

PRELIMINARY ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON THE BAKOYA IN GABON

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ABSTRACT Little is known about the Pygmy groups living in Gabon. The Bakoya, along with the Babongo and the Baka Pygmy groups live in this central African country. They settled about seventy years ago and now share the same village space with Bantu ethnic groups. After a summary of the historical background and the social organization of the Bakoya Pygmies, I will give a brief description of their subsistence activities to highlight the social changes and economic transformations that the Bakoya underwent, by comparing two groups of Bakoya Pygmies, one living in Imbong and the other in Ekata. This first anthropological study has found how agriculture is important for subsistence and for earning money, a shift from collective to individualistic activities, and less dependence on non-Pygmy neighbors, with some noted differences between the two Bakoya villages.

Key Words: Pygmies; Settlement; Bantu ethnic groups; Subsistence activities; Agriculture; Road; Change.

INTRODUCTION

The term “Pygmy” encompasses a variety of groups of people spread out in the tropical rainforest of the Congo Basin in central Africa, from Cameroon to the Great Lake region. They share some cultural characteristics, but also show variability both between and within their own groups (Bahuchet, 1991). Far from the cliché of the Pygmies living in small huts in the deep forest and remaining semi-nomad hunter-gatherers, the Bakoya of Gabon present a new facet of Pygmy identity, and a double anthropological interest: they are settled since the 1930s, and there is remarkable variability between the villages where they live.

The aim of this article is to provide a description of the Bakoya⁽¹⁾ Pygmies of Gabon, because until today no monograph existed. While some Pygmy groups, including the Aka and Baka, have been well documented (Althabe, 1965; Thomas et al., 1981-2008; Bahuchet, 1985; Bahuchet & Philippart de Foy, 1991; Joiris, 2003; Vallois & Marquer, 1976) similar studies are missing for the Gabonese Pygmies. Literature that refers to the Bakoya is sparse, and mainly consist of ethnographic notes from linguistic studies (Mayer, 1987; Medjo-Mve, 2004), agronomic reports (Biffot, 1964), histories of the colonial period (Serre & Dermigny, 1954; Serre, 2003), and ethnography (Cabrol, 1960; Tilquin, 1997). Some other information can be found in more general reviews (Sato, 1992; Leclerc & Annaud, 2002; Knight, 2003) and studies about other neighboring Bantu ethnic groups, such as the Bakota (Perrois, 1968).

Formerly, Pygmies were referred to as the *Négrilles* or *Babinga* (Poutrin, 1910; Fleuriot, 1942; Demesse, 1980). Those names encompass other Pygmy groups as

well, such as the Aka in the Central African Republic. In Imbong Village, Pygmies call themselves Bakoya, but they are also known as Bakola in the village of Ekata (Gabon) and in Congo, but not to be confused with the Bakola-Bagyeli of the southwest coast of Cameroon.

The Bakoya Pygmies live in the Ogooue-Ivindo Province, one of the nine provinces of Gabon. They are settled in the Zadié Department, along two roads from the city of Mékambo to Mazingo (Canton Djoua) and from Mékambo to Ekata (Canton Loué). The Bakoya communities have been largely overlooked by anthropologists, probably because they are known to have settled since around 1933. Agriculture and other subsistence activities are practiced at different levels by the Bakoya, according to the village where they live. Also, the ethnic composition and the spatial organization differ between these villages. Authors have referred to with various names the ethnic groups who have contacts or live with the Pygmies. Some call them *Grands-Noirs* (Bahuchet, 1985), “Bantus” or “Villagers.” In this article, in referring to these distinguishable groups of people, I prefer to call them “non-Pygmies.” This is firstly because the terminology does not make any segregation based on arbitrary criteria such as size, as the *Grands-Noirs* suggests; secondly, because the name, “Bantu,” refers to a linguistic family, of which Bakoya also belong to together with the other groups of the same region,⁽²⁾ and, finally, because today the Bakoya also live in villages and are themselves villagers.

This article is a general review of Bakoya livelihood and social relationships, based on my long-term field research⁽³⁾ particularly in the villages of Imbong and Ekata, with a particular emphasis on their agriculture and their new sedentary lifestyle. I will discuss the importance of the new subsistence activities and their consequences on these two Bakoya communities. The comparison of these two villages is useful to highlight the differences on subsistence activities and the Bakoya’s relationships with their neighbors.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND RESIDENTIAL PATTERN

Bakoya spatial organization today is influenced by three main factors linked to the history of the area. First, are the numerous migrations and tribal wars that took place in the region. Some specialists including Hecketsweiler et al. (1991) hold that the Bakoya have probably followed the Bongom, a non-Pygmy group, who left the banks of the Ogooué River to go upstream along the Ivindo and Zadié Rivers. Cabrol (1960) believes Pygmies living in the Canton Djoua are native to forests to the north of Mékambo and from the neighborhood of the source of the Djoua River. They supposedly would have come to this region following the Bongom migrating from the Ngounie Province.

The Bakoya themselves, in their oral tradition, explain that they went through the Djoua River (in the north of the country), crossing the Yieze River on a big creeper. During their travel, the Bakoya guided the Bongom through the forest. The latter group came out of the forest to the villages, and the Pygmies, delayed by the harvest of *u.panda*⁽⁴⁾ (*Panda oleosa*), remained in the forest. At that time,

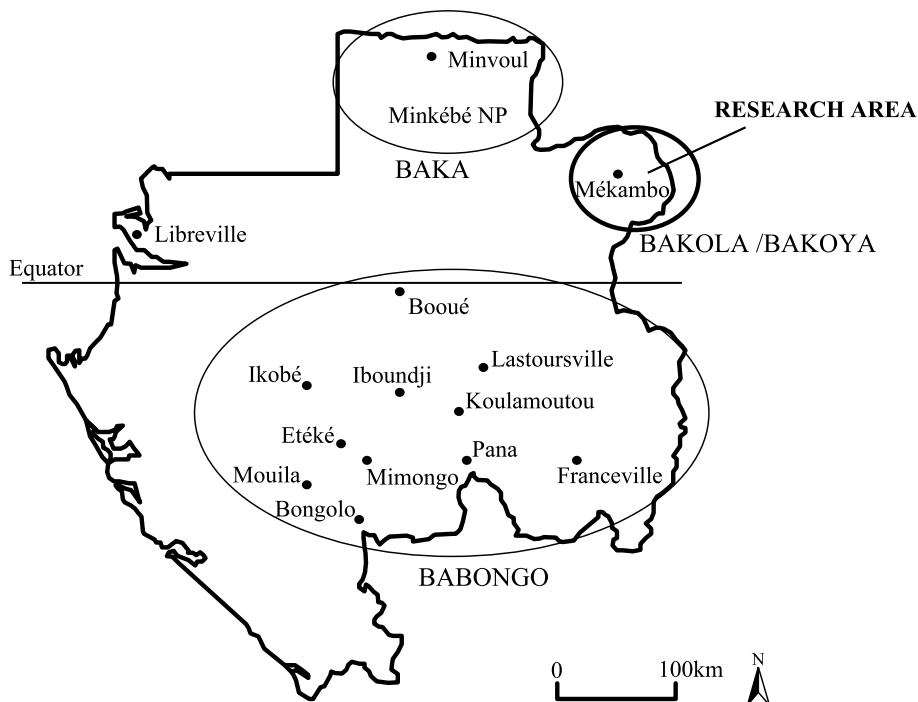


Fig. 1. Distribution of the Pygmy groups in Gabon and research area. Source: Matsuura (2006)

the Bakota were already living in the area. Then the Mwesa or Iesa arrived from Cameroon and the Bakwele from Congo, all chased by other groups during tribal wars. The Bongom founded the villages Ego, Grand Itumbi, Ngunangu and Ibea, along the Mékambo-Mazingo Road. In Ekata Village, the Bongom have a slightly different version. They say they came from Congo, and went south following an old path linking a village named Ville Bakota (near Mékambo) to Ekata.

The non-Pygmy people were then living in villages in the forest, interconnected to each other by paths. The Bakoya Pygmies lived in small camps that consisted of rectangular huts arranged in a circle, near the Mwesa and Kota villages in the case of Imbong, and the Bongom in the case of Ekata. The non-Pygmies had with the Bakoya Pygmies a privileged social and economical partnership through trade; the Bakoya gave bushmeat to the non-Pygmies in exchange for agricultural products such as cassava or tobacco, and also for iron and salt.

The second factor explaining the present spatial and social organization is the roads. When the French military opened the roads in the 1930s, they allowed the circulation of consumer products and induced numerous consequences on the spatial and social organization of those communities. These roads were at the origin of the contact between the “Whites” and the ethnic groups living in the area. The first road opened, where Ekata Village is now settled, links Congo with Mékambo. All commodity items came from Brazzaville, then the capital of the A.E.F. (Afrique Equatoriale Française). The trade of duiker skin and the exploitation

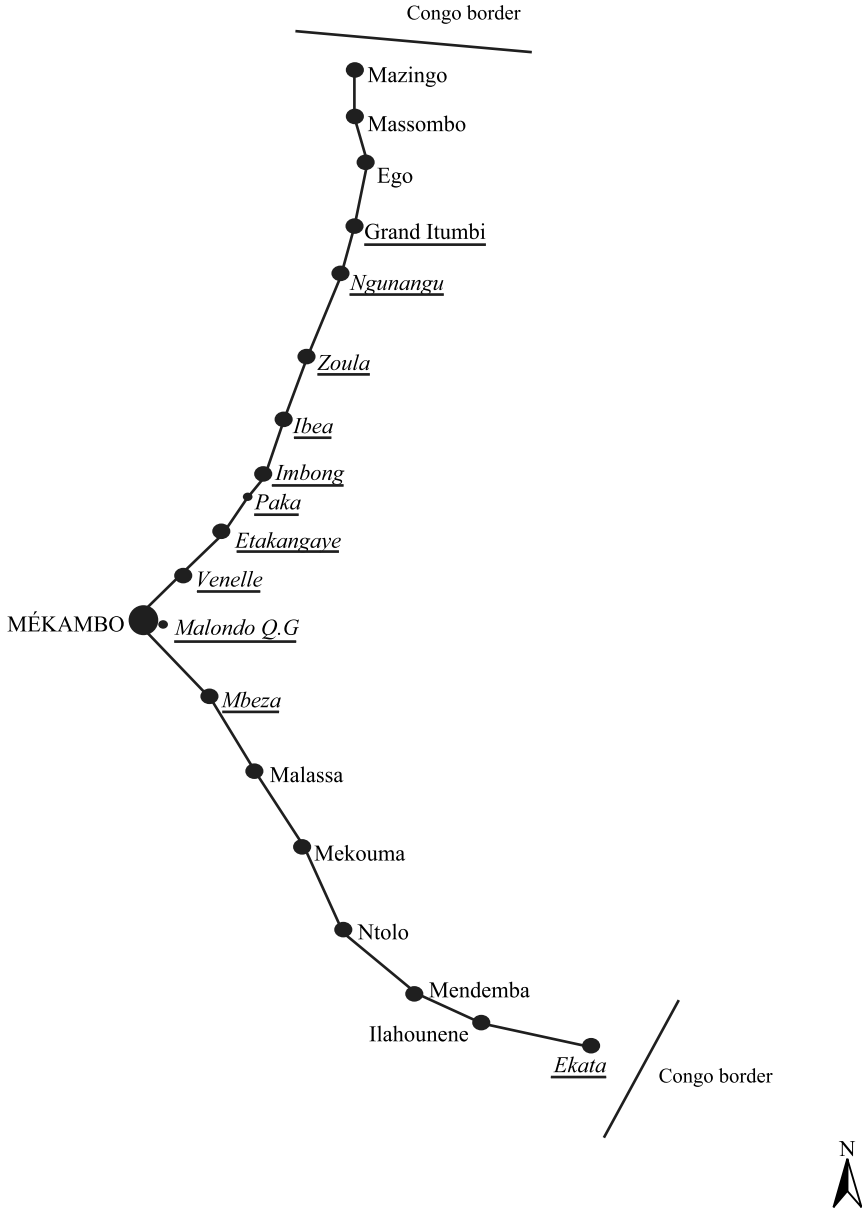


Fig. 2. Map of Bakoya villages (underlined) in Mékambo area. Distance between Mékambo and Imbong 7 km; distance between Mékambo and Ekata 69 km.

of wild rubber, extracted from the wild vines (*Landolphia* spp.) and trees (*Funtumia elastica*), was exploited by the *Compagnie Française du Haut et du Bas Congo*, a French company operating in the beginning of the 20th century. The French military encouraged the sedentarization of the Bakoya along the road and the first

Pygmy villages seem to have been created around 1935 (Cabrol, 1960). The Bakoya and other ethnic groups were employed as the workforce to clear brushwood for the future road. The old Bakoya still remember the heads of the District of Mékambo, Lieutenant Thomas (in post from 1933-1936) and the Administrator Gérard Serre (in post from 1949-1951). The first is considered as the one who made the Pygmies “go out” of the forest. At that time, the French people also brought with them a new way of life: aligning the villages, establishing schools and health care facilities, nominating chiefs, creating plantations of cash crops such as oil palm (from Congo), cocoa and coffee, and bringing new goods including clothes and machetes, all to be purchased with money.

Under the French rule, the Bakoya did not immediately follow the non-Pygmies who shifted their villages from the forest to the roadside. They remained dispersed in the forest while maintaining frequent contact and exchanges with the other ethnic groups with whom they had close relations for many years. In dribs and drabs, they gradually came closer, establishing their camps in a 2-4 km radius, which correspond today to the area where their fields are located. Fleuriot (1942: 101) indicated that the Bakoya shyly started to settle down along the road of Mazingo in 1929, whereas Cabrol (1960: 12) dated as 1934 the settlement of Bakoya in Mangombe 1 (today located near Imbong) along the road opened by Lieutenant Thomas.

The third factor is the *Programme de regroupement des villages* initiated by the Gabonese Deputy Jean-Hilaire Aubame in 1947, and introduced to Mékambo in 1949. The idea was to create village cells by concentrating the previously scattered hamlets as a basis for future development, and to construct schools and health care facilities in order to overcome rural exodus. Therefore, the villages of Mékambo, Loué and Djoua Cantons present different configurations, not only spatially but also socially. Imbong, 7 km from Mékambo, is the result of the regrouping of a Mwesa village called Imbong, and three Bakoya villages of Mitumbei, Mangombe 2 and Baya. The village of Ekata is a regrouping of the villages of Mabula (Bakoya), Ekata (Bongom) and Mandombo (Mahongwe).

The dynamics of village formation still continue today but for different purposes. Some villages are created after discords between members of the same family. This is the case for Paka, a little village founded by a Ngom followed by a group of Bakoya, both of whom formerly lived at Etakangaye. The village of Ngunangu is another example that illustrates the different spatial configurations. Situated alongside the Mékambo-Mazingo Road, Ngunangu consists of one house owned by a Ngom on one side of the road, and several huts belonging to a Bakoya family on the other side.

The traditional circular arrangement of huts, as seen in the forest camps, was replaced by a linear arrangement of houses alongside the road. While the villages do not have electricity, they have a mobile phone network, and some villages have a water pump and a school. In all villages, architecture is very diverse, and consist of a mishmash of wood houses, most of which belong to non-Pygmies, and mud huts, belonging to both groups. Bakoya houses are generally smaller than those of non-Pygmies. There is one Catholic church and two Evangelists in Ekata, and one Evangelist at Imbong. While there is no dispensary in Imbong,

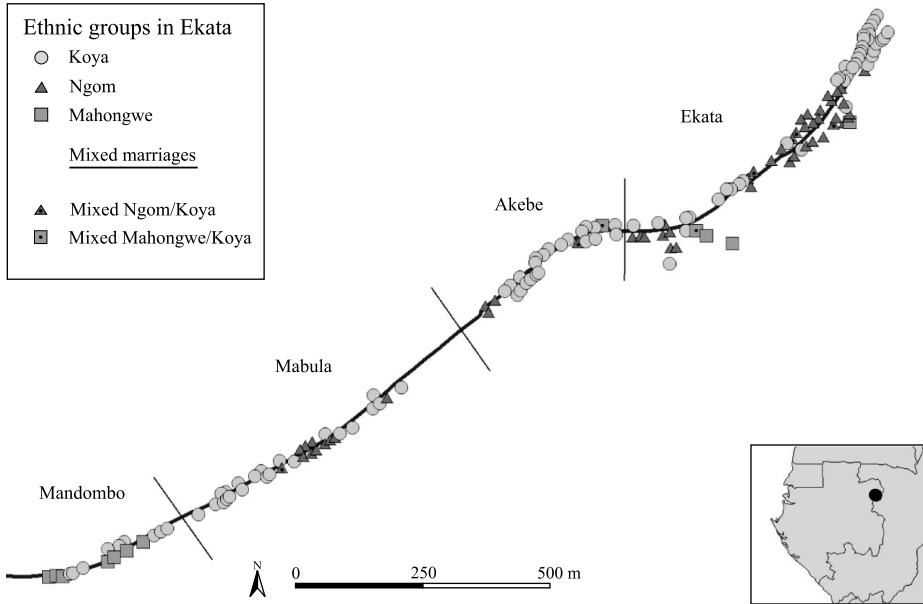


Fig. 3. Organization of Ekata Village, and its different “quarters” (Mandombo, Mabula, Akebe and Ekata), with the ethnic origin of the different households. In the case of mixed marriages, the first name refers to the ethnic group of the husband.

unlike in Ekata, a government health care worker lives in the village. Behind all houses there is a row of plantains, and some inhabitants have home gardens where they cultivate fruit trees such as *Dacryodes edulis* (*u.sa*). The hemispherical hut seen among the Baka or Aka are not traditionally made by the Bakoya, but those who know how to build them said they learned it from the “Bayaka” (the name given to the Baka in Congo). When the Bakoya used to live in the forest, the death of a member was the principal incentive to move the camps to another location. Nowadays, the Bakoya bury their deceased in cemeteries located at both ends of the village. As the village grows, Bakoya have built new houses behind the first row of houses, hence creating new quarters in the vicinity of their relatives.

The shift to sedentary life implied for the Bakoya living in wider communities, and sharing their living space with many different ethnic groups. In Imbong the Bakoya live with the Bakota, Bakwele, Bongom and Mwesa people; in Ekata, they live mainly together with the Bongom and Mahongwe. The maps below (Figs. 3 and 4) show how the different ethnic groups are distributed in the two villages of the study. The organization of the village still reflects the past distribution of the villages before the *Programme de regroupement des villages*. They now form “Districts,” which correspond most of the time to the ethnic origin of their inhabitants. In the next section, I describe the social organization of the Bakoya in their new settlement, and their relations with the other groups with whom they live.

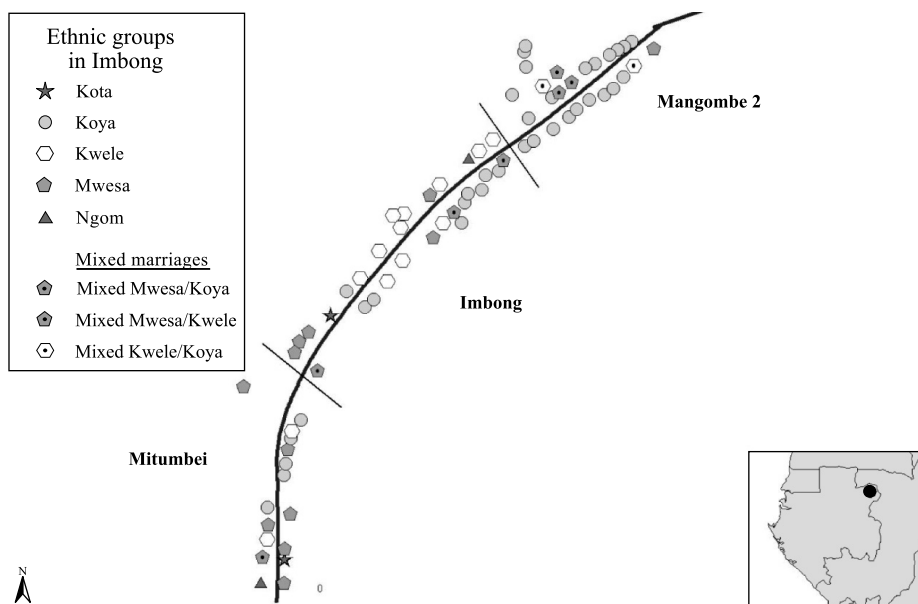


Fig. 4. Organization of Imbong Village, and its different “quarters” (Mangombe 2, Imbong, Mitumbei), with the ethnic groups of each household. In the case of mixed marriages, the first name refers to the ethnic group of the husband.

BAKOYA SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS

The relations between the Bakoya and their non-Pygmy neighbors, the Bakwele, Bongom, Mwesa and Bakota, are ancient and complex. Pygmies in general are known in the literature to have maintained close relations with their villager neighbors, which some authors have described as a form of patron-client relationship (Bahuchet, 1985, 1996; Demesse, 1980; Turnbull, 1965). Meanwhile, those relationships changed with the arrival of the French colonists, who imposed a new way of living, mainly precipitating the shift from a nomadic way of life to a settled one, in which the Pygmies were supposed to live close to the non-Pygmies.

Traditionally, the Bakoya had close relationships with the Bongom, but following the movements of populations due to the migrations and to the tribal wars, they came into contact with other Bantu-speaking groups, such as the Mwesa in Imbong Village. The non-Pygmies that the Bakoya used to call the “Others” had always considered themselves “the true People,” but still have maintained close relationships with the Bakoya, including inter-marriages between the two groups. With only one known exception, the inter-marriage has always been a non-Pygmy man marrying a Koya woman, and rarely the opposite. A similar trend was reported among other Pygmy communities by the authors cited above, which suggests a hierarchy in the social relationships between the Bakoya and their non-Pygmy neighbors. Even today, some non-Pygmies still consider themselves as the “owners” of the Bakoya “bequeathed” by their relatives of their parents’ generation, who had close relations and practiced barter with the Bakoya.

The Bakoya do not speak an original language: even if it had existed in the past, they have lost it. They speak the Koya, a form of Ngom, a Bantu language corresponding to B22B in Guthrie (1971) classification. Koya is a close dialect of Ngom, with little lexical and phonological differences. (Medjo-Mve, 2004). The Bakoya also speak French as well as other Bantu languages (Kwele, Kota) spoken by their neighbors.

I. Social Organization

The Bakoya and their non-Pygmies neighbors share some social and organizational features, and participate together in different ceremonies that punctuate the life of the village.

Like their non-Pygmy neighbors, the Bakoya have a so-called Hawaiian type classificatory kinship terminology. For an Ego, the men of his generation are considered to be his “brothers” and the women his “sisters.” Similarly, men of the generation of one’s father are considered as his “fathers,” and the women of such generation considered as one’s “mothers.” The Bakoya are exogamous, and they cannot marry a person of the same clan. The lineage system is patrilineal and residence is virilocal, although some men leave their village to settle in the village of his wife for an indefinite period. Similarly, when his parents-in-law beckon him to work in their farms, he may leave his village to work with them. Once a part of bridewealth has been paid by the man to the family of his future wife, the young couple move to the house built by the husband in the village of his parents. The bridewealth today consists of a certain sum of money, chickens, machetes, etc., and payment can be deferred in time.

Most Bakoya have names from Ngom clans, for example, *Sayuka* or *Samwadi*, and sometimes from another non-Pygmy group, for example, *Sabololo* (Kota). The non-Pygmies gave their own clan names to the Bakoya families with whom they have the closest relationships. Children, boys and girls alike, are members of the father’s clan. In mixed couples where the father is non-Pygmy, the children belong to their father’s clan.

The Bakoya make regular visits to their parents living in other villages, staying up to several months with them. Visits are important to maintain contact and to strengthen the relations between the members of a family. It is also the moment to share gifts and news. Visits to other villages are also the opportunity to find one’s partner, usually during summer holidays, funerals and other ceremonies. Most circumcision ceremonies (*Mungala*) occur during summer. People sometimes travel to distant villages to attend the circumcision of a family member. The ceremony lasts three days with different stages, and provides the occasion for the family and the entire village to celebrate together the courage of the young boys, to share food and alcohol. It is indeed a difficult test that involves the honor of the boy and his family. Originally, the *Mungala* was a non-Pygmy ceremony. Non-Pygmies families observe the circumcision of the Bakoya boys, providing support, money and goods. In return, because the Pygmies are considered to be great singers, musicians, and dancers, no ceremony can take place without their support.

Other important ceremonies still practiced by all communities are the mourning ceremonies, called *retrait de deuil* and *levée de terre*. Minor ceremonies, such as *issembu*, a feminine initiation, are either vanishing, or tend to be mingled with Christian traditions. The “ceremony of the twins,” for example, is now sometimes celebrated in the Christian way.

The Pygmies and non-Pygmies alike frequent the numerous Evangelical churches (*La Bonne Semence*, *L'Alliance Chrétienne* and *La Vie Profonde*) that flourish in both Imbong and Ekata villages. A lesser fraction of the Bakoya and non-Pygmies frequent the Catholic church of Mékambo or Ekata. Very few have converted to Islam, mostly those who worked with Hausa shopkeepers. The term, “Hausa,” encompasses all Muslim traders and shop owners from West-African countries, such as Mauritania, Chad, Cameroon and Mali. All shops in Mékambo belong to the Haussas.

However, Bakoya and non-Pygmies still hold a strong belief in wild spirits or “genies” living in the forest, for example, *Djundju*, who cries and steals children who wander in forest.

II. Political Organization

Pygmies are known for their egalitarian community and acephalous political organization. When living in the forest, decisions were made by an assembly of elders. During the colonial period, the French military asked them to choose a chief for each village. In Imbong and Ekata, the Bakoya have their chief elected by the inhabitants. For example, the Bakoya chief of Mangombe 2, a village which forms part of the *regroupement* of Imbong, is elected by the inhabitants of Mangombe 2. The chief of the *regroupement* is elected by all the people living in Imbong. However, the Koya chief does not make any decision before he consults the elders of the village. When there is a problem in the village, people have to speak first with the village chief. If no solution can be found, the problem is brought to the *regroupement* chief, then to the canton chief. If still no solution has been found, the problem goes to the prefecture. The chief of the village incarnates the administrative authority at the cell level and has diverse functions. He ensures the application of the law, embodies the administrative police, looks after the village health and signals the epidemics, participates with his population in local development actions decided by the cantonal council, registers births and deaths, and helps in the census-taking.⁽⁵⁾ At the national level, there is no Pygmy representation in the Government nor in the Gabonese Parliament. However, non-profit organizations, including the MINAPYGA (*Mouvement des Minorités Autochtones, Indigènes et Pygmées du Gabon*) founded by a Bakoya, work to bring awareness to the national and international level as to the Pygmy difficulties, and strive for more considerations to be given to these populations at the social and political levels.

There are few data concerning the demography of the Bakoya in Gabon. In 1960, Cabrol counted 970 Bakoya (Cabrol, 1960), and in 2002, Leclerc and Annaud (2002) reported 2,160 Bakoya living in Gabon. In both Imbong and Ekata villages, the Bakoya are in significant majority (Figs. 5 and 6). The Bongom in

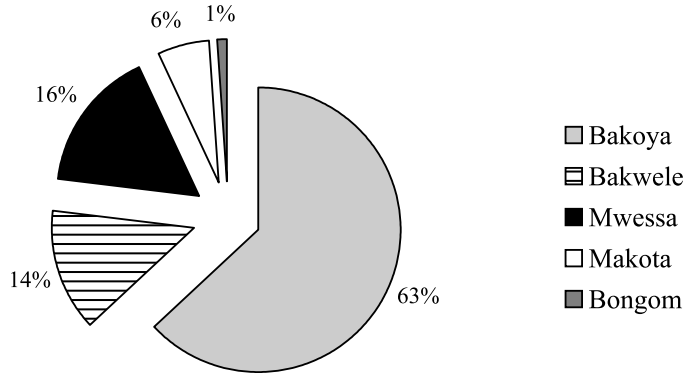


Fig. 5. Population of Imbong Village by ethnic groups. N=386 inhabitants, April 2006.

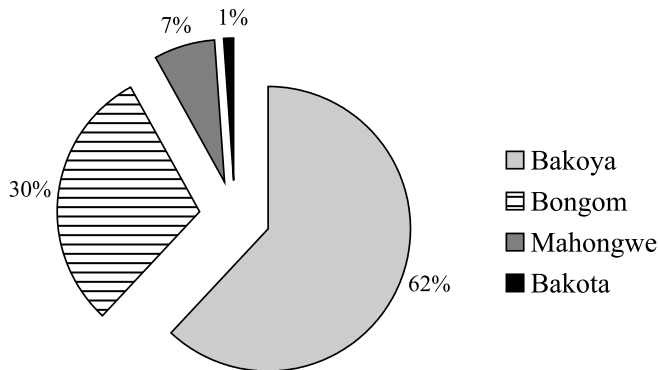


Fig. 6. Population of Ekata Village by ethnic groups. N=532 inhabitants, November 2007.

Imbong Village are a very small community, while in Ekata, they accounted for a third of the population, and formed the majority of the non-Pygmyies.

As described above, the Bakoya and non-Pygmyies have had long-established relationships. Both communities are connected through alliances of social, political, and emotional solidarity, creating lasting friendships and partnerships that transcend ethnic boundaries (Rupp, 2003: 41). Some Bakoya and non-Pygmyies still have duties towards each other, in terms of providing food and services on the part of the Bakoya, and protection and care on the part of the non-Pygmyies. The latter describe this mutual assistance as a sort of “social security” system. Alliances and friendships, collective ceremonies, and cooperative activities foster sentiments of social solidarity (Rupp, 2003: 39). However, the Bakoya to this day are still the subject of disparagement from non-Pygmyies communities.

However, some Bakoya no longer feel subordinate to the other Bantu ethnic groups. As the Bakoya now earn their own money and engage in the same activities, the distinction among these groups tend to vanish. I will now describe the subsistence and economic activities practiced by Bakoya Pygmyies in my study area.

ECONOMY AND SUBSISTENCE ACTIVITIES

The forest surrounding the villages, from which the people extract the natural resources needed for their subsistence, is a semi-caducifolius forest, with an altitude between 490 and 525 m, interspersed with secondary forests near the villages and swamp forests along the Zadié and the Djoua Rivers. Rivers and backwaters form a network that the Bakoya use as pathways and fishing spots. Annual rainfall is between 1,600 and 2,000 mm. The frequency of the various activities changes depending on the season. There are four seasons, two of low rainfall around January and July, and two of heavy rain in October and around April–May.

The Bakoya and their neighbors share the same space and the same resources, even if sometimes, as in the case of agriculture, the places are referred to as belonging to one ethnic group, as I will show below. Concerning the Bakoya social organization of work, the Bakoya distinguish some activities such as hunting mostly suitable for males, and some other activities suitable for females, such as fishing. This sexual division of labor is expressed more in terms of cooperation between the sexes than by a rigorous dichotomy. A woman still can do what a man does, if she wants to do so, and provided that she learns how to do it. The only taboo is the prohibition for a woman to go hunting with her husband and to pound cassava when she has her periods.

Since they settled, the Bakoya invested themselves more and more in agriculture, to the detriment of some “traditional” activities that eventually disappeared. However, there are variations in the subsistence activities carried out by the Imbong and Ekata villagers. I compare below these two villages in terms of hunting, fishing, collecting, agriculture and trade.

I. Hunting

The Bakoya have a high reputation as hunters and providers of bushmeat to their non-Pygmy neighbors. They are also considered the specialists in net hunting and bush pig (*ngoya*) (*Potamochoerus porcus*) hunt using spears (Tilquin, 1997). Today the subsistence activities have changed, and some of the traditional activities have disappeared, while others have diminished in importance. Shotguns and metallic cable introduced by the French colonists have completely replaced the traditional tools and materials used for hunting. The meat is either consumed in the household or sold totally, in parts (such as the leg) or small cuts sold for 100 CFA each in the village. This kind of sale is called *qui-va-vite*.

The non-Pygmys have the monopoly on shotguns, and lend them to the Bakoya in return for meat, as either the whole game or a part (leg, shoulder). Generally, Bakoya hunters borrow the shotgun, or the non-Pygmy owner hires a Koya to hunt for him. Sometimes the hunter provides the cartridges, and then shares the product of his hunt through prior mutual agreement with the shotgun’s owner.

Hunting is practiced by men and young boys. Bakoya also hunt with crossbows⁽⁶⁾ (*ngane*), dogs and *mbele*, an adhesive extracted from the latex of a vine which is used to coat sticks fixed onto the ground near the rivers to catch the birds

perching on the sticky sticks.

Men usually go hunting at night or in the early morning. They may return to the village within the same day, or stay for several days in the forest. They go either alone or sometimes accompanied by their wife, their children, or other men. Each man sets his own line of traps in forest, and also places some around his fields to protect the crops from wild animals. The Bakoya identify as “pests” such animals as the porcupine (*ngomba*) (*Atherurus africanus*). Five types of traps exist using the cable. These can catch the animal by the neck or the leg. The number of wires used to make the traps depends on the animal the trapper wants to catch. For example, only one wire is needed for *Cephalophus monticola* (*isiel*). For *Potamochoerus porcus*, a strong animal, hunters need to prepare a trap with at least three wires. The principal animals captured by the hunters are monkeys (*cema*) (*Cercopithecus* spp.), blue duikers (*Cephalophus monticola*), and other kind of duikers, such as *Cephalophus sylvicutor*.

Hunting and trapping techniques do not vary much between Imbong and Ekata. Nets are no longer used, even though some can still be found in Ekata. Spears for elephant hunting have also disappeared, but are still remembered in Imbong.

Hunting is more important in Ekata Village, where men are much less involved in agricultural activities, but devote more time to hunting. Bakoya can go far from the village to find game. For the circumcision and for the New Year’s Day, hunters travel far to find as much game as possible. Game is more abundant around Ekata. I suppose that the proximity of Imbong to Mékambo and other villages increases the pressure on animals. Imbong is 7 km from Mékambo, 4 km from Ibea, and only 1 km from Etakangaye, while for Ekata the closest village is 9 km away. Furthermore, many people from Mékambo come to hunt in the forest surrounding Imbong. As game has become scarce, lucky hunters keep their capture for household consumption, and only sometimes sell it. Often meat could not be found for sale in Imbong, whereas hunters in Ekata had difficulty in finding buyers. When meat is rare, people often talk of *disette* (*dinzàù*), corresponding to the *faim de viande* cited by Bahuchet (1985: 421).

Bushmeat is socially highly valued. Ceremonies, similar to those observed in other Pygmy groups (Bahuchet, 1985; Tilquin, 1997) and presided over by a *nganga* (the *maître de la chasse*, but also indicating the traditional healer), used to take place on the eve of *abwema* (net hunting) and *ngoya* (bush pig hunt using spears). Today these ceremonies and collective hunting for which Bakoya were famous are not practiced anymore, but still remembered by the older generations, who participated or witnessed their parents taking part in the ceremony. The *nganga* are still alive in Ekata, but they are now too old to officiate.

II. Fishing

Fishing is mainly a woman’s activity. Sometimes helped by their children, they build small dams (*nweke*) up and downstream of the river and scoop out water using baskets called *diapa*. When all water has been removed, they clear the riverbanks with their machetes and search for fish hiding among the tree roots in

the river.

Another technique, practiced by both men and women during the night or the day, is to set several rods along the riverbank along the stream, and return later to check if fish have been hooked.

There is another technique, called *bampabe* (also the fish captured by this technique is called by the name) which is employed only by men and young boys using a fishing rod of which the hook is made with a thin wire adapted to the small mouth of this fish. When the *bampabe* is captured, it is directly put in a basket held by the fishermen in his other hand.

All these techniques and activities are carried out by groups of both Bakoya and non-Pygmies, who sometimes fish together. The favorable fishing season is around July and August, when the weather is dry and the water level is low. Women, accompanied by children and sometimes by their husbands, camp for weeks, and smoke the fish on smoking racks. While men look after the camp, building the smoking racks and shelters, and gathering firewood, women do the fishing.

Although fish is not as important as meat in the Bakoya diet and cash income, it tends to be more important in Imbong Village than in Ekata, to compensate for the lack of game. Smoked fish from the village of Mazingo can also be bought in Mékambo, and recently, frozen fish and chicken also became available.

III. Gathering

Gathered resources are various and used for different purposes, such as food, construction, medicine, material culture, and firewood. I do not give a comprehensive list here but provide some examples of the most frequently used resources. The Bakoya catch by hand small animals like the pangolin *káwe* (*Manis tricuspis*), snails (*bokwé*) (*Achatina* sp.), or turtles (*kudie*) (n.d.). The principal plant items collected are the fruits of *u.panda* (*Panda oleosa*) and *o.pece* (*Irvingia gabonensis*). Seeds from those fruits are dried, roasted, and pounded to prepare sauces for cooking. Seeds can be stored on a smoking rack in the kitchen, but can also be sold to bypassers from Mékambo and from nearby villages.

Unlike *Irvingia gabonensis*, *Panda oleosa* and mushrooms, tree fruits such as *dibuta* (*Trichoscypha acuminata*) and *abombu* (*Anonidium mannii*) are not the object of specific expeditions in forest. Instead, they are collected on the way back to the village, after working in the fields. The Bakoya recognize tens of different mushrooms, most of which they collect during the heavy rainy season. Another important forest product is the multi-purpose Marantaceae leaves, that the Bakoya use to wrap food and prepare packets for cooking in the ashes, to make ad hoc cups in the forest to drink water from the rivers, or thatch huts in the forest camps. In Imbong, the roof of the houses is usually thatched with raffia palm leaves *dibò* (*Raphia* sp.), while in Ekata the Bakoya used another kind of leaves called *dikótoko* (n.d.), because the raffias are available only in distant places from the village.

Palm nuts from *dilenti* *Elaeis guineensis*, the oil palm, form an intermediary product between forest and cultivated land. The oleaginous nuts are boiled and pounded, to extract the oil which is then used to cook meat, fish, or cassava

leaves. The palm can grow spontaneously in the forest with the seeds spread by birds, or planted in the field or in the village's backyard.

Pygmies traditionally collect honey and caterpillars, but these are rarely consumed in Imbong Village. In Ekata Village, collecting wild products is more significant. The Bakoya of Imbong said that the Bakoya living in Ekata "put their heart more in the bush" than they do. Very few people in Imbong go to collect *Panda oleosa* compared with the Bakoya of Ekata. This is mostly, they say, because working in the fields does not leave them enough time for these activities.

IV. Agriculture

According to Ngom oral tradition, Bakoya started to engage in agriculture when a Ngom woman caught the Bakoya stealing roots from her field. It was the first time she encountered the Pygmies, and she called for her husband at the village. The Bongom brought the Bakoya back to the village, and showed them how to plant cassava. They also gave them their first cassava cuttings and some banana shoots. The Bakoya then cleared their own fields behind the houses of the Bongom, and started planting them.

It is hard to date precisely the beginning of agriculture among the Bakoya. The literature (Biffot, 1964; Cabrol, 1960) indicates that the Bakoya probably started to cultivate their own fields around the 1960s, whereas the old Bakoya explain that they began to plant crops well before that; when Lieutenant Thomas arrived in 1933 they had already started to plant crops.

The Bakoya, as do the other villagers, practice slash-and-burn agriculture and clear new fields twice a year, before the start of each rainy season. Once the location of the new field (*akàn*) has been chosen, men clear trees, and wait several days for the vegetation to dry out, then burn the field. Most of the time, the new farm is opened next to the previous one. Women then plant cassava *óonto* (*Manihot esculenta*), together with a large number of secondary crops, sometimes with the help of their husbands and children. Cassava cuttings are taken from the previous field left to fallow (*dibutu*). Fields are planted only once, then left to fallow. Women continue to visit their old farms to harvest plantains and tubers, and collect other plants such as peppers. Both the Bakoya's and other villagers' fields alike are usually small (0.3 hectare on average). Only three farmers, a Mwesa from Imbong and two Bongom from Ekata, all retired men who had once left the village, had fields of one hectare. They employed Bakoya workers to plant, harvest and soak the tubers of manioc, kept in rice bags of 50 kg in the (*didúbulu*) or the pond, where the cassava is left to ferment for five to seven days. This process is used to eliminate the cyanides contained in the roots that make cassava otherwise unfit for consumption. The duration of soaking varies according to the variety of manioc, and is decided according to whether they are considered bitter or sweet. Other non-Pygmies hire Bakoya men or women to work in their fields for weeding and other occasional tasks.

Agricultural products are the most important elements of the Bakoya diet, and cassava is the main staple in both communities. It seems that the first cassava cuttings were given by non-Pygmy women to the Bakoya women who worked

in their fields. Today, landraces circulate from village to village following family links or friendships. The circulation can take place in the village itself, and sometimes cuttings are imported from the neighboring or distant villages, as people bring with them the planting material when returning from a visit to their relatives, or while working in cities and other regions of Gabon, and as far as from Congo.

Cassava tubers can be prepared in many different ways. Leaves are also consumed and prepared according to various recipes. The cassava leaves are consumed to diversify and stretch the food supply throughout the year, especially in periods of *disette*. When people leave the village for several days, they bring cassava to their forest camp in many different forms (e.g., tubers, *bâtons de manioc*). When cassava provisions are depleted, someone is sent to the village to restock more *bâtons de manioc* or to the fields to harvest some more tubers.

The Bakoya also cultivate maize (*pôte*) (*Zea mays*), pepper (*mitangadie*) (*Capsicum* sp.), tobacco (*dâlaku*) (*Nicotiana tabaccum*), squashes (*ngondo*) (Cucurbitaceae), sugar cane (*kókwe*) (*Saccharum* sp.), amarant (*ndunde*) (*Amaranthus gracilis*), taro (*diika*) (*Colocasia esculenta*), plantain (*akóndo*) (*Musa* sp.), and sweet banana (*itóto*) (*Musa* sp.). Everybody in each ethnic group of both villages planted everything. Peanuts (*nzol*) (*Arachis hypogaea*) are only grown by those who can afford to buy the seeds. In Imbong, some Bakoya used to buy peanuts from the Bakota women, but they now store a part of their harvest for the next planting season. Peanuts are not planted in Ekata, where people say they do not have the money to buy the seeds, and that growing peanuts requires too much work.

In Ekata Village, fields were much closer to the village, and usually in the vicinity of their owners' houses. Fields in Imbong Village were located at approximately 3 km from the village, in the former camps called (*abò*), where their forefathers lived. Each farming area has its singular name. The Bakoya of Imbong Village have their fields essentially in sites called *Mayeka* and *Mbamba*, where non-Pygmies also had farms. The Mwesa had their own site called *Gadipana*, on the other side of the road. Land allotment obeys a single and simple rule, "first-come, first-served." Whoever clears a place becomes, and is recognized as the "owner" of the place by the rest of the village, and the "ownership" of the field is then inherited by his descendants. Farmers must hence ask the "owner"⁽⁷⁾ for the permission to clear a farm on his old fallows. Each farmer has his own strategies to select the location of his new fields. Some prefer to go closer to the village to reduce the distance they have to walk with heavy baskets full of cassava roots. Others go farther, in the hope of not having to do too much weeding.

At Imbong Village, the Bakoya men are organized into working associations. Those who plant in the same sites group together to work. Every day the members of the group work in the field of one of the members to clear and cut the trees of a new field. The next day they begin again in the field of another member, and so take turns. The non-Pygmy men married to Bakoya women participate in this association as well. Women also work in associations to plant, but sometimes there is dissociation because of quarrelling. This happens when some women, for example, are accused of planting poorly or of working less in the fields of their associates than in their own.

In Ekata Village, the Bakoya do not practice agriculture to the same extent as in Imbong, nor in the same way. Some cleared a field but then abandoned it because they were involved in other activities like hunting, or working in the Bongom's fields. The chief of the *regroupement* and another Ngom man are the principal employers of Bakoya workers in this village. They pay a daily wage of 1,000 CFA francs for working from 8 a.m. to 12 a.m. Also some Bakoya come from Olloba, the closest Congolese village, to work in the farms of their Bongom "relatives." Many Bongom said their Bakoya neighbors did not have their own fields because of their lack of interest in agriculture as well as carelessness.

When farming requires time-consuming, painstaking tasks such as clearing, planting, or weeding the farms, farmers in both villages settle in provisional camps, where they can stay up to several months. They build rectangular huts made of leaves, and some of them bring their chickens in fear that they can be stolen in the village during their absence. Children too young to attend school stay with their parents, while their elder brothers and sisters are looked after in the village by their relatives, including the brother, sister, uncle, or in some cases, the grand-parents.

When a couple parts, the woman usually returns to her parents' home. Yet, she can still harvest the field that she planted with her husband, because she worked in it. Overall, agriculture is the most important subsistence activity in terms of time allocated but also in terms of income for the household.

V. Trade and Wage Labor

Another important aspect of the Bakoya economy is trade and remunerated work. The Bakoya are often employed by a non-Pygy farmer to clear or harvest his farms. In cities such as Mékambo or Makokou, Bououé or Libreville, jobs usually consist of clearing new farms, working on building sites, or working as assistants in Haussas shops.

Back in the village, the average wage for a day of work is 1,000-1,500 CFA. Remunerated work concerns mainly men. Women can also be employed to assist with the planting in non-Pygy fields, to harvest cassava and transport roots to the rivers. When they have money, some Pygmies employ other Pygmies to work on their fields, but it is very rare. If they need help, they use their network of mutual aid. In Ekata Village more than in Imbong, the Bakoya help the non-Pygmies cut firewood or fetch water in exchange for tobacco, or a 100 CFA coin. Bakoya called those little occasional jobs *bricoles*.

There are various marketable products that are sold in the village, among which cassava is the most important. Cassava is used to make the *bâton de manioc* (*numbwe*) sold at 100 CFA each. Also, mixed with maize, it is used to make the *vin de maïs* (*maóku*) or *ngoss*, a distilled alcohol sold at 1,500 CFA per liter. Soaked roots can also be sold in bags, or *sakapea*. Each bag (ca. 25 kg) is sold for 2,500 CFA to traders who later sell these bags in Libreville for twice the price. Many people in Imbong have abandoned this form of trade because it is too demanding, saying "*sakapea* finishes cassava in the field." In Ekata, only the Bongom are

involved in the trade of *sakapea*. Banana is another important source of income, and may be sold outside the village. Other agricultural products (e.g. maize, peanuts) and non-timber forest products (e.g. fruits, mushrooms) are sold locally.

Some Bakoya have chickens, goats, and sheep, but they do not eat these animals. Chicken or their eggs may be consumed, but rarely. More often, livestock are sold to the Haussa who do not eat bushmeat. These animals may be part of the bridewealth or gifts given to the family during ceremonies.

The Bakoya and non-Pygmies alike buy goods in Mékambo and then sell them in the village for a small margin. They usually sell alcohol, cooking oil, rice, salt, cigarettes, matches, sardines, razor blades, *Maggi* bouillon cubes, candies, tomato sauce, tobacco leaves and kerosene for the lamps. All these products are bought in Mékambo and sold for around 100 CFA higher than the original price.

Trade increases in the period of ceremonies when family members come to visit their relatives for Christmas, New Year's Day, and on other particular occasions, such as circumcision ceremonies where much alcohol and food is consumed. In Ekata Village, trade is not as dynamic as in Imbong. The distance to Mékambo (69 km), the poor condition of the road, and the lack of money may be the main limitations. Yet some products, such as bread, are sometimes imported from Congo.

VI. Household Economy

Most of the time, money is kept by the Bakoya women, because men have the reputation of being extravagant and spending all their money on alcohol. Sometimes, both men and women keep their earnings for themselves or share them. Money is spent to buy manufactured products, such as cooking oil, soap, clothes, or kerosene for the lamps. Groups of friends, neighbors, or relatives sometimes organize a *tontine* which the non-Pygmies can also take part. Each member gives a contribution each week to a member. The contributions of the members and the refunds allow fulfilling basic needs.

The Bakoya have been involved in trade since Gabon became a French colony at the beginning of the twentieth century, when forest products were exchanged for money or manufactured products. Today, trade and money are important aspects in the daily life of the Bakoya. Also what was exchanged before, in a seemingly coherent exchange system to satisfy reciprocal needs, is now available at the markets, and even sold in the village. Access to market networks and the introduction of money drastically transformed the nature of relations between the Pygmies and non-Pygmies. The traditional exchanges between the farming societies and Pygmy hunter-gatherers are known to have formed along with the specialization in these two groups: the farmers in the techniques of transformation of the environment, of which agriculture is the best illustration, and the Pygmies in the techniques of direct exploitation of wild resources (Tilquin, 1997: 72). Today, the situation has changed, particularly in Imbong Village where the Bakoya seemingly have gained in "food autonomy," mastering all the steps in cassava preparation, from harvest to their sale in markets. They do not depend anymore on the farmers to access agricultural and manufactured products.

CONCLUSION

My purpose in this article was to give a general overview of the Bakoya of Gabon, and show the social changes and economic transformations that they have undergone in the last century, by comparing two villages with contrasting situations. The particularity and originality of the Mékambo area resides in the fact that the two villages of Imbong and Ekata were situated along the roads in the same way, and despite the short distance between the two communities, each had followed its own way of change. There are two different configurations: the two villages do not have the same ethnic group composition, some subsistence activities are practiced more and others less, and the relations between the Bakoya and their non-Pygmy neighbors are quite different. This implies that the term, "Pygmy," does not encompass homogeneous groups.

Pygmies have been described with seemingly inherent features in the literature, the most important of which qualifies them as "hunter-gatherers." In reference to what I described above, I consider the term, "hunter-gatherer," to be unsuitable for the Bakoya in the villages of Imbong and Ekata. The Bakoya have completely given up their nomadic lifestyle, and their subsistence activities do not depend only on hunting and gathering activities. Furthermore, the collective aspect of their subsistence activities tends to vanish and to become more individualistic. This was most striking in the hunting practices, where the introduction of shotguns and metallic cables made the collective hunt no longer effective. Hunters now keep for themselves the direct (meat) or indirect (money) benefits of their catch.

Another characteristic I have addressed here is the practice of agriculture in varying degrees. Sato wrote about the Baka, another Pygmy group living in Congo, that "above all, the Baka themselves take pride in being a forest people and do not necessarily persist in agriculture" (1992: 21). But in our case, I have shown that many Bakoya are heavily involved in agriculture, and count on this activity to improve their life standard. As Kitanishi (2003: 153) observed among the Baka, since they adopted agriculture, their dependence on farmers has decreased. According to him, this has weakened the partnership between the two groups. I argue that the resultant relationships tend to be of another nature. The Bakoya's ancient relation with the non-Pygmy people have indeed changed since the Bakoya acquired their "autonomy," mainly through the practice of agriculture and increased access to market. While the non-Pygmies still need the assistance of the Bakoya in their farms, now the terms of the contract have changed, and the Bakoya work for a wage. I have shown that some Bakoya do not cultivate their own fields but still work in the farms of their non-Pygmy partners in return for cassava tubers. This was particularly true in Ekata Village, although in both villages some Bakoya had their own fields but also worked from time to time in the farms of their non-Pygmy neighbors. The Bakoya who engaged in agriculture are self-sufficient and earn their own money, and hence have gained autonomy, "releasing" them from their ancient "patrons." This is the case seen more in Imbong than in Ekata, where many Bakoya still depend on the Bongom farmers to obtain agricultural products for food. It does not mean, however, that the Bakoya will cut their relations altogether. Rather, the social partnerships, even kinship, remain. What has

really changed is the economic situation. This is even more striking when one compares the villages of Imbong and Ekata. The Bakoya in Imbong practice agriculture on a larger scale than those in Ekata. Sato has shown doubts as to whether the Pygmies will become complete farmers in the near future (1992: 215), but I have seen on the contrary that Bakoya engage in the kind of agriculture similar to that of the non-Pygmies. Some of them have even started storing peanuts for the next year, a practice characteristic of “farmers” societies.

What I have described also has a consequence on the change in the way people look on themselves. The Bakoya in Imbong Village consider their fellows in Ekata Village as “bushmen” and “less advanced,” because they are less involved in agriculture. However, we should not forget the “individualities.” There are also in Ekata some Bakoya involved in agriculture, and some of them are also self-sufficient in food.

Also the non-Pygmies who have had a civilizing discourse about Pygmies, today say that the Bakoya, who now earn their own money and manage their own farms, “are more developed.” Many in both groups, Pygmies and non-Pygmies, believe that “there is no more differences between us.” The practice of agriculture seems to be the reference point that they take to compare the “developed” and “not developed” Pygmies.

Another factor which explains the differences between these two villages is the proximity to the city of Mékambo. Imbong is located only 7 km away, while Ekata is 69 km away. The distance, combined with the poor condition of the road, makes difficult the circulation of people and goods. The people of Imbong have better access to markets and goods in Mékambo, and can take advantage of the many cars and other *taxi-brousse* driving along the Mékambo-Mazingo Road. The situation on the south part of Mékambo towards Ekata, is completely different. The road is hardly suitable for motor vehicles. Its poor state has been a major setback to the development of the area. A better road could be a major incentive for agriculture in the region. The road is seen by the inhabitants as a vehicle of development, because it links the region to the rest of the country, and allows the access to market networks, where they could sell their agricultural products, bushmeat and possibly, in the future, timber.

The Bakoya show flexibility. Against all clichés people have about the Pygmies, the Bakoya have not undergone change in a passive way, but play an active role in their own development. Pygmy communities may still be at the bottom of the social scale, but they have embraced change on their own initiatives.

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NOTES

- (1) In the name “Bakoya,” “Ba-” is the prefix of plural and “koya,” the radical.
- (2) The family of Bantu languages bring together approximately six hundred spoken languages in about twenty countries of the southern half of Africa.
- (3) April–September 2006 and August 2007–February 2008.
- (4) Vernacular names in Koya and in French local names are written in *italic*.
- (5) Decree n° 00724/PR/MI fixing the attributions, powers and advantages of the staff and auxiliaries of Commandment 29/06/1998.
- (6) Crossbows in this area are different from those known among other Pygmy groups. They are smaller, and measure on average 115 cm in length and 45 cm in width.
- (7) “Owner” not in a legal sense, as the forests belong to the Gabonese State. The people have a customary right of use on the national forests (Article 251 of Forest Code, Gabonese Republic, 2007).

To know more about the Bakoya Pygmies please go to the following address: <http://www.rap.prd.fr/ressources/vodMenus.php>, select “Consulter les vidéothèques,” then under “Vidéotheque principale: Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle” look for “Chronique des Pygmées Bakoya 2006. Auteur/Réalisateur: B. Soengas.”

Film list of author/director: Beatriz Soengas

Production B. Soengas, SMM, CNRS-MNHN, Minapyga & UOB Libreville
2007: «Mime d’un accouchement». In *Chronique des Pygmées Bakoya 2006*. 3mn 19s.

http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06mime_accouchement.rm

2007: «Sortie de réclusion de la mère des jumeaux». 15mn 38s.

http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/sortie_reclusion.rm

2007: «Cérémonie *Ngoya*». 57mn 48s.

http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06ceremonie_ngoya.rm

2007: «Premiers baptêmes d’un pasteur pygmée». 19mn 42s.

http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06_bapteme.rm

2007: «*Mbélé*, la chasse aux oiseaux». 3mn 52s.

<http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06mbele.rm>

2007: «Visite des pièges». 15mn 04s.

http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06_pieges.rm

2007: «Découpe d’un céphalophe bleu». 13mn 47s.

http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06_decoupe_gazelle.rm

2007: «Fabrication du panier de portage *dikuya* (vannerie)». 44mn 26s.

http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06panierportage_dikuya.rm

2007: «Fabrication du *diapa*, *ankala* et *mbaka* (vanneries)». 1h 07mn 48s.

<http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06vanneries.rm>

2007: «Campement de pêche». 6mn 31s.

- http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06campement_peche.rm
2007: «La pêche au barrage». 11mn 37s.
- http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06peche_barrage.rm
2007: «En rentrant de la plantation». 14mn 51s.
- http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/Bakoya06_en_rentrant_dela_plantation.rm
2007: «Activités à la rivière *Itaba*». 6mn 07s.
- http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06activites_riviere_itaba.rm
2007: «Préparation de l'*akuét* (bouillie de maïs)». 6mn 54s.
- http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06akuét_bouillie_mais.rm
2007: «Préparation du *mandjaka* (purée de feuilles de manioc)». 13mn 57s.
- http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06mandjaka_pureefeuille_manioc.rm
2007: «Grillage d'arachides». 1mn 03s.
- http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06grillage_arachides.rm
2007: «Jeu de cuisine de feuilles de manioc». 2mn.
- http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06_asaka.rm
2007: «Mambuli dansé par les enfants». 2mn 51s.
- <http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06mambuli.rm>
2007: «Jeux d'antan». 8mn 22s.
- <http://video.rap.prd.fr/video/mnhn/smm/BKY06jeuxdantan~iMovie2Project.rm>

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