

## HISTORICAL CHANGES IN LAND USE AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONS OF THE BABONGO IN SOUTHERN GABON

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**ABSTRACT** There have been drastic social changes in many African hunter-gatherer societies in the last several decades, but it is often difficult to elucidate the historical processes because they neither have written records nor systematic oral traditions. It is therefore necessary to combine several methodologies in order to reconstruct recent historical processes. In this article, the author focuses on a group of central African hunter-gatherers, the Babongo in southern Gabon, and demonstrates how the Babongo's land use patterns and interethnic relations with their neighboring farmers have changed in the last several decades. In order to reconstruct the historical processes several sources obtained from both archival studies and fieldworks are combined: (1) historical documents, (2) life histories obtained from interviews, (3) qualitative and quantitative data for intermarriages and naming patterns, and (4) geographic data. According to the evidence, it is supposed that the Babongo had been living a semi-nomadic lifestyle until the early 20th century, and their land use patterns and interethnic relations dramatically changed during the 1960s. They settled in villages along the roadside and began to do agriculture more intensively, becoming closer and more intimate with Massango farmers.

**Key Words:** Babongo Pygmies; Gabon; Historical processes; Social changes.

### INTRODUCTION

There have been drastic social changes in many African hunter-gatherer societies in the last several decades, such as sedentarization, agriculturalization, commoditization, and even urbanization. However, it is often difficult to elucidate their historical processes since they neither have written records nor systematic oral traditions (Osaki, 2001; Wilkie & Curran, 1993). In addition, it has become increasingly difficult to collect oral histories because the elders who remember the changing era have passed on. Historical documents by missionaries and/or colonial officials are also limited, and if they exist, they are not completely reliable because they were written only from a European point of view. Although linguistic, archeological, and genetic studies are useful when approaching the long-term history of hundreds or thousands of years (Brooks, 2002; Eggert, 1992; Klieman, 1999; Mayer, 1987; Patin et al., 2009; Verdu et al., 2009), they are not always effective for understanding recent social changes. It is therefore necessary to combine several methodologies in order to reconstruct recent historical processes of African hunter-gatherer societies.

Central African hunter-gatherers, or Pygmies, who inhabited the tropical rainforests with a nomadic lifestyle, have also experienced considerable social changes in the 20th century. Many Pygmies have come to live sedentarily along the road owing

to the implementation of sedentarization policy by the governments and the construction of roads (Knight, 2003; Sato, 1992). In the 1970s and 1980s, exploitation of natural resources by foreign companies expanded into the local communities because of logging and mining concessions. As contacts with market economies increased, some Pygmies have been involved in bushmeat trade or wage labor (Ichikawa, 1991; Kitanishi, 2006; Köhler, 2005; Noss, 1998). Modern state systems have also infiltrated into some Pygmy societies and modern facilities, such as pumping wells, clinics, and primary schools have become more accessible (Kamei, 2001; Knight, 2003; Matsuura, 2006; Soengas, 2009). It is supposed that their land use patterns have also changed with sedentarization. They have come to practice agriculture in their own fields and spend a large amount of time in the village (Kitanishi 2003; Matsuura 2006; Soengas, 2009). This is an outline of Pygmy lifestyle changes in the last several decades, but detailed processes of sedentarization and change in land use patterns have never been recorded. Thus, an intensive study on the historical processes of a specific local community is needed.

In the process of lifestyle changes, interethnic relations between the Pygmies and their neighboring farmers have also changed. Farmers who have embraced the modern systems, such as the judicial system, tax system, and monetary economy, generally become dominant over the Pygmies who cannot adapt to the modern systems (Biesbrouck, 1999; Lewis, 2005; van de Sandt, 1999). They have established longtime symbiotic relationships based upon economic exchanges, fictive kinships, shared ceremonies, and/or friendships (Joiris, 2003; Rupp, 2003; Terashima, 1998). The relationships have been ambivalent in that the Pygmies and the farmers were mutually dependent economically, but the Pygmies were socially distinguished from farmers in the context of the farmers' patriarchal and hierarchical social system.<sup>(1)</sup> Social discrimination by farmers against the Pygmies used to be rather latent because of the great differences in residence and mode of life. However, daily interactions between the Pygmies and farmers have increased while their lifestyle differences have decreased owing to the Pygmies sedentarization, and thus the discrimination has become clearer.

In contrast, I demonstrated in my previous articles (Matsuura, 2006; 2007; 2009) a case of interethnic relations that has been changing toward relatively equal relations between the Babongo Pygmies and Massango farmers in southern Gabon. I discussed Gabonese political and economic situations and the social system of Bantu in southern Gabon as the factors for such relatively equal relationships (Matsuura, 2006; 2007; 2009). Although it seems the changes in interethnic relations have advanced since the Babongo sedentarization, there is not enough evidence. The changing processes of interethnic relations between the Babongo and the Massango have not been examined yet.

In this article, therefore, I focus on the historical processes of a certain Babongo community. How the Babongo's land use patterns and interethnic relations with their neighboring farmers have changed in the last several decades is demonstrated. In order to overcome the difficulties in reconstructing the historical processes as I mentioned above, several sources obtained both from archival studies and field-works are combined. I deal with historical documents, life histories obtained from interviews, qualitative and quantitative data for intermarriages and naming patterns, and geographic data for historical places and actual land use patterns.

RESEARCH SITE AND SUBJECTS

The research site is in the Ogoulou department, Ngounié province in southern Gabon (Fig. 1). There are villages situated along the road at intervals of 5–10 km, which are inhabited by the Babongo Pygmies and the Bantu farmers, the Massango (Bantu B42) (Guthrie, 1967–1971). Field research was conducted eight times from 2003 to 2011, totaling about two years mainly in the Boutoumbi Village located along the roadside approximately 50 km to the east of the departmental capital, Mimongo (Fig. 1). Although many Babongo live without spatial separation from Massango in the same village in this area, the only Babongo living in Boutoumbi are close relatives with a small population of approximately 30 inhabitants (Fig. 2).

The uniqueness of Boutoumbi Village is supposed to be derived from its historical processes. The people living around Boutoumbi, including both the Babongo and Massango, were assembled in the adjacent village, Moukandi, by the Gabonese regroupment policy in the 1960s. However, the Babongo originally from the Boutoumbi area and those from the Moukandi area were unable to peacefully coexist although they had kinship ties.<sup>(2)</sup> There was a problem with alcohol abuse among the Babongo soon after regroupment, and a Massango chief in Moukandi decided to make them separate. It might also have been convenient for the Massango to have a settlement between Dibamba and Moukandi, which are pretty far apart

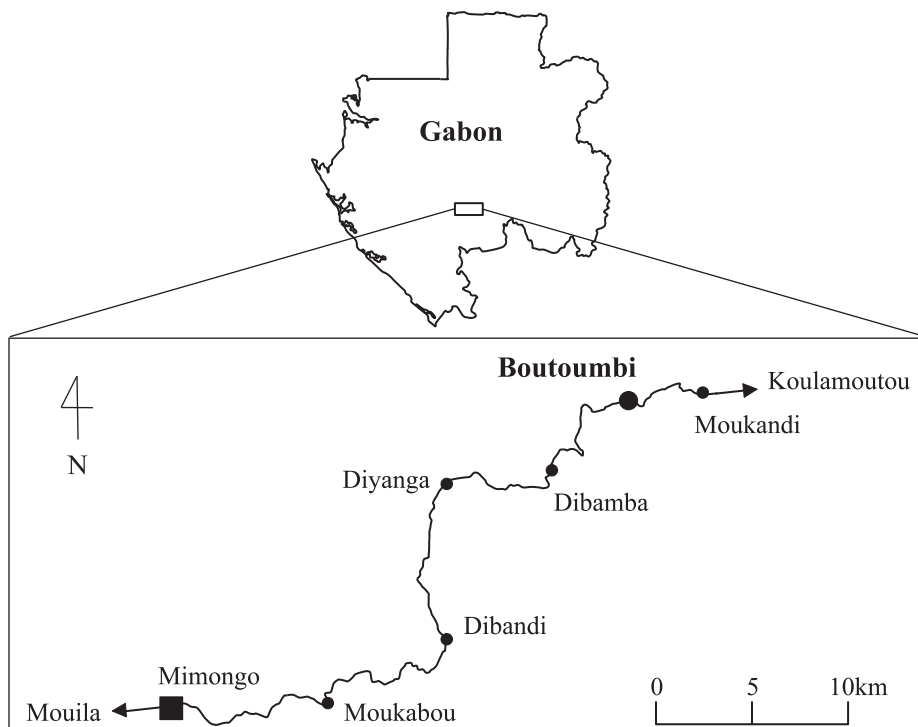


Fig. 1. Research site.

(see Fig. 1). Finally, a Babongo extended family from Boutoumbi area went away from Moukandi and resettled in Boutoumbi. Since then, Boutoumbi has consisted of only a small of population of closely related Babongo. However, it does not mean that the Boutoumbi people are socially isolated. The Boutoumbi people have kept close relationships with others including the Massango through intermarriage, mutual visits, and shared rituals (Matsuura, 2006; 2007; 2009).

The Babongo have adopted the matrilineal descent system and the patrilocal residence rule of the Massango and share the language, clanship, and other rituals with Massango (Matsuura, 2006; 2007; 2009). Since the Babongo and the Massango both have a matrilineal descent system, the children of intermarriage are regarded as belonging to the mother's ethnic group. Thus, I principally define an individual's ethnic category according to their mother's group. In terms of subsistence activities, they mainly do farming and depend heavily on agricultural products (Matsuura, 2006). Hunting, gathering, and fishing in the forest also provides protein and fat food. The Babongo usually go hunting, gathering, and fishing in the forest for a day, but sometimes spend several days at forest camps for these activities (Matsuura, 2006; 2009).

## HISTORICAL PROCESSES OF THE BABONGO

To demonstrate the Babongo historical processes of social changes in the last several decades, I deal with the following: (1) historical documents for the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, (2) life histories obtained from interviews with Babongo from each generation, (3) qualitative and quantitative data for intermarriages and naming patterns, and (4) GPS data for old settlements, campsites in the forests and actual utilization for campsites and subsistence activities.

### I. Historical Documents

There are fragmental documents on the Babongo and Massango history in the research area found in several literatures. The first important record is in a book of Paul du Chaillu<sup>(3)</sup> (du Chaillu, 1867). The Babongo is mentioned as *Obongo* and the Massango as *Ashango* in the book. He traveled central Gabon from coast to deep forest and passed near the research area in 1865. He describes the first contact with Babongo who feared outsiders and tended to hide in the forest. According to du Chaillu's description, the Babongo inhabited the forest camps less than an hour's walk from the Massango settlement. They changed campsites frequently for hunting and gathering activities. In a campsite, there were a dozen round dome-shaped huts made of leaves and branches. It is estimated that the population of a residential group was approximately fifty persons. Although there was no intermarriage between the Babongo and Massango, they had established close and intimate relationships. Du Chaillu mentioned, "I was surprised at the kindness, almost the tenderness, shown by the Ashangos (Massango) to their diminutive neighbours" (du Chaillu, 1867: 322). The Babongo did not have their

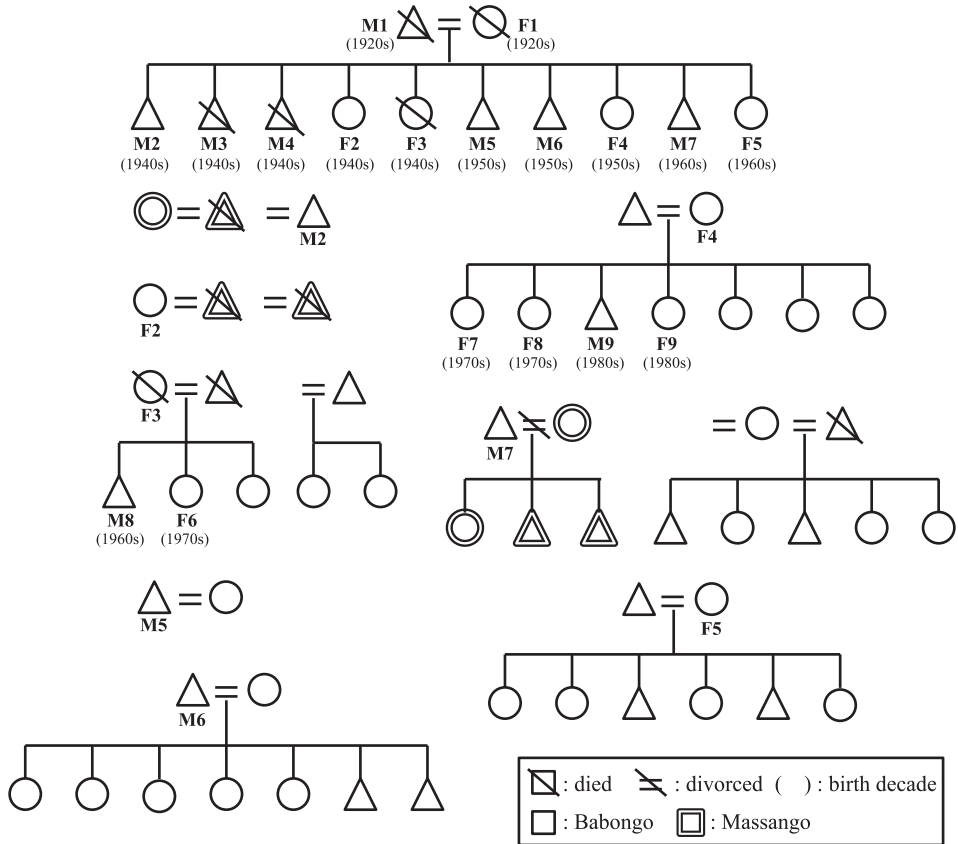


Fig. 2. Genealogy of Boutoumbi people.

own fields but obtained crops by exchanging forest products with the Massango or by stealing from the Massango’s fields. Sometimes, the Massango gave the Babongo crops as a gift or on trust (du Chaillu, 1867: 322). It is supposed that such an economic and cultural situation lasted until the first half of the 20th century, according to some literature from the early 20th century as mentioned below.

Several decades after du Chaillu’s trip, a missionary, Efraim Andersson, visited the Babongo in south western Gabon near the border with Congo in the 1930s (Andersson, 1983). While the Babongo maintained a semi-nomadic lifestyle and symbiotic relations with farmers based on economic exchanges, the change in their lifestyle was also found when compared with the era of du Chaillu. Some Babongo lived in rectangular huts in the roadside village and adopted agriculture in the 1930s. Andersson observed the expansion of this change when he revisited the area in 1949. Agriculture had become more important to their subsistence, and some of them had become self-sufficient (Andersson, 1983).

In the same era as Andersson, Donald Fairley, a missionary who worked in southern Gabon from the 1930s to the 1960s, observed that the Babongo have gradually changed their lifestyle to agriculture and mixed with neighboring farmers

(Fairley, n.d.). Such changes in lifestyle and interethnic relationships had occurred not only among the Babongo in southern Gabon but also among other Pygmy groups in Gabon (Gray, 2002; Knight, 2003; Soengas, 2009). It seems that the Babongo in Boutoumbi Village have experienced a similar process of social changes in the first half of 20th century.

## II. Life Histories

### *1. Babongo man in his sixties (M2 in Fig. 2)*

M2 was born in the 1940s at a semi-sedentary settlement in the forest where he lived until his adolescence. Then he and his family moved to a semi-sedentary settlement close to Boutoumbi Village, which was only inhabited by Massango at the time. During M2's childhood and youth, the Babongo lived a relatively nomadic lifestyle, flexibly changing residences. They depended mainly on hunting and gathering for their subsistence. Although they had already adopted agriculture, they were not self-sufficient. They obtained crops by exchanging forest products and/or labor for agricultural food with the Massango. M2 worked as a hunter for a Massango patron in Boutoumbi. This patron-client relationship was also based on ritual practices. M2 was initiated into a Massango male ritual society by the patron.

After the semi-nomadic period, M2 and his family had sedentarized in Moukandi Village because of the regroupment policy by the Gabonese government. Nevertheless, they left Moukandi and resettled in Boutoumbi because of family problems as mentioned above. M2 had kept a close relationship with a Massango patron after the resettlement through economic exchanges. The Babongo were sometimes needed by Massango for their rituals because they were regarded as special ritual practitioners. However, he had very few opportunities for daily communication with Massango. Therefore, he speaks the Babongo language but cannot speak the Massango language well; however, he can understand it. He had neither wife nor children until recently. He married a Massango woman—his patron's widow.

### *2. Babongo man in his fifties (M6 in Fig. 2)*

M6 was born in the 1950s at a semi-sedentary settlement in the forest and moved to a settlement close to Boutoumbi with his family during his youth. He spent his childhood with Massango in Boutoumbi through labor and ritual practices. He was also initiated in a Massango male ritual. In his adolescence, M6 and his family had sedentarized in the Moukandi Village. He married a Babongo woman in Moukandi and returned to Boutoumbi because of the family problems as mentioned above. Since the resettlement in Boutoumbi, he has lived there until now mainly on agriculture, which is at a self-sufficient level. He has had frequent communication with other people including Massango from town. His two daughters married Massango men from the town, Mimongo, and live there.<sup>(4)</sup> Although he can understand the Babongo language because his parents spoke it, he usually uses the Massango language even when talking with other Babongo. He understands Massango social norms very well because he usually participates in the rituals as an initiate and sometimes plays an important role.

### 3. *Babongo man in his forties (M7 in Fig. 2)*

M7 was born in the 1960s at a semi-sedentary settlement approximately a fifteen-minute walk from Boutoumbi. He was named after a Massango man, a Boutoumbi chief who was a patron of his father and his older brother (M2). M7 grew up in Boutoumbi where he was initiated in a male ritual. He was also initiated in a Massango ritual society for traditional healers. He moved to Moukandi with his family and married a woman who had a Babongo father and a Massango mother. Because his wife has Massango relatives, he established close relations with Massango and experienced many trips to towns to visit his Massango affines. M7 spent several years with his wife in Boutoumbi and had three children, but they divorced in the end. After several years, he met a Babongo woman, a widow with five children, who he married. Today he lives mainly on self-sufficient agriculture as well as M6. He has mastered the Massango language and their social norms through the frequent participation of rituals. He is regarded as a special ritual practitioner and often plays a central role in the rituals. Although he did not go to school, he also speaks French well because of rich experiences offered in town.

### 4. *Babongo woman in her thirties (F7 in Fig. 2)*

F7 was born in the 1970s in Boutoumbi and grew up there. She did not go to school, but she undertook housework and agricultural activities and looked after her younger siblings in Boutoumbi during her childhood. When she was around sixteen years old, she married a Massango man from the Dibamba Village, which is next to the village of Boutoumbi, whom she knew from childhood. They have two daughters and three sons. Although F7 married outside Boutoumbi, she visited her parents frequently and on each visit spent several days in Boutoumbi with her husband and children. In addition to visits to Boutoumbi, they visit town frequently in order for her Massango husband to enjoy the rich experience of town life, such as going to school and doing wage labor. Lately, they spend much of their time in Mimongo where their children's school and the hospital for the mother of F7's husband are located as well as a facility for access to wage labor and commodities.

### 5. *Historical processes from life histories*

According to these life history records, it is supposed that there had been considerable social and cultural distinction between the Babongo and Massango during the early 20th century. The Babongo had lived semi-nomadic lifestyles and changed residence frequently in accordance with hunting, gathering, and fishing activities. Although they had already adopted agriculture, there were not enough crops from their own fields. They provided particular Massango partners with labor and forest products to obtain agricultural food. In addition to the economic relations, the Babongo had established close ties with Massango through participating in the Massango rituals. While the Babongo and the Massango bonded each other through economic exchanges and ritual practices, daily interactions between them was infrequent as shown in the example of M2 who cannot speak the Massango language.



After Babongo sedentarization in the mid-20th century, however, the Babongo have become proficient in the Massango language, social system, rituals, and so forth as shown in the example of M6 and M7. The Babongo who are less than sixty years old can speak the Massango language well, and they use the language even among them, because they grew up in the village cohabiting with the Massango. They understand Massango social norms and practice the Massango rituals, such as *Bwiti*. The *Bwiti* is a male initiation ritual along with an ingestion of the hallucinogenic plant (*Tabernanthe iboga*) originally from Bantu groups in central Gabon (Bonhomme, 2006). It is assumed that the *Bwiti* was brought to the Massango society hundreds of years ago,<sup>(5)</sup> and the Massango introduced the *Bwiti* to the Babongo. The Massango used to lead the Babongo into the ritual society, but they have come to entrust the Babongo with the important ritual roles after the Babongo's sedentarization. Nowadays, the Babongo themselves sometimes organize the ritual (Matsuura, 2007; 2010). The Babongo's rapid adoption of the Massango ritual after their sedentarization is partly because of the Massango's concept of the Babongo as special ritual practitioners. Many Massango have great respect for the Babongo inclusion in the ritual, especially in healing practices because they have a vast knowledge of plants. And the Massango believe that the *Bwiti* is of Babongo origin in their myths. Therefore, the Babongo could have participated easily in the ritual and established an equal relationship with the Massango in the ritual context.

In addition to the relations established through rituals, intermarriages between the Babongo and Massango have occurred frequently after the Babongo's sedentarization as shown in M7 and F7 life histories. The ethnic categories are less important in the western Bantu society in southern Gabon, including Massango, because of the matrilineal descent system and patrilocal residence rule, and the primacy of clan allegiance goes beyond the ethnic boundary (Gray, 2002; Mayer, 2002; Vansina, 1990). Therefore, intermarriage had become possible after the Babongo and Massango had come to live together, having not occurred when the Babongo and Massango were residentially separated. Through the social bonds based on marriage with the Massango, the Babongo went through social change and adopted a sedentary lifestyle. They not only visit towns many times, but some of them also live in towns.

### III. Intermarriages and Naming Patterns

The Babongo history, I illustrated in the previous section, is supported by evidences from other sources. One is the change in the intermarriage rate between the Babongo and Massango. In a previous article, I demonstrate that there are many intermarriage cases (about one-third of the total marriages) between the Babongo and Massango, and that the Babongo is unique among Pygmy groups in that the intermarriage occurs not only between the Massango men and Babongo women but also between the Babongo men and Massango women (Matsuura, 2006). In order to demonstrate the historical processes based on intermarriage data, I examine the intermarriage rate in each generation. Table 1 shows the number of marriage cases and the intermarriage rate in each generation among



**Table 1.** Change in intermarriage rate in each generation.

Birth Decade*	BB	MM	MB	BM	Intermarriage Rate**
before 1940s	8	12	3	1	17%
1950s	9	8	0	1	6%
1960s	7	0	2	1	30%
1970s	6	9	15	4	56%
after 1980s	12	6	9	2	38%
Total	42	35	29	9	33%

BB: between the Babongo, MM: between the Massango, MB: between the Massango man and Babongo woman, BM: between the Babongo man and Massango woman.

Divorce, re-marriage and polygamy cases are included but re-marriage among older people are excluded.

\* Classified by wife’s birth decade.

\*\* (Intermarriage Rate) = (MB+BM)/(BB+MM+MB+BM)

the people inhabiting or having inhabited in three villages in the research area: Moukandi, Boutoumbi, and Dibamba. The generation is classified by the wife’s birth decade. It includes divorce cases, re-marriage cases, and polygamy cases, but does not include re-marriage in old age, such as remarriage after a spouse’s death. Therefore, differences in the intermarriage rate in each generation are paralleled with the historical processes of change in interethnic relations between the Babongo and Massango.

It is shown that the intermarriage rate increases considerably among the people who are less than fifty years of age—those who were born after the 1960s. Because the Babongo sedentarized in the 1960s, these people would have communicated closely with the Massango who lived in same villages throughout their lives. Through such daily interactions with the Massango, these people have also adopted the Massango language, social system, norms, and rituals, which I demonstrated in the previous section. This is the reason why intermarriage occurs frequently in these generations. Although it is still difficult for Babongo men to marry Massango woman, largely because of the lack of political and economic power, the intermarriage is not altogether avoided, and the Babongo men are able to marry Massango if they have enough income for example. On the other hand, it is much easier for Babongo woman to marry Massango man. Babongo women who are under forty years old marry Massango men more frequently than Babongo men (24 vs. 18 in Table 1). Owing to the frequency of intermarriages, there are many Babongo-Massango people of mixed parentage. Table 2 shows the proportion of such mixed parentage—those who have both Babongo and Massango kinspersons among their fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and grandmothers. There are no mixed persons over sixty years old, but they have appeared in accordance with the occurrence of intermarriage. Since intermarriage began mixed persons have increased rapidly. Eventually, mixed persons make up more than half of the births in the 2000s.

I also give an example of naming patterns to explain the Babongo’s social change.<sup>(6)</sup> Generally, parents name their children after close relatives in their family. There are also some cases that parents take a name from their friends and persons

**Table 2.** Proportion of mixed persons in each generation.

Birth Decade	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Mixed	0	0	1	4	11	8	35	57
Non-Mixed	7	41	34	15	57	48	62	46
Proportion of Mixed	0%	0%	3%	21%	16%	14%	36%	55%

**Table 3.** Babongo naming patterns in each generation.

Birth Decade	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Named after Massango	0	0	0	2	4	5	14	13
Named after Babongo	2	14	18	9	26	26	35	21
Proportion of Massango	0%	0%	0%	18%	13%	16%	29%	38%

with intimate relations outside kinships. The person who is one's namesake is important for an individual, and they have a close social bond (Idiata, 2008). The person who gave his or her name is obliged to take special care of the recipient. Thus, naming patterns reflect their social relations and the extent of their social networks. Table 3 shows the origin of names among the Babongo in each generation. It is shown that all Babongo over fifty years old were given names from Babongo; they are mainly from their relatives. However, as increased communication, including intermarriages, with Massango began in the 1960s, the origin of names has also changed. The number of Babongo who were given names from the Massango has increased gradually, and more than one-third of Babongo children born in the 2000s were named after the Massango. Similar to the marriage selection, there is little ethnic distinction between the Babongo and Massango with regard to naming patterns today. It is supposed that the social bond between same-named persons has accelerated frequent communication and expanded social networks between the Babongo and Massango.

#### IV. Geographical Data

To elucidate the historical processes of change in land use patterns of the Babongo in Boutoumbi Village from a geographical viewpoint, GPS data for old semi-sedentary settlements and nomadic camps in the forest are examined in this section. Data were collected by Garmin GPSmap 60CSx in September 2010 with cooperation from some Babongo men living in Boutoumbi. I also apply the information about birthplace and place of adolescent residency obtained from interviews for each individual.

While the Babongo in Boutoumbi Village are highly sedentarized, they often go hunting, gathering, and fishing for the day. They sometimes stay for several days in forest camps for these activities (Matsuura, 2006). Whenever going to the forest, Boutoumbi people use particular forest trails. They usually use the land within about 10 km from the village and frequently use within just a few kilometers from village where they are able to go and come back in a day. Although they occasionally go to the southern side of the village for subsistence

activities, they tend to go north much more frequently because they are originally from the northern area.

The forest trails and principal utilization area for subsistence activities of the Boutoumbi people are shown in Fig. 3. A logging road constructed in 2008 by a Malaysian logging company is also shown in the figure. I will describe it in detail later. The forest trails and the logging road were drawn on the basis of the track data I obtained. However, there is no track data on the logging road outside the utilization area. It is supposed that the forest trails have existed and have been utilized for a long time, because there are many historical reference points along these trails. Fig. 4 shows such places and their historical implications in the forest: old semi-sedentary settlements, nomadic camps, and landmark trees. Birthplaces obtained from interviews for the Boutoumbi people are also indicated in the figure. In addition to these, adolescent residency of the Boutoumbi people is shown in Fig. 5. The symbols in Figs. 4 & 5 correspond to the individuals in Fig. 2. It is shown that there are many semi-sedentary settlements in the forest, and many Boutoumbi people were born and/or grew up there. These settlements are situated under forest gaps surrounded by secondary vegetation, which is presumed to be created by human intervention (Ichikawa, 2001). Most Boutoumbi people remember the name and location of settlements and use these places for resting during daily activities or staying for several days. There are also many nomadic camps for resting and sleeping.

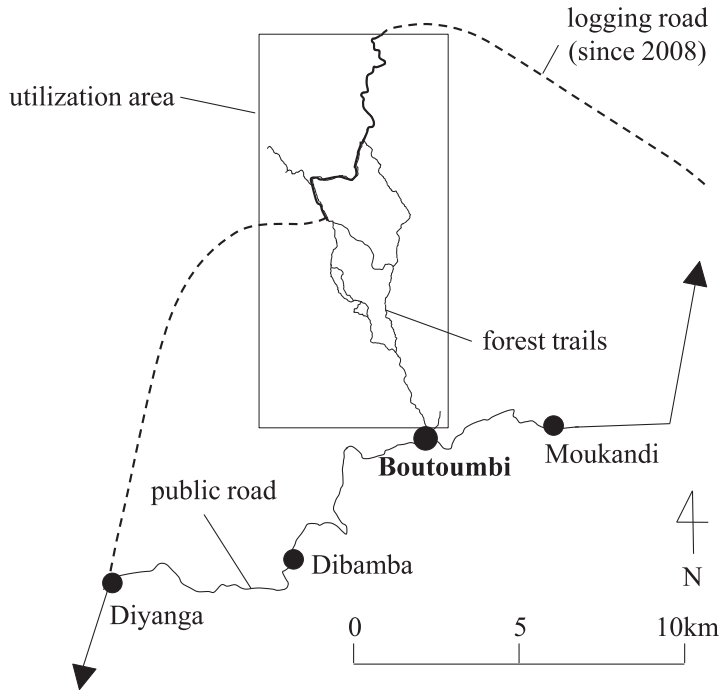
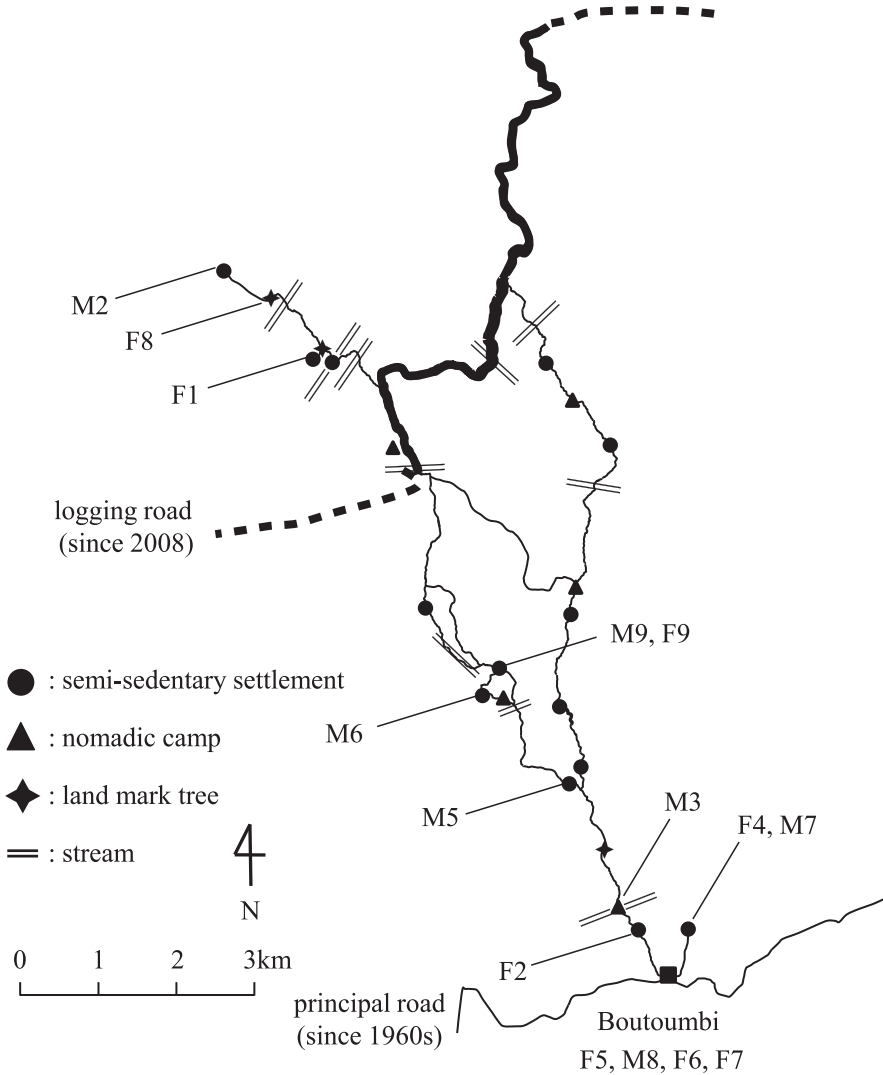
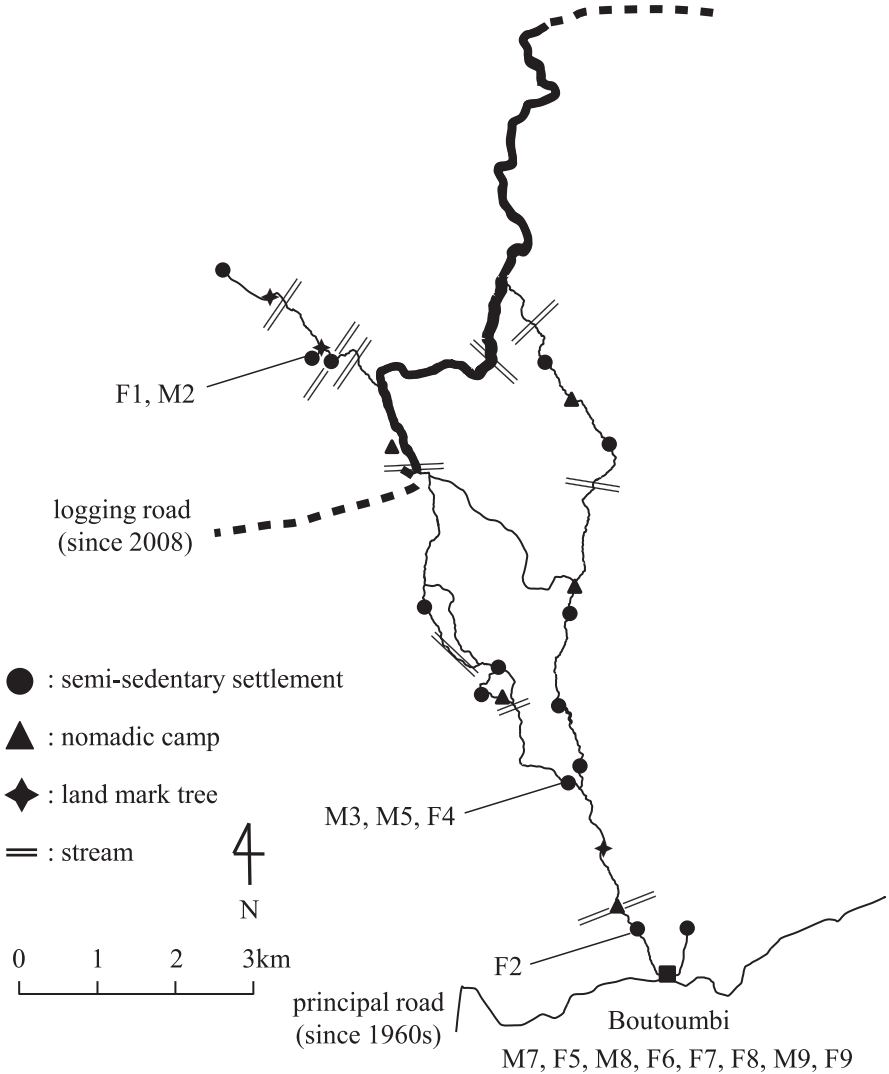


Fig. 3. Forest trails and utilization area.



**Fig. 4.** Settlements and birth places of Boutoumbi people. Symbols correspond to the individuals in Fig. 2.

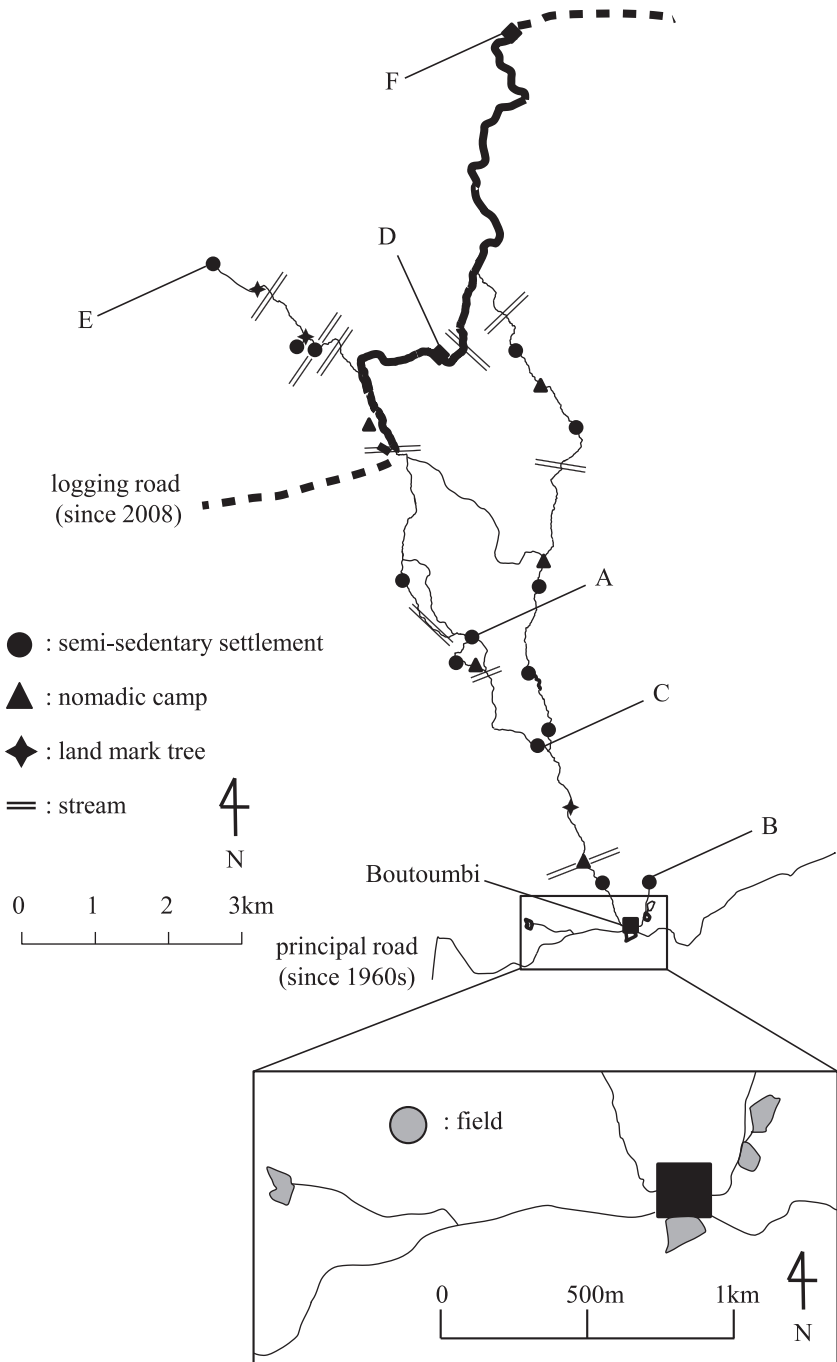
According to birthplace and adolescent residency, it is generally said that the Babongo have gradually changed their home range from deep forest to roadside (Figs. 4 & 5). They are supposed to have lived around a settlement within about nine kilometers from Boutoumbi until the 1940s. From the 1940s to the 1960s, they mainly used the area around a settlement within about three kilometers from Boutoumbi. After the 1960s, all Babongo have settled along the roadside and nobody has grown up in forest settlements. However, there are some individuals who are in their twenties and thirties who were born in forest settlements (Fig. 4). It is assumed that some of them were born while their mothers were camping in the forest, because the Babongo frequently use the forest area for their



**Fig. 5.** Settlements and adolescent residency of Boutoumbi people. Symbols correspond to the individuals in Fig. 2.

subsistence, and they maintain old settlements and campsites. In addition, it is because the Babongo are still closely tied to the forest culturally. They have some landmark trees as sacred places and tend to choose to give birth there. The distribution of birthplace and adolescent residency in the forest are thus used as reference points for reconstructing the historical processes of Babongo movements and their relations with the forest.

To analyze the actual land use pattern, the location of campsites and fields is shown in Fig. 6. Although the Babongo camp frequently and use many sites, only the places I observed and collected GPS data on during the research periods are plotted. All fields for Boutoumbi people cleared in August and September 2010



**Fig. 6.** Location of campsites and fields. Campsite A: Aug. 2003, B: Jun. 2005, C: Jun. 2005, D: Jan. 2010, E: Sep. 2010, F: Feb. 2011. Fields were measured in Feb. 2011. Fields were measured in Feb. 2011.

(dry season) were measured in February 2011 (rainy season). The Babongo use the old semi-sedentary settlements as campsites to spend several days for hunting and gathering. In particular, the Babongo use their birthplace and adolescent residency as campsites because they know these areas very well as they have been the location for important life experiences. On the other hand, they have fields that are close to the principal road within 2 km of the village. Although precise locations were not examined, I observed that they had fields within the area in all research periods between 2003 and 2010. In addition, the Babongo often go hunting and gathering for the day in the area. For example, they set snares on the way to and around the fields. They also go spear hunting for small animals and gather palm wine, honey, and caterpillars in the secondary forest near the road.

Babongo land use patterns are also influenced by forest exploitation activities. There is a logging road from Diyanga Village to the east of Moukandi Village passing through the forest (Fig. 3). It penetrates the middle of the utilization area of the Boutoumbi people. A Malaysian logging company constructed it in 2008 and conducted an investigation of the trees for logging operations. Some Babongo were also employed by the company. The Babongo guided company employees through the forest. It is assumed that many Babongo assembled along the logging road during the construction and investigation. However, the operation is suspended because of the Gabonese new policy, which bans the export of unsawn logs in 2010 in order to take advantage of forest resources and generate job opportunities for the Gabonese people. While the road is abandoned by the company, the Babongo use it as a passage in the forest. It seems that the logging road is relatively comfortable to use, because it is very open and developed. Since there are some logging camps and maintained water places, it is also convenient to camp along the logging road.

## DISCUSSION

I analyzed the data from archival studies and fieldworks to elucidate historical processes over the last several decades of the Babongo Pygmies. In this chapter, I reconstruct the changing process of land use patterns and interethnic relations with neighboring farmers among the Babongo. Several events and factors influencing the historical change are discussed. I also describe recent situations and discuss contemporary issues, such as the forest exploitation along with globalization and customary rights of the Pygmies.

According to the evidence I examined, I assert that the Babongo had led a semi-nomadic lifestyle depending largely on natural resources until the early 20th century. They principally had practiced hunting, gathering, and fishing as subsistence activities. Although they had already adopted agriculture, they were not self-sufficient. Therefore, they obtained agricultural products by exchanging natural resources and/or labor with particular Massango partners. It is assumed that the patron-client relationship was based not only on economic exchange but also on ritual practice. In the first half of the 20th century, the Babongo gradually



adopted agriculture and came to live closer to Massango villages. Although contacts with Massango might have increased during this period, the Babongo were still socially and culturally distinct from the Massango.

Babongo land use patterns and interethnic relations have greatly changed after their sedentarization in the 1960s. They have settled in villages along the roadside where they cohabit with Massango. They have come to do agriculture more intensively—at a self-sufficient level. Relationships with the Massango have become closer and more intimate and the Babongo have adopted the Massango language, matrilineal decent system, clanship, and rituals. Their social bonds were strengthened because the Babongo acquired Massango social norms through ritual practices. Intermarriage between the Babongo and Massango began during this period and has surged thereafter. Intermarriage has also deepened the relationships. Relations between same-name persons have accelerated frequent communication and expanded social networks between the Babongo and Massango. Along with the Babongo adoption of the Massango culture and an increase in intermarriage, biologically and socially mixed identities have expanded in their communities. Such identities have also accelerated inter-ethnic mixture.

It is supposed that a similar process of sedentarization has occurred in many Pygmy societies. However, some Pygmies could not adapt to a sedentary life and have gone back to the forests, because farmers have become much more dominant against the Pygmies (Biesbrouck, 1999; Lewis, 2005; van de Sandt, 1999). In contrast, the Babongo have sedentarized and adapted the farmers' social system smoothly and rapidly. Political, economic, and social factors have influenced the processes (Matsuura, 2006; 2007; 2009; 2010). In particular, cultural characteristics of western Bantu groups in southern Gabon have largely been concerned with the unique process of the Babongo social change. Because of the matrilineal descent system and patrilocal residence rule, there is a lack of congruence between residence and lineage in their society and clan alliance is more important than territoriality (Gray, 2002; Vansina, 1990). While the primacy of clan allegiance goes beyond the ethnic boundary (Gray, 2002; Mayer, 2002; Vansina, 1990), ethnic categories are less important among the western Bantu in southern Gabon. Such characteristics are found even in the description of historical documents (Andersson, 1983; du Chaillu, 1867; Fairley, n.d.). Thus, it is presumed that the Babongo had intimate relationships with neighboring farmers even before their sedentarization. Although they were clearly distinguished from each other because of differences in residence and mode of life, there had already been social potentialities toward assimilation.

While being largely sedentarized, the Babongo also retain close ties with the forest. As many Babongo and/or their parents were born and grew up in the forest, they are quite familiar with the forest even today. They often go hunting and gathering in the forest for the day and sometimes spend several days at forest camps. They carry on using particular forest trails, old settlements, and campsites. There are many historical landmarks in the forests, and they give birth in such places with historical implications even after sedentarization. The forest is also important culturally for the Babongo. It is well known that the Pygmies have vast knowledge of natural resources especially of plants for rituals and medicines

(Betti, 2004; Terashima & Ichikawa, 2003). Such knowledge of nature was respected by Massango, and the Babongo are regarded as special ritual practitioners. It is said in general that because Pygmies are closely bonded with forests, they cannot adapt to the state system and are discriminated against by farmers. On the contrary, the Babongo have established a relatively equal relationship with the Massango because they are closely bonded with the forest and have great knowledge and ritual skills. Today, not only neighboring farmers but also many Gabonese people, including political and economic personages, depend on the Babongo knowledge of natural resources and skill in the traditional healing practices. I described in previous articles that there were many visitors to Boutoumbi Village from the town to request the healing rituals, and that politicians brought the Babongo to town for the rituals before political events (Matsuura, 2009; 2010). The rituals are a great source of monetary income for the Babongo, and the Babongo are connected with the outside world without depending upon the Massango through the rituals (Matsuura, 2010).

The Babongo, however, do not always keep close ties with the forests. National and international forest policies and economic activities also influence their land use patterns. It was the Gabonese regroupment policy in the 1960s that initially caused the Babongo social change. As well as other central African countries, these policies aimed to collect tax and control the local people. It is supposed that the Babongo were somehow forced to settle in the roadside village in the name of bringing civilization and development to the “backward” people (Kenrick, 2005; Knight, 2003; Lewis, 2005). Since there was less consideration for the Babongo lifestyle and culture in the policy, the Babongo faced difficulty in living in a village with a large population and experienced conflict, which compelled them to change their residence.

Recently, the Babongo have intensified the relation with townspeople owing to the improvement of local infrastructure, and some Babongo have come to live in town for wage labor and school education. While it may contribute to the development of the Babongo quality of life, it is unclear whether the Babongo will maintain the intimate relation with the forests and their traditional knowledge of nature. I observed that road construction was in progress around the research sites in August 2010. Car traffic has increased considerably and some Babongo have been employed by the road company. Telephone networks have also rapidly infiltrated into the research sites, and the Babongo have come to possess mobile phones. Thus it is inevitable that the Babongo will experience great social changes in a few years. Economic globalization also accelerates the separation of Pygmies from the forests and threatens their customary rights (Kenrick, 2005; Lewis, 2005). I demonstrated in this article that the logging road penetrates the middle of Babongo utilization area in the forest. It is true that the Babongo sometimes benefit from activities such as the employment of wage labor. Nevertheless, it is also possible that forest exploitation, which does not pay much attention to their land use patterns, has a huge impact on the forest and is destructive to the Babongo utilization area.

While it is doubtless that the Babongo traditional knowledge and customary rights are threatened by the process of political and economic globalization, it

can also be emphasized that the Babongo have been adapting flexibly to social change. The Babongo have adopted the Massango language, social system, and rituals after their sedentarization and have established relatively equal relationships with them. Lately, the Babongo take advantage of the logging road as a passage in the forest and use logging camps for their subsistence activities since the logging operation has been suspended. Today, various activities to protect Pygmy customary rights, such as community mapping, are being carried out in many regions both by international and local organizations (e.g., Hopkins, 2007; Mbile, 2009). To improve the activities, it is necessary to understand the historical process of the social changes and flexible land use pattern.

#### NOTES

- (1) Pygmies are assumed to be “children” of the farmers in a fictional family concept and submit to farmers’ domination (Grinker, 1994; Takeuchi, 2001; Vansina, 1990).
- (2) It is supposed that the Babongo who had lived in small residential groups with flexible membership had not socially adapted to sedentary village life with large population.
- (3) He is an American explorer originally from France. It is well known that he was the first modern westerner who had encountered Pygmies.
- (4) The other two daughters married Babongo men and live in neighboring villages.
- (5) Du Chaillu describes that the Massango practice the ritual in his book in the 19th century (du Chaillu, 1867: 313).
- (6) There is no Babongo peculiar name but all Babongo in the research site use the common name with Massango. It is unknown when they first adopted Massango names, but it is presumed that the Babongo have used the Massango name for hundreds of years. Du Chaillu (1867) describes a name of Babongo woman, *Misounda*, which is a typical name of Massango (Idiata, 2008).

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