

BAKAS' MODE OF CO-PRESENCE

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ABSTRACT The characteristics of hunter-gatherer societies have been discussed previously within the framework of social structure or in relation to various “-isms,” such as egalitarianism. Eschewing this relatively rigid structure, this report focuses on the fluid daily social interaction of the Baka Pygmies of southeastern Cameroon. First, their spatially diffusive conversation in the forest camp or roadside village is described. Then the relative calmness, and high degree of resonance, of their interactions are discussed, based on the results of analysis using the time-sampling method and video image analysis. It is conjectured that living under such “multi-connected” conditions may cause them to face an “explosion of processing effort,” in responding to the tangled interactional relationships that characterize their community. The sophisticated resonance observed in these interactions is thought to be an ethno-method for diminishing the impact of such complexity. This viewpoint is discussed in relation to hunter-gatherers’ socio-ecological way of life.

Key Words: Baka Pygmies; Cameroon; Hunter-Gatherers; Parallel distributed interaction

INTRODUCTION

Although social interactions in hunter-gatherer societies have been described in the form of episodes or impressions in previous ethnographies, they have yet to be fully characterized. This is probably because a people’s or a group’s interactional attitude can be “felt,” but is difficult to “describe” and “analyze.”⁽¹⁾ Following on from my previous report on the conversational form of Baka Pygmies in CHAGS8 (Kimura, 2001), the present report will describe the daily communication pattern of the Baka, analyzed using the time-sampling method and video image analysis, to determine a framework through which their characteristic “mode of co-presence” may be understood.

THE BAKA

The Baka inhabit the border area of Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic (Fig. 1). The population is estimated to be 30,000-40,000 (Ndi, 1968), and they are one of the major so-called Pygmy groups in the African tropical rain forest, alongside the Aka in the Central African Republic, and the Mbuti/Efe in the Eastern DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo; former Zaïre) (Bahuchet, 1993). The Baka language belongs to the Oubanguian group (Greenberg, 1966), which is relatively remote from the Bantu language group.

The Baka are known to be a hunting and gathering people. However, in the last 30-40 years, their subsistence has shifted towards agriculture and commercial hunting and

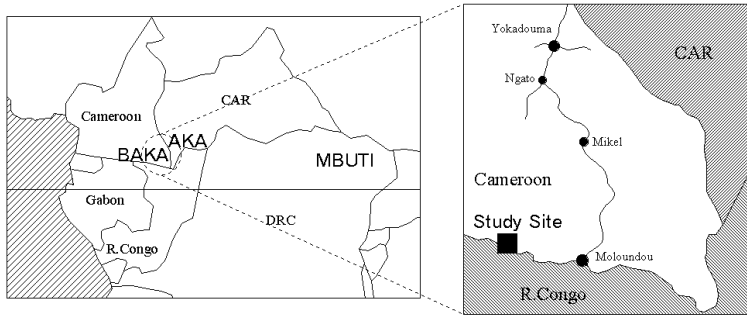


Fig. 1. Study site and the distribution of tropical rain forest hunter-gatherers.

fishing, and sedentarization has also occurred (Stromayer & Ekobo, 1991). Despite this, they frequently visit the forest camp for hunting, fishing, and gathering. In addition, they retain their own unique culture, expressed in forms such as song and dance. Their attitude to social interaction, which is discussed in this paper, is also quite different from that of the adjacent Bantu farmers.

In 1994, and from 1999 to 2001, an intensive field study was conducted in the village called “Mbàkà,” located about 60 km upstream of Moloundou, a central town near the border of Cameroon and the DRC (Fig. 1). The village was comprised of two clusters. Adjacent to the east cluster, there were several houses of the Hausa and the Bakwele. I stayed in the western cluster, the population of which was made up of the Baka people only. In 1994, the population of the west cluster was 71 (18 adult men, 20 adult women, and 33 unmarried children).

Before going to Cameroon, I conducted two years of anthropological research in the DRC. I lived in a village of Bantu farmers called Bongando. On first meeting the Baka people, I was very impressed by differences in their methods of interaction, as compared to those of the Bongando. Such differences will be described here to characterize the Baka’s mode of co-presence, and to suggest the mode of co-presence of hunter-gatherer groups generally.

PEOPLE IN CONNECTION

I. Spatially diffusive conversation

The density of the Baka’s roadside village was higher than that of the Bantu farmers. The houses were generally closer together, and smaller (Fig. 2); most were rectangular, farmer-like dwellings, but traditional dome-shaped huts called *mongulus* were also seen. *Mongulus* in the forest camp were closer together than were the village houses.

Under such crowded conditions a number of conversations could be heard continuously, during the daytime and the evening. The evening conversations were especially numerous, and by just sitting in a house it was possible to “tune in” to one of many outside conversations.⁽²⁾

Some descriptions taken from my field notes are presented below.

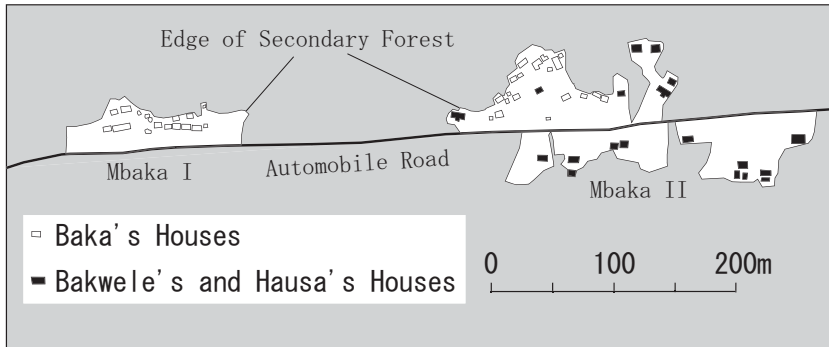


Fig. 2. Map of Mbàkà village.

- I am surrounded by the voices of a woman and baby from the adjacent house, the cries of children playing in the distance and, occasionally, the sound of women shouting.
- Menata, my Baka informant, comes to my house. He is laughing at a woman muttering to herself next door. He explains that she is talking about the problems of man-woman relationships.
- The talk of some distant women can be heard. Menata whispers that they are talking about the problem of a woman's husband going to the forest to lie with another woman.
- The members of Basil's family are talking in the neighboring house. Menata laughs and then suddenly calls out, "Basil!" Their conversation begins through the walls. They are talking about the cigarettes that Basil has bought.

Under such conditions, it was difficult to decide to which people specific utterances were addressed, and who had the right to respond to an utterance etc. In other words, the frame of conversation was unclear. Distant utterances were designated as "background utterances," and the indefinite conversational style was designated as "spatially diffusive conversation." This kind of conversational style seems to be common in Pygmy societies. Sawada (1990: 166) has described the Efe Pygmies' conversation in the following way:

One of the most remarkable characteristics of utterance in the camp is the active utterance, especially conversations, which occur in the morning and in the evening. At dawn, some adolescent men shout "waa..." to the forest. From 5 a.m., when people get up, until they finish breakfast, loud conversations are heard in and outside the huts. Conversations in which people speak 10 m apart, each at the edge of the camp, are not unusual.

In contrast, Goffman (1963) has written on the conversational rule in Western societies as follows:

Whether an individual is allowed to enter a region, such as a room, or is excluded from it, he will often be required to show some kind of regard for the physical boundary around it, when there is one. Of course, theoretically it is possible for boundaries like thick walls to close the region off physically from outside communication; almost always, however, some communication across the boundary is physically possible. Social arrangements are therefore recognized that restrict such communication to a special part of the boundary, such as doors, and that lead persons inside and outside the region to act *as if* the barrier had cut off more communication than it does.

In the Baka society (and probably also in the Efe), communication through a wall, or across a considerable distance, is quite normal. In other words, unlike Western societies, they have no *as if* barrier. They are free to respond to any of the “background utterances,” because the addressing of such utterances is not generally clear. Thus, the pattern of the Baka’s daily communication can be called “multi-connected.”

II. Daily fluctuation of background utterances

To determine the frequency of the background utterances, and when they were most numerous, time-sampling was performed. The same kind of sampling was previously carried out in the Bongando society, in former Zaïre, and this allowed a comparison between hunter-gatherer interactions and those of farmers.

From within a house, attributes of background utterances, such as volume, direction of address, and a speaker’s age and sex, were recorded. It was not practical to use a tape recorder because some speeches heard *in situ* were too quiet to be recorded. Therefore, a modified “instantaneous sampling” method was used. The attributes of background speech were recorded in the first second of periods of 15 seconds, which comprised one sampling unit.

In this paper, only the daily fluctuation pattern of the frequency of background utterances will be presented (Fig. 3).⁽³⁾ In both societies, the frequency of background utterances was very high. More than one utterance could be heard at most times during the day. The most marked difference found was in the degree of daily variation, which was higher in the Baka village. The increase in frequency in the early morning, afternoon and evening, and decrease of 9:00-11:00 A.M. were more marked in the Baka community. This characteristic was closely related to the resonance of interaction, which will be analyzed in the next Section.

CALMNESS AND RESONANCE OF INTERACTION

The following section describes some aspects of the Baka’s daily social interaction.

I. Sitting still

First, I will describe my initial impressions of the Baka people. In September 1993, two colleagues and I were conducting an extensive survey of the rain forest area of Cameroon (Fig. 1) when we first met the Baka people. A well-maintained wide road for logging had been constructed there, and small dome-shaped huts (*mongulus*) had been built beside the road. Stopping at one of these hamlets, we asked and were granted permission to pitch our tents near their huts. Prior to this encounter, having read the work of Colin Turnbull (1961) and my Japanese colleagues, I had expected the so-called Pygmy people to be lively and rather clamorous. However, I was struck by their remarkable calmness. Notably, their responses to our questions were always delayed for an instant, as compared to the timing

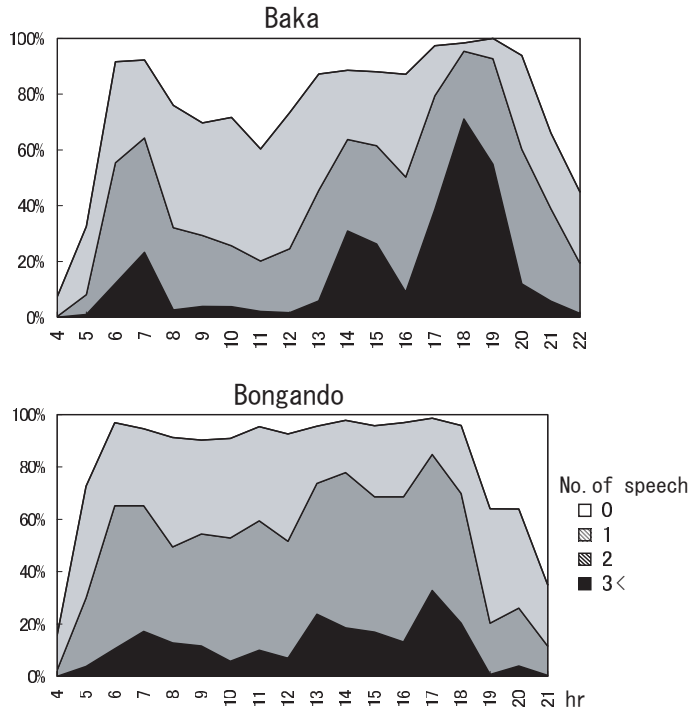


Fig. 3. Daily fluctuations in the level of background utterances in the Baka village and Bongando village.

in Japanese conversation. The pace was also quite different from that of the neighboring Bantu people.

When staying in a house in the Baka village, it was common to be surprised by the presence of someone one had not previously noticed sitting still, like a shadow, in the corner of the room. Generally, the Baka people conveyed an impression of vacancy. I felt no annoyance toward the Baka person sitting still beside me.

Occasionally, the Baka people appeared to sit “outside themselves.” One of my colleagues described this as their “staring into the distance” stance, an apt description for this observed behavior.

Such interactional calmness was also recorded in my field notes.

- In the evening, sitting on the bench outside the house, I listened to Radio Japan on my short-wave radio. A boy was sitting still beside me, watching other children playing on the road. I felt that he was not actually here beside me, but was playing with the others over there, as in the saying “here in body, but not in spirit.”
- Even when the Baka people sit in one place together, they seem to turn a part of their attention to the outer world. During moments of long silence, their eyes frequently move rapidly, looking around. Do they disperse their attention, not feeling tied to face-to-face interactions?
- When I asked Menata “Why are you going to the forest camp?” he replied in Lingala “*Nayoka jamba malam,*” which means, “To hear (or feel) the forest well.”

Such “quiet” attitudes with respect to social interactions have also been seen in other hunter-gatherer societies. As there have been many reports on the behavior of well-known hunter-gatherer groups, such as the Pygmies or Bushmen, here I will present a scene from Ainu life, in northern Japan, as described by the famous Japanese painter Morikazu Kumagai (Kumagai, 2000: 84) during his time in Sakhalin in 1905 as a member of an investigation team:

Even though the Ainu are recognized as fishermen, they stop fishing when they have caught enough for themselves and their dogs. Throwing the fish on the beach, they stare abstractedly at the sea, sitting in a row with folded knees. Without doing anything, all of them sit gawking at the sea. As the fish are laid down at the water’s edge, even I became anxious that the catch might be carried away on a wave.

II. Delayed reaction against gaze

“Calmness” in social interactions was also observed with respect to eye contact.

While among the Bongando Bantu farmers, I sometimes joked with the children, when they looked into the house through the window, by staring back at them. They would eventually cast their eyes aside, and the duration of their stare differed according to age. Generally, older children (more than 10 years old) glanced away within several tens of seconds, but younger children bore my gaze for longer. Although I did not record the time accurately, it was rare for them to continue to look for more than 1 minute.

I performed the same “experiment” in the Baka village, with interesting results. The older children, who quickly glanced away in the case of the Bongando, kept looking for far longer periods in this instance, sometimes for more than 5 minutes. They sometimes turned their face away in an unnatural posture, maintaining the direction of the body, or hid under the window frame for some time. Moreover, not only the children, but also adults sometimes showed the same behavior. They seemed not to “endure” my gaze directly, but received it indirectly.

In summary, in the Baka’s social interactions, the intentionality (or directionality) of an act was not affected by those of others.

III. Speech overlap and long silences

Previously, I reported the phenomena of the Baka’s speech overlap and their long silences in CHAGS8 (Kimura 2001). A brief description is presented here.

While in a Mbàkà hamlet for an intensive survey, I attended the daily gathering at the assembly house (*mbanjo*) and noticed that very long silences frequently occurred. However, once the talk became excited, their utterances overlapped quite often. These features appeared to be not only a characteristic of their conversation, but also to be closely related to their basic attitude to social interactions.

The results of time-sampling of Baka, Bakwele (Bantu farmers living alongside them), and Japanese university student conversations were compared. The results clearly indicated that the Bakwele and the Japanese obey the principle of turn-taking (that is, one person talks at a time) quite strictly, while the Baka tend to deviate from this principle. Thus, utterance overlap and long silences are actually more frequent in Baka conversation.

IV. Simultaneous activities in aggregation

I bought some local spirits for the forthcoming *be* (singing and dancing assembly; described below). My informants approached me and asked to be given some of the spirits to drink. I consented to this request and they drank. However, others then began to approach me with the same request, one after another. One of my informants took on the role of server. Sometimes, he attempted to stop pouring, but this was in vain and several liters of spirits were eventually consumed in the course of the evening.

Kerosene is one of the Baka's most desired goods. There were many lamps in the village, but kerosene was usually scarce. On one occasion, I gave someone kerosene because a woman was giving birth and the light was needed. After this incident, others began to approach me to request kerosene, one after another; sometimes five people in a day would approach me.

Frequent begging is commonly seen in African societies, but the Baka's begging had a conspicuous characteristic: it occurred simultaneously. For example, in the Bongando society, in former Zaïre, people also approached me often for spirits, kerosene, cigarettes, etc., but their visits occurred independently. In contrast, among the Baka, the situation was such that 5 or 10 people would come in one day, and then no visits would occur in the following week.

My distribution of spirits or kerosene was not loudly announced in the village. The Baka were probably conscious of the subtle behavior of others, and synchronized their own behavior with that of others.

This seems to be a common feature of hunter-gatherer societies. Ethnographic descriptions of hunter-gatherers have given many accounts of such sudden and unexpected collective actions, such as in the movement of the forest camp, or group hunting, etc. This suggests that continuous attention and entrainment to the activities of others facilitates such collective behavior.

V. Interactions at *be*

Such highly synchronized behavior, or "resonance," was typically observed in the Baka's singing and dancing assemblies called "*be*." In *be* women sing and the men, or "spirits" from the forest called "*me*," dance. The dancing and singing activities of Pygmies have long been known, and are even recorded in ancient Egyptian writing. They are also well known today, as many CDs of Pygmy music are currently available.

The women's singing is characterized by the repetition of a relatively simple phrase on the part of each singer, but the collected voices constitute a highly polyphonic complex chorus.

I will again quote some descriptions from my field notes.

- Although they seem to be calm with a "soft" demeanor in the daytime, how vigorous they are in the *be*. Everyone who experiences the interaction of the Baka is surprised by the gulf between their daytime behavior and that of the *be*, at night. Their voices resound through the forest. The women, who laughed quietly in the daytime, are now singing loudly.

- My brain is filled with endorphins, creating an almost narcotic effect. This technique for achieving such a sensation has been used for at least 3000 years, and requires neither spirits nor drugs.

Tsuru (2001) and Bundo (2001) have reported the social interactions that occur during *be*. I will briefly describe the important points, in accordance with their descriptions. Despite the enthusiasm described above, the order of the *be* is quite flexible. It usually begins without any fixed plan. Several boys beat a drum in the evening, and people gradually begin to gather. In due course, the women begin to sing, and then a dancer(s) appears. However, the process can stop at any stage, if the atmosphere is not conducive to further performance. In fact, in some cases, a *be* ceases right in the middle of the performance. In addition, the participants are free to leave the assembly, without sanction.

In summary, *be* has no consistent interactional framework or specific organizer, and is, essentially, a self-determining process. Therefore, it can hardly be called a “ritual.”

DISCUSSION

The social interactions of the Baka described above can be summarized as follows.

- In comparison to industrialized societies, their daily vocal communication can be described as “multi-connected.” That is, they are free to respond to any of the utterances dispersed throughout the village or camp.
- Their interactional attitude shows remarkable “calmness” or “meekness.”
- They sometimes show tight resonance in their interactions.

What follows is a discussion of how these three points are mutually related, and can be generalized to relate to theory on the social interaction of hunter-gatherers.

I. Avoiding the explosion of relational diversity

To an observer coming from an industrialized culture, the spatially diffusive conversation of the Baka people could constitute a constant annoyance, as it makes it difficult to ascertain which utterance should be taken into consideration, and which should be ignored.⁽⁴⁾

As noted by Goffman (1960), in Western (and Westernized) societies, each conversation is normally “encapsulated” in a public place. Even though it may be possible to hear utterances from the other side of a wall, or from another conversational party, one acts *as if* it does not exist. Thus, one does not have to take these utterances into consideration.

In the Baka society, in contrast, utterances (and also social relations) dispersed throughout the village or camp are not encapsulated, but open to everyone. This may have been the source of my own discomfort in this context. Under such conditions, the amount of information to be processed was overwhelming,⁽⁵⁾ and I was unable to grasp the ethno-method for dealing with such diversified relations.

This raises the question of how the Baka themselves avoid this difficulty, without encapsulating each conversation. The Baka appear to have adopted an attitude that results in

them resonating their own actions, rather than accurately reacting to those of others. This attitude could be seen in simultaneous activities in aggregation, interactions at *be*, and in frequent speech overlap.

An explosion of relational diversity occurs when each individual reacts to each other's action. When most of these actions coincide, the diversity derived from the number of combinations will be reduced by the resonance displayed by the Baka. The impression of vacancy that they convey is the consequence of such an orientation, i.e., of not reacting to the actions of others. The observations reported here suggest that this is the ethno-method adopted by the Baka people for co-presence.

II. "Parallel distributed interaction" in hunter-gatherer societies

Sitting in the house at night, I had the feeling of being inside the brain of a single, huge entity, with the Baka's background utterances acting as the electronic pulses running through neurons. The information-processing model that is based on the brain's activity is called "connectionism" or "parallel distributed processing (PDP)." Using this term, I called the Baka's interactional pattern "parallel distributed interaction."⁶ This naming is, however, not simply a parody.

The interactional characteristics of the Baka discussed above are summarized below.

- The interactional connection is multi-directional and multi-related.
- Even in collective activities, such as the *be*, there is no unique central figure.
- At gatherings, each person performs a simple role, but the gathering as a whole can become a fairly complex process.
- The process of interaction is defined by the course of the interaction itself; sometimes it gathers momentum, while at other times it loses momentum.
- Even if some of the participants in the gathering retire, the gathering itself does not break down, but continues uninterrupted.

These points closely resemble the features of PDP.

However, the character of the PDP system is determined not only by the fact that connection is multi-directional, but also by the parameters of each connection. In Western and Japanese societies, for example, interactional connection is, in fact, multiple. However, we behave *as if* it is not multiply connected (i.e., encapsulation). The Baka people have adopted another method; they tune the connection parameter to the resonance as a whole.

Finally, why have they adopted this approach and not some other method? The behavior of the Baka social system, derived from such connection parameters, can be summarized as follows.

- The framework of social events is not strictly determined. Even events such as *be* or camp movement, which seem to be very important, can be quickly decided or abandoned without conspicuous negative effects.
- Events are carried out by the participants as a whole, without any specific central figure.

These points coincide with the following social characteristics of hunter-gatherer societies, generally, that have been described to date: frequent meeting and parting, flexibility, loose organization, and opportunism. These are all characteristics that are probably not effective for modern, industrialized societies. However, these modes of behavior have been adopted by hunter-gatherer societies, which consist of small groups in diversified environments. These conditions have resulted, therefore, in the development of this particular mode of co-presence on the part of hunter-gatherers.

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NOTES

- (1) However, in recent years, new research from an interactional viewpoint has been performed (Sugawara, 1998; Sawada, 1987, 1990; Tsuru, 2001; Kimura, 2001). In addition, in the CHAGS9 conference, younger Japanese researchers presented new reports (A. Takada, D. Bundo, and A. Hirasawa) on the behavior of hunter-gatherers.
- (2) However, it was difficult for me to understand the details of the conversation.
- (3) Although there may be differences in the villages’ spatial structures, people’s daily activity, etc., between these two societies, the basic characteristics of the interactional attitude are still clearly expressed in this figure.
- (4) In this sense, Baka society was easier to cope with as an outsider than the Bongando, because the utterances in the village of the latter were more intrusive than the calm utterances of the Baka. However, if I could better understand the Baka language, my annoyance might have been exacerbated.
- (5) In the cognitive sciences, such problems are generally called “frame problems” (McCarthy & Hayes, 1969). This problem was originally presented in the field of artificial intelligence, in the form of the question: “Which things (facts, etc.) change and which do not?”
- (6) The same idea was presented by Hutchins (1995), who studied interactions in ship navigation.

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