

## INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN SOUTHEASTERN CAMEROON: CHALLENGING THE “HUNTER-GATHERER” – “FARMER” DICHOTOMY

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**ABSTRACT** By slotting forest communities into reductive categories such as “hunter-gatherer” / “farmer” and “pygmy” / “villager,” analyses of social relations in tropical forests are reduced to two dimensions based on contrasting subsistence strategies and polar relations of power. As a result of this flattened perspective of the social landscape, other ways of reckoning social relations as expressed by contemporary forest peoples may be rendered analytically invisible and ideologically irrelevant to outside observers and analysts. This paper examines the formation and transformation of social relationships among Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam, four distinct communities that intermingle in the forests of southeastern Cameroon. Far from conforming to these simplified, paired classifications of social identity based on presumed economic strategies and political relationships, the diverse communities of southeastern Cameroon pursue numerous and flexible production techniques, engage in manifold and changing relationships, and identify self and other in multiple and shifting ways. This paper demonstrates that, rather than maintaining strict ethnic divisions according to subsistence production, Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam individuals participate in interfamilial, interethnic, and interregional networks that are social, economic, ritual, and political in nature.

**Key Words:** Ethnicity; Identity; Cameroon; Bangando; Baka

### INTRODUCTION

As is evident from the wealth of fine-grained research and the abundance of rich resources and publications, and as would seem obvious from the named field of study, “hunter-gatherer” studies tend to focus primarily, and often exclusively, on social and cultural, economic and ecological processes from the perspective of “hunter-gatherers.” And yet, this tendency to treat “hunter-gatherers” as a substantively distinct and easily identifiable social type obscures the fact that many “hunter-gatherer” communities live in contact, and sometimes intermingled, with people of other communities.<sup>(1)</sup> Perhaps this focus of research and analysis on “hunter-gatherers” can be justified by the methodological need to achieve fluency in a particular language and culture, to ensure that the ethnographic research is as thorough and rigorous as possible. And because of constraints on both time and funding, it is often difficult for a researcher to comprehensively study more than one language and culture in a particular setting, even if that setting includes people from multiple communities.

Yet the limited ethnographic scope of “hunter-gatherer” studies also results from an ideological orientation among many scholars that disaggregates “hunter-gatherers” from

other neighboring communities, reflecting and reinforcing the assumption that “hunter-gatherers” conform to a sociological ideal type whose particular patterns of behavior are distinct from nearby groups, but whose general form can simultaneously be recognized across diverse temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts. In recent years scholars have recognized that this narrow conceptualization of “hunter-gatherer” communities has produced a homogenization of images and analyses of “hunter-gatherers” based on subsistence, use of wild plants and animals, egalitarian social behavior, and so on. In contrast to these static and predictable models, abundant research indicates that “hunter-gatherers” constitute tremendously diverse communities; “hunter-gatherer” experts have made progress in emphasizing the diversity of the communities they study, steering conceptual analyses away from totalizing models of the “hunter-gatherer” as quintessential Other (cf. Kent, 1996 *inter alia*).

But the field of “hunter-gatherer” studies in general continues to prioritize the study of “hunter-gatherers” (as diverse as they are now recognized to be) in relative isolation from their neighbors, who usually belong to different ethnic or language groups. The fact of conforming to the theoretical paradigm of “hunter-gatherers” seems to be a more important criterion in imputing their identity than the many and varied dynamics between “hunter-gatherers” and their neighbors, even when these relations with surrounding communities may be both intricate and intimate. It is these dynamics among people and their neighbors that, through lived experiences and emotional expressions of sociality, shape the contours of ethnic groups and form the substance of ethnic identities (cf. Barth, 1969). Where researchers *do* pay analytical attention to the other communities with whom “hunter-gatherers” interact, these “non-hunter-gatherer” others are homogenized into categories that are placed in opposition to “hunter-gatherers” suggesting – and reinforcing – polarized and permanent binary oppositions between the groups. These simplifications of identity, based on dichotomous or at most trichotomous lines of economic production (hunting-gathering, farming, and sometimes herding or fishing), offer few insights into the formation and transformation of identities within and among diverse yet integrated forest communities.

As some researchers have tended to emphasize the similarities among “hunter-gatherers” thus creating an ideal type or model for “hunter-gatherer” society, researchers who examine the interface between “hunter-gatherers” and their neighbors have also tended to emphasize difference and divergence between “hunter-gatherers” and “farmers.” Although diversity has been recognized among the many communities of “hunter-gatherers,” their relations with neighboring groups are described in remarkably constant, static ways: distance, difference, and antagonism continue to be posited as the lowest common denominators of social dynamics between “hunter-gatherers” and their immediate neighbors.

Furthermore, while the diversity within “hunter-gatherer” communities has been emphasized in recent research, their neighbors continue to be referred to in large, conceptual blocs: Negroes; Grands Noirs; villagers; farmers; horticulturalists; Bilo. Some of these categories reflect racial frameworks for analyzing identity employed by scholars at the time; other categories reflect researchers’ focus on subsistence strategies and the assumed connection between ethnicity and economic production (*pace* Woodburn, 1997). Other scholars adopt a stereotyped epithet used by “hunter-gatherers” to refer to their neighbors, accepting this emic terminology of one particular community as adequate nominal identification of other, often culturally, linguistically, and politically distinct, neighboring

communities. The homogenization of a great variety of neighbors into one conceptual package of “villagers” or “farmers” to contrast with “pygmies” or “hunter-gatherers” results in (and reproduces) an artificial distillation of social relationships into simplistic, linear models that are oriented along a single axis. These models of social relations between “hunter-gatherers” and “villagers” reinforce the binary opposition between the categories of people through their consistent focus on the tensions between domination and subordination, master and slave, patron and client.

This paper explores three social dimensions in which individuals of four different ethnic groups – Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam of southeastern Cameroon – frequently come together in contexts that foster sentiments of social solidarity: alliances and friendships, shared ceremonies, and cooperative activities. From social relations of alliance that forge partnerships among individuals across ethnic lines, to social relations that embrace entire communities, fostering and reinforcing interethnicity through participation in shared ceremonies and rituals, to active participation in cooperative activities for the good of the wider community, the threads of affiliation and affection among the Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam of the Lobéké forest are, in fact, thoroughly twisted and tangled together. As this essay explores, far from conforming to the simple, economic classifications of “pygmy” and “villager” into which equatorial African forest communities are often slotted, the diverse communities of southeastern Cameroon engage in manifold and changing social relationships, and identify self and other in multiple and shifting ways.

The Lobéké forest of southeastern Cameroon is distinguished as a region by “Lake” Lobéké, which seasonally diminishes to a swamp. This forest is merely one small area of semi-deciduous, tropical forest within a much larger cultural and ecological sphere of influence on the western edge of the Congo River basin. This region lies near the articulation of the borders of Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic. The Lobéké region is home to four locally based communities: Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam. In addition, small groups of people who identify themselves with innumerable other communities have immigrated to the Lobéké forest from other regions of the East Province of Cameroon and from many other regions of Cameroon, as well as from the broader region of central Africa. Although this article specifically addresses interethnic relationships among the Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam, the primary focus of research and writing is the Bangando community, with secondary emphasis on Baka. The Bangando are a numerically small community, comprising approximately 4,000 individuals who reside in the Lobéké forest. The Baka community is estimated to include 40,000 individuals, spread throughout the forests of southern Cameroon. A handful of Bangando, and a very few Baka, have migrated to towns and cities in Cameroon and Congo in search of employment. Euroamerican scholars, conservation and development workers, and missionaries consistently identify Bangando, Bakwélé, and Mbomam as “villagers” and Baka as “pygmies.” As this article demonstrates, the high degree of social interaction and emotional articulation among these communities suggests that the hermetically sealed categories of “villager” and “pygmy” are misleading reflections of social dynamics among the communities.

## ALLIANCES

The literature on relations between “pygmies”/“villagers” and “hunter-gatherers”/“farmers” tends to emphasize material or economic exchanges in analyzing social relations between the groups, often to the exclusion of examining sentiments of solidarity or lines of social friction that characterize relations between forest communities (Lee & DeVore, 1968; Museur, 1969; Peterson, 1978; Demesse, 1980; Blackburn, 1982; Bahuchet & Guillaume, 1982; Bahuchet, 1988, 1993; Hart & Hart, 1986; Waehle, 1986; Testart, 1988; Bailey & Peacock, 1998). According to these analyses of exchange, labor is provided by hunter-gatherers to farmers, while goods – particularly agricultural produce and commercial goods such as clothes, iron tools, and salt – are provided by “farmers” to “hunter-gatherers.” A leading ethnographer of “pygmy” communities in central Africa describes the social relations between forest peoples according to and reinforcing the consistent model of economic exchange:

Each Pygmy family has exclusive economic relations with a family of farmers. The Aka [Pygmies] provide the villagers with game, forest products, and seasonal agricultural labor (for forest clearing and harvesting). In return, they obtain metal tools and agricultural products. But the two communities are quite independent, with different systems of kinship, and social and religious organizations. The relationship between the two populations is comparable to the “patron-client” relationship in ancient Rome. (Bahuchet, 1999: 193)

The summary of socioeconomic relations between “pygmies” and the very non-descript “villagers” is typical of much of the literature on forest-dwellers. Scholars often portray such exchanges of labor for goods, in addition to the fundamental exchange of forest products for agricultural products, as the basis for social interaction between groups of “hunter-gatherers” and “farmers.”

But alliances between Bangando “farmers/villagers” and Baka “hunter-gatherers”/“pygmies” are more complicated than unidirectional exchanges of labor for goods and forest products for agricultural products. Bangando and Baka families support each other in diverse ways with daily labor and production needs, with emotional and political support, and formalize their friendships and partnerships through the creation and maintenance of relationships between interethnic partners (*bándí*), between homonyms (*kólá*), and between former antagonists who have made formal peace agreements (*mbòní*). While these relationships of amity are generally initiated between two individuals, who are usually male heads of households, often their partnerships develop into intergenerational connections between families passing from one generation to the next, and often extending to special friendships between the wives and children of the families as well.

Bangando and Baka men first struck up friendships through the exchange of meat: Baka men hunted elephant in the forest and invited Bangando men and their families to partake of the feast; Bangando reciprocated by offering elephant meat that they had hunted (according to some versions) or goat meat when the Baka families arrived in the Bangando villages as new friends and neighbors (according to other sources). In addition to these initial ties of collaboration, the mutual aid extended across the communities during the tumultuous eras of slave raiding, warfare, and the onset of colonialism, when forced labor (road building and rubber collecting) and capitation taxes stretched families to their limits of their productive and protective abilities (Rupp, 2001). Bangando and Baka families were further intermingled when the newly independent Cameroonian government forced

Baka families to leave their separate, smaller villages and settle in Bangando villages that had earlier been relocated from the forest and stretched out alongside the colonial road. Little by little, first through internal dynamics of mutual affinity and later through external “push” factors of forced labor and resettlement, Bangando and Baka became more and more intricately involved in each other’s lives, struggles, and successes. Intimate relations evolved between men, women, and children of all four communities as daily interactions generated sentiments of affection (as well as irritation), providing the contextual foundations for friendships, the sharing of first names, and blood-alliances. Relations of amity and alliance transcend ethnic boundaries, weaving together families and individuals from various ethnic communities.

As patrilineal families are often linked through structural alliances that emphasize and reinforce interethnic cooperation, individuals are often connected through alliances of social, political, and emotional solidarity creating lasting friendships and partnerships that transcend ethnic boundaries. At the level of structural kin relations, there are no overlapping terms for the biological relationships of a nuclear or extended family in the Bangando and Baka languages. One metaphorical appellation for a very intimate friend is included in the palette of kinship terms in both languages, however: *bò jáá mù* (in Bangando) and *bò jáá álè* (in Baka), where *bò jáá* in both cases refers to a “person of the same stomach (*jáá*),” and *mù* and *álè* are first person possessive pronouns in Bangando and Baka, respectively. The appellation *bò jáá mù* evokes the intimate connections that siblings share, and is attributed to a very close friend, or *bándí*. Although the terms for kinspeople in Bangando and Baka languages may vary, indicating a fundamental divergence in the origins of the societies and their intimate structures of kinship, the shared concept for an especially close friend, partner, and ally indicates that sentiments of emotional and social solidarity have developed between individuals of different ethnic groups, affections that can and often do surmount ethnic differences.

### *BÁNDÍ* – FRIENDSHIP

While increased intimacy brings both increased tensions as well as affections, the emergence of the *bándí* relationship between Bangando and Baka men, a relationship of formalized friendship that continues to link interethnic partners among men and women today, is testimony to the fostering of interethnic friendship. As explained by Ambata, a Bangando man,

Bangando and Baka are tightly connected. Most Bangando and Baka families have associated families of the other group. Baka families who are allied with Bangando families tend to live in the same neighborhood as their Bangando partners, or even in the same house compound. The two families are connected as groups. But they are also connected as individual people: the heads of each family are special friends; the wives are friends; and often the children are friends, too. So this *bándí* friendship will pass down to the next generation.

Sometimes the Baka family will give names from the Bangando family to their own children. The head of the Bangando family is responsible for the actions of the Baka family with respect to other Bangando. The head of the Baka family is responsible for things that the members of the Bangando family do with other Baka. And if someone in the Baka family has a conflict in the village, the Bangando man will help him in discussions or at the *gálá*

wè, the tribunal. If a Baka *bándí* has trouble with the government or missionaries, often his Bangando *bándí* will help him, although the Bangando is not finally responsible for what happens. If the Bangando *bándí* has a conflict with other Baka, the Baka partner will help to sort out his problem.

If a woman from the Bangando family gets married to a man from another village, sometimes a member of the *bándí* family will go with her when she moves to her husband's village. Then the *bándí* relationship can be extended to include the new husband's family.

The Bangando family helps to look after the needs of the Baka family, especially in terms of money – buying clothes or pots, paying school fees and paying for medicine. The Baka family also helps the Bangando family. If someone falls sick, both partners will help find medicines to cure the illness.<sup>(2)</sup>

As a result of these *bándí* friendships, Bangando engage in daily, often prolonged interaction with Baka. Bangando and Baka male *bándís* interact informally during hours of leisure and often during productive activities such as clearing land for a garden or during hunting. *Bándís* interact and support each other formally during village meetings, especially if the men seek to resolve a conflict, either within their own families or between a member of their families and an outsider (or an external element such as the government, missionaries, or an NGO). Bangando and Baka women interact more frequently and for longer durations of time, simply because women's work is both more time-consuming and often involves tasks during which women can socialize.

In fact, Bangando women tend to have more frequent domestic and intimate relations with Baka women *and* men than Bangando men have with Baka of either gender. Bangando women enlist and have come to count on, but are not dependent upon, domestic and agricultural labor provided by Baka women and men. Baka often help Bangando women by clearing land for planting, carrying water, and collecting edible leaves for preparing the evening meal or useful vines and rattan for weaving baskets. It is not at all unusual for Baka to linger and socialize with Bangando women in and around their kitchen houses before and after working, and sometimes arriving at Bangando kitchen houses simply to socialize. But because of the imbalance of social and political power, in which Bangando often seem to prevail over their Baka counterparts in formal political and social settings, Bangando women only occasionally assist Baka families with *their* domestic work; the majority of social and productive activities that involve both Bangando and Baka happen in the context of the Bangando domestic sphere. It is important to take into account both the asymmetry in social power between Bangando and Baka, both in a general political sense and in very specific domestic contexts in which Bangando may seem to dominate their Baka *bándís*; but it is also essential to recognize the voluntary, mutually supportive, and extended nature of these *bándí* relations.

Two recent examples of the mutual assistance between *bándís*, gestures of friendship and support that follow neither the lines of “farmer”/“hunter-gatherer” as economic exchange nor the lines of dominance and subordination presumed to be integral in the stereotypical “villager as patron”/“pygmy as client” relationship, are offered here. In the course of one week in early May 1999 a Bangando family experienced separate births of three newborn babies, one infant death, and the dramatic worsening of the grandmother's tuberculosis. Because the family was preoccupied with pressing health concerns, no one was able to harvest plantains, check snare lines, or gather leaves from the forest to prepare the family's meals. Instead, the family's *bándí*, a Baka family that lives just a stone's throw

away in a neighboring cluster of houses, without solicitation provided their Bangando partners with plantains, leaf sauce, and other prepared dishes. In situations where misfortune or stress befalls this Baka family, their Bangando *bándí* support them in similar ways. In less urgent situations, the readily forthcoming, mutual support between *bándí* partners is evident in friendship and assistance that flows in both directions. For example, a few weeks later when her tuberculosis subsided and she returned to her work, the grandmother of this same Bangando family brought her *bándí*, whom she addresses as *mbàïé* – friend – a basket full of avocados from a tree near her garden and mushrooms that she had collected in the forest. By sharing their space and resources, work and materials, Bangando and Baka women in particular cultivate deep ties of mutual help and goodwill across ethnic lines. The relations of reciprocal support among women are reflective of *bándí* relations that link individuals in friendships and families in extended partnerships, transcending ethnic boundaries and spanning generational time.

Wanguwangu, a Bangando elder and renowned elephant hunter, offers another personal perspective on the enduring intimacy of his *bándí* friendship with Ndomonyo, a Baka man who lives just on the other side of the road from Wanguwangu and his family. He also suggests that where *bándí* relationships between a Bangando and a Baka family retain emotional significance over the course of numerous generations, the bonds of mutual collaboration and support generate bonds of fictive kinship, reflecting strong sentiments of interethnic siblinghood.

Oh, yes! I have Baka *bándí*. Don't you see me with those neighbors who stay just on the other side of the road? Because our father left them with us, so they are also our friends [*bándí*]. Ndomonyo is my *bándí*, but he is no longer my friend, he is already my brother. My father was the *bándí* of his father, and because his father is dead and my father is dead too, and because we were both left as orphans now I consider him to be my brother. And also because I am with him.<sup>(3)</sup>

In some cases, the melding of intimate relationships between *bándí* partners may reinforce, or even be the primary force behind, the overlap between parallel clans, Bangando and Baka clans that share the same totem and food prohibition (cf. Rupp, 2001). Where *bándí* friendships link numerous members of two families, it is probable that parallel clan-ship was a contributing factor in initiating the friendship; the common observance of and adherence to clan rituals and history also reinforces the close relations between the two extended families. Cooperative engagement during rituals and mutual support during times of family crisis offer clear indications of particularly close interethnic *bándí* friendships and parallel clans. For example, the *bándí* alliance between Mosongo, a Bangando elder and renowned hunter, and Lembi, a Baka elder and renowned spiritual leader, is reinforced by their membership in parallel clans, *bò wé* (Bangando) and *yé gùgà* (Baka), both taking the monitor lizard as their totem. Although the names of their clans are different (and are articulated in different languages), members of both clans recognize their shared affiliation in the clan of the monitor lizard.

Where *bándí* alliances are particularly intimate, such as the partnership between Mosongo and Lembi in which their partnership is reinforced by their parallel clan-ship, a *bándí* partner may assume the full responsibility for an important rite of passage that his partner's family undertakes. In the case of Lembi and Mosongo, these *bándí* partners live in adjoining house compounds with their wives and families, share meals together, hunt together, and are actively involved in the successes and difficulties that each encounters. So

when Lembi's younger brother died during a hunting trip that took him more than twenty kilometers from the village, Mosongo and Lembi together arranged an expedition to retrieve the body and bring it back for a funeral and burial in the village. Several days later, the body was buried and the loss was mourned by Lembi's extended family and network of friends at Mosongo's household. The funeral ceremony, including dancing and singing as well as the bulk of the participants, were Baka. But as Lembi's *bándí*, Mosongo and his family organized, hosted, and financed the funeral. Mosongo also undertook the important task of digging the grave for Lembi's deceased brother. Because of their close *bándí* friendship, Mosongo and his family supported Lembi and his family both logistically and emotionally with their constant, quiet presence.<sup>(4)</sup>

### KÓLÁ – HOMONYMS

Everyday, informal contexts of interethnic friendship serve as a base-level indicator of the high degree of integration among the communities in southeastern Cameroon. Rainy days often find women of neighboring households and mixed ethnic affiliations gathered together in someone's kitchen house near a slowly smoldering fire, smoke and conversation mingling as they slowly rise from the damp, thatch roof. The kitchen house of Salo, an elderly Bangando woman who maintains friendships with both her Bangando and Baka neighbors, offers warmth and conversation on rainy days. A young Baka woman named Alombi comes with her toddling daughter to visit Salo in the early morning drizzle. Later that morning, Bangando travelers passing through Dioula on their way to another destination also stop at Salo's kitchen to take refuge from the rain. Salo invites the visitors to sit on stools near the fire, demoting Alombi and her toddler – neighbors and close friends of Salo – to the chilly floor, where they sit on a mat that is used for drying cocoa on sunnier days. Alombi cuddles her little girl in her lap as she settles herself on the mat, her legs sticking straight out in front to counterbalance her unsupported back as she listens to the conversation, which had now shifted to topics initiated by the Bangando visitors. While the embrace of friendship in Salo's kitchen includes neighbors and visitors from various ethnic communities, the overt signs of social positioning are variable, depending on the individual's social status and membership in one particular ethnic community or another.

The next morning the thatch of the kitchen house is steaming as the early sun dries the dampness from the long rain that fell the day before. The socializing with her Bangando visitors and Baka neighbors is over, the grandchildren have been fed and are washing clothes at the river, and Salo prepares to leave for her garden. Alombi and her young toddler come again for an early-morning visit with Salo. In the quiet of the kitchen house Alombi sits on a stool rather than on the cocoa mat, and swings her daughter from her back onto her lap as she sits down, resting her back against the wall. As the women quietly share the news of the morning, Salo notices the rough cough of Alombi's young daughter. Reaching back into the black, resin-encrusted storage rack above the fire, she pulls out a bundle of leaves (*sàà óngò*) and bark (*kàngà*), the local treatment for a cough (*sábé*). Salo carefully divides her store of cough medicine into two bundles and reties them in large, round leaves, passing one packet to Alombi. Alombi bundles her little girl – whose name is also Salo – onto her back and heads into the bright sun, going home to treat her child's cough. Salo, the elder Bangando woman who is well known for her knowledge



of medicinal plants, takes up her large carrying basket and goes to her garden to harvest plantains. Arriving at home on her mother's back Salo, the younger Baka girl, takes the medicines prepared for her by her elder Bangando homonym.

The toddler's name, Salo, was given to the Baka baby girl by her family to honor the Bangando elder, and to place the young girl and older woman in special, intimate relations as *kólá* – homonyms. Alombi is the daughter of Nakolongjoko, a sprightly, wrinkled Baka man who is the *bándí* partner of Salo's deceased husband. Alombi named her own child after her father's *bándí*'s wife, cementing the relations of friendship and support between the Bangando and Baka families for another generation, despite the death of the initial Bangando *bándí* partner.<sup>(5)</sup>

The giving of a first name to an infant initiates intimacy between the child and the person for whom she was named; these explicitly created relationships between homonyms serve as powerful, emotional ligaments between two families, who often hold different ethnic affiliations, but who have been emotionally, practically, and structurally aligned for numerous generations. The establishment of relations between homonyms also serves the practical purpose of ensuring, ideally, that the child has a formal, extra-familial sponsor as she grows – someone who will contribute to her school fees, buy her new clothes for the annual celebration of Children's Day (*Fête de Jeunesse*), and support her should a calamity befall her family. Typically the relationship between *kólás* is established when they share the same Bangando/Baka name (as opposed to the French name that is considered to be a secondary name, or *prénom*). Thus Salo Odette, the elderly Bangando woman, and Salo Thérèse, the Baka toddler, are *kólás* by virtue of the fact that they share the name Salo. In deference to and respect for elder generations, the younger homonym cannot actually be *called* Salo until her elder homonym is deceased. Until then, she will be known by an array of nicknames, by her French name, or simply as "*Kólá*" if the speaker is the elder Salo.

Relationships between *kólás* are usually imbued with special emotions of affection and respect. Because of the formal constraint that only one individual at a time can be known by a single name, and because of the practical limits of any single sponsor's resources, a given individual usually does not have very many homonyms. With a manageable number of young namesakes (perhaps one or two), the elder homonym can take an active role in the experiences of the younger *kólás*. Because the role of an elder *kólá* is to support and guide the younger *kólá* from a position slightly outside the nuclear family, *kólás* often enjoy a relationship permeated by positive emotions of giving and receiving, gratitude and guidance rather than one dominated by ambivalent emotions of discipline and respect, sentiments that often give rise to tension in parent-child relationships. *Kólá* relations are recognized and experienced as something special. Thus when the elder homonym does ultimately die, the younger namesake(s) fulfills the role of chief mourner at the funeral. While the most intimate biological members of the deceased's family often participate in the funeral and burial in a state of quiet shock punctuated by intermittent wailing, the *kólá* of the deceased is the most vocal and consistent of the mourners, often embodying and expressing the collective grief through her continual wailing and crying throughout the several hours to several days of funeral activities. Because of the outpouring of grief from family and friends in the name of the dead homonym, a name that by definition the *kólá* shares, during the mourning period the still-living *kólá* must protect herself. Because her nominal identity is the same as that of the now dead body of her *kólá*, and because

the *kólá's* spirit is searching for refuge now that its body is dead, the living homonym is at great risk of spirit possession by her deceased homonym. During the funeral, the *kólá* wears protective garlands of braided banana leaves diagonally across her chest and shoulders. When she mourns over the body, she vigorously shakes a rattle – which today is made from an old tin can filled with stones – to keep the spirit of her dead homonym from lodging itself in her body. Thus while homonyms are still alive, they typically enjoy an intimate relationship of sharing and support; at death, the proximity of their interrelationship is enacted and embodied by the younger *kólá*, who now must protect herself from the wandering spirit of her deceased *kólá*.<sup>(6)</sup>

That *kólás* and *bándí* partners play active roles in rites of passage in the lives and experiences of their partners and their families underscores the social importance of these sentimental and structural interethnic relations. For example, when a man marries, his *bándí* and *kólá(s)* will contribute to the *díkwèlí*, the bride price that he will offer to his fiancée's family. If his *bándí* and *kólá(s)* have means to contribute cash, they will do so. If not, they may contribute meat or local whisky<sup>(7)</sup> to contribute to the wedding feast, or something else that can be sold in order to contribute to the bride price. From the bride's side, her family's *bándí* and *kólá* partners will contribute woven mats (*fě*) and chickens to her dowry, which will be presented to the family of the groom as a return-gift. When the groom's and bride's families have exchanged these marriage gifts, the gifts that have been received by each side will be redistributed to the individuals who contributed to the initial wedding offering. Thus *bándís* and *kólás* who contributed a woven mat to their partner's daughter's dowry will each receive a return gift of money, whisky, or meat when the marriage rituals (and transactions) are complete. Not only with marriages, but also in ritual occasions that mark the beginnings or ends of socially significant relationships (such as initiations and funerals), alliances between *bándís* are reinforced by their joint participation in the presentation of gifts and the re-distribution of return-gifts.<sup>(8)</sup> *Bándí* and *kólá* relationships offer individuals formal ways to acknowledge and perpetuate interethnic partnerships that, often begun in generations past, continue to have meaning and relevance today.

### MBÒNÍ – BLOOD ALLIANCES

While *bándí* friendships continue to link Bangando and Baka today, the even more potent political and social alliances that were founded through a pact of blood – *mbòní* – are no longer undertaken. The atrophy of social relations between *mbòní* allies does not correlate with a disintegration of overall social ties or interconnectedness; on the contrary, where *mbòní* served to unite previously warring communities through the sharing of blood and thus acceptance of mutual peace and integration, the need for such ceremonies has been largely overcome as interethnic coexistence and cooperation have replaced interethnic conflict in southern Cameroon during the past century.

Conflict, violence, slavery, and flight typified social dynamics among the shifting communities of central Africa throughout the nineteenth century. When two warring communities ultimately resolved their differences, often an *mbòní* alliance was undertaken to seal the former enemies as allies, as they pledged their mutual friendship, loyalty, and support in the face of future aggressors. During the ceremony to initiate the *mbòní* alliance, the

elders, warriors, and youths of both groups came together to prepare for a joint circumcision ritual of young men (see discussion of *békà*, male circumcision, below). Meanwhile, women of the previously antagonistic communities came together to prepare a large feast of pounded maize and meat. The boys were circumcised in the center of the village, with elders of both sides as witnesses to the cutting. Blood from the circumcision of the boys was caught in a gourd and used to prepare the maize meal; this blood-soaked maize was served as the centerpiece of the feast.<sup>(9)</sup> As they shared the conciliatory meal, the former antagonists ate the blood of their sons, representing the inextricable mixing of the primordial essences of both groups, and the symbolic consummation and internalization of the alliance. Through the *mbòní* alliance, the former enemies were now literally “of the same blood.” Or as an elder explained, through *mbòní* the enemies become “one people” [*gà wì síkínò*].<sup>(10)</sup> After entering into an *mbòní* alliance, the two communities were prohibited from engaging in warfare against each other, and instead were obliged to support and defend each other. These allegiances between *mbòní* partners approximate the obligations among kin; thus *mbòní* alliances created kin-like loyalties among communities of different ethnic affiliations.

The incidence of *mbòní* alliances varied across the communities. Bangando, Bakwélé, and Mbomam seem to have been most directly implicated in the wars and violent conflicts of the nineteenth century, both as victims initially and later as perpetrators. Thus it is not surprising that oral histories recount *mbòní* pacts among these groups (Bangando with both Bakwélé and Mbomam) as well as between each of these groups and other communities external to the region (Bangando with Ndzimou, a community located to the northwest of the Lobéké forest today, for example). Baka appear to have entered into *mbòní* alliances with Bakwélé and with Mbomam even though oral accounts of interactions among these communities make no mention of tension or conflict, much less warfare, between them. Perhaps at a later time, when Bakwélé and Mbomam were established in villages in southeastern Cameroon and when friendships and partnerships with the Baka stabilized, Baka engaged in peacetime *mbòní* pacts to cement their social relations of cooperation with these groups of neighbors, a slight variation of the *mbòní* pact that was usually made to formalize peace between enemies.<sup>(11)</sup> It is notable that Baka who live in villages that are dominated by interactions between Baka and Bangando, with relatively few Bakwélé or Mbomam residents, seem unfamiliar with *mbòní* pacts, and claim never to have engaged in these alliances with Bangando.<sup>(12)</sup> Perhaps the close integration of Baka and Bangando communities from very early in their relationship precluded the formal construction of *mbòní* alliances; perhaps cooperation has been a consistent feature of Bangando-Baka relations from an early stage in their association.

## SHARED CEREMONIES

In addition to relationships that unite individuals, families, and even entire communities through alliances and partnerships that transcend ethnic boundaries, several central ceremonies also serve as interethnic social adhesives that hold men of different communities together in special relations of spiritual fraternity. Enduring the liminal dangers of initiation evokes deep and exultant sentiments; the collective sense of vulnerability, courage, and perseverance of the young initiates fosters their interethnic solidarity as a cohort of

members in various men's societies. As joint participation in ceremonies continues to bind men who have been initiated together, cooperative perpetuation of spiritual sentiments throughout the years of adulthood continually reinforces their shared membership in spiritual societies and ceremonies.

*Békà* is one of the most important ceremonies that men throughout southeastern Cameroon – Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam alike – undertake. According to Bangando elders, the *békà* ceremony is the initiation of adult men into a men's secret society that is charged with the general protection of society and the maintenance of stability in everyday life in the Lobéké forest region. According to Joiris (1998), men who have been initiated into the *békà* society are also obliged to arrange and undertake the funeral celebrations of fellow members, and to support the families of deceased members. Men who are initiated in the same cohort are bound by a strong emotional solidarity. For the remainder of their lives, they will share meat with each other following a successful hunt and will offer contributions to a cohort member's bride price payment, constructing relations of kinship and upholding the responsibilities of caring for and supporting each other as brothers (cf. Joiris, 1998: 308). Entrance into this extraordinary society of men requires extraordinary endurance: adult men who are usually in their twenties and thirties are re-circumcised, involving the re-opening of earlier circumcision scars and the cutting of new, ceremonial markings on the penis.<sup>(13)</sup> While not all men choose to enter into the *békà* society, the ceremonial society refuses entry to no man, regardless of ethnic affiliation.

Entrance into *békà* society was formerly limited to wealthy men who had accumulated enough wealth to afford the sizeable contribution of prestige goods that *békà* society members required for the initiation to be held. The prestige items consisted mostly of goods that were consumed during the ceremony such as domestic meat (goats and chickens) and meat from the forest (elephant, duiker, wild pig) as well as locally-distilled whisky; the ability to amass the resources to make such offerings served as an indication that the initiate possessed the means to make future contributions to meet the needs, both anticipated and urgent, of the community at large. In this way, men of the *békà* society served as community trustees: wealthy, respected, and presumably wise individuals who could help to see the village through contingencies and conflicts that might arise. Because *békà* initiation required this financial ability to accumulate and then dispense with large amounts of wealth, and because Baka typically did not amass property in goods, the first Baka members of *békà* were sponsored by their Bangando *bándí*, who also served as advisors and protectors to their Baka partners who underwent initiation. Thus the process of initiation into *békà* society reinforced the ties between Bangando and Baka *bándí* at the same time that membership in the *békà* society advanced interethnic relations among a larger community of Bangando and Baka (and also Bakwélé and Mbomam) men. Although researchers may assert that “villagers” sponsorship of their “pygmy” partners as they enter into ritual initiations and secret societies amounts to coercion and continued unilateral domination by the “villagers” (e.g. Turnbull, 1965), the relationship between Bangando and Baka men in the *békà* society of southeastern Cameroon appears to be based on willing and even enthusiastic participation of both Bangando and Baka partners. That Bangando initially sponsored Baka initiates is a reflection of historical conditions of economic, social, and political disparities. Today Baka may be initiated into the *békà* society without reliance on the economic support of their Bangando *bándí*, indicating their increasing economic parity with other ethnic communities in the region. While Baka participants in

*békà* do not claim to have been the original initiates, today they take great pride in their unflinching participation in the ceremony, claiming to best represent the potency of men initiated into the *békà* society. *Békà* serves as a powerful, unifying rite that binds together men of all four ethnic communities of southeastern Cameroon into a ceremonial society whose mandate is the maintenance of social stability and protection for their interethnic community.

Two other important ceremonies bring men together in rites of passage, although each includes active participants from predominantly one ethnic community or another. As explained by Maga,

Bangando and Baka also take part in each other's ceremonies. Bangando men may join Baka men in celebrating *jengì*, and Baka men may join the *dìò* ritual of Bangando men. But usually one group of people won't participate as fully in the other's ceremony. The other group usually watches more than they take part.<sup>(14)</sup>

*Jengì* constitutes the most important ceremonial occasion for Baka men, who are initiated into the cult of *Jengì*, a prominent Baka forest spirit. Likewise, *dìò* is the central ritual of Bangando men's spiritual initiation, participation, and death; the powerful and violent spirit *Dìò* is invited to return to the village where an important elder has passed away, to ensure the proper burial and spiritual repose of the deceased.<sup>(15)</sup> But despite the ethnic particularities of each ceremony, a significant number of men from neighboring communities actively participate through initiation and continued involvement in the ceremonies.

*Jengì* is a central ritual institution of Baka throughout southern Cameroon. During the ceremony, whose intricate stages take place over numerous months, male initiates live together in an isolated camp in the forest where they learn about the roles and responsibilities of adults in society, techniques of hunting, and about spiritual life in the forest. The process of being initiated into *jengì* is the process of becoming an adult man. At the end of the ritual instruction, the initiates are ritually killed, to be reborn during the culminating ceremony as adult men ready to participate fully in social life (Bahuchet, 1992: 288-89). Once initiated, *Jengì* protects his "children," granting Baka men the powers that they need to survive the dangers of the forest (Joiris, 1998: 186).

Initiation in *Jengì* is not limited to Baka men. Today men of various ethnic backgrounds, including Bangando, Mbomam, and Bakwélé, participate, as do boys and adolescents of various ages. As suggested by Joiris, it is possible that the age of Baka participants is declining, as Baka struggle to maintain some kind of control over the various changes in their ritual and profane lives, changes that seem to be accelerating with each generation. By initiating Baka males at a young age, perhaps parents attempt to inculcate their children with values that they hold dear while they feel they still have some sway over the younger generation. At a *jengì* ceremony in 1998 a young Baka boy, approximately two years old, was initiated.

Although the radical reduction in age of Baka *jengì* initiates seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon, it is likely that *jengì* initiates of multiple ethnic backgrounds have entered into the ceremonial society for many generations. As discussed in detail by Joiris, renowned Baka elephant hunters are the ritual guardians of *Jengì*, the forest spirit. In the Bakwélé context Joiris contends that Bakwélé men initially desired to participate in and learn through *jengì* initiation because they hoped to benefit from Baka knowledge of the

forest as well as their mystical powers. Through their participation, Bakwélé men strategically began to build interethnic “pseudo-familial” links with Baka to gain a measure of political footing in the potent spiritual life of Baka as well as to benefit from the technical and spiritual edge offered by Baka knowledge of the forest and its animals (Joiris, 1998: 271).

It is likely that motivations for participating in interethnic ceremonies vary from community to community. Enormous diversity in sentiment characterizes social realities among the four communities of southeastern Cameroon today; no doubt there has always been divergence in levels of open friendship, covert manipulation, and outright aggression among the ethnic groups (and among factions within the communities). Dynamics of interethnic relationships vary markedly between different regions of southeastern Cameroon. For example, relationships between Baka and Bakwélé in Ndongo differ significantly from relationships between Baka and Bangando along the main Moloundou road, and are especially different from relations between Baka and Mbomam in Ngola and Mikel. The interethnic sampling of this research suggests that Bakwélé participate least intimately in Baka ceremonies, including *jengì*; Bangando men participate very regularly in *jengì*; Mbomam men participate most often, and with the least imbalance of social and ritual status, in *jengì*.

Unlike the overall collaboration of various communities in *békà* initiation and in the governing of the ritual and mundane society, interethnic participation in *jengì* ceremonies occasionally results in conflicts of interest in and perspectives of the ceremony. On occasion “outside” participants – usually observers from ethnic communities for whom the ritual is not part of their time-honored cultural repertoire – upstage and upset the smooth proceedings of the ritual. At a *jengì* ceremony in Yenga (December 1998), a large village with roughly equal proportions of Bangando and Baka residents, young Bangando men disrupted the initiation rites and threatened to tear down the initiates’ dome-shaped, leaf-shingled house (*mòngúlú*) where they were receiving their ritual instruction from *jengì* elders just prior to their ceremonial death and rebirth, the climax of several days of intense activities. The Bangando youths had no particular conflict with the *jengì* participants; their condescending insults suggested that they viewed themselves as suave and sophisticated young men, above and beyond the rites of the forest, and superior particularly to Baka rites. The youths belittled and taunted the initiates, until a collaborative group of Baka and Bangando elders interceded to drive them away. One possible interpretation of this friction at the *jengì* ceremony suggests that, as youths may overtly embrace values of contemporary Cameroonian society and modernity, they in fact fear ritual power all the more acutely because of their emotional distance from these time-honored values. Thus perhaps the Bangando youths’ derision of *jengì* initiates stems from their need to dismiss and undermine these expressions of continuing ritual power, power to which they feel they have no access and over which they have no control (cf. Worby, 1998). The remainder of the *jengì* ceremony was infiltrated with an undercurrent of negativity towards Bangando, as Baka grumbled and muttered that Bangando interfere in Baka ceremonies and spoil them, whereas Baka treat the Bangando *dìò* ritual with appropriate fear and respect. But irritation with the Bangando youths and their cultural condescension did not dampen the spirits of participants in the *jengì* celebrations, including a Bangando school teacher from Moloundou, the regional capital, who took his initiation guidance and induction with great

gravity, as well as enthusiastic observers, both Baka and Bangando. Interethnic participation in ritual ceremonies is clearly contested. The fact that a majority of Bangando men overall are initiated into *jengi* serves as an important indication that, conflicts aside, the structural and emotional participation of both communities in shared ritual knowledge and experience has long been accepted and continues to be cultivated.

If *Jengi* is the signature spirit into whose ritual community adult Baka men expect to be initiated, *Dîò* is the quintessential Bangando spirit into whose cult men also enter. *Dîò* ceremonies are conducted very infrequently in a given village, only on the occasion of the death of a very respected Bangando elder. A short time after the death of a notable elder, Bangando men who have been initiated into the *dîò* community call this potent and potentially violent spirit to come out of the forest and to oversee the settling of the deceased elder's spirit. *Dîò* is the most feared spirit of all communities in southeastern Cameroon, and improper "handling" of the spirit can quickly result in the death of participants. Because of the violent death suffered by the first woman who encountered the spirit *Dîò* in the forest, women are not allowed to see the ritual. Instead, women, uninitiated men, and children gather together and close themselves into a collective kitchen house near the clearing where the initiated men and *Dîò* conduct the ceremony; the women and uninitiated men listen to and participate in the ceremony by singing and talking with *Dîò* from a safe distance.

Even though both *Jengi* and *Dîò* are greatly feared by all residents of the Lobéké region, participation of adult men in both secret societies is widespread. The undertaking of both *jengi* and *dîò* ceremonies is a momentous event for the entire interethnic village. Given their deep expertise with the particular ritual preparations and requirements, Baka and Bangando men take responsibility for the ceremonial preparations for *jengi* and *dîò* respectively, although men of all ethnic backgrounds who have been initiated into the societies are expected to contribute according to their ceremonial roles. Although in the past it is likely that Baka did not participate in *dîò* initiation and ceremonies, today their participation is widely accepted. The slight imbalance in interethnic participation in *jengi* and *dîò* ceremonies, in which it is more common for Bangando men to be initiated into *jengi* than for Baka men to be initiated into *dîò*, reflects the continued but narrowing differences in social status between the two communities. This increasing joint participation in central rituals of both communities underscores the increasing integration of interests and values across the four ethnic communities of southeastern Cameroon.

## INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

Interethnic relations in southeastern Cameroon are multifaceted, with some angles that gleam and shimmer reflecting social cohesion and cooperation, some surfaces that have lost their luster as communities contend with the realities of economic competition and social difficulties, and with some edges between interethnic communities that are sharp and cutting. As we have seen, one side of interethnic social relations is based on and perpetuated through genuine feelings of enduring friendship and support between individual companions. A second aspect of interethnic social relations involves balances between collaborative work and the desire to ensure reciprocal assistance and gifts, as well as

partners' perceptions of the balance between each individual's contributions to the relationship. Where sincere sentiments of abiding friendship are lacking, this circumspect side of relations may bring interethnic partners together through cooperative but calculated efforts, as partners weigh their inputs to the relationship with respect to actual or potential outcomes and benefits. Where interethnic partnerships lack personal sentiments of affection and loyalty and are instead dominated by calculations of present investments and future returns, collective and often negative generalizations of ethnic characteristics of "others" are more likely to come into play.

As a pragmatic minimum, it is in the interests of both sides of an interethnic partnership to remain on good terms, providing an informal social insurance policy. Especially in southeastern Cameroon, where the corrupt national bureaucracy tends to undermine rather than support possibilities for economic prosperity and social advancement, there is no alternative to hard work and mutually beneficial collaboration for contending with uncertainties and contingencies. By building reliable and trustworthy partnerships, one friend knows that the other can help her access meat from the forest or plantains from a garden, if she cannot muster enough food for her family's evening meal. Another friend may rely on his partner to help him amass chickens and mats from their combined network of extended families and friends to pay his bride price. Partners understand that they can turn to each other in case of emergency, illness, or death. In case of sickness, Baka and Bangando alike may turn to both medicinal resources in the forest as well as commercial medications for themselves, their families, and their partners.<sup>(16)</sup> Through their collaboration, *bándí* partners' pools of resources for meeting daily needs and contending with unforeseen circumstances are vastly increased.

But the collaborative relationships generated through friendships and alliances are neither uniform nor ubiquitous throughout southeastern Cameroon. The warmth bestowed by a Baka man on his Bangando *bándí's* newborn son, as he attached a tiny bracelet of braided fibers from the forest onto the little wrist to ensure the baby's health and speedy growth, may be contrasted with occasionally bitter experiences between *bándí* friends. For example Michel, a Baka resident of Dioula, describes the unraveling of his father's *bándí* partnership: his father and Gindé, a Bangando elder, were united both through their membership in parallel clans and as *bándí* friends. When Gindé passed away, Michel explains that his father maintained his *bándí* friendship with Gindé's son, Ndjumbé. Michel's father and Ndjumbé did many, many things together. But one day Ndjumbé tried to give Michel's father a potent medicine (*nínà*) from the forest; it was a trick to make his father look like a fool. Michel's father was furious and broke off the *bándí* partnership permanently, terminating a two-generation relationship of mutual collaboration and friendship.<sup>(17)</sup>

Perhaps as a result of his father's bitter experience with his Bangando *bándí*, today Michel remains acerbic about formalized partnerships between Baka and Bangando. Michel argues that Baka work much harder for the benefit of their Bangando partners than the stinginess of Bangando reciprocation should warrant. Bangando are tightfisted in providing their share of compensation through material goods, money, or work. According to Michel's perspective, Baka simply invest more energy and more thought in their relations with Bangando than Bangando partners do for their Baka counterparts. Bangando know that Baka are hard workers, so they call Baka to come do their hard work for them. When Baka work in Bangando gardens, their work will produce a good harvest for the Bangando



family, whereas the little bit of food or compensation that the Bangando gives to his Baka partner is hardly enough for the Baka partner to feed his children for that one day.

This discourse of inequality between Baka and Bangando is recurrent, and offers a consistent counterweight to statements and actions that reflect interethnic amity. This portrayal of the inferior social position of Baka also typifies much of the literature on “pygmies” and “villagers,” in which their relationship is usually depicted as one of dominance and manipulation of “pygmies” by overbearing “villagers” (e.g. Turnbull, 1965, *inter alia*). But the focus of researchers and development practitioners on the perceived social injustice sustained by Baka and other “pygmies” tends to ignore the complex tangles of sentiments that comprise Baka-Bangando relations.

Michel’s discussion of their relationships grew more complex after Michel had emphatically expressed his distaste for alliances and partnerships with Bangando. When pressed about why Baka would continue to work for Bangando – even voluntarily – if they harbor such negative emotions for their Bangando partners, Michel and his friend, Yana, who had been listening intently to Michel’s discussion, both shrugged their shoulders as Yana replied,

Some Baka want to work for Bangando and some don’t. Some Baka like Bangando, and some don’t. Some Bangando like Baka and some don’t. Baka work for Bangando because people have to do what they have to do for their families. But it’s better if Baka work for themselves.<sup>(18)</sup>

Michel and Yana then explained that some Baka *do* like Bangando and have Bangando friends, tempering their firmly (almost fiercely) negative comments about Bangando that they had articulated at the outset of the discussion. Michel began to describe his own friendships among fellow residents of Dioula. He explained that although he has no Bangando *bándí* with whom he works particularly closely and whose collaboration he counts on, Michel does have Bangando friends, *mbàïé*. For example, Michel often walks from his neighborhood at Dioula-Mbandame to Dioula-Beligela, four kilometers to the south, to visit Ngola, a middle-aged Bangando man. Michel emphasizes that he comes to see him – *a sèbi a sèbi* – only to visit him, not to work for or with him; Ngola is one of his friends, not his *bándí* partner. Michel explained that his wife left home early that morning to go and help Ngola and his wife, Pauline, plant maize in their garden. But he quickly qualified this statement, explaining that it is not a habitual pattern, for his wife to come and work with Ngola and his family. Michel walked to Dioula-Beligela to join his wife at Ngola’s house at midday, to find that Pauline had prepared a large meal of plantains chunks of pangolin meat stewed in palm-oil sauce. Michel also recalled that his wife had carried a basket of plantains and a packet of peanuts when they returned home to Dioula-Mbandame, a gift from Pauline, so Michel and his family ate well again in the evening. Michel explained that he and his wife do not visit Ngola and Pauline because they are obliged to under some kind of collaborative agreement or partnership. Michel enjoys visiting Ngola simply because he enjoys Ngola’s company. Just a few days later, Michel and Ngola were sitting together under a guava tree near Ngola’s house in the late afternoon, when another Bangando man hurried along the road nearby, and called out that he would meet Michel later in the evening. When asked what they were planning to do together, Michel face broke into a sly grin as he replied, “*Oò bò mà yè mbàïé ná? – Aren’t we friends?*” Michel articulated the tangle of interethnic relations between Bangando and

Baka, explaining, “*Oò bó kìnò mò, bémóngó òò bò má kìnò mó nà* – We are the same thing, **but** we are not the same thing.”<sup>(19)</sup>

This fundamental ambiguity concerning the sentimental unity of Bangando and Baka seems to lie at the core of their interethnic social relations. While Michel is vociferous in his critique of Bangando participation in *bándí* partnerships, alleging that Bangando cannot be counted on as trustworthy, equitable partners who look out for the interests of both parties, he clearly embraces Ngola as a friend, someone whom he can count on for companionship and collaboration. When friction between partners or friends exacerbates tensions in social relations, perhaps members of this interethnic society reactively and defensively criticize the negative behavior and link these generalized, negative characteristics to all those who share the offending individual’s ethnicity. Negative social attributes, when encountered in consistent or parallel contexts, may be conflated with primordial attributes of the entire community, generating readily recognized and accepted stereotypes of the ethnic “other.” Although these stereotypes are familiar and generally acknowledged throughout the communities of southeastern Cameroon (Bangando as manipulative cheapskates; Baka as unreliable thieves), as individuals of various communities delve into the particularities of their own interethnic relationships, the nuances of other social dynamics and sentiments emerge. Even individuals who begin by complaining about the behavior of people of a different ethnic community often conclude by affirming their fundamental unity, even as they recognize but not longer condemn their ethnic differences. Evidently individuals of contrasting ethnicities do not remain neighbors and friends, allies and partners simply to maintain economic exchange relations. Baka friends who contribute chickens to a Bangando man’s bride price payment, and Bangando companions who offer medicine to their Baka homonyms, maintain their friendships – whether formalized or not – because sentiments of social unity have interlinked the ethnic communities of southeastern Cameroon in increasingly intricate relations of social intimacy. This intimacy does not override ethnic differences; instead the complexities of allegiances, friendships, and long-standing relationships often cut across boundaries of ethnicity, bringing subsets of the various ethnic groups together through shared ceremonies and celebrations, collaborative subsistence activities and cooperative work efforts. Fundamentally, social groupings that emerge from collaborative efforts and amicable partnerships often result in social relations that offer alternative attributions of self and other beyond those of ethnicity, and certainly beyond categories that distill identity to simple modes of subsistence or stereotyped social attributes such as “pygmy” or “villager.”

## NOTES

- (1) I ask the reader’s patience with the awkward presentation of terms such as “hunter-gatherers,” “pygmies,” “farmers,” and “villagers.” I offset these terms with quotation marks consistently and consciously, to underscore the fact that these categories are social constructions of Euroamerican researchers, and do not necessarily reflect ethnic or social identities as expressed or experienced by the people of southeastern Cameroon themselves.
- (2) Discussion with Ambata, recorded in field notebook #1, pp. 23-25. Dioula-Beligela, 14 October 1995.
- (3) Discussion with Wanguwangu, recorded on field cassette #33A. Dioula-Beligela, 28 April 2000.

- (4) Discussion with Mosongo and Lembi, recorded in field notebook #7, pp. 42-43. Kangoïe, 25 April 2000.
- (5) Observations and discussion with Salo and Alombi, recorded in field notebook #6, p. 75. Dioula-Beligela, 15 April 1999.
- (6) Observations and discussions at funeral, recorded in field notebook #4, pp. 139-142. Mbateka-Njong, 4 February 1999.
- (7) This whisky is called *ngòlóngòlò*, and is made of distilled maize and manioc.
- (8) In his dissertation on the Bakwélé, Siroto also notes the custom of *contredot*, in which the bride's family offers a return-gift of fowl, mats, and brass anklets to the family of the new husband. This seems to be an unusual custom in the northwestern corner of the Congo River basin, as Siroto suggests that it is only found among the Mongo, far to the east (Siroto, 1969: 102). The significance of woven mats is unclear, although mats are an indispensable part of the marriage exchange. Perhaps among communities of the western Congo River basin, keeping at least one mat in a household represents the ability of a family metaphorically to cross a river using the sleeping mat as a raft, to escape unrest or conflict (Harms, 1987: 101-02).
- (9) That the central dish of reconciliation was maize meal indicates that the origins of the *mbòní* ceremony probably lie in the grasslands of central Cameroon or the Central African Republic, perhaps among the Gbaya and other Ubangian communities, rather than in the equatorial forest, where plantains provide the staple starch.
- (10) Discussion with Mungoï, recorded in field notebook #7, p. 22. Dioula-Mbandame, April 2000.
- (11) According to Baka who live in Ndongo, in the past Baka and Bakwélé friends made *mbòní* alliances to cement their friendship. But with the constant friction between the communities today, they no longer make these alliances. Discussion with Lapo and Lekewe, recorded in field notebook #5, p. 116. Ndongo, 15 March 1999. At the other end of the Lobéké region, Baka and Mbomam established intimate friendships in the past, and continue to do so today. As explained by an Mbomam elder in Ngola, Mbomam forefathers participated in the Baka initiation ceremonies of *Jengi*, and so they became brothers ("frères"). Mbomam and Baka also undertook *mbòní* alliances to solidify their friendship. Mbomam also formed *mbòní* alliances with Bangando. ["Friend" in Mbomam (and Bakwélé) is *ésò*. "Alliance" in Mbomam is *bón*.] Discussion with Ando, recorded in field notebook #5, p. 93. Ngola, 5 March 1999.
- (12) Discussion with Yana and Michel, recorded in field notebook #7, p. 37. Dioula-Mbandame, 28 April 2000.
- (13) Boys are circumcised for the first time at 10-14 years old.
- (14) Discussion with Maga about relations between Bangando and Baka, recorded in field notebook #3, pp. 142-151. Lopondji, 5 October 1998.
- (15) *Jengi* and *Dìò* are both the names of powerful forest spirits as well as the names of ceremonies in which the spirits are called to visit the village from the forest, when uninitiated men are ritually inducted into the ceremonial society. Where the terms refer to the proper names of the forest spirits, they are capitalized. Names of the ceremonial practices are denoted by using lower-case letters.
- (16) Differences in knowledge and access to resources cannot be correlated directly with ethnicity, however. Mosua, for example, is an elderly Bangando woman and *tótòbàngè* (a sorcerer who heals rather than harms), and is the unparalleled local medicinal expert whose patients include members of all ethnic communities – and primarily Baka – from throughout the region.
- (17) Discussion of Baka-Bangando relations with Michel and Yana, recorded in field notebook #7, pp. 34-42. Dioula-Mbandame, 28 April 2000. This story of betrayal between *bándí* friends is clearly incomplete. Michel recounted the complex saga to me twice in a combination of Bangando and Baka, but unfortunately my comprehension of the details was limited.
- (18) Yana's comments, recorded in field notebook #7, p. 38. Dioula-Mbandame, 28 April 2000.
- (19) Field notebook #7, p. 38. Dioula-Mbandame, 28 April 2000.

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