

RECENT ADVANCES IN CENTRAL AFRICAN HUNTER-GATHERER RESEARCH

Mitsuo ICHIKAWA

Daiji KIMURA

Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University

JAPANESE RESEARCH ON CENTRAL AFRICAN HUNTER-GATHERERS

It was more than 30 years ago when two Japanese anthropologists, late Professor Junichiro Itani and late Professor Reizo Harako, first visited the Ituri forest in northeastern part of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, former Zaire). They took the route from Bukavu toward north along the western escarpment of the Great Rift Valley, passing through the area currently under a state of war, and reached to Bunia, then hitchhiked a camion to the Ituri forest. After a preliminary survey, Harako conducted a comparative research on the Mbuti net-hunters and archers at Lolwa village from 1972 to 1973 (Harako, 1976). Tanno took over Harako's research in 1973 in a new field in the Teturi area, focusing on hunting activities of the Mbuti net hunters (Tanno, 1976). When Tanno returned to Japan in 1974, Ichikawa left for the Teturi area to conduct further research on the social organizations of the Mbuti net hunters (Ichikawa, 1978). In 1978, Terashima started the research on the Efe archers in the northern part of the forest (Terashima, 1983), where Ichikawa had carried out a preliminary survey in 1975. A series of research by Japanese anthropologists in the 1970s marks the starting point of the Mbuti and Efe studies after Turnbull's studies in the 1960s (Turnbull, 1965). The research in the Ituri forest had continued until the early 1990s, when the political situation of former Zaire became extremely unstable. In the early 1990s, the major field shifted to the northern part of Republic of Congo (Congo=Brazzaville) to study the Aka in the Likouala region (Kitanishi, 1995; Takeuchi, 1995). When the situation of Congo=Brazzaville worsened in 1993, the major fields again shifted further westward to Cameroon, where we have been carrying out the research in the tropical rain forest on the western edge of the Congo basin.

Research activities by Japanese anthropologists has thus covered most of the major hunter-gatherer groups in central Africa, the Mbuti, Efe, Aka and Baka, and expanded to wider fields of interests. While initial research was focused on the ecology, ethno-science, relationships between ecology and social organization, and other aspects of the people's relationship with the natural environment, research interests also have gradually expanded to other fields, such as ritual performances, non-verbal communications, as well as such contemporary issues as development, commercialization and environmental problems. As a result, more than 20 researchers and students have so far been engaged in the research of the central African hunter-gatherers.

GROWING INTERESTS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN HUNTER-GATHERERS AND THE WORKSHOP AT CHAGS9

There are, of course, other anthropologists working on the central African hunter-gatherers. In Central African Republic (CAR), studies of anthropology and human genetics on the Aka, led by Cavalli-Sforza (1986), has been conducted since the latter half of the 1960s. Barry Hewlett later joined this group and studied infant care among the Aka (Hewlett, 1991). French researchers have also been quite active since the early 1970s in their research on ethnomusicology, ethnolinguistics and ethnoecology of the Aka in CAR (Bahuchet, 1985; Arom et al., 1981-1993). In the Ituri forest, Robert Bailey and his colleagues started the research on the Efe in the end of the 1970s, mainly from the viewpoints of physical anthropology and behavioral ecology. Thus from the 1980s to 1990s, there was a sort of research rush in the study of central African hunter-gatherers, involving dozens of researchers in various fields. We could always find, in some parts of the central African forests, anthropologists who are studying the livelihood, ethnoecology, social organization, ritual performances, and relationship with other societies and the external world of the hunter-gatherers. Such thriving in research is probably related to an increasing international concern with the conservation of the tropical rain forests. As the destruction of the tropical rain forests has been accelerating, there has also been a growing interest in the conservation of the forest ecosystem. The life of the forest people has become an important focus of research, since they have been living in the forest for centuries while depending on the forest resources in a sustainable way. As a result, contemporary central African hunter-gatherer studies show a tendency toward convergence; they are in some way related to the "tropical forest issues," whether they deal with ecological, social or cultural aspects of forest peoples' life.

Based on such growing interests in central African hunter-gatherers and their life, a workshop was organized on the occasion of the 9th International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHaGS9), held in Edinburgh from 9th to 13th September, 2002. The purpose of this workshop is described in the following session summary drafted by the workshop co-organizers Justin Kenrick and Mitsuo Ichikawa, the senior editor of this volume.

"The aim of this workshop is to exchange information concerning recent studies and to explore methodologies of systematic comparison of the different groups of hunter-gatherers in central Africa. Various hunter-gatherer groups in this region inhabit a similar forest environment, and exhibit a variety of cultural similarities (as well as differences), which, combined with the recent accumulation of empirical data, allow us to conduct a systematic and fruitful comparison among these forest living peoples. The topics to be discussed include issues relating to the environment, subsistence, knowledge and perception, social and religious life, relations with neighbouring agricultural societies and external world, as well as contemporary issues such as the emergence of "indigenous" representation and the impacts of conservation and development projects, tourism and the cash economy. The workshop also aims at promoting a network of researchers and research information on central African forest hunter-gatherers."

The workshop was held in the evening of the 2nd day of the conference. How far our intended purposes were accomplished remains a question, but at least, exchange of research information and promotion of networking, took place lively. It was therefore an effective attempt as a first step, and we agreed during the conference to the idea of holding a similar workshop in the near future.

The followings are the summaries of the six papers presented at the workshop, and another related paper by Koichi Kitanishi, who unfortunately could not come to the conference.

SUMMARY OF THE PAPERS

I. Indigenous Culture

One of the major interests of the Japanese studies in the Ituri forest hunter-gatherers is ethno-science, the “traditional” knowledge on the animals and plants in the forest. The first related research was conducted by Tadashi Tanno on the plant utilization by the Mbuti in the Teturi region (Tanno, 1981). Similar works were conducted by Ichikawa on the animal food and on the avifauna. A more systematic project on ethnobotany started in the middle of the 1980’s, when Terashima, Ichikawa and Sawada conducted research in the Efe area (Terashima et al., 1989). This research was later extended into other parts of the forest and integrated into the Aflora project, a database project of traditional plant use in tropical Africa to preserve the intellectual heritage of African peoples. Using this database, Terashima attempts a comparative study of ethnobotany of the Ituri forest hunter-gatherers.

It has become evident from a series of ethnobotanical studies (Terashima et al., 1989; Ichikawa & Terashima, 1996) that the peoples of the Ituri forest extensively depend on the wild plants for their life. It has also been pointed out there exists variability in plant use even among the groups living in almost identical environments and with similar cultural backgrounds. Terashima argues, such intra-cultural variability comprises an important characteristic of the “traditional” ethnobotanical knowledge, and discusses the factor generating such variability, which seems to be related to their flexible social organization with a low level of social integration.

Another characteristic also closely related to their flexible social organization is a fluid pattern of their daily social interaction, which Kimura shows in his analysis of the Baka Pygmies of southeastern Cameroon. Based on the data obtained from a time-sampling method and video image analysis, he demonstrates their spatially diffusive conversation pattern, which, according to Kimura, represents tangled interactional relationships in their community, and exemplifies a peculiar social life of hunter-gatherers. While characteristics of hunter-gatherers can be seen in various aspects of their culture and society, Kimura’s study demonstrates a new approach to the study of the characteristics of hunter-gatherer sociality.

II. Relationships with Other Societies

A number of studies have so far been made on the relationship of hunter-gatherers and neighboring farmers. Earlier studies mainly focused on the economic aspects of this interdependent relationship (Ichikawa, 1986), describing the complementary exchange relationship between the two groups. An important element of this relationship is missing, that is, the asymmetrical or hierarchical political relationship in which hunter-gatherers

are subordinate to farmers. Takeuchi (2001) examined elsewhere such an unequal relationship between the Aka in the northern Congo=Brazzaville and their neighboring Bantu farmers. The Aka have an economically reciprocal relationship with farmers through exchange of labor services for cultivated crops. While both groups regard each other as sub-human based on mutual stereotypes, the Aka are politically subordinate to the farmer. Takeuchi attributed such an asymmetry to the villager's authoritative ideology modeled on parent-child relationship between the two groups, and tries to examine economic and social factors for such an asymmetrical ideology.

We should note however the other aspect of this relationship. In her paper with a post-modern subtitle, Rupp emphasizes that the social relations of contemporary forest peoples may be invisible in a flattened perspective to slot forest communities into deductive categories such as "Pygmy hunter-gatherer" and "villager farmer." Through examining the formation and transformation of social relationships among the Baka and other peoples in southeastern Cameroon, she demonstrates that individuals in this area, including the Baka, participate in interfamilial, interethnic, and interregional networks that are social, economic, ritual, and political in nature, rather than maintaining strict ethnic divisions according to subsistence production. In this way, she (like the forest peoples themselves) challenges the concept of ethnic boundary among the Baka and other peoples in this area.

A sharp contrast seems to exist between Takeuchi's view that the relationship is opposing and discriminative, and that of Rupp which emphasizes intermingling and assimilative aspects of the relationship. These seemingly opposing accounts may, however, be in fact the representations of two aspects of the same composite relationship. Joiris's paper explores this in some detail.

In a comparative study of the interethnic relationships across the Congo basin (Cameroon and DRC), Joiris points out a similar interethnic relationship which involves both the "ideology of solidarity" sustained by links of pseudo-kinship, and the "ideology of domination," or political-economic domination over the "Pygmies" by the "villagers," as well as the similar fluid nature of the relationship. She attributes such an interethnic relationship to the social environment with people's mobility and acephalous political organization.

It seems to us both of the opposing and assimilative aspects arise from the same parental model (Takeuchi's parent-child model, or Joiris's pseudo-kinship model), which has connotations of both "authority (domination)" and "solidarity (assimilation)." While Takeuchi used it for demonstrating the former aspect, Joiris use the same model for the latter.

III. Changes in the Modern Context

As has been emphasized in various previous studies, there is not a single society in central Africa that lives entirely by hunting and gathering. Today, most central African hunter-gatherers lead a semi-sedentary life, and cultivate crops to some extent, although they still maintain forest life, depending largely on the wild animals and plants, at least for a part of the year. Faced with various impacts from the outside world, such as logging, bushmeat trading and conservation movements, coupled with government policies which "equate development with sedentarization and integration into the state system (Knight,

this volume),” they now show a tendency toward more sedentary agricultural life. Next three papers describe such recent changes in their lifestyle.

In Gabon where “Forest Peoples” have been thought to have adopted new cultural practices and lost many of their own, recent research has revealed a range of socio-economic situations including forest-based semi-nomadic communities who combine hunting-gathering with shifting cultivation. However, the majority have moved to the roadside, and where the last forest-based groups remain, relocation is inevitable. Based on recent fieldworks and the archival materials on the forest peoples in Gabon, Knight reports on their distributions, settlement patterns and subsistence strategies, and the processes by which they have been relocated to the roadside, and examines the reasons why they have been relocated to the roadside.

While sedentarization of nomadic hunter-gatherers is promoted in the form of settlements on the policy level, a high degree of mobility is retained on the individual level. People frequently shift their residences in response to changing economic and social conditions. Based on the research on demographic history of the BaAka Pygmies in the Dzanga-Sangha Forest Reserve in the CAR, Kretsinger and Hardin show how the BaAka in the reserve have been influenced differently by changing (coffee and logging) economic cycles, and analyse their engagement with capital and the extent to which it influences immigration. They also discuss the effects of local economies on traditional marriage migration patterns.

Introduction of agriculture is another element of “development” projects meant for the hunter-gatherers. Cultivation itself by central African hunter-gatherers may date back to a long time ago, and some, as the Mbuti in Ituri forest, even hold an oral tradition that their ancestors once gave plantain suckers to Bantu immigrants to plant in their garden. Most hunter-gatherers in central Africa have, however, long been engaged in hunting and gathering, which has molded their life and economy oriented to an immediate-return system (Woodburn, 1982).

Kitanishi describes cultivation currently practiced by the Baka in southeastern Cameroon, and tries to reconstruct the process of their adoption of agriculture. While the Baka started cultivation as early as the 1950s, they still cultivate only in an unplanned and haphazard manner: crops are not well tended, and some of the cleared fields are even left unplanted. Kitanishi attributes such “failure” in adopting substantial agriculture to a difference in temporal regime between hunting-gathering and agriculture; the former characterized by immediate return, while the latter by delayed return (Woodburn, 1982). Thus, the Baka in his study area have continued to receive crops from neighboring farmers in exchange for forest products and labor assistance, instead of cultivating their own fields for sustaining their life. However, according to Kitanishi, they start substantial cultivation when the relationship with neighboring farmers worsens and makes it difficult to obtain crops from the farmers. On such an occasion, their major crop, plantain, plays a crucial role, since it is suitable for the cultivation by the Baka, who are oriented to an immediate return system.

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Author's Name and Address: Mitsuo ICHIKAWA / Daiji KIMURA, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, Yoshida-shimoadachi-cho 46, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto 606-8501, JAPAN. E-mail: ichikawa@jambo.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp / kimura@jambo.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp