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Egalitarian social organisation among hunter-gatherers
The case of the Mbendjele Bayaka
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Egalitarian social organisation among hunter-gatherers

The case of the Mbendjele Bayaka

Jerome Lewis

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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 characterized by great diversity (Bahuchet 2012). One small group in Cameroon, the Medzan, now occupies a savanna; many Twa groups in DR Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda have sedentarized among farming communities; and increasing numbers of Baka in Cameroon and Gabon are becoming sedentarized and alcoholized, 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 Pygmy groups find themselves in today, they share some remarkable similarities. In particular, their egalitarian social organization 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; practicing important rituals associated with elephant hunting; having intimate parent-child relations; and diverse relationships with neighboring farming groups (1996).

Ethnomusicologists working among Pygmy groups across the Congo Basin remark on similarities in their unusual highly integrated choral yodeled (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; Fürniss 1993, 1999, 2006, 2007; Fürniss and

Bahuchet 1995 on western Pygmies; Kazadi 1981 on similarities across Tua 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). 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 yodeled 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 (also see Verdu, chapter 2).

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 labor based on the symbolism of blood (Ichikawa 1987; Lewis 2008), economies based on demand-sharing, egalitarian social organization, 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.

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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[1]. 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, labor 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 evangelized 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, the 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 neighboring bayaka groups such as the Mikaya, Ngombe, or Baka. While not concerned about height, bayaka is equivalent to the academic term “Pygmy.”

The bayaka groups I will be focusing 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. Because the Baka are speakers of an Ubangian language, whereas the Aka and Mbendjele speak Bantu languages, I write the ethnonym as “BaYaka” to emphasize this dual classification. I shall use BaYaka to encompass all these western groups, but their individual ethnonyms when providing specific examples.

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[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.

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 neighboring 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

non-hunter-gatherers, their inexperience of the world outside the forest, and the huge profits to be made by commercializing 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.

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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, sophisticated navigation and positioning technology now 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 bushmeat. 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 organization undermine anyone who emerges as a leader, rejects their authority, and generally favors avoidance over confrontation, sharing over private property, individual freedom over organized representation, and immediate over delayed returns on labor.

While there is a growing international indigenous movement in central Africa, they remain mostly marginalized 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

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 labor, and make aggressive claims to own farmland, rivers, forest, and even other people. While Mbendjele resent these claims, Mbendjele elders often emphasize 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; Grinker 1994; Kenrick 2000; Lewis 2001; Kenrick and Lewis 2001; Köhler and Lewis 2002). Where forest people no longer have access to forest, they speak the same language and share many similar cultural practices and beliefs with their farmer neighbors, and 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 immediateand delayed-return societies go well beyond economics to determine key aspects of social structure and political organization. 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 labor over long periods before a yield is obtained. Typical examples include farming, herding, or capitalist systems, but also certain hunter-gatherer societies that invest labor over time or store yields (such as the Kwakiutl and Inuit, and most Amazonian farmer-foragers, including the Ache). The requirement to manage labor during the period in which the yield is being produced results in relations of dependence and authority developing between people to assure that labor is put in at the right times and that those who contribute are recompensed when the yield is obtained, and so willingly provide their labor again.

and massana. Establishing consensus, witnessing humorous reenactments of unacceptable behavior, participating in spirit plays, or respecting ekila rules of sharing and behavior 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 nonlinguistic 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 because 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, an economy organized by demand-sharing, a division of labor based on the symbolism of blood, and an egalitarian social and political organization remain so strongly associated

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 emphasizes 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,

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 organized 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 cannot be egalitarian; therefore, the analyses of "egalitarian" societies done by Alden-Smith et al. (2010) that 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," and so on 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 because 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, Mbendjele, 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 Southeast Asia, the Agta, Batek, Maniq, Penan, and others. Though numerically insignificant today, these societies are hugely significant for anthropology because their egalitarian immediate-return orientation represents such a radically different mode of social organization to the numerous hierarchically organized delayed-return systems that currently dominate human societies. Reviewing how his typology had stood up to the evidence from thirty 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 forest 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-laborers, beggars, potters, bar musicians, and similar jobs that provide immediate remuneration (Lewis and Knight 1995; 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

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, and 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 take over 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 njmb, dt ba die ebɛ!" (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 counterassertion 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.

Women's dancing cooks Ejɛngi, 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 instills 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 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 his or her 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 organizational implications in a society where daily hunting and gathering activities are intuitively coordinated 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

young educated Kabunga Bilo expressed it, unprompted, like this:

Despite production being for subsistence, the Kabunga organize 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, organizing 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 honor debts.[2]

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 immediatereturn hunter-gatherers and their neighbors in other places have resulted in anthropologists elaborating distinctions of their own. For example, Barnard's contrast between the "huntergatherer mode of thought" and "accumulation modes of thought" (2001), Biesele's hunter-gatherer "way of thinking" or "imaginative substrate" (1993) 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) that the term "society" is inappropriate.

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[2] Moise Taito, Kabunga chief's son and second-year psychology university student, aged twenty-six, 1996.

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 recognized 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.

they experience. They are the major social arena for learning gendered forest skills, cooperation, and the group coordination that is 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 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, maintaining 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 Ejɛngi 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 Ejɛngi, men's strength, and fearlessness controls and manages Ejɛngi safely. By combining their differences, they succeed in bringing him out of the forest into the human group, so all are able to share Ejɛngi'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 Ejɛngi, he is raw.

"tie-up" the man's semen to grow the fetus. 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) and the men with burying the body and ensuring the body is "tied" into the earth.[6]

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 and emphasizes the equally important contribution each makes to valued social production. Thus, women grow men's children by turning semen into a fetus and men kill animals that women's mystical activities have made available. These ideological leveling 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 learned 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-playing games and spirit play rituals (mokondi massana) where forest spirits are sung to, to attract them to dance in camp to share euphoria among all present.

Masssana activities are based on the principle that the better the participants coordinate with each other the more pleasure

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[6] I use italics to show where I have inferred, rather than heard, the use of these terms.

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 labor-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 such as 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 specialize in obtaining foods with potentially large yields, such as 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. Because 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 favoritism 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 among all present or the hunter's luck will be ruined. If sharing is not conducted according to ekila rules, it jeopardizes future success and the well-being of the camp. Ekila instills 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 shares his or her 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 recognize 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 organization. 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 grand-

I have mentioned how ekila defines proper sharing; other aspects of this important polysemic concept define the gendered division of labor 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 labor nor the yield of women's labor. Neither can they control the destination of women in marriage because 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 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 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. 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).

Mbendjele men and women spend most of their waking time apart; in the forest, women gather and fish together with other women and children, and 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 it is 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 and talk to each other in a particularly songlike speech-style (Lewis 2009).

Before today's society existed, the 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). 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.

children. 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 as avoidance is a common way of resolving disputes. In situations of temporary high population density (such as during dry season ceremonies, 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 farther away. When numbers get over about sixty people, Mbendjele often make several separate camps close to each other 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 with it, they or someone else may ask you for the item again, and so it continues traveling 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 their having nothing left for themselves. They contrast this behavior with the “hard hands” of Bilo villagers.

Demand-sharing is not a form of tolerated theft, indirect exchange, or of generalized 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 so 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 behavior 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 behavior that assume that good producers will get recognition, status, and fame, here it is not the case. They stop hunting for a while rather 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

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 organized through the institution of mosambo.

Specialist Roles

This doesn’t mean that Mbendjele do not recognize 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 guardians gets no more alcohol or smoke than anyone else and are 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 mosambo to the other men. They listen and express agreement by exclaiming “bonaapɛ,” 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

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 neighboring 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 behavior toward 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 organize 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. Because 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, and 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. Because adults do 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 chose 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!"

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 addresses 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 emphasizing it with sweeping downward 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 dresses 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 humor. 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. Humor 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, criticize, and organize 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.

In an egalitarian society, no one can play the role of "judge" because 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. Because 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 minimize the potential for injury, depending on the seriousness of the combatants and their gender (Lewis 2002).

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.[3] It is ekila, and despite having witnessed numerous fights, I have never seen an Mbendjele use such weapons against a person.[4] 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 institutionalized process of shaming called moadjo that is the monopoly of elderly women.[5] Some time after an event in which someone behaved particularly stupidly or unacceptably, one or two women will rise and begin comically reenacting the event. They will not say who they are mimicking but repeat the scene many times as an audience collects around them. The audience, among 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.

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[3] The early French military explorer Captain Cottes was struck by this dislike or "fear of spilling human blood" (1911).

[4] 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.

[5] Men occasionally do this, but rarely as elaborately as women.

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 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 behavior. 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 criticized is present, the madjo will only end when they laugh publicly too. However, on realizing that they are becoming the center of the camp's mirth, the wrongdoer often flees and hides in the forest until things calm down.

Camp Organization—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 because no one 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)—a 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 recognize 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 recognized individual to coordinate activity, the camp is organized in nonhierarchic way through a public-speaking protocol called mosambo. It is the means by which the camp communicates with itself, organizes activities, and resolves problems. It should be heard twice a day, in the morning and evening, but anytime somebody ad-