bag (*ngamata*) had been left in an abandoned camp. A party of logging workers came through the area, found the camp and opened the

bag. Its contents were found on the ground. *Monano* had escaped back into the forest. The men considered this a great tragedy. It took many years to recover the situation. In 2011 I saw Mokaba's brothers again and asked about *Monano*. They explained that they had recaptured him and now *Monano* danced again.

6. *Mokondi* forest spirit economies

The movement and dancing of spirit-plays connect, identify and distinguish Mbendjele and other BaYaka over a wide area. Old spirit-plays, such as *Ejengi* and *Yele*, are widely distributed among BaYaka groups and so rarely traded. However, newer spirit-plays are unevenly distributed between clans living in the same forest area. These newer spirit-plays have a variety of histories. Some were traded from other BaYaka (Mbendjele say they got *Malobe* and *Niabula* from Baka), some came from other Mbendjele clans or communities and others, such as *Monano*, were captured in the forest.

Introducing a new spirit-play to one's clan after a long journey (*molongo*) is, like smoked meat or fish, one of the spoils of the journey brought back for others to enjoy. Like Samba who stole *Monano*, a man who travels to do brideservice or to work outside his traditional forest may learn about new spirit-plays. If accepted by the original spirit-guardian, he can legitimately become a spirit-guardian. He must give the original spirit-guardian all he demands, principally metal goods such as small anvils, coils or spear blades, but also wine, food, cloth and money. If he satisfies the spirit-guardian, he will be initiated and becomes a legitimate spirit-guardian himself. Then he can begin producing joy by initiating others and using the spirit-play to 'pull-out/bring into the open' (*ulua*) more goods and money.

While also responsible for procedures, spirit-guardians are expected to 'pull-out money' (*ulua mbongo*) by finding initiates for their spirit-play. Money, unlike meat or honey, can be well hidden and its existence denied. By obliging or pressuring eligible young men to become neophytes, their elder siblings and parents are forced to 'pull-out' their money to pay the fees. Since the money or goods received are shared among all participants to fuel the spirit-play, no one individual will benefit more than others.

Bringing money and goods out into the open is an explicit objective of spirit-plays and one of the main ways Mbendjele have made ritual an immediately productive activity. Spirit-plays are also used in this way to pull-out goods from neighbouring villagers. Due to their status as 'first people' BaYaka perform spirit-play rituals at all of the villagers' most important ceremonies. These

ceremonies are the main arena for villagers' inter-clan status competitions. It is important for inter- and intra-villager claims to prestige and status that large numbers of Mbendjele perform spirit-plays during their rites, especially during weeklong commemoration ceremonies (*matanga*).

Between villager clans, status is demonstrated by conspicuous consumption and by sustaining large numbers of dependents on the 'wealth-in-people' model described by Jane Guyer (1993). A well-attended villager commemoration ceremony, with impressive spirit-plays and abundant supplies of food and drink is the mark of a strong clan. Villagers organising such ceremonies have to provide whatever the Mbendjele demand in return for performing their spirit-plays. Mbendjele use this dependence to extract vast quantities of goods from villagers. Villagers often complain about this. They said that other villagers tease them if Mbendjele stop a ritual too early because all the alcohol and tobacco had been consumed.

Since villagers will never be able to buy the rights to perform the spirit-plays or initiate neophytes² themselves, the Mbendjele maintain a monopoly on these profitable performances. The Mbendjele are proud that the villagers depend entirely on them for the proper performance of their major rites.

Mbendjele also do commemoration ceremonies (*eboka*) for themselves. Due to their immediate-return economy, like Njulle mentioned earlier, it is challenging to provide for their guests. Although many clans will organise net-hunting expeditions and tap palm trees for wine in order to have at least something to offer, the requirement to give whatever guests demand is always difficult to fulfill. In this context having some new spirit-play rituals to perform will reduce the burden by generating desirable goods such as alcohol, or money.

Introducing a new spirit-play involves initiating as many eligible people as possible. Neophytes will pay an initiation fee. If not in kind, fees are immediately spent on alcohol and other consumables to fuel the performance. During large commemoration ceremonies several dozen neophytes can be initiated generating significant amounts of consumables for several days of performance. This is an important source of sustenance during these long ceremonies.

Another way new spirit-plays generate goods and money is that they will attract curious villagers to come and watch. Mbendjele deftly play up villagers'

2. There are two exceptions: *Mabonga* and *Lota*. *Lota* is an *Ejengi* from Minganga and the story can be read in Lewis 2002:173 fn 148. Sangha-Sangha villagers stole *Mabonga* from the Mbendjele of Ibamba by force sometime before the 1960s, and have suffered the mystical consequences ever since. When some neophytes went mad after initiation in the late 1980s, the villagers stopped performing the ritual until 2005 when a young man usurped the chieftaincy and began holding *Mabonga* ceremonies to intimidate his opponents.

claims to superiority by drawing them into status competitions with one another. Spirit-guardians must manipulate villager 'big-men' to contribute something to festivities by telling them how much another villager big-man has already given. If done with charm and skill, a smart spirit-guardian will extract huge amounts of alcohol and manioc.

If the hosting clan entertains their guests with a wide variety of spirit-plays this is appreciated and will be a favourite topic of conversation for some time to come. However, if the hosting clan does not own the spirit-play that their guests are expecting, they will be obliged to find and possibly pay a spirit-guardian to call the spirit-play for them. This can become a source of conflict since Mbendjele have so little they are often tempted to do the ritual without following this protocol. This may simply involve doing the spirit-play without an owner present, or more seriously, as Samba did with *Monano* on Njulle's behalf, by changing its name and claiming to be its discoverer so as to initiate others.

Past conflicts over non-payments when one clan was discovered to have danced another's spirit-play led each clan to get its own *mokondi*. Emeka said that the ancestors have bought and sold spirit-plays since ancient times. He knows which spirit-plays his ancestors bought and from whom, as he knows which people his ancestors initiated as spirit-guardians. Some of these transfers occurred several generations ago. Like Emeka, most elders know who legitimately owns what.

This ritual economy of forest spirit-centred relationships are carefully remembered and form a key part of the way Mbendjele identify, discuss and judge the extent to which other Pygmy groups are real 'forest people'. Spirit-play rituals are discussed in terms of the accomplishment of various key aspects of the performance – the quality of the singing and dancing, the appropriateness of the forest spirit's behaviour and the success of the dance formations characteristic of the particular ritual whose performance is being appraised.

Figure 4 illustrates these for *Malobe* and *Enyomo*. *Malobe* has become the most appreciated spirit-play ritual that the Mbendjele bought from the Ngombe (Baka). The Ibamba Mbendjele got *Malobe* when Dito Dzelle bought it from the Ngombe five generations ago. Since then it went from Ibamba up the Sangha River north of Ouesso, and into the interior to the Terres des Kaboungas and further north to Mbandza. A spirit-play called *Malobe* is danced on the Motaba River, but with very different dance formations and melodies.

The *mokondi Enyomo* is not at Ibamba but travelled South from Mbandza only as far as Terres des Kaboungas and North to the upper Motaba River and some parts of the Ibenga River. In 1997 I participated inadvertently in part of

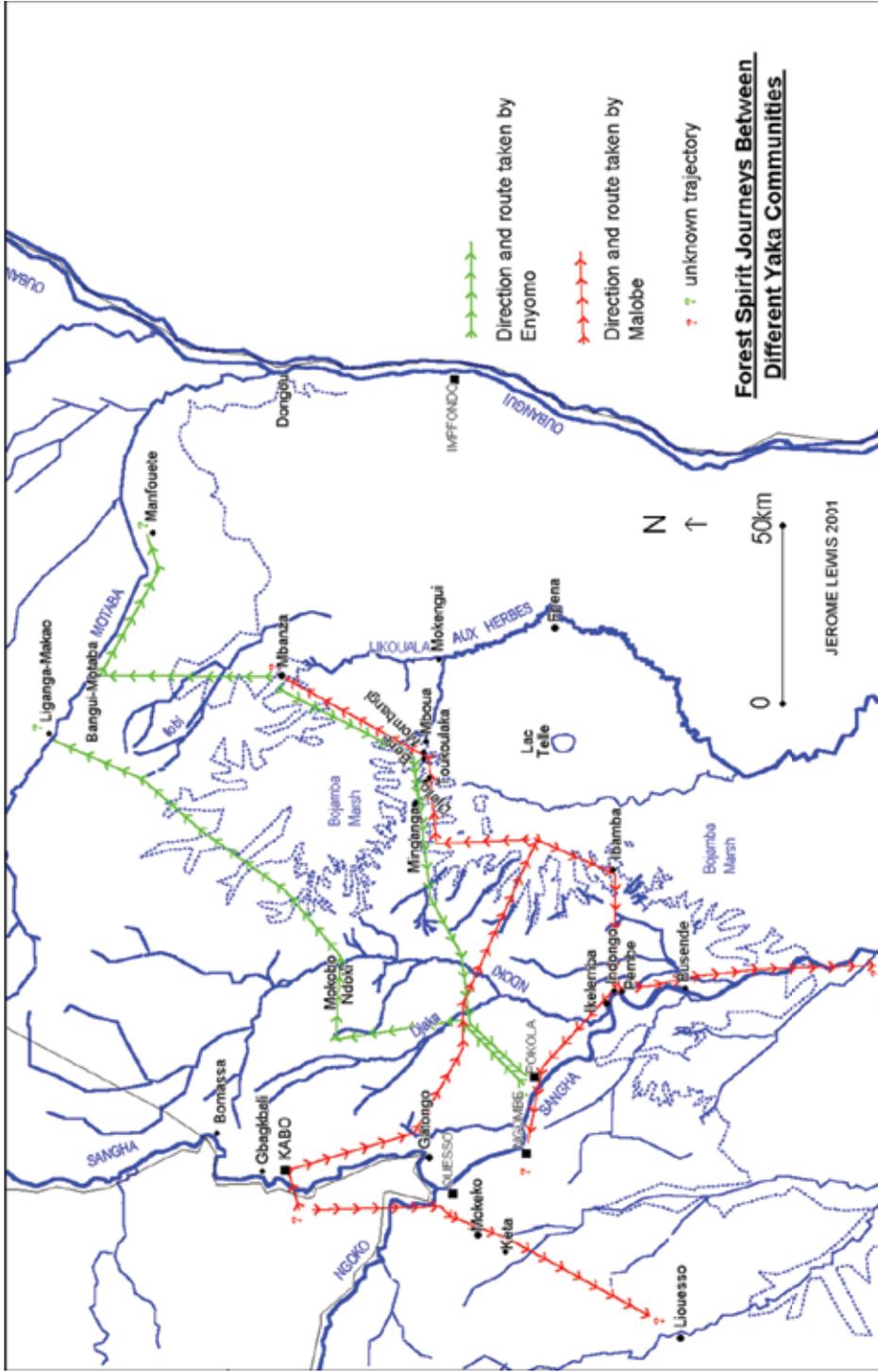


Figure 4 Map of forest spirit mokondi journeys

this process because the elder, Toma, who was the first *Enyomo* spirit guardian in Makao on the Motaba River, travelled with our party back to his home area with *Enyomo*. Upon arrival he began initiating his clan's people, and many others too. A great *Enyomo* was danced for three days. Toma was perceived as exploitative by some, since he cashed in on all the new initiates when it was his younger brother who had bought *Enyomo*. Toma, being older, claimed the right to be its guardian for the clan. Lewis 2002 (Appendix 1) provides some of the oral history concerning *mokondi* trading between the Ngombe and the Mbendjele over the past century and possibly longer.

7. Elephant hunting and spirit-play

In contrast to the *eboka* or *matanga* (Lingala) commemoration ceremonies just described, elephant hunting combines many types of spirit-play rituals in a way that illustrates the main dimensions of these economies.

Here the great social capital of the elephant's meat is carefully surrounded by spirit-play so as to undermine any claims to status by the hunter by dividing responsibility for his success with the women. This follows the rule that the person who spears an animal first is named it's hunter, someone who speared it second is called *mokobia* even though it may have been their blow that killed. In the context of big game hunting women are hunters, men are *mokobia*.

Occasionally an elephant or its fresh tracks are encountered by chance, but in ideal circumstances *Yele*, a women's spirit-play, precedes the departure of men to go elephant hunting. Women sing *Yele* songs, drink a herbal brew and entering trance fly over the forest. When they see large game such as an elephant they 'tie up' the elephant's spirit. In the early morning they tell the men where to find it. In effect women catch the elephant first. This is why an elephant hunting journey is called '*mwaka ya baito*' – 'a women's hunting trip', although no women accompany the men.

Men then depend on using both mystical and physical skills cultivated and refined during spirit-plays such as *Niabula* and *Ejengi* to supplement the great skill they have developed in tracking and stalking to get to the elephant. Approaching close enough to shoot or spear the elephant requires secret knowledge acquired on the *njanga* path in addition to an intimate knowledge of one's fellow hunters and the prey's habits, precision in aim and movement and a significant dose of courage. In line with their egalitarianism, when in conversation men emphasise the help they get from these forest spirits rather than their skill.

While the men are out hunting the elephant the women may continue in the characteristic *Yele* deep trance posture. Women rest their folded raised arm on the top of their crooked head, which bows forward as if weighted down by the arm. I was told that they continue to rock rhythmically back and forth as they sing the *Yele* songs until the forest spirit *Moshunde* flies through the forest to tell them the men have killed, and leads them to the place.

The spirit-play called *Malimbe* occurs at the site of the kill. *Malimbe* uses children as his emissaries to demand whatever he needs (normally meat) from the wife of the elephant hunter (*mwito ya tuma*). *Eya* is called in after dusk to mark the death of the elephant. The *Eya* forest spirits begin a raunchy, sexually explicit and sometimes simply rude conversation with the camp in squeaky, screechy voices, which the singing women saucily reply to.

During feasting *Yolo* will be sung, celebrating the abundance of meat, and later *Eya* again for some more raunchy provocation. Feasting, dancing and sex go well together. Until the majority of the meat is consumed, spirit-plays and feasting continue, sometimes involving the men in all night sessions of *Niabula*, the elephant hunters' spirit-play.

These spirit-play rituals serve to circulate the meat as widely as possible within the camp as well as with other camps. When people in neighbouring camps hear the drumming drifting over to them at night, they know there is something there for them and come to visit. Any extended feasting is accompanied by spirit-play. If sufficient people are present *Ejengi* is the spirit-play of choice. To enjoy the great abundance provided by killing an elephant many types of spirit-play come together.

8. Conclusion: a regional system

Hunter-gatherers' spirit-plays are sophisticated, many dimensioned aesthetic achievements. They offer music and dance to establish a dialogue with the forest mediated by the *mokondi* forest spirits. Participants share and are stimulated by the humour, poetry and beauty of the songs, wowed by the aesthetics of the performance and the insight and wisdom of the teachings of the *njanga* path, and irresistibly drawn to experience the solidarity and community created among people normally widely dispersed in small camps across the forest.

When meeting together like this, spirit-plays 'pull out' desirable goods hiding in peoples' baskets or pockets, while creating and sharing out joy right away. They allow groups in society to communicate with each other as groups rather than as individuals, and cultivate attraction between the gender groups while

re-affirming mythical agreements. If the camp is getting on well then it is 'open', food will come and life is good.

There is huge creativity within this form, with constant innovations to the songs and dances of established spirit-plays, as well as new spirit-plays being discovered, or purchased from neighbours and then brought home, to be learnt and enjoyed, and through the attraction of initiates generate desirable goods to fuel further singing and dancing. The economic achievement of spirit-play is to extract hidden production, distribute actual production and teach skills and knowledge that assure future production.

The trading networks that evolve around the movement of spirit plays across language boundaries and international frontiers unite Mbendjele with each other and with other BaYaka groups. They judge participation in this ritual economy to be a key indicator of their shared identity as autochthonous, egalitarian forest hunter-gatherers. This marks them out as a distinct component of the larger West and Central African cultural area proposed by Herskovits (1926), Vansina (1990) and others.

Despite the BaYaka sometimes being considered small-scale, isolated and mutually independent groups with closer ties to their agriculturalist neighbours than with each other, the ubiquity of spirit play among these different groups in the western Congo Basin hints at a broader shared identity and culture. Approaching from a different angle, Moise labels this the 'autochthonous tradition of Central Africa' (2014). An important reason not to refer to spirit plays as ritual associations is to emphasise the difference between the agriculturalists' practices and those of the autochthonous tradition.

Despite surface resemblances with spirit-play economies, the agriculturalist ritual associations and their ritual economies embody fundamental differences that resemble those between 'delayed return' farming societies and 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherer ones. As with BaYaka spirit play, villager ritual association members are organised in a cult whose access is governed by initiation. Some cults have masked dancers or other performers who display publicly. Others only allow their music or sounds to be heard.

Röschenthaler's 2011 comparative study of the diversity of these cults in the Cross River Region spanning Cameroon and Nigeria allows certain characterisations to be made. Agriculturalist ritual associations are based around ancestral spirit shrines, earth shrines and masquerade plays and only transacted between land-holding, high status men and women for high status goods such as slaves, though now iron and money. The associated performances are intended to be visible manifestations of power and status based around places or objects revealed by the ancestors as powerful. Some cults

perform blood sacrifices, including human sacrifice, others only pour libation to ancestors to gain their blessings.

In village ritual associations, ancestors are the central mediating spirits between initiates and the invisible world. Through the revelation of power objects ancestors become the focus of these cults, and when offered sacrifices, mediate for the living to ensure good harvests, fertility and success in warfare. In other words, ritual work is like farm work; invest now to harvest later. Though the ritual effort is made now, its yield will only be enjoyed in the future. In this sense the ritual associations of villagers, like their economy, are delayed-return.

By contrast, hunter-gatherers' spirit-plays are concerned with immediately producing valued goods for all to freely enjoy, not with waiting for them to come in the future. The hunter-gatherer spirit plays mediate between the camp and the forest, through *mokondi* forest spirits not ancestral spirits, and it is singing that feeds them, not blood. The performance of spirit plays emphasises the equality of all, rather than the status of some.

The different modes BaYaka groups employ to distribute knowledge and material goods are almost an inversion of the scientific ideal that knowledge should be shared on demand, while material property remains exclusive. As I am doing with you now, we academics are expected to share our insights and knowledge freely, but not our shirts, computers or bicycles.

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