

ELEMENTS OF TECHNO-ECONOMIC CHANGES AMONG THE SEDENTARISED BAGYELI PYGMIES (SOUTH-WEST CAMEROON)

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ABSTRACT This paper deals with the problems of the relations between the settled BaGyeli (or BaKola) Pygmies and their non-Pygmy neighbours from the perspective of techno-economic changes in BaGyeli society. The first part concerns the hypothetical reconstruction of the history of the ancestral relationship between these Pygmies and their agricultural neighbours, particular attention being paid to the inequalities existing today between these two communities. The second part studies certain aspects of changes and influences affecting BaGyeli society which seem to be more important for the activities of women than for those of men.

Key Words: BaGyeli; BaKola; Pygmies; Settlement; Gender; Hunters and gatherers; Cameroon; Techno-economy.

INTRODUCTION

From January to May 1985, I begin ethnographic research among the BaKola and BaGyeli Pygmies in south-west Cameroon. They have been in the process of sedentarization since the beginning of this century. This preliminary study took place in five encampments located in the Département de l'Océan in the Southern Province (Arrondissements Akom II, Kribi and Campo). Some pockets of BaGyeli also occur throughout the forest zone, bounded to the west by the Atlantic, to the north by the Nyong, to the south by the frontier with Equatorial Guinea and to the East by the latitude 10°60'E (see Fig. 1).

The region is covered by tropical forest that has been impoverished by the deforestation caused by farmers and the industrial extraction of timber (especially *ekki*, *Lophira alata*).⁽¹⁾ The climate is of the tropical humid type with four seasons: two dry seasons and two wet seasons. The major dry season lasts from November until the end of February and the minor dry season from mid-June until the end of August. The major wet season lasts from September until November and the minor wet season from the beginning of March until mid-June.

The name I gave to these Pygmies is generally "BaGyeli" (n.gyele/ba.Gyele) following the French transcription of the name given to them by their neighbours. They are in fact called "Boguel" (Bògyel) by the Ngumba, "Bagyeli" (Bògyelè) by the Mabea and "Bekoe" or "Bekwi" (B-kòe) by the Fang. Nonetheless, they call themselves "BaKola" (n.kola/ba.kola) (Loung, 1959: 29). One hypothesis is that those among them who call themselves "BaKola" are linguistically more conser-

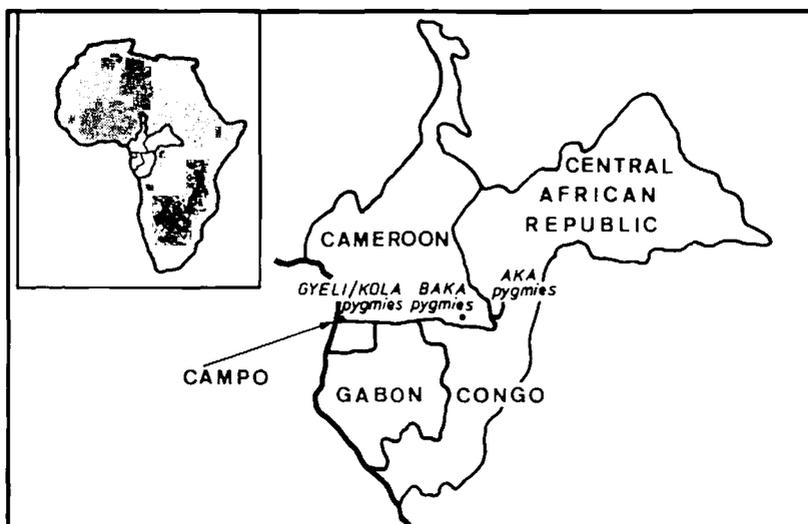


Fig. 1. Distribution of the Gyeli Aka, and Baka groups.

vative than those who call themselves "BaGyeli" (Renaud, 1976). BaGyeli and Bakola are phonetically, morphologically and lexically slightly different dialects and it appears that the two coexist in the same encampment, the older people speaking a dialect slightly different from that of the younger people. Be that as it may, for the region where I worked, I will continue to call them "BaGyeli" inasmuch as they are so described.

The BaGyeli speak a Bantu language of the Maka-Jem group (Guthrie A81) close to Mvumbò (the language of the Ngumba and Mabea). Like all the other groups of African Pygmies, the BaGyeli are in contact with non-Pygmy neighbours who are, besides the Ngumba and Mabea, the Basa, Bulu, Mvae, Batanga and Yasa. The neighbours of the BaGyeli encountered during fieldwork were the Bulu and Mvae farmers and the Mabea farmer-fishermen.

The BaGyeli number about three thousand and are the second most numerous group of Pygmies in Cameroon.⁽²⁾

They are little known in the ethnographic literature and the most recent article concerning them was published in the late 1950's (Loung, 1959). The principal characteristic of the BaGyeli Pygmies (in addition to the fact that they are acculturated and genetically much mixed (*fortement métissés*)) is their quasi permanent settlement.⁽³⁾

It is difficult to date the beginning of the process of sedentarization just as it is to discern the causes. Some accounts (Tastevin, 1935; Castillo-Fiel, 1949; Loung, 1959; Renaud, 1976) suggest a change from a nomadic hunting and gathering way of life to rudimentary agriculture around the years 1930-1940. Be that as it may, it can be assumed, following the account of Curt Von Morgen (Laburthe-Tolra, 1974), that in 1900, the BaGyeli were nomadic and that in 1950 they no longer were. In 1900 they led a hunting and gathering way of life, most probably similar

to that of other African Pygmies, but which displayed numerous differences from one region to another. The beginning of the 1960's was marked by a campaign to sedentarise them by attempts to settle the encampments along the roads. Some land for food crops was allocated and the authorities encouraged the BaGyeli to take up schooling and encouraged health education and agriculture (Ndtoungou, 1972).

Today, although the sedentarization of the BaGyeli has not brought about the giving up of traditional activities, it has generally led to their substantial modification, but not to the extent that agriculture has become the principal mode of production. Nonetheless, the adoption of permanent settlements has greatly reduced social mobility and isolated some family groups which no longer assemble to take part in collective hunts and who have, in some cases, relinquished nets or cross-bows in favour of individual trap-setting or hunting in pairs. But generally, the traditional hunting and gathering way of life, often modified by material imports from and the requirements of the outside world, coexists alongside an agricultural way of life. Nowadays, the BaGyeli lead a semi-sedentary life, their time divided between hunting, fishing, gathering and agriculture.

My aim is to outline the general range of contacts between the BaGyeli and villagers and to emphasise some aspects of the techno-economic changes among the BaGyeli resulting from them. I begin, in section 2, by reviewing what a study of the language can reveal about the history of contact. Then I describe the supposed evolution of their relations as far as the present disequilibrium, paying particular attention to the economic and social dependence which the practice of agriculture by the BaGyeli often involves. Section 3 deals with aspects of the techno-economic changes. After describing some activities, for the most part those of women, I consider the importance of the change and borrowings among the BaGyeli which they owe to their non-Pygmy neighbours. I conclude by underlining the interest of the BaGyeli for a study of the contacts between Pygmies and their neighbours.

THE GENERAL SCOPE OF THE CONTACTS BETWEEN THE BAGYELI AND THE VILLAGERS

1. Historical Factors

As seen in the introduction, BaGyeli is a Bantu language related to Mvumbò, the language of the Ngumba and Mabea. It is possible to speak, moreover, of a BaGyeli dialect in the sense of BaGyeli and Mvumbò being mutually comprehensible. This linguistic kinship has historical significance and suggests ancestral contacts between the BaGyeli, the Ngumba and the Mabea. According to Ngumba tradition, the BaGyeli would have accompanied the Ngumba and Mabea during their mass exodus as far as the other side of the Sanaga (mid-19th Century). They would have guided the migration of these agriculturists, which developed from the progressive displacement of fields in the traditional pattern of shifting agriculture (Loung, 1959). The intimate contact between the Pygmies and these populations

can in some ways be confirmed by a study of the language (Bahuchet, 1985; Bahuchet & Thomas, personal communication; Renaud, 1976). The close relation of BaGyeli and Mvumbò can only mean sustained and close contact between the Pygmies and ancient Mvumbò. It would have been during these contacts that the Pygmies would have adopted the Bantu language of their neighbours.

Today, a close continuity into this linguistic identity can be seen. The dialect of these two populations are not noticeably different. Nevertheless, the BaGyeli are dispersed throughout territory and have entered into contact with populations other than the Ngumba and Mabea. BaGyeli, proper to the whole of the Pygmy community, now has phonetic features originally specific to other neighbouring Bantu languages. Now the Pygmies use the language of their neighbours (Basa, Mvae, Bulu, Yasa and Batanga) in their relations with them.

Two types of historical influence can thus be distinguished; the first owing to the Mvumbò origin of the BaGyeli language and deriving from the long contact there has been between the two populations, the second owing to the dispersal of the BaGyeli in their present region and their coming into contact with populations other than the Ngumba and Mabea. This said, many questions remain: what were the circumstances of the first contacts between the Pygmies and the ancient Mvumbò? What were the causes and nature of their separation?

2. Ancestral Complementarity?

At the end of their migrations (Ca. 1880–1885), the Pygmies continued to lead their nomadic hunting and gathering way of life. An ancient complementarity can be postulated, and the assumption made that the villagers and the BaGyeli kept up, until an unspecified period, balanced relations within the pattern of the system of traditional exchange. The Pygmies thus exchanged principally game, forest products and labour (services) against iron, salt, soap, agricultural products and the protection of the villagers. Trade brought with it privileged links between the Pygmies and “their” villagers with whom they enjoyed close relations of clientship. These relations were based on membership of village lineages, but which, in case of conflict, allowed the Pygmies to leave and settle further away under the protection of another villager (of the same, or possibly, a different, ethnic group).

Around the 1930's (Loung, 1959), the progressive impoverishment of the forest resources through agriculture and forestry, reduced the hunting and gathering territory of the BaGyeli. Agriculture became indispensable in order to satisfy needs that could no longer be met by traditional methods. Without defining either the exact causes or conditions, it can be said that the relations of clientship grew weaker and gave place to unequal exchanges marked by the economic domination of the Pygmies by the villagers. The BaGyeli increasingly began to settle in the same encampments on returning from hunting expeditions. Around 1939, the Pygmies of Lolodorf (Loung, 1959) settled in permanent encampments for half a year. Since the 1940's these encampments have been surrounded by plantations and fruits trees.

It can be asked, at this point, if the relations of clientship which existed without doubt during the nomadic period, contributed to the process of sedentarization

and whether, despite the unbalanced nature of the relationship nowadays, the BaGyeli, in every case, made their permanent encampments close to "their" villagers.

3. Factors of Current Imbalance

Today, the traditional system of exchange is much altered. Without doubt it still plays an important role but some of the exchanges have taken on a much more commercial character (BaGyeli specialisation in the meat trade, herbal medicines and treatments and the livening up of village festivals), while other kinds of exchanges had been altered by these changes and have increased the dependence of the Pygmies on their neighbours.

The relation between the BaGyeli and the villagers goes beyond the classic form of integration at the level of the village ecosystem and sometimes involves integration into the system of market exchange. But, the goods acquired by the BaGyeli (meat, *Strophanthus* plants) are rarely exchanged for cash. When they are sold, the amount paid is often derisory and always less than the going rate. The Pygmies often receive alcohol, cultivated food or tobacco in exchange. Work done in the plantations of "their" villagers is generally rewarded in kind. The salaries they receive from the local industries where they occasionally work are usually the lowest.

Now, if this complex relation between the BaGyeli and their neighbours is clear at the material level (unbalanced clientship), it remains ambiguous at the symbolic level. One can therefore see the extension of the complementary relation into a market relation, but which, nonetheless, is still treated at the symbolic level. This important aspect deserves to be dealt with within the context of the relations between Pygmies and non-Pygmies.

4. Agriculture and Dependence

The BaGyeli took up the slash and burn cultivation techniques of their neighbours. Most usually manioc was planted with a scattering of banana trees and oil palms. No cocoa trees in the area belonged to a BaGyeli.

Their plantations are still very often rudimentary and the harvest inadequate during certain (dry) seasons. As a result, the women go to neighbouring villages to obtain a supplement, either by purchase or by working and being paid in kind.

The dependence of the BaGyeli on the villagers today would appear to be linked to their lack of self-sufficiency. Following Loung (1959) one can thus talk of a partial system of agriculture which is not sufficient in itself (agriculture d'appoint).

Encampments with adequate plantations are rare. Only a few encampments are surrounded by plantations large enough to satisfy the demand for food. The plantations seem to guarantee them an adequate margin of self-sufficiency. These instances are the only ones there is no systematic and constraining bargaining between the BaGyeli women and the village women. The women are thus available to help the men make the hunt more profitable. The other encampments are, in general, unable to guarantee this autonomy. In accordance with the definition of

supplementary agriculture (agriculture d'appoint), the BaGyeli only cultivate rudimentary fields in the immediate vicinity of their encampments. In these cases, the plantations do not furnish enough manioc to guarantee self-sufficiency. The women are regularly obliged to travel long distances in order to obtain food from the villagers. This obligation not only creates a dependence on the villagers — a dependence that the village women do not hesitate to encourage — but also deprives the collective hunt of potential female participants. Less meat is thus available for sale. The pauperisation of these encampments, subjected, despite themselves, to criteria of production and profitability which they can only, with difficulty, fulfil, can thus be seen.

Another effect is the proletarianisation of isolated encampments, exploited both by local industries (sawmills, for example) and by the villagers. The Pygmies work very little on their own account: this represents a rapid falling away in all the economic activities of the camp, whether traditional or not. The men and the women simply sell their labour-power for a paltry income and a few tins of food. In such cases the women (and the men during the period when the fields are being prepared) work much more frequently in the villagers' fields than in their own, which remain rudimentary. They are paid in kind with small quantities of food (manioc tubers, cultivated yams and sweet and plantain bananas). Clothing is also given to the women for this sort of seasonal work.

Because of their sedentarization, the BaGyeli become cogs in the wheels of agricultural mode of production, but their first steps in the learning of a foreign production method and the relative nutritional dependence which follows give rise to a stigmatisation that seems to confine them to the bottom of the social scale. They are often regarded with some contempt, characterised by condescending irony: they are pitied for their lack of organisation. As for the Pygmies, they plead frequent absences (journeys undertaken for mourning, marriages, cures or simple visiting) at key moments during the preparation of fields. One can thus see the atomisation of two previously complementary societies.

ELEMENTS OF TECHNO-ECONOMIC CHANGES

1. Details of Techno-Economic Changes

(1) Fish Bailing

Among the BaGyeli, this is a collective fishing method and is typically practised by women, but not exclusively by Pygmies. Usually, the village women and Pygmies fish within their respective communities. But occasionally individuals integrate themselves into a neighbouring group. Hence, from time to time, village women and Pygmies may fish together. The tools and technique are the same in both cases.

The peak of the dry season arouses a kind of euphoria for fish bailing such that people sometimes go twice a day, taking great pleasure in it. At this time of year some young BaGyeli go so far as to neglect collective hunting in order to go fishing. This fishing technique involves isolating a stretch of a river or stream using

dams that range in complexity from a simple dike of leaves, mud and branches to a veritable framework supporting a log placed across the bed of the river. After having made the dikes upstream and downstream with the aid of machetes and elbow power, the women set to and empty the resulting pool of water using wooden scoops or basins-tin plates even-until there is only mud left in which are stranded small fish, crabs and shrimps, which are caught by hand or deftly scooped up using a shrimping net (fibre net encircled with vines).⁽⁴⁾ The catch is then carried in a basin, a basket slung over the forehead or in a small basket carried at the waist.⁽⁵⁾

(2) Fish Trap

This fishing method is practised individually and typically by women and as much by Pygmies as by village women, with the exception of some of the older BaGyeli who do not have collections of traps. This type of fishing, which takes place almost throughout the year (insofar as the water level in the rivers, swamps etc. near the encampments allows), furnishes a relatively regular secondary supply of food. A women might have a collection of more than 20 traps, which are constructed in such a way that the crustaceans and small fry that enter them, attracted by a bait, cannot escape. The women usually set their traps for a few days and nights in an isolated corner of a nearby river. The BaGyeli make the traps themselves from vines, in contrast of the village women who often have them made for them by their husbands.

(3) Food Preparation

Bitter manioc, either cultivated or purchased by the BaGyeli women has become the staple food. Here I deal primarily with the preparation of manioc which is eaten in a variety of forms, which vary according to the different methods of preparation.

Manioc tubers are prepared every two or three days in the following way: having brought the tubers from the field the Pygmy women peel them and put them to steep in a large cauldron of water.⁽⁶⁾ The soaked tubers are then squeezed dry by hand and the central fibrous root drawn out. They are then usually ground using a mill consisting of a flat stone on which a smaller stone is worked so that a smooth paste is obtained which is then wrapped in the form of a stick in Marantaceae leaves. Fibres from the trunk of a banana tree are used to tie the package. Finally, the sticks are put in a large pot filled with water, sealed with banana leaves and metal lid and then steamed.

On the other hand, the steeped and cleaned tubers may be either steamed as they are or roasted in cinders. The women also prepare "cassaves," soaked and steamed manioc which is then cut into small cubes which are eaten after having been left in a large net in a swamp or stream.

"Foufou" balls made from paste are stored on a wattle rack until required when they are ground and steamed to make "foufou."

Every two or three days the women also cook manioc leaves which are ground, using either a wooden pestle and mortar or the stone mill mentioned earlier, and then cooked in portion-sized lumps in a little water to which has been added pepper and palm oil.

The wooden pestle and mortar are also used to detach the oil-bearing fibres from the palm nuts once they have been boiled; finally the fibres are squeezed to extract the oil. Similar tools are used by the women to crack the nuts in order to extract the kernels which are used to sauces. A pestle and mortar are also used to make a paste from plantain bananas, if they are not to be simply cooked in water.

It is the women who butcher small game, and who scrape and clean both large and small game (the men butcher and divide up the large game). The women usually cut up the meat and cook it in water with a little pepper, ground up using a mill consisting of a wooden board and a round, dried fruit. Fish and snails are cooked in packets made from banana leaves.

(4) Village and Dwellings

The older BaGyeli no longer remember the traditional huts in the form of a hemisphere. At least they do not recall them unprompted. It is difficult to date precisely the demise of this type of architecture. The beginnings of sedentarization were certainly marked by occasional and then more regular returns to the same encampment after hunting trips, which necessitated permanent dwellings, something which without doubt gave place to a variety of forms of building, ranging from Pygmy hamlets composed of "Bantu" huts, coexisting alongside those of a more traditional construction, via a collection of huts of a variety of new forms, rectangular and covered with leaf thatch of the traditional sort. Present-day BaGyeli house construction can be arranged into three categories: the first comprises huts built along the lines of old village dwellings; the second, reduced examples of contemporary village huts; and the third, somewhat rarer, consists of mud huts. In comparison with village settlements the Pygmy village gives the overall impression of being more precarious, consisting of both abandoned huts and others in the process of construction. The exacting building methods of the villagers are incompatible with the frequent coming and going of the members of the encampment. The BaGyeli houses are constructed by the men.

(5) The Specialised Meat Trade

It seems that sedentarization and the modification of traditional exchange patterns has encouraged the development of new Pygmy work patterns. As was seen above, the BaGyeli have specialised in the meat trade, curing and herbal medicine, occasionally even in the livening up of traditional village festivals.

It is not uncommon for villagers and townspeople to stay in an encampment for several days, even weeks, in order to make sure that an order for meat will be fulfilled. Meat is either sold to intermediaries who retail it later at market, or to individuals who wish to obtain a substantial amount for a festival. The price of meat is lower in the encampments than in the villages. The BaGyeli often demand payment in the form of cash or Spanish wine.

2. Imports and Borrowings

Before sedentarization the BaGyeli way of life underwent irreversible changes that were drawn from the village way of life. The traditional hunting and gather-

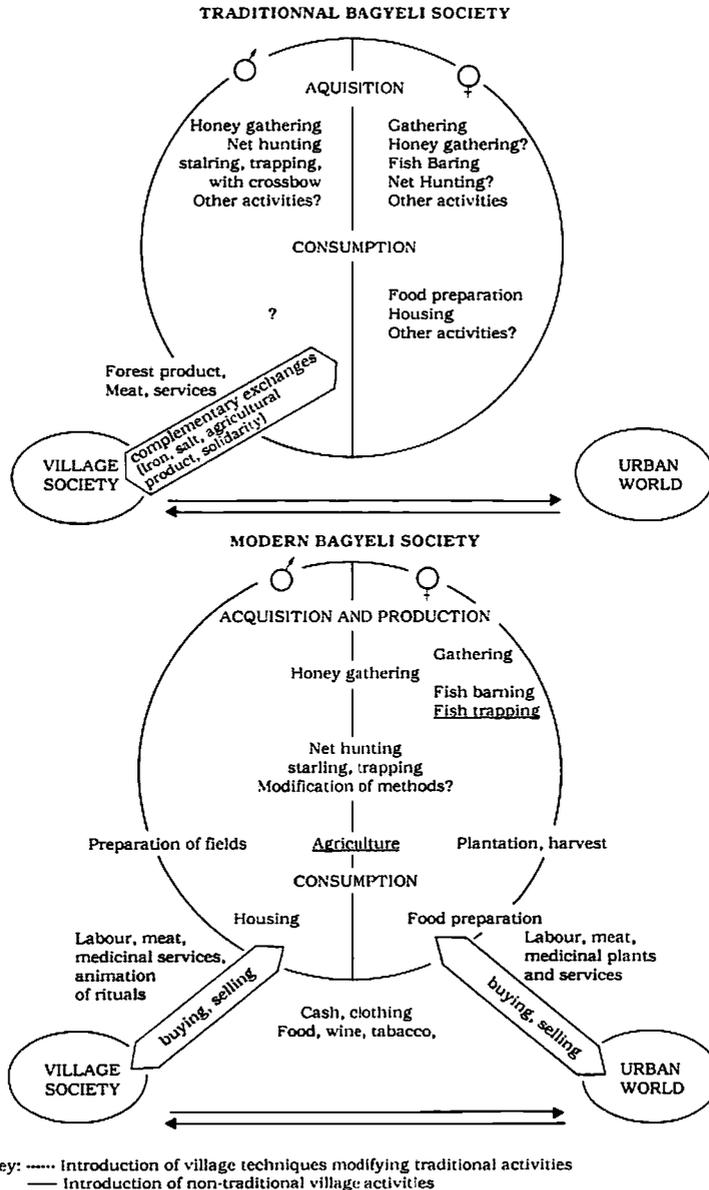


Fig. 2. Schematic representation of the sexual division of labour in traditional and modern BaGyeli society (not inclusive of all activities).

ing way of life became obviously destructured. The invasion of village activities is clear, being either partial in the case of borrowed techniques having brought about changes in traditional activities, or total, in the case of the acquisition of modern methods and work patterns.

It seems to me that the changes have been greater, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in the field of female activities rather than in men's activities. The majority of the present-day work-patterns of women (fish-bailing, fish-trapping, agriculture, food preparation) are modelled on those of the villagers, whereas those of the men continue the traditional patterns (Fig. 2). A systematic and detailed study would perhaps demonstrate that this assimilation of the village way of life is much more marked in women's work than in men's work.

In the majority of cases, the traditional activities of women have been changed by borrowings, whether simply through the introduction of traditional village tools and methods, or by the introduction of modern village activities and methods.

If agriculture, and the adoption of village work patterns now taking place, show the marked effect of village life on the BaGyeli, it is no less true that other activities have also been adopted without such major structural modifications. Fish trapping has without doubt been adopted by the BaGyeli women following their gradual sedentarization. The fact the older women do not have collections of traps may indicate their recent introduction.

Fish bailing is a traditional technique, certain features of which have been borrowed. It is perhaps interesting to note that, among the BaGyeli, the wooden bailer, the small waist-basket and the shrimping net, unevenly distributed among the encampments, are thought of as traditional tools that have become outdated. They are not thought much of by the younger generations. The "plates" of European origin do not seem to have had any effect on the traditional fishing techniques. One question remains. Are the tools that are nowadays spurned by the younger people in fact the result of borrowings prior to the plates and bowls usually used nowadays?

The present-day techniques which arise from the process of sedentarization and permanent contact between villagers and Pygmies, have modified the traditional patterns of consumption along village lines. Perhaps a closer study would reveal nuances in the differences between the food preparation of the BaGyeli and the village women. Taken as a whole, it appears that food preparation is practically the same in encampments and villages. Nonetheless, they might be more traditional in the hunting camps. While the BaGyeli living in base camps have taken up the eating habits of their neighbours, by regularly eating manioc with their meals, meat nonetheless continues to be abundant and to be the most nutritionally valuable food. If the agricultural seasons are disjointed, the BaGyeli always have recourse either to gathering or to the purchase of food from the village.

3. Shifts in the Sexual Division of Labour

The adoption of the villagers' sedentary way of life has modified the sexual division of labour that lies at the heart of BaGyeli society, particularly in the construction of houses and in hunting.

In house construction the women, who used to construct the traditional temporary huts, now do no more than help their husbands or "fiancés" to improve and repair the permanent dwellings.

This general shift of the burden of task from women to men results, in all likelihood, from the technical innovation brought with the change from house construction using flexible materials to construction using rigid materials (Murdock, 1973).

The adoption, from the villagers, by the BaGyeli, of house-construction techniques, is undoubtedly accompanied by mimicry of the sexual division of labour.

Without claiming that these factors provide the only explanation, it can be said that the borrowing of these village characteristics has without doubt modified building requirements just as it has women's role vis-à-vis the house and consequently, her position at the heart of BaGyeli society.

A final remark is necessary on the possible link between the meat trade and the surprising participation of women in hunting. Nowadays, BaGyeli women usually take an active part in some types of hunt. They not only participate in the net hunt, but also in stalking, either in groups of women, or with men. Moreover, it is not unknown for a woman to use her husband's spear (for example, but always that of some man), in order to hunt small, medium and even large game. In a similar vein, women have also taken up trapping. The data so far gathered do not allow more precise specification of the hunting techniques that they practise. But one thing seems certain — that BaGyeli women hunt more than other Pygmy women.

This state of affairs does not surprise the older BaGyeli at all, however bitter and critical they are of "changes." They simply consider that "just as the white women carry guns, so too do the BaGyeli women carry spears."

It might be asked to what extent hunting was open to women in the past. Be that as it may, the beginnings of an explanation can be proposed for the current state of affairs: if gathering, replaced by secondary agriculture, now has only a supplementary function, hunting, the keystone of the traditional economy, continues to be central importance because of the meat trade. The intensification of hunting thus demanded the active participation of women.

CONCLUSION

The BaGyeli, in the process of sedentarization since the beginning of the century, have a way of life that has been disrupted by the surrounding timber industry and by agriculture.

These Pygmies, who are genetically much mixed (*fortement métissés*), are an example of a society that has undergone marked acculturation and destructuration: their economy shows many borrowed techniques that owe their presence to the influence of the villagers. This influence is so striking that it might be asked why, despite everything, the BaGyeli continue to be distinguishable from and of different status to the villagers. This said, little is known about the origin of the BaGyeli and the extent of their acculturation is difficult to assess as there are no indications as to what BaGyeli society might have looked like in the past.

This paper can only raise some questions about the borrowing and techno-economic changes among the BaGyeli in contact with villagers. Questions that only a longer and more exacting study would, certainly resolve.

NOTES

- (1) Translator's note: also known as *bongossi*, red ironwood and African oak. Cf. Letouzly, R. 1960. La forêt à *Lophira alata* Balnks du littoral camerounais: hypothèses sur ses origines possibles. *Bulletin de l'Institut Centrafricain* (n.s.) 19/20: 219-240; Bullock, S.H. 1980. Impacts of logging in litoral Cameroon. *Commonwealth Forestry Review* 59 (2): 208-209.
- (2) According to the 1976 census (Loung, personal communication), this region of low population density (12/km²) has 3,098 Pygmies, representing 6.1 percent of the rural population. They thus have an average density of 3.9/km². The settlements of the BaGyeli are very spread out in comparison with the settlements of their villager neighbours. The BaGyeli hamlets in which I stayed had from fifteen to fifty inhabitants at the most.
- (3) Whatever their importance, the Pygmy hamlets are commonly called 'encampments' whereas those of their neighbours are always called villages.
- (4) These nets are sometimes made by the villagers who sell them to the BaGyeli for 500 frs CFA each.
- (5) These smaller baskets carried at the waist, are called "mfunde," and are made from vines by the BaGyeli.
- (6) A similar method involves steeping the tubers in a river for two or three days and then peeling them.

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