

**THE POLITICAL IS PERSONAL: EROS, RITUAL  
DIALOGUE, AND THE SPEAKING BODY IN CENTRAL  
AFRICAN HUNTER-GATHERER SOCIETY**

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## ABSTRACT

Hunter-gatherers have traditionally represented the exception to theoretical models developed on the basis of hierarchical society. In these communities the principle of sharing is the most pervasive social fact. My research explores how this sharing ethos diffuses outwards from the distribution of material items to negotiations about symbolic, religious power itself. I argue that women's ritual and dance collectives are centrally placed in the creation and maintenance of egalitarian society. "Symbolic power" in such contexts is inseparable from the bodily conversation out of which it emerges. The biological, procreative body is of great cultural import, informing as it does most of the major cosmological and ritual events, and I have attempted to expand "biology" beyond traditional Western understandings of it. I utilise several ethnographic sources to examine Mbendjele, Baka and Efe women's management of reproductive demands, connecting evidence for "collective mothering" to women's corresponding ritual involvement in hunting labour. Here we begin to see a metaphysical relationship taking shape between the female body and its fluids (most particularly blood) and game animals and spirits. The central premise of the thesis is that it is through the sensual, somatic conversation between male and female ritual collectives that the political pendulum at the heart of community life is animated. In the metaphorical and actual repartee between the sexes, with its ribald, graphic humour, and its recruitment of spirit others, we see the pulse of a society in continual flux.

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that the content of this thesis is my own work unless otherwise stated.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*Eloko tembe ya polo, a mou wa lai: Eneke ganye!*

*The penis is no competition, it died already: The vagina wins!*

BaYaka women, quoted in Kisluik, 1999

Biology is culture, for the Mbendjele and for other forest hunter-gatherers scattered across the Congo basin. This is the first and most general proposal of this thesis. The perennial social eddying that occurs between procreation and hunting, sex and meat, and humans and spirits forms the structure of community life: a complex and subtle political landscape criss-crossed by threads of loyalty and resistance, by the diffusive tug of the sensual against the snap of procreative sex. Different kinds of bodily affinity and agency are involved at every point. Ritual – large, communal ritual performance – is the point at which the fluency and imaginative potential of bodies is explored. Through such ritual commentary, the relationship between husbands and wives is potentially destabilised; the coalitionary solidarity between groups of mothers, sisters and daughters is given precedence by particular ways of coordinating the common body and its lyrical voice. It is through the weave, dance or dialectic between these different possible positions, iteratively occupied and surrendered by people that we begin to see a complete tapestry. At the core of this tapestry are children and those capacities or actions which bring them to fruition, most particularly female procreative power (inseparable from male hunting power) and male observance of rules and restrictions surrounding menstrual blood and childbirth (inseparable from female ritual hunting power). Where one group claims corporeal speciality, the other steps forward with a corresponding ideological or metaphysical prowess.

The result is a society perennially in motion, everything animate and designed to animate. It is here that we see the symbolic as bodily language thrust up out of the action of person upon person, group upon group. And it is with this in mind that I've tried, rather than reducing culture, to expand biology beyond traditional Western understandings of it. Rival (1997) describes the longhouse economy of the Huaorani

Indians of Amazonian Ecuador where “to procreate is a quintessentially creative act” around which social reproduction is organised. Accordingly, Rival (1997) takes issue with Western gender theorists such as Butler (1990) who are “fundamentally concerned with individual sexed subjectivity and the embodiment of sexual identity...Their units of analysis are no longer gender categories, i.e. “men” and “women”, but fully individuated subjects constituted through their sexual desires...Reproductive sex is entirely ideological, oppressive or irrelevant” (Rival, 1997: 635).

Lewis (2008) echoing this writes of the Mbendjele term *ekila*: “Ekila anchors key areas of cosmological knowledge, gender and political ideology in the physical and biological experiences of human growth and maturation” effectively describing an egalitarian habitus. Jackson (1998) attempts the same movement – to pull the terms back to the creative impetus of the body. Speaking about the Yurok (Erikson, 1943) understanding of the world, Jackson notes that “this corporeal and sensible way of “reading” what the world means presupposes a continuity between language, knowledge and bodily praxis” (Jackson, 1988: 140). Metaphor “reveals unities; it is not a figurative way of denying dualities. Metaphor reveals not the “thisness of a that”, but rather that this *is* that” (Jackson, 1988: 142). Metaphor here is something rather than means something. It manifests streams of causality and implication which motivate cultural life, and therefore it is central to understanding action. Metaphor, understood as “a mode of praxis” is above all about rhythmic movement, the fire that “cooks” the raw individual. The knowledge held by communities like the BaYaka, Mbendjele, Yaka, Efe or Baka is “nothing if not practical” (Jackson, 1988: 122), yet many subsequent analyses set about stripping such knowledge of its flesh, putting down on paper the dry bones. “Their” cultural expertise becomes something they would not recognise. It is to this end that I have tried here, despite obviously “Western” theoretical preoccupations, to describe a culture still moving, still full of music, laughter, and blood. This in turn has led to the attempt to get back to a deeper understanding of culture, believing with Jackson that “to treat body praxis as an effect of semantic causes is to treat the body as a diminished version of itself” (1988: 123).

Despite his caution against arguing “for some distinctive hunter-gatherer world-view” (Ingold, 1996) that is essentially where Ingold arrives, albeit using different terms, in

an influential paper on hunter-gatherer perceptions of the environment. He proposes turning hunter-gatherer understandings of relationship with the “natural” world back on Western approaches which tend to assume meaning as “laid over the world by the mind” (Ingold, 1996: 135). Ingold (1996) argues that for those such as the Cree, “consciousness is not supplementary to organic life but is...its cutting edge” (Ingold, 1996: 135), a “continuous birth” or unfolding in which “form arises and is held in place within action: it is movement congealed” (1996: 146). In his endeavour to animate a world that has been apprehended as “an indifferent and impersonal physical substrate”, mere raw material for human cultural construction, Ingold (1996) extends “culture” out beyond human parameters. I attempt a similar manoeuvre but from an alternative position: I have tried to expand biology beyond “animal” parameters. Maitland (2008) points out that the three major monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – “are highly verbal narrative faiths, their adherents speak directly with their god, and their god speaks to them through texts...the Children of the Book, as Islam describes us” (Maitland, 2008: 119 – 120). She notes that Christianity and Islam have exercised a uniquely invasive military and cultural presence on the basis of “The Word”: The divine rights and powers bestowed on humans over everything they name.

My aim is to get beneath this, to the interactive, social intelligence of the body identified by Blacking (1977): “It cannot be assumed that somatic states remain neutral until some social interpretation or value is assigned to them...Telepathy and bodily empathy, for instance, are not paranormal but normal, although they are often suppressed or allowed to atrophy in cultures in which excessive importance is attached to verbal communication” (Blacking, 1977: 6 - 10). The “ontology of dwelling” described by Ingold (1996) for hunter-gatherers seems to me first to be a dwelling in the “complete instrument of the body” (Bourdieu, 1990), whose voice, communalised in recurring dramas and myths privileges not only human blood, semen, milk, excrement, saliva, snot and viscera but that of other animals and deities or entities. Such a world-view offends the measured, logos-centred approach with which we are familiar; as Ingold (1996) notes, “Western” ontology operates through the exclusion of all but the intentional impositions of the human. Here we have in another guise the myth of conquest through “The Word”: The world and all its subtleties and shadows rendered a blank palate for the Children of the Book to name.

The kind of belonging to or engagement with the entirety of world described by ethnographers for hunting communities (cf. Bieseke, 1993; Bodenhorn, 1990; Ingold, 1996) crystallises a more expansive, sensually richer culture, in which the authority and attention of the fertile body is retained. So much of the writing produced on gender inequality in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s had in common the desire to prove an equality without difference; a sameness. Salvatore Cucchiari (1981) in an attempt to liberate women from their reproductive bonds dedicated a long paper to explaining that women had not in fact always been mere child-bearers, and that it was only with the shift from bisexual horde to patrilocal band that they became weighted down by culturally imposed biology. What Cucchari (1981) really argues for though is not “equality” but subsumation into someone else’s experience of power. By dismissing sexual difference or “biology” as though it really were separable from “the person”, the possibility of confronting difference head-on is lost. As Blacking cautioned: “If the biological base of behaviour is ignored or misrepresented, laws of nature must inevitably override man’s (*sic*) attempts to escape them” (Blacking, 1977: 17). One of the major insights generated by Turnbull’s (1961; 1965; 1972; 1978) work was that much of the cultural and political innovation in Mbuti society was generated through the confrontation of potential inter-sexual conflict.

The Mbendjele, Baka or Yaka person is always in immediate and complex relationship with a social totality encompassing a whole range of non-human “others”. In order to get to this, we must go beyond the realm of logos in which Western ontology is snared. Ingold (1996), attempting this, questions the use of the term “metaphorical” to describe hunter-gatherer engagement with the non-human world. There are good reasons for mistrusting the use of “metaphor” as a term in this context; but in attempting to salvage commensurability, perhaps we can bring it back to the tangible effort of a community to render the indescribable, to shake through a sieve of words a broader, more chthonic dialogue. There is no harm in seeing metaphor at play so long as we understand that metaphor can be real; not a piece of conceptual frippery but a profound intuitive and bodily trigger for expansion, slippage. Metaphor could be seen as the *body’s* way of reading, and speaking, the world.

## THEORETICAL SYNOPSIS

The thesis is divided into six theoretical chapters, interspersed with more informal, narrative accounts of the journey to and time with the Mbendjele. The theoretical chapters are necessarily longer than the ethnographic pieces and it is in these that I develop my main arguments and ideas. In the first chapter, I begin by highlighting the intense communistic life of the Mbendjele and other Central African hunter-gatherers, where there is little or no “domestic” curtailment of body or voice. The camp – a small cluster of raffia and mud shelters – serves as a base from which women collectively set out on daily gathering expeditions. Men hunt more sporadically and in smaller groups of two to four individuals. Hunted meat is distributed by the wives of hunters; gathered foods are generally processed by individual women at their own fires, but these too burn outside doorways that lean towards one another in an intimate architecture reminiscent of Morgan’s (1964[1877]) “longhouse economy”. One of the first things you notice on entering an Mbendjele camp is the visibility of children, particularly small infants who are continually passed between adults and adolescents and frequently end up in the thick of dance performances on someone’s back. Another striking thing is the collective nature of women’s movement and voice – it is rare to see a woman going about any daily task alone, and this is intensified during dances. This does not foreclose individual differentiation – people are aggressively autonomous, and a large part of the social melee in camp is the perennial negotiation involved in reaching a consensus amenable to everyone.

The thesis commences from this extraordinary economic, social and political freedom. I think through the consequences of the continuity between bodies with Bourdieu’s words in mind: “The body...does not memorise the past, it *enacts* the past, bringing it back to life...This is particularly clear in non-literate societies, where inherited knowledge can only survive in the incorporated state. It is never detached from the body that bears it” (Bourdieu, 1990: 73). The “knowledge that is never detached from the body that bears it”, and the voice arising from the pluralized version of such a body, is explored in subsequent chapters. In the second chapter I

use several ethnographic sources to describe and examine BiAka, Efe and Baka women's management of reproductive demands and the kind of collective, public mothering I witnessed at Mboule. I connect this to the rather different theme of ritual hunting using as a bridge Robert Brightman's (1996) paper on the division of labour among hunter-gatherers.

In the third chapter I begin with a challenge to traditional gender theory, pulling the terms back to the politics of procreative sex. I use Turnbull's (1978) writing on the socialisation of Mbuti infants to argue that we are talking about a radically different kind of body in small-scale, egalitarian societies where private property and its ideology of proprietorship and containment is not relevant. Yaka babies are in contact with another person for 99% of their lives (Hewlett, 2007). They are breastfed by multiple "mothers" for an average of three years. Already in infancy then the body that is cultivated is in fluid, sensual continuum with all others. Turnbull (1978) hypothesises that this physical connectedness is what sustains equilibrium when the sexes digress around puberty into ritually demarcated coalitions. Kisliuk (1999) and Lewis (2002) comment on the provocative nature of women's ritual lyrics, which assert female sexual prowess and reproductive superiority. I give this attention because it seems integral to the debate about power worked out in kinetic interchanges between ritual associations during *mokondi massana* – Mbendjele spirit performances (Lewis, 2002). I use the theoretical insights of Devische (1993) and Bakhtin (1969) to argue for an understanding of symbolic power as rooted in the sexed body. The "politics of Eros" then refers to the erotic power of the female body collectively activated, showcased, and withheld in an amplified statement of inviolability. At the heart of all this is the bawdy, slap-stick humour of the "material lower bodily stratum".

In the final chapter, I connect the political fluidity of the body among forest hunter-gatherers to a cosmology which highlights a social web stretching beyond the human, an interconnecting universe in which bodies of various kinds act upon one another. The spirits are the religious pivot in Yaka communities. I look at them through the lens of motion – their flow in and out of human domains – and through their political mediation in human inter-sexual affairs. A key part of spirit dances, and one generally neglected, is the ongoing adult female dance that precedes and succeeds

them, and I use writing on this to argue for women's informal or "joyful" dance as a core aspect of counter-power. The spirits themselves are usefully compared with Khoisan trickster figures who have equal prominence in religious thought. I use the comparison to argue that both Khoisan tricksters and Yaka spirits are active cultural agents embodying a distinctively egalitarian social ethos.

## THE POLITICAL GETS PERSONAL

Travelling through rainforest, living in a forest camp, suffering illness and homesickness, all this interwoven with a core of young women who night after night stamp out a kind of erotic, visceral power in the dust at the threshold, struggling to make sense of the overload of sense, having to pull back into the cipher and conduit of "the body" whose own hormonal equilibrium is shifting. It is no coincidence that in later theoretical struggles I have returned again and again to the trope of motion. The immersion, shock and destabilisation of those first months of fieldwork can be as relevant to the anthropological project as later, more analytical perceptions and engagements. For Hastrup (1995): "The force of first experiences and their powerful mark upon later reflections bear witness to the unmediated, non-linguistic nature of the cultural encounter. Strangely enough, so far we have not taken this particular knowledge at face value...The actual experience of understanding without words has been glossed over as irrelevant" (Hastrup, 1995: 167). When the first months are all we are left with, the value of these is picked over in such detail that they begin to emit their own particular import. Physical impressions retain their intense signification, connections made by the imagination linger, dreams resonate sharply which might otherwise have been neglected as the more sought after "conceptual" data crystallises.

The way I have chosen to structure this thesis reflects my attempt to retain original theoretical interests alongside the story that humanised these, not just the story of our journey to the Mbendjele Yaka, but of the new life that flared up out of this. It has seemed to me in the writing of the thesis that to deny my daughter some foothold in it would be to sterilise the experience. Therefore I have tried to speak from the interface between personal and theoretical narratives. It is appropriate that my framework echoes the turbulence – bodily, social, political and metaphysical – that I have laboured to describe. All of this is an experiment in conceptual and

communicative elasticity – in the capacity of language to mould itself to the shapes and concerns of the space the ethnographer has become implicated in. Concurrent with this is the project of making sense of the ways in which the material and political concerns of a community are collectively performed and diffused, and what this says about the nature of symbolic power more generally. This is not about translating a prewritten cultural text, nor about imposing structure where none exists. It is about finding ways to express alternative social processes without rendering these so particular they become incomprehensible. When I first began work on this project five years ago, my theoretical inclination was towards social structure. What has become apparent is that the kind of structure I imagined – static, arrested – couldn't possibly work in communities for whom fluidity means everything. Yet interest in seeing it has meant I have begun to recognise in the creative, conceptual flux oriented around the reproductive body, a kinetic, fizzling structure, one always sparking out of the interstices between collectives. Hunter-gatherers do not lack society, polity, or complex structure. What they lack is the structural violence that would pin these things down, erect fences around them, and render them visible to the abstract eye.

Ortner (1996), in a review of her seminal paper “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture”? concedes that in many of the societies she first analysed, “male dominance” may have been present in fragmented, sporadic forms but was never woven into a “hegemonic order”. It is worth mentioning that what Lewis (2002) and Kisliuk's (1999) ethnographies show is a complimentary “female dominance” at work in Yaka ritual contexts, also fragmented and sporadic. Neither male nor female “dominance” in such contexts is problematic, each being hedged by firm ritual proscriptions. In fact such moments could be understood as unitary aspects of a single political commentary on the nature and distribution of social power. Ortner (1996) speaks of wanting to probe “culturally unmarked elements of male dominance” (Ortner, 1996: 175), to understand their imprint on gender patterns. In this she remains focused on men as active “culture-making” individuals, as leaders, whether of communities of women and children or of ideological and value-systems. Her way to explain sporadic, non-permanent episodes of male dominance (ie. corporate expressions of male power in response to corresponding female expressions of power) is to label such communities “contradictory and inconsistent” (Ortner, 1996: 175). Rather than stay with her original structural analysis and correct her own world-view, Ortner



(1996) abandons it and corrects theirs.

If these episodes do not become “structural” it is because people are not structure makers, but “inconsistent”. Regarding egalitarian societies such as the Wana of Central Sulawesi or the Meratus of Kalimantan, Ortner (1996) accepts it is not inaccurate to speak of gender egalitarianism, but cautions that this is “complex, inconsistent and – to some extent – fragile” (Ortner, 1996: 175). But “fragile” implies immanent demise: push it and it falls. “Non-static”, “dynamic”, or even “delicate” are more accurate terms, all the evidence suggesting that egalitarianism has remained the norm in such communities over a long period. How to imagine the process of the emergence of male dominance, Ortner (1996) wonders? But why expend energy imagining what male collectives were or were not doing? There seems to be an unspoken consensus that imagining the doings of men, originary or otherwise, is interesting and valid theoretical practice. Few analyses begin by imagining scenarios in which male dominance is *countered*, or prevented from emerging (though see Knight, 1991). If we turn the usual terms on their heads we can ask why, in certain contexts, male dominance did not emerge as the social norm. We can go further, and dispense with that term (at least momentarily) taking *female* agency as the starting point for analysis.

Organised male violence shows its face in all human communities. The question we must ask is why, among Central African hunter-gatherers, this has never gathered sufficient momentum to harden into a systematic assault on women’s autonomy and fertility? Why do incidents of violence remain “sporadic and non-permanent” (Ortner, 1996: 175)? Such communities are not necessarily defined by “social peacefulness and harmony” (Lorrain, 2000: 295); neither are they preoccupied by “law, on the one hand, and war on the other...by the organised exercise of coercive authority through the use, or the possibility of use, of physical force” (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1962: xiv). Lorrain (2000), writing on Amazonian egalitarianism, admonishes Overing (2000) and others (Clastres, 1972; Gow, 1989) for having underestimated the influence of hierarchy, coercion and subordination in Amazonia in their attempts to correct the bias of earlier theorists, for whom politics was considered “coterminous with coercion and subordination” (Lorrain, 2000: 294). Lorrain for her part stresses gender exploitation and hierarchy managed by male “warrior leaders,

shaman-chiefs, or priests” (2000: 294).

My focus however has been on the ground between two conventional positions regarding the politics of hunter-gatherers, either of warfare and hierarchy, or of egalitarianism as a wholly peaceful, harmonious affair – what might be called the Hobbesian/Rousseauian divide. The politics I describe in this thesis are best summed up by Ashley Montagu’s (1978) rendering of Vegetus: “Who desires peace, let him make ready for war” (Montagu, 1978: 9). Women, in mobilising against the prospect of organised male violence, must actively nurture negotiation, conversation, and motion. Any “festival of resistance” must by its nature be ongoing and recursive. The ability to imagine and reimagine situations or orders requires a continual – and perhaps literal – dance (cf. Ehrenreich, 2007). The collective body that is women’s forte in Central African hunter-gatherer society, with its velocity, mobility and confusion of fixed positions, is a significant political force. In order to reach this kind of political tension and attention, it is necessary to attend to the power of the nonalienated procreative body. We are talking about a deeply political awareness in the collective female orientation, a sustained social argument regarding fertility, reproduction and affinity. As one Mbendjele elder put it: “It is all about children” (Lewis, 2002: 299).

Povinelli (2001) tackles the “incommensurability and inconceivability” brought out in recent ethnographies of “subaltern counter-publics...radical worlds in the shadow of the liberal diaspora” (Povinelli, 2001: 320). While her focus is different the question of how “the inconceivable is conceived” is a pertinent one for my analysis. Here, a productive metaphor is available in the idea, among hunting and gathering peoples, of occupying alternative perspectives in order to return to one’s own skin enlarged. In his paper on Amerindian Perspectivism, Viveiros de Castro (2000) cautions against viewing the masks or other ritual clothing of Amerindian shamans as “mere disguises” or “fantasies” (Viveiros de Castro, 2000: 482). These are instruments, pieces of equipment, the meaning of which used in the correct ritual context is akin to donning a wet suit, rather than a carnival mask. We need to ask then how it might be possible to take on the “clothes” of the people we seek to understand, how it might be possible to *feel* our way into another, related social space, but not one already closed to us by our own preoccupation with relativism and specificity. These are not the

terms of ritual or its various masks. As Kirsten Hastrup (1995) has claimed of the work of anthropology in the aftermath of its own crises, it is urgent to challenge the “malaise” of individualism, and the “loss of a moral community”, by finding new ways to express a shared language (Hastrup, 1995: 6).

This is where the story becomes useful. If the act of writing has its limitations, and this is most true where it attempts to describe communities who do not themselves use writing, all peoples use *words* to house and reflect upon experience. It is the formal, narrative use of words I am interested in here, the trope of the story as it may yield access to realities that elude a particular academic style. None of this is new. What I hope for here is to find a way of manifesting this awareness in ethnographic terms. Of writing with a foot in two worlds as it were – that of rigorous, structural analysis, and that of the novelty or fluidity of metaphorical sense. If in “real life” these are inseparable, then the holism should be reflected in our knowledge making processes. Working through the filter of the story-form may potentiate the visiting of new territories, allowing us to report back to the project of ordering and theorising experience. In its ability to liaise between alternate realities and kinds of discourse, the story can approach the chaos and fracas of unknown social and cultural spaces as no other medium can.

While Biesele (1992) has written extensively on the use of stories in organising and instructing hunter-gatherer groups, it is the general metaphor or pedagogy of *story-telling* that I want to draw on. As a tool or instrument, it can be utilized in the same way that ritual masks are used, to help intuit new landscapes. I want to illustrate this with a brief theoretical narrative. The narrative is a condensed version of a current theory of human symbolic origins, the politics of which have influenced from the beginning my choice of research questions. Although I have used its insights to alert myself to dynamics of interest in contemporary egalitarian communities, I do not attempt a comparison with these communities. Rather, like any well told story, it points to previously unsuspected areas of tension and creativity.

In order to appreciate this, it is first necessary to step back from the major anthropological debates and theories of the last century. Now, before the urge to break apart the category itself kicks in, place “women” as a collective at the centre of

society. Of the impellents underlying kinship relations and incest taboos; of hunting and sharing, religion and ritual performance; of the distribution and use of symbolic power, politics and conflict. This act does not merely modify or expand landscapes. It transforms them. Knight et al (1996) argue that around one hundred thousand years ago, coalitions of mothers were forming in response to increasingly severe environmental change. In the period preceding this, the intensified costs of encephalisation – with cranial capacity expanding from 1200 to 1500 cubic centimetres between 500,000 and 100,000 years ago - would have meant a substantial leap in female reproductive costs relative to male. Unable to source nutritiously rich vegetable foods, and unable to hunt consistently because of reproductive demands, women needed to elicit greater paternal investment from partners in order to survive and keep their children alive. The story is practical – a problem arose that needed an urgent, collective resolution. How could women compel their mates to bring back meat? How could they argue a symbolic monopoly on the flesh of prized large game animals?

A conceptual correlation had to be made between these and women's own bodies. Female blood and game blood needed to be set in a relationship of correspondence and antipathy. None of it would have been framed this way. Those women who were able to band together to demand equal rights to meat would simply have stood a better chance of survival. Knight claims the ethnographic record is replete with references to such demands, couched as the "hunter's own-kill rule" (1991: 92–103). The own-kill rule states that no hunter may claim exclusive ownership of his catch, most particularly big game animals. Rather, this should be returned to the community for distribution among in-laws and kin. In almost every known context, there are ritual proscriptions stating that until meat has been cooked by women, it remains dangerous to hunters. Further, strong taboos exist in all known hunter-gatherer societies drawing equivalences between women and game animals, menstrual blood and meat. Knight (1991) hypothesises that women in these first communities were able to capitalise on a lunar clock in order to schedule periodic "strikes", moments of collective withdrawal from sexual, "domestic" relations that would have signalled a demand for meat. He sees cross cultural evidence of menstrual symbolism and taboo as another aspect of this "clock" or collective signal generated by women. Where Levi-Strauss (1969) saw coalitions of men exchanging wives, and Freud

(1965[1911]) saw coalitions of sons challenging alpha-males, Knight (1991) sees coalitions of mothers acting not to pull social contracts out of the air, nor to suddenly and inexplicably unite against a patriarch, but to ensure the survival of their children. Unlike previous stories about origins, Knight's model makes use of recent research from the fields of archaeology, primatology, evolutionary ecology and biological anthropology, to support his notion of female kin-coalitions as a feasible possibility prior to and during the human "symbolic revolution".

I do not go further here in exploring the factual legitimacy of the story. What I want to ask is this: If it is acceptable practice to use local myths and stories to sensitise our research, why not a story from within anthropology? The minutiae of this theory are not relevant here. It is the resonances of it for the distribution of and argument about political, symbolic power in contemporary egalitarian communities which I explore. It is a frame that sits *behind* the questions I have chosen to ask, and a rationale for these questions. My concern is with the story happening in and across the type of social process known as egalitarian, and what theoretical and political relevance this might bear to the crumbling edifice of global capitalism. Knight and Power (1996) begin from the biological body, using evolutionary ecology and sexual selection theory. What interested me as I became more familiar with the data on contemporary hunter-gatherer sociality and ritual politics was a rich, experiential voice missing from their otherwise meticulous account: The creative, social voice of the *collective* female body as it "spoke" to a corresponding male ritual front. My interests moved away from theory to the living culture of contemporary hunting communities, balanced as many of them now are on a fragile political ledge. After my experience in the Republic of Congo, I began to think seriously about the politics of aesthetics, about the place of ritual in general and spirit ritual in particular in maintaining the extraordinary egalitarianism of Mbendjele and other forest hunter-gatherers.

Knowledge is made available in non-literate hunting societies through metaphor and poetics (cf. Bieseke, 1993; Devische, 1993). The first and most efficacious source for metaphor is the human body. The human body "thinks" itself by communing with other bodies in a living, breathing symbolic matrix. Polyphony with dialectical motion is the language of the collective body mobilising against the static power-over of structural violence and privatisation; this is "language" at its most liquid, still

pulsating, still full of heat – an uncut umbilical running from the community to the strain and earth of the biological body. We cannot take one without the other. If the first language is the somatic, procreative self, this is because the first crisis occurs out of the somatic, procreative self. Or to put it another way: “Evolutionary ecology predicts conflict between the sexes over investment in offspring” (Power, 2004: 75).

My understanding of what it is a mother will do to protect her child could never have come without the difficulty of protecting my own. And my thoughts on the way in which mothers as individuals need and demand a political voice, and rely on each other for the muscle to assert this, are transformed by having, even if briefly, experienced a system in which this is to a large extent achieved. None of the accounts I had read of hunter-gatherer sociality (Ingold, 1996; Biesele, 1993; Bird-David, 1990) prepared me for the collective ferocity of women who literally depend on one another for their voices. Their authority as social and political agents rests on a moment-by-moment sensual solidarity almost incomprehensible to the Western imagination. And yet the fluid balance of power emergent from this solidarity goes beyond it, to a degree and kind of sociality that has occupied ethnographers for decades. Since returning, I have had reason to reflect on the kind of collective mothering I witnessed at Mboule. What strikes me most are the profound political and creative implications of social groups which *privilege the tension* between reproductive and productive roles, mothers and wives. While it is true that these were always the focus of my research, they have become personal in a way they could not have done without the arrival of my own daughter. In a way that theory with its ethical and categorical sensitivity could not have predicted, I found myself drawn back from my sexually neutral identity as “anthropologist” and into the female reproductive body.

How, in beginning the process of writing what field experience remains, do we order and integrate such experiences? In the desire to report back on theoretical concerns, or simply the need to present a certain kind of knowledge, the work of imagination and bodily intercession could so easily be neglected. Blacking (1977) seemed to believe there might be a place for somatic reading, an empathetic undercurrent in which “the observer’s body may serve as a diagnostic tool” because “through my body I can sometimes understand more than I know through my or another’s society”

(Blacking, 1977: 5 - 6). How this translates into a systematic analytical approach is unclear, yet the effort of exploration seems worthwhile.

Conversely, the project of foregrounding personal stories has frequently sacrificed collective knowledge-scapes. It is worth quoting Hastrup (1995) here, in her argument for the survival of the empirical foundation of anthropology, not despite but *because* of the rigour of a newly valorised anthropological imagination. The two may seem incompatible, as indeed they were under the Enlightenment gaze; but Hastrup (1995) makes a good argument for the way in which individual anthropologists' imaginative powers may be harnessed to the endeavour of making collective, disciplinary sense. Graeber (2007) too, in a different context, speaks of "a political ontology of the imagination": That creative pressure brought to bear on situations where people "begin to act as though they were free" (Graeber, 2007: 405). This may happen where novel connections are made which incorporate the unlikely, the unseen, the unacknowledged. Speaking of metaphor as a central device of the anthropological imagination, Hastrup writes:

Metaphor is not a waste bin for the not understood. Rather, it is a prime element in our structuring of experience; it is a pervasive mode of understanding by way of projecting particular patterns or connections onto the unprecedented...The frightening indeterminacy of experience is transformed into a temporary making of sense (Hastrup, 1995: 62).

Taken seriously, this is the equivalent of the donning of masks, not as decoration but as metamorphosis. Using words in a particular way (like the "strong", visceral, ritual words used by Piaroa (Overing, 2000)), rather than attempting to change their meaning, "metaphor makes us see *as* rather than see *that*" (Hastrup, 1995: 62). The thought systems of hunter-gatherers are centrally concerned with this "seeing as". Take this testimony from the mouth of //Kabbo, a /Xam Bushman speaking to the linguist Bleek over a century ago:

*The Bushmen's letters are in their bodies. They speak, they move, they make the Bushmen's bodies move...*He feels a tapping at his ribs; he says to the children: "The springbok are coming" ...We have a sensation in our feet, as we feel the rustling feet

of the springbok...We have a sensation in our heads, when we are about to chop the springbok's horns...We have a sensation in our face, on account of the blackness of the stripe on the face of the springbok; we feel a sensation in our eyes, on account of the black marks on the eyes of the springbok... Therefore we are wont to lie quietly, when the sensation is like this, when we are feeling the things come (Quoted in Bleek and Lloyd, 1911: 331-5 Emphasis mine).

Dreams, metaphor, "imagination", ritual transformations – if we wish to foreground local knowledge forms, we need to bring these prodigal daughters back into our own writings. When we let go of the body's story, we enter a land of permanent daylight, a precision and order that at first seems like enlightenment, revelation. Bakhtin's (1968) voice permeates this thesis in his implicit appeal on behalf of the excluded voice of the body: its *jouissance*, its dark humour, its play as grotesque clown against the gravitas of power. In its absence from our final analyses, much is lost from the attempt to make sense of and speak to social realities. The retreat further into disciplinary scepticism and a focus on particularity without attempting to maintain some shared foundation, or the insistence on a science without the matter of imagination, makes us responsible not just for our own impoverishment, but for the immanent losses of others who have not yet surrendered their holistic ways of seeing. I do not intend here the well known sentimental refrain of the loss of some exotic "other"; I mean the mass displacement of entire communities whose lands are viewed as commodities to be logged, mined or farmed. I mean the casual clearance of thousands of hectares of primary forest, in which live hundreds of hunting and gathering communities. For us, all this indicates a scientific, territorial or environmental loss. But for those people who occupy them, these "landscapes" are inextricably woven into a collective, imaginative tapestry, a fund of intuitive and social intelligence that can not be detached without being torn. Hunter-gatherer communities are able, for a short time, to retain their mode of thought, and it is testimony to the time-depth and tenacity of it that they do.

But the sense and imagination of a people are intricately bound to economic and ecological realities. On our first evening in the forest camp at Mboule, the people, pleased by our decision to settle with them rather than a nearby Yambe community, decided to dance "*Ejengi*", one of their main *mokondi massana* or spirit



performances. Late that night as Ejengi made his entrance in a whirling blaze of leaves, Dzenga, an Mbendjele *kombeti* or elder, leaned across, pointed to the whirling figure and said: “That’s the forest”! He signalled a world of imaginative and emotional understanding, a connectedness to the forest that will not survive the destruction of it. Acknowledgement of this should be the urgent prompt towards a “moral intelligence” that will free anthropologists from our reluctance to take sides. As many long-standing ethnographers of hunter-gatherer societies are recognising, there is a growing need to find and argue our solidarity with other communities, not as helpless, exotic others, nor as fragments of some pristine human condition, but as fellow humans still profoundly and collectively involved with their universe.

## *FIRST INTERLUDE*

### *Brazzaville - Pokola: Logs, Politics, and Visitations*

The Congolese morning is dense and sweet. Already we can see the jostling of taxis out in the car-park, drivers squabbling and honking as they wait nervously for passengers to emerge. Entering Brazzaville's Maya-Maya airport is to be sucked into a vast swarm of bodies and agitations, and as we flounder in the thick of it a policeman with a sour, aloof face looms up before us. He stares at our passports and visas, turning them over slowly in broad hands. But this is only the first hurdle. We're herded from the policeman to a long desk of airport security who rummage through our hand luggage, commenting softly in Linghala. At "baggage reclaim", under a sheet of corrugated tin, an impossible multitude of people compete to be heard – passengers, police, baggage handlers, porters whose job it is to rescue the luggage from wherever it's gone. No-one seems to know. When we head presumptuously towards what looks like our packs, we're herded back by armed police with batons.

It's almost two hours before we're unceremoniously emptied out the other side into the hands of the waiting taxi drivers. A long bargaining session ensues, with scores of men all vying to capitalise on the bounty of two "*mundele*". Finally we settle on a driver, and rattle off with our copious cargo towards Hippocamp, the small Vietnamese-owned hotel recommended by Jerome Lewis. Jerome lived with a community of Mbendjele near Pokola for three years. His subsequent thesis on the religious life of the Mbendjele has been an invaluable source for my own work, and a large part of the reason I'm here. Early morning Brazzaville is surreal and exquisite, everything blurred and softened by exhaustion. Banana trees, flame trees and palms line the road, and sun-birds hover over the open mouths of trumpet flowers. Women balancing impossible baskets on their heads idle along anarchic, broken footpaths. The wide, metallic plait of the Congo river shimmers in the morning heat.

At Hippocamp we're led to a modest room and almost immediately sink into a long, relieved sleep. Waking at dusk, there's the whine of the hotel generator, the voices of young soldiers threading the traffic, and the strange discrepancy of panpipe music drifting up from the restaurant below. The air is balmy, tinged with flower petal, frog-song, and the blunted Linghala of the cleaners, sweeping rhythmically on the paths around the hotel. At dinner in the open restaurant, a formidable poster of Congo's President, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, presides over the bar. His benevolent, paternal smile will become familiar over the coming months, stamped as it is on all public spaces, on T-shirts, dresses, books and cards. Small lamps burn around the periphery of the tables, bleaching the stalks and vines of surrounding foliage. As we eat, Congolese waiters in starched white shirts weave discretely among a clearly affluent clientele, composed mainly of European diners. Occasionally a table of Congolese guests, rigid and formal, breaks the monotony of white skin.

The next morning brings Martial, a friend of Jerome's who has volunteered to help us navigate the inevitable first field of bureaucracy. His voice on the phone is warm, and he arrives an hour later, beaming into our small room in an impeccably pressed suit and tie. Martial is a minister for the Communauté Chrétienne Évangélique, and takes his pastoral duties seriously. He explains his interest in my work - he himself is working on a project with a group of Congolese lawyers partnered by the U.K based Rainforest Foundation, in order to establish formal legal rights for "Les Communautés Pygmées". It occurs to me as he speaks that the aims of this small, courageous core of people are paradoxically antithetical to the continuance of Yaka mobility and autonomy: The right to own land; the right to be involved in local politics; the right to go to school (a "right" we'll later learn is being vigorously resisted by the Mbendjele).

Martial invites us to his home for lunch the following day, and as we sit with him under an avocado tree in his yard, he reads my research proposal and resolves to do what he can to help us obtain the necessary permit. Until we have this, we can't leave Brazzaville, and he cautions us it could take some time. Meanwhile Genevieve, Martial's wife, saunters in and out laying down platters of avocado and tomato salad, "baccala" stew, baked sole, fried banana, sliced papaya in lemon juice. A solid woman in a wrap splashed deep orange and blue, she clearly knows the torturous path

through various government offices that lies ahead. Placid, happy, she suggests we forget work for now and accompany them to a neighbourhood wedding. That evening we emerge to the milky silver of the full moon over Congo river, the far lights of Kinshasa blinking in the distance. I'd factored in a few weeks in Brazzaville, secretly thinking we'd need less than that. Now, listening to Genevieve and Martial, I see we could be here for months.

So begins an attenuated six week wait in Brazzaville, during which we're absorbed into the odd community that satellites Hippocamp. Every evening a rag-bag of researchers, missionaries, conservationists and NGO workers congregates in the leafy, mosquito-ravaged restaurant. Under the strains of pan-pipe music, alliances are formed, friendships cemented, and rivalries played out. The majority of residents at Hippocamp are Wildlife Conservation Society (W.C.S) employees. These are young British and American academics employed to man various conservation projects and research initiatives throughout the Northern forest. They return to Hippocamp intermittently to report back to base and recharge after months alone. Although they're keen to integrate us into their social circle, I find their attitude to locals appalling. We're repeatedly told we can't trust the Congolese. One man, a post-graduate from a major British university, informs me that all Congolese women are potential prostitutes. He advises I keep an eye on Germano.

During the day, Martial, Germano and I troop to various offices in search of the one, elusive bureaucrat who might dispense our permit. After three weeks of returning daily to one office, where we're told the person responsible will see us "tomorrow", we discover this is not only the wrong office but the wrong building, the wrong part of town, and we must start all over again. What's alarming is that Martial is as bewildered as we are. While he knows many of the officials we meet, it seems there's genuine confusion as to who should deal with us. After these circuitous and frustrating mornings, we settle down to afternoons of French, and the brief Mbendjele dictionary Jerome has bequeathed us. Days evaporate in the garden at Hippocamp, drinking espresso and pouring over word lists and maps of the Northern forests while a snake of human traffic undulates on the road outside.

The streets, when we venture down town to check e-mails, are white with dust and heat, littered with hawkers selling fake Gucci handbags, hand-woven bracelets, French newspapers. Small boys race bare-foot after us, calling plaintively – “*Mama! Mama!*” – and passing men mutter and stare. Once, a young woman, luminous in a peacock blue dress and silver heels, lobs spit in my face. There are no tourists in Congo. The Westerners we meet are all here for functional reasons – researchers, conservationists, loggers, petroleum workers, Red Cross volunteers. In the gateways of local government offices running towards the central thoroughfare, Avenue Charles de Gaulle, clusters of soldiers cup rifles. They step out silently in front of us from time to time, forcing us to weave around them. The military here remains volatile and powerful following the recent four year war. Because of continuing Ninja fomentation in the Poole region of the South, they’ve maintained a degree of authority that borders on law.

Our contact with Martial and Genevieve is the only thing that liberates us from the hotel in the evening. They arrive periodically to ferry us out to small, local restaurants in market areas, where the pulse of Congolese life is palpable. In bare cafes lit by paraffin lamps we sit crushed up with locals eating fresh sole and fried plantain. The same faces that closed to us in the day are open here, where we’re guests of two respected neighbours. “*Je n’aime pas l’hotel*” - says Genevieve emphatically one evening, curling her mouth. “*The food is bad. The cooks are bad people*”. She muses on this a moment: “*And they use frozen fish*”. I think about the WCS workers, sitting down to their aperitifs, eyeing the road outside the hotel gates. As we bump home along narrow, potholed streets in the dark, islands of people congregate around oil-lamps and radios, drinking beer and dancing under the heavy fragrance of mango leaves and fried chicken.

It takes weeks – and a spell in Pointe Noire - to accept that I’ll need help from someone other than Martial. While he’s clearly respected by those in local government, this isn’t sufficient to propel anyone into action. I have the number of Yves Dubois, the Director of Congolaise Industrielle des Bois, the major timber company logging in Congo. I’ve resisted contacting him, or any of his colleagues, from a vague ethical desire to remain independent. Now reality has set in and it’s clear that navigation through the labyrinth of Congolese officialdom requires a more

flexible approach, one willing to utilize available contacts and influences. It takes a few days to arrange a meeting with the aptly named Dubois. A minute into our first phone call he interrupts brusquely to tell me he's in a meeting. He suggests I stop trying to speak French because he can't understand a word. "*Use English*" he snaps, and hangs up. As we leave the hotel a few days later, we meet Martial arriving with a sheet of typed paper peppered with stamps. Our persistence has finally paid off. In fact, it will transpire later that even this – granted by an official with connections to Brazzaville University – is not the "official" research permit. On our way out of Brazzaville months later, we'll meet an American anthropologist with connections to the Director Adjoint at the Delegation Generale a la Recherche Scientifique et Technologique, where authentic permits are administered and stamped.

Yves Dubois calls that afternoon to say he'll meet me at Hippocamp in the evening. I'm sitting in the restaurant when an elderly man in an open shirt and jacket strides toward me with his hand extended. There's a ripple of power around him - the waiters fussing, the manager gaping curiously. After he's declined a drink, we sit down across from each other and he speaks in clipped English: "*So, you're Irish. Not a terrorist I hope?*" Then he smiles politely as it dawns on me he expects an answer. I reassure him I'm not, and thus appeased, he launches into an itinerary for our journey into the forest. He'll see to it we have places on a C.I.B flight leaving for Pokola on Tuesday. He'll arrange for Olivier Desmet to meet us there, and a room will be booked for us at the Marien Ngombe hotel (the only "hotel" in Pokola). Desmet is currently working on the new C.I.B management plan for Forest Stewardship Council certification. Philippe Auzel, the French sociologist and conservationist recently hired by C.I.B will assist us in finding an interpreter, guides, and adequate forest supplies. I'm welcome to use the office facilities at the C.I.B headquarters in Pokola. Monsieur Dubois knows the area I want to visit intimately, having been based at Pokola for years. He tells me he wants to assist visiting anthropologists in any way possible, and is open about the fact that this can only benefit C.I.B. All my good intentions are beginning to wilt into the naiveté of the uninitiated, but Brazzaville is no longer tenable. I accept his offer of help cautiously. Sun-birds tremble over orange flowers, the big, flat banana leaves hang transfixed in the dense air, and the Vietnamese brothers bicker in the kitchen.

That night, I dream Germano and I are being hunted by a witch, through a dense forest, down steep scrub-covered scarps. As we flee, there's a palpable fear accompanied by the realisation that she's trying to reach Germano. Knowing I can't allow it, as she closes on him, I swing round to face her. In an act of faith, I raise my left arm and hold my palm flat against her, willing her to be tied, bound, invoking all my energy to hold her at bay. Stopped a few yards away from me, she's laughing, aware my ability is only a fraction of her power. Then we're running again, the witch now parallel with us. From somewhere in her blurred form, a small bundle drops onto the earth and I realise it's a baby. Without a thought, I scoop it up, thrust it into Germano's arms and shout: "*Run!*" As he takes the baby, there's a fleeting moment of unease – we've stolen this child from the witch and therefore it is of her. But this is immediately cancelled by the urgency of salvage, a conviction of the child's innocence. As Germano disappears through the trees with the baby, the witch and I are once again at a standstill, and again I hold my palm up to ward her off, fighting to bind or tie her. I can see her face – long and cracked with lines, her black eyes, her intent. I wake into the pre-dawn gloom and lie for a few moments, threading a vague sense of unease. Around me there lingers the shadow of the witch's person. My heart is thumping in my throat. I wonder whether the dream means death. Then I sit at the dresser in our room and write it out as I remember it. It seems more urgent than the other, equally vivid dreams that have come since arriving in Congo.

Tuesday morning at 6.00 a.m, and our baggage sits in a clump at the gates of Hippocamp. A warm breeze ruffles the leaves along the road. The dream about the witch is haunting me now – I can see her gnarled, fairy-tale face, her long white hair. I've convinced myself the baby and its signature of life is an inversion - a symbol or portent of impending death. The energy of the dream is condensed, visceral. At the gates, a ragged band of vendors already wait for the inhabitants of Hippocamp to rise. Martial arrives just as the C.I.B van pulls in and two burly Congolese begin loading our luggage. As we say goodbye he embraces us both. He takes my hands and says simply – "*Maintenant vous apprendrez comment prier*" - "*Now you'll learn how to pray*".

Many travellers describe the strangeness of leaving a settlement where it seems human influence is unending, only to find within moments a great, uncultivated

expanse. As we fly low over the rainforest, leaving behind all vestiges of human order, I stare down at a vast brocade of greens. This is one of the most complex habitats on earth, an ocean of endless variation and diversity. It is home to hundreds of Yaka communities. After a year of theoretical and methodological preparation, there's the sense of something passing out of the abstract, taking on contour and colour - a body beginning to fill itself in. An hour passes, and we circle over a jagged red wound in the expanse. Pokola is a "logging town", composed largely of a Bantu-speaking population that has mushroomed around the C.I.B headquarters. Not only is there the obvious attraction of employment in saw-mills or at logging operations, but because of the Europeans and their workforce a sizeable market has sprung up offering everything from bush meat to mop buckets.

The locals are noisy, affable and curious. Yet there's also a clear, resounding hopelessness peculiar to such makeshift centres. Everything revolves wistfully around the C.I.B compound, with its high fences and security guards. The houses too have a makeshift quality – mud and wood with low roofs and shuttered windows; large, open yards in which families congregate and spend most of their day. Pigs, chickens and goats meander through the general chaos of plant life, small stalls and thin mud lanes. When C.I.B arrived here in 1969 the population numbered no more than five hundred people. Now there are an estimated fifteen thousand, all hoping to benefit from the logging company. C.I.B has made gestures towards this expectation, building a hospital and two local schools, but their purpose here is the extraction and processing of valuable tropical hardwoods. Ultimately, no-one pretends the local population is more than peripheral to this.

We're ferried through town by Oliver Desmet to the C.I.B mess. Inside the compound, the residences of the white loggers are tasteful and spacious, surrounded by landscaped gardens and jeeps. The "mess" itself is dark wood with tropical flowers dotted around the periphery. A small swimming pool lines one wall. It could be an exclusive hotel. Inside, football scarves decorate the walls and there's a long bar bedecked with gleaming glasses and bottles. A fan purrs in the corner. We sit at the bar with Olivier Desmet and Philippe Auzel as they quiz me about the purpose of my research. Olivier loses interest after a few moments and begins discussing the virtues of Brazzaville with Germano, but Philippe Auzel has been employed by C.I.B



to conduct a social survey of forest communities, and listens closely as I muddle my way through what now seems like an absurdly abstract thesis. We're invited to lunch that day, but warned that as non-residents (our "hotel" is outside the boundary of the mess) we'll not be able to eat here again. Only later will the difficulty of obtaining food become apparent, in a town where everything is focused on the needs of C.I.B personnel. Our room at Marien Ngombe is minimalist, with a small bed, a toilet and sink, and a door under which lizards and bird-like moths squeeze at night. Yet outside, from the wooden veranda, there's the wide body of the Sangha with its cargo of grasses and pirogues, the sunset threading its waters, and behind it, the fragrant bulge of the forest from which issues a perpetual cacophony of bird and insect calls.

Olivier Desmet has offered us a tour of Pokola and we find ourselves chauffeured around the outskirts of town in a C.I.B land rover. Our guide – Merko, an Italian researcher on a temporary contract with C.I.B – tells us the Pygmies have recently been built their own school, away from that of the Bantu-speaking children. The *"Pygmy school"* is outside town, on the banks of the Sangha. This is a progressive step in his opinion – the Pygmies will get educated, settle, begin to understand the value of land, money, and work. The prevalent view, expressed by Olivier Desmet also, is of impoverished nomads. We stop for a moment on the river bank with the forest looming behind us, and I turn to see a small group of people materialise silently out of the trees. Four women with six small children come shyly forwards as we climb back into the land rover. The children's mouths are agape as they gaze up at us, and I reach out the window and call *"Bo-te!"* – the Linghala greeting. Immediately they step forward and one by one touch my hand, then their mothers follow, issuing the sing-song greeting – *"Bo-te! Bo-te!"* They beam in at us with wide, direct faces. Almost before we move off they've melted back into the trees. I think about the almost requisite academic cynicism I've encountered about Pygmy communities, the preference of many contemporary researchers who quantify and weigh, stripping back the gauze of Western romanticism to set out linguistic, genetic or ethno-botanical details. For all this, I'm left with the impression of having been brushed by the forest.

That night, we go for dinner with Philippe Auzel to the only café in town – "Chloe's". We emerge from the meal to a huge terracotta moon, suspended in a bowl of

cumulus, and behind it, the blue-black of the forest. Though Pokola has been successfully established, there's the perennial press of foliage at its flanks. As we walk back to our room, Philippe tells us about his role at C.I.B. He was employed a month ago to co-ordinate a two-year survey of the entire logging area, with a view to helping Olivier Desmet facilitate FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification for all the company's concessions in Northern Congo. These are Pokola, Pikounda, Kabo, Loundoungou, and Toukoulaka. Ostensibly, the FSC certification demands a high degree of answerability on the part of C.I.B. It includes local populations as stakeholders, and requires C.I.B to liaise with them in the extraction process. The Kabo concession is the first in line for FSC with the final audit in December. Also at Kabo is the newly initiated "PROGEPP", a coalition between C.I.B, W.C.S and the government. This involves conservation related research, education "initiatives" for the local population, and ecological management, including the employment of "eco-guards" stationed permanently throughout the forest. I've heard rumours about the violence of these eco-guards toward Mbendjele in particular, and one account involving torture. But C.I.B is proud of "PROGEPP", and views it as part of an ongoing strategy of responsible forest management.

Philippe goes on to disclose that a new saw mill is being planned for Loundoungou, close to Bangui-Motaba where I plan to work. While this isn't supported by WCS or C.I.B, the government Minister for Forestry (himself from Loundoungou) is pushing for it. It will open a large clearing in the forest and transform the socio-economic landscape, but is part of the pressure the Congolese government is exerting on C.I.B to nurture local industry. Philippe points out that C.I.B clears 340,000 cubic metres annually, targeting prized hardwoods such as Sipo and Sapeli. In order to extract these trees, large swathes of primary forest are cleared. While C.I.B claims to take one and a half trees per hectare, the reality is less neat. The company maps pinpoint trees that will be cut in a clean, abstract way. But on the ground, there is carnage – the incursions of large machinery, the skid trails, the destruction of trees and vegetation around that one, marked tree. On the logging maps, you see neither the natural diversity nor the subsequent ruin. Philippe tells us that although radios were introduced in an attempt to help navigate machine drivers to the selected trees, lack of training and carelessness resulted in drivers frequently running amok and clearing vast tracts of forest. I ask about the Yaka. He shrugs tiredly. Both Sapeli and Sipo

are important trees for forest communities – Sipo is a major source of honey, and Sapeli trees provide the caterpillars so prized by the Mbendjele.

Everything condenses to the familiar story – powerful commercial interests being played out and negotiated, spoils being divided among the strongest, the predictable and depressing machinations of industrial capitalism. Where are the stories of the people whose land this forest traditionally is? The people whose lives and histories are interwoven with the landscape the loggers have so recently and violently entered?

This is a question that has recently risen to the surface of local and international debates on logging and its effects. The World Bank has just given C.I.B a substantial grant in order to assess the socio-economic impact of logging on local populations. A recent study commissioned by C.I.B pinpointed Mbendjele burial grounds, sacred sites and old villages under threat by logging. But Philippe tells us now that his own more recent research suggests the maps used were inaccurate – the study was hastily conducted with little real communication with Mbendjele communities. More worryingly, C.I.B has announced its intention to buy an area of land around Pokola as a permanent “settlement” for Pygmies. This is, ostensibly, to counter Bantu discrimination and a lack of formal land rights for Mbendjele. But the benefits for the company of removing Pygmy communities permanently from the forest are clear. We arrive at our small hotel in darkness, the path down to the veranda littered with fireflies. Before us is the dark plait of the river, and the forest that hedges it. The abstractions of maps function by stripping away all this – what is left is cold, numerical, easy to dissect. The maps of the loggers are blind, profit-oriented things. I fall asleep thinking about those women on the lip of the Sangha.

The next morning Philippe arrives to say he’s planning a trek into the Ibamba forest, South of Pokola, to find an Mbendjele community whose land will shortly be logged, and inviting us for the trip. It will be a four day round trip with a group of Mbendjele men from Ibamba. Elated, we tramp off to market to stock up on supplies. As we make our way back across town, a man approaches us with a message from the local police Chief, demanding to know what our purpose here is. In his office, the Chief is intransigent, fussing about my letter of permission and slamming out questions. I stumble along in halting French, unnerved by the men lounging silently by the door

and the animosity of the Chief: “*Mais me dire encore – pourquoi souhaitez-vous voyager a Bangui? Qui a autorise ceci? Avez-vous paye?*” Finally, I call Olivier Desmet and ask for help. Almost immediately he swoops in, all camaraderie with the now smiling police Chief. As we leave, Olivier turns to me and says loudly – “*Perhaps you should cover yourself up?*” I stare at him blankly for a few seconds. Then I realise he means *literally*. I look down at my sweaty T-Shirt and knee length shorts. It occurs to me he’s using this as an opportunity to undermine and humiliate me. We have arrived – enthusiastic, naive - into the midst of a complex and fraught political situation. International companies and conservation organisations with their own agendas and ideologies vie for a place alongside national government interests, and all this transects and circumvents the needs of local communities. It’s becoming clear now that we’ve left the varnish of Brazzaville that our explicit interest in the Mbendjele and in the political environment surrounding them is not particularly convenient for C.I.B.

That evening, I become suddenly and violently sick. As the fever worsens, I fall into a strange, dissociated state somewhere between sleeping and waking. At one point, I’m in another, unfamiliar room. Cradled in my arms is a raw, new-born baby. I wake to a new bout of vomiting. Only after two days of this do we identify food poisoning – an omelette eaten in the town’s only café, where we’ll be forced to return when I can face food again. On the evening of the third day, as we sit on the veranda drinking lemon tea, a long train of singing Bantu women winds slowly down to the river, to where two boats drift in from the North. The women’s chorus floats out over the water to meet the boats, and the melody is echoed back to them. Our neighbour - a squat, rough Italian - tells me it’s a wedding celebration.

Antonio has been building roads in Africa for twenty-five years. His hands are gnarled with warts and old scars, and his clothes – jeans and a blue denim shirt – are a worn uniform. He sits with Germano and I, lights up a Marlboro and as the blue smoke envelops us, begins to talk about the Pygmies he’s worked with. He doesn’t like the Bantu, and has refused to learn Linghala as a kind of objection to them. “*But*” he says, “*once two of my workers caught malaria, way out in the forest, and the Pygmies made a poultice of leaves and bark*”. He exhales smoke out into the dusk. “*And I was shaking my head, but you know it worked – the malaria was gone*

*within a day*". The Pygmies, he tells me, are "*gente sconosciuta*" – "*strange people*". They would often come to him and give him small gifts, mostly food - meat or fruit - and then go, having requested nothing in return. He began to feel discomforted by this and eventually offered them a few cigarettes in return. Baffled by the unsolicited generosity, he felt the need to reciprocate, as though his own position and agency were troubled by the giving. Another time, camped for a few months in one place, he decided to plant tomatoes. "*The earth was so rich, you could have grown anything, I couldn't understand why they didn't bother.*" When the tomatoes were finally ripe – big, fleshy red fruit - he picked a few and ate them. Next morning, all the tomatoes were gone. The Pygmies, taking his cue, had picked the entire crop. "*They didn't even try to hide it*" he says incredulously, "*they'd walk past and smile at me eating one of my tomatoes*"!

The day before we're due to leave for the Ibamba forest, a young Ikenga man turns up at our room, sodden with rain and clutching a note from Olivier Desmet. His name is Fabrice Seinzor-Kalla and he's heard we're looking for an interpreter. As he stands on our porch introducing himself, my immediate response is negative. Although he's fluent in French and Linghala and claims to have a little Mbendjele, he's from Makao, whose Ikenga population have been embroiled in a bitter land conflict with the Bangui Yambe people. Philippe Auzel has already cautioned me against transgressing local political etiquette in Bangui, as the Chief there is particularly sensitive. More importantly, Fabrice has been educated at the Marien Ngombe University in Brazzaville, and because of this is unlikely to be trusted by locals. His discomfort is tangible when I tell him it's the Yaka, not the villagers, I'm primarily interested in.

And yet we're floundering in the same stasis as before, prevented from moving by lack of experience and contacts. And there's a vulnerability to this gangly young man that makes it hard to turn him away into the rain. No-one in Pokola matches the requirements I have, and I decide to be forthright with him. We'll employ him for one month, to make the journey into the forest with us and help negotiate with the community. As we sit down to lunch in "Chloes" I watch him watching us. He orders a mountainous plate of steak and plantain chips, saka-saka, bread, beer, tea loaded with sugar. I realise that this meal will sustain him for days. He asks for

credit for his mobile phone, new shoes, a tent, an advance on his wages. I can see his mind whirring, the possibilities panning out before him. Germano is looking a question across at me, but what can we do? No alternatives have presented themselves. I impress on Fabrice that this is a temporary arrangement, a month at most. Of course, he smiles.

Later the same day I travel out to Kabo, a nearby C.I.B concession, with Philippe. He needs to meet the manager of the saw-mill and collect some work documents from the employees. We emerge from the green blaze of forest into a wide clearing in which the saw mill grinds, surrounded by local men from nearby villages. It's shocking to emerge from the vitality and lull of tropical forest into such a wound. The sound of nightjars and cicadas has been swamped by the whine of machinery. Then the jeep swings down towards the white-washed house of the French saw-mill manager, on whose manicured lawn egrets stand poised like ornaments. Monsieur Ouellet and his wife are elderly and lonely, and insist on serving lemonade and snacks. As we chat in their air-conditioned living room, the workers are being lined up outside the fence to have photos taken for work documents.

On the drive home Philippe is quiet. Before the current contract with C.I.B, he spent many years working with his then wife - an American anthropologist and botanist - in the forests of Cameroon and later the Central African Republic. As we round a corner on the isolated road, a clutter of guinea fowl cross our path and flutter up into the air, narrowly missing us. A few hundred yards further, a loan wild boar stands immobile on the track. He moves off casually at the last moment. "*Last year*" says Philippe, as though continuing a conversation, "*the government collected about forty billion cfa in forest taxes*". I look across at him in the grainy light, waiting for more, but he doesn't elaborate. Half an hour outside Pokola, a small group of Mbendjele women step out of the headlights as we pass. In the near-dark, their baskets are full of cassava leaves. "*What about the Mbendjele*?" I ask him. He shakes his head and grimaces. "*The Pygmies know the forest like nobody else*" he says. "*They're used by loggers, bush-meat traders, Bantu. But when you start talking about forest rights – what Pygmies*"?

## CHAPTER TWO

### SHARING AND GIVING: HUNTER-GATHERERS AND AN ARGUMENT ABOUT COUNTER-POWER

*The illusion of distance is broken*

Kirsten Hastrup

It is important to state at the outset what I will not be doing in this chapter. I will not attempt to present a focused empirical account of Pygmies in Central Africa. Given my lack of sustained fieldwork, this would at best reiterate other people's ethnographic observations. Where appropriate, I refer the reader to writers whose work elaborates on particular issues or areas of concern. What this chapter aims for instead is the description of a type of community and sociality integral to my subsequent argument about the symbolically rendered and "thinking" body. Thus while I begin with one community of forest hunter-gatherers, and progress to incorporate other peoples in the region, my main objective is to explore the theoretical, epistemological, and political consequences of counter-power in "egalitarian" society. As such, I borrow from various different ethnographies and research traditions, melding these together with more reflective writing on the history and nature of hunter-gatherers. My main point is to bring out something of the vigour and voice with which Mbendjele or Baka women collectively move, and to follow the repercussions of this kind of agency into social politics.

It is my purpose therefore to detail not the ways in which hunter-gatherers resemble other societies – although this is important work – but rather the ways in which they do not. Doing so should be seen as a temporary framing off of hunter-gatherer sociality, in an attempt to clarify traits of particular relevance to my argument. My aim is to explore difference not in order to bracket these societies off as interesting (if ultimately doomed) exceptions to "our" rule, but to explore the political implications of the work recursively performed in non-hierarchical, consensus-based communities. I want to look closely at the kind of system that pertains where women as a collective

hold substantial political and symbolic power. It is clear that women in “immediate-return” (Woodburn, 1982) or “egalitarian” societies benefit from high levels of political power. I argue that it is *because* women in certain types of society are actively and vigilantly exercising their rights to power – whether economic, socio-political or symbolic – that not only they but all community members enjoy a social reality in which personal freedom and autonomy are basic tenets. The question of how this is achieved and maintained seems paramount. What are the strategies by which Mbendjele or Mbuti women help to construct social groups premised on negotiation, sharing and humour?

This is a somewhat polemical way of stating a more complex and shifting reality. All members of egalitarian communities are equally responsible for their maintenance. But in order to highlight an important ethnographic blind spot, I foreground women as a political body. The terms I use are of course “our” terms – equality, political rights, the system. It is probable that Mbendjele, Baka or Efe communities do not think in these terms, and I will attempt to integrate local perspectives into my writing. However, and despite much recent criticism of the use of Western concepts and categories in approaching different cultures, I work with these in the hope of achieving a structural coherence and continuity that seems fundamental if we are to communicate beyond our own specialities. As Vivieros de Castro (2000) cautions, there is little point in abandoning our own “conceptually dichotomous heritage” in the absence of an effective alternative.

I go further, to suggest the possibility of utilizing our propensity for dichotomy, in order to exploit its creative potential. The tension or dialectic of the conversation about difference occupies all human communities. Further, this “conversation”, as has been noted by many scholars of symbolic structure, is always housed in a formal, oppositional schema, composed of sets of contrasts. Perhaps our “conceptually dichotomous heritage” can be freed in order to respond imaginatively to this larger conversation. The Enlightenment fission between reason and imagination may be uprooted and reapplied as a critical imaginative capacity for *apprehending* dualisms. This is theoretical of course – the ways in which such thought structures are experienced and govern experience are infinitely more spontaneous and unruly. But language is more supple than often allowed, and it is not necessary to be constrained



by the poetic or the allegorical in order to employ it. Just as it is not necessary to avoid “grand” questions in order to remain sensitive to local realities. My point here is that local realities are frequently far more concerned with these questions than us. Far from disabling systematic, empirical enquiry into the rivalries and conversations at the root of systems, sensitivity to local knowledge forms and preoccupations may oblige us to deal directly with these. Dualism and its symbolic formality is not so alien to the cosmologies of other peoples.

## THE HUNTER-GATHERER MODE OF THOUGHT

That there are communities of people for whom social hierarchy, economic inequality and sexual discrimination are not a daily reality, has generated an interesting degree of disciplinary scepticism. Whether from political economists seeking to re-configure hunter-gatherers as victims of historical and economic marginalisation, feminist and gender theorists intent on probing the universality of sexual inequality, or simply those who prefer to remonstrate from the vantage of terminology and definition, “hunter-gatherers” continue to be the subject of considerable anthropological debate. As a result, the field of hunter-gatherer studies has been marked by an increasing refinement of analyses. Since the first “Man the Hunter” conference in 1966 (Lee and Devore, 1968), there has been a large amount of reflection on the subject of what, if anything, differentiates hunting and gathering societies from others. One major fall-out from the conference was the feminist objection to the invisibility of women in the concept of “man the hunter”. In a later attempt to redress this lacuna “Woman the Gatherer” (Dahlberg, 1981) was published, focusing on the importance of women’s economic, social and religious contribution to foraging society. Rather than place women at the centre of hunting communities and culture, however, this book set up an opposing category, as though women really *were* confined to gathering, or men to hunting.

Increasingly too, comparative research has demonstrated the many ways in which hunter-gatherers are implicated in wider systems, and share aspects of these with others. A major debate spanning the mid-1980s till the early 1990s was concerned with precisely this – the supposed characterisation of hunter-gatherers as “pristine” remnants of an archetypal human society, and the countering proposition that such

peoples were in fact simply a disenfranchised underclass. The publication of Wilmsen's *Land Filled With Flies* (1989) marked the apex of the debate between those known as "isolationists", and "revisionists" who argued that early ethnographies of people such as the Kalahari San were at best partial, at worst romantic fictions founded on an outmoded nineteenth century vision. As Bird-David (1988) remarked at the time, the debate itself was something of an anachronism, given that history had always demonstrated the interaction of hunter-gatherers with neighbouring peoples, and the relative tenacity of egalitarian systems regardless of this. If there was a flaw, it was not so much in the validity of hunter-gatherer systems, but in the representation of these by ethnographers. And even here, it was argued by "isolationists" (Lee and Soloway, 1992), there had always been some allowance of the presence of external relationships and forces in shaping hunter-gatherer societies.

Barnard (2001), more recently, has offered a resolution to the protracted debate, by pointing out that what is most distinctive about the hunter-gatherer way of life is best described as a "mode of thought", qualitatively different to the "accumulation mode of thought" characteristic of non-hunter-gatherers. His argument is that focusing solely on modes of production obscures fundamental cultural differences. Barnard (2001) highlights a preoccupation among hunter-gatherers with sharing as against accumulation, political autonomy over leadership, "universal" kin categorisation as against clan-based, agrarian or class organisation, and a relationship with land based on mutuality rather than conquest and exploitation. This approach moves beyond Woodburn's (1982) immediate-or-delayed-return schism to include part-time hunter-gatherers and rural Gypsies, and opens questions about the mind guiding the system, rather than the material forces viewed as encroaching upon it. By focusing on the impact of external relations and politics upon hunter-gatherers, Wilmsen (1989) and others drew attention away from this mode of thought and located such communities at the nadir of a hierarchy of economic and political power.

But it is not necessary to insist on egalitarian society as representing an equivalence of form with our own, in order to allow that such societies are complex and historical. Nor does occasional interaction with capitalist economies disqualify hunter-gatherers from their own systems. Indeed, it is the political and economic forces at work *within*

such systems that need to be examined as elements of a holistic way of thinking the world alternate to Western ontological forms. As Leacock (1978) noted:

The possibility that altogether different sets of relationships from those involving economic power might be operating in non-class society is not followed through...It is no accident that hierarchical patterns similar to our own are found to be “incipient” wherever they are not well established. (Leacock, 1978: 247).

It takes effort and imagination to think outside one’s own worldview, yet that is what is required if we are to understand cultures premised upon different relational and value systems. Bourdieu (1992) wrote extensively on cultural assumptions which view dominant ideologies as the only or correct ideologies: “The culture which unifies...is also the culture which separates...and which legitimates distinctions by forcing all other cultures to define themselves by their distance from the dominant culture” (Bourdieu, 1992: 167).

In the end, debate always invigorates its subject, and the field of hunter-gatherer studies has flourished in response to the criticisms of recent decades rather than in spite of them. The term itself remains a valid descriptive term, generally acknowledged to be more theoretically accurate than its alternative “forager” (see Ingold (1988), for a fuller discussion of this). It will be used here to indicate both those peoples still largely subsisting by hunting wild animals and gathering wild foods, and those who have relatively recently developed some form of agriculture but who maintain social, political and religious practices premised upon the refutation of authority, systematic sharing practices and egalitarian relations. The idea of a “mode of thought” distinctive to hunter-gatherers and separate (at least in the short-term) from subsistence, is particularly helpful in moving away from a narrow focus on the material life of hunting communities to the exclusion of the social and cosmological.

Given my intention to develop a theoretical perspective rooted in the ethnographic literature of forest hunter-gatherers in Central Africa, and one group in particular – the Mbendjele Yaka - it is necessary to provide some background to these peoples and the ethnographers who have worked with them. My own field experience, brief as it was, will be utilised where relevant. Having established a basic scenography, I

will expand the discussion to encompass theoretical ideas and debates on the nature of sharing. The Mbendjele Yaka, with whom I briefly lived, fit Woodburn's (1982) definition of an immediate-return economy reinforced by egalitarian social relations, and although I will speak more generally of hunter-gatherer society, it is the Mbendjele and other Central African hunter-gatherers to whom I return for ethnographic evidence. I use Woodburn's (1982) terms here, despite the fact that they are tied to economic relationships and returns, because they offer widely understood and agreed upon definitions.

## CENTRAL AFRICAN HUNTER-GATHERERS

There are various "Pygmy" groups throughout Equatorial Africa, each with its own self-ascribed local name. Hewlett (1996) and others (Lewis, 2002; Ichikawa, 2004) note that no adequate term has emerged to replace "Pygmy", though this is considered contentious. Some local groups do adopt "Pygmy" as a positive appellation, using it to implicate themselves in a particular kind of cultural milieu – many Baka communities in Congo and Cameroon "pride themselves in belonging to this ethnic category and may...proudly declare in French "We are Pygmies" (Lewis, 2002: 47)! The term has persisted in the anthropological literature on the area because of its utility in referring to "a series of different, geographically separated aboriginal peoples in equatorial Africa who share certain cultural and economic practices" (Lewis, 2002: 48). Ichikawa (2004) sees use in the term because of the many (non-linguistic) cultural similarities between groups. Despite this, I prefer to use "forest hunter-gatherer", "forest people" (a term many communities themselves use) or people's own ethnonym where appropriate. On occasion, as many writers have found (Kisluik, 1999), "Pygmy" is unavoidable "when addressing issues and attitudes that engage "Pygmies" as a social and cultural category" (Kisluik, 1999: 6). The community with whom I lived were unequivocal in their rejection of the term, it being frequently used by neighbouring *bilo* as a disparagement. They referred to themselves instead either as Baaka or Mbendjele.

There are 10 ethno-linguistically distinct populations of forest hunter-gatherers scattered across the Congo basin. These are the Efe, Mbuti, Aka and Twa in Northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the Aka and Mbendjele in Northern

Congo and Central African Republic, the Baka in Camaroon, Gabon and Northern Congo, the Gyelli and Tikar in Western Cameroon, and the Bongo in Gabon (Hewlett, 2006). In this thesis I refer to data on only five of these groups – the Mbuti, Efe, Aka, Mbendjele Yaka, and Baka. The reason for this is that these populations have accrued most data, with detailed monographs on the religious life of the first four, and much recent writing on ritual performance among Baka peoples.

Despite the widespread dispersion of groups throughout the Congo Basin, and a great deal of cultural diversity (Hewlett, 1996; Joiris, 1996), there are often striking similarities between geographically distant communities. All those I refer to as forest peoples spend at least four months a year hunting and gathering continuously in the forest, during which time they live in small camps composed of a few families. All have “a strong identity with and preference for forest life” (Hewlett, 1996). All maintain an economic and social relationship with a particular agricultural neighbour, though this relationship is often fraught. All share a distinctive polyphonic singing style and what Lewis (2002), following Barnard (1999), has described as a particular “ritual grammar”. Many writers have commented on broad cosmological and ritual similarities between groups from diverse parts of the Congo basin (Arom, 1978; Sawada, 1990), neighbouring groups of whom meet periodically to celebrate large festivals. Kisluik (1999), working with the BaYaka of the Central African Republic, and Lewis (2002) whose ethnography focused on Mbendjele Yaka in Congo-Brazzaville, found the same women’s ritual association or dance repertoire - *Dingboku* and *Ngoku* respectively. Similarly Joiris (1996) in her writing on the Baka of Cameroon and Lewis (2002) both describe *Yeli*, an important women’s ritual association related to elephant hunting.

The first reliable account of forest hunter-gatherers in Central Africa was by Georg Schweinfurth (1873), a German explorer who reported finding a community of diminutive people called “Akka” in Southern Sudan (Ichikawa, 2004). In the 1920’s, Paul Schebesta (1938–50), an Austrian missionary, conducted research with “Pygmies” in the Ituri forest and subsequently produced a detailed monograph on the social and religious life of the Efe, Mbuti and Aka. Colin Turnbull (1961; 1965) was the first anthropologist to carry out prolonged fieldwork with a group of forest hunter-gatherers (the Mbuti, in the then Zaire), living and travelling with them over a period

of years.

In both the *Forest People* (1961) and *Wayward Servants* (1965), Turnbull pulled the terms of analysis back to the Mbuti within their own physical and cultural environment. While Schebesta (1938–50) had interviewed forest people in agriculturalist's villages, thereby obtaining information palatable to the agriculturalists, Turnbull (1961) argued that understanding the Mbuti was impossible without directly experiencing forest life. For him, collective performances of singing and dancing formed the substance of Mbuti religious life, in opposition to the more formal and hierarchical rituals of agriculturalists (Ichikawa, 2004). This was the prelude to a debate over the definition of “ritual” among ethnographers in the region which is still ongoing (Tsuru 1998; Bundo, 2001). In subsequent essays Turnbull (1978; 1981) developed a particular thesis about Mbuti gender ritual which has influenced much subsequent analysis, including my own.

Ichikawa (2004) in a review of Central African ethnographers, points out that the Japanese, with their interest in ecology, were the first to treat systematically the relationship between forest people and their environment. Coming from a primatological background, Japanese researchers in the Ituri forest produced the first papers describing the subsistence activities, hunting methods and hunting efficiency of Mbuti net hunters (Harako, 1976; Tanno, 1976). Driving the Japanese research agenda was a disciplinary interest in human evolution and a belief that studying contemporary hunter-gatherers would shed light on this. As Ichikawa (2004) notes, this was and is still a contentious approach, yet it has yielded many detailed studies of Mbuti cultural life. Younger researchers in particular chose to focus explicitly on Pygmy song and dance performances (Sawada, 1990), ritual (Bundo, 2001), children's play (Harako, 1980), and sociality (Tsuru, 2001).

Gradually, Japanese research spread over most of Central Africa to include the Efe, Aka and Baka (Ichikawa, 2004: 108). New research has been conducted on themes such as non-verbal communication and social interaction (Kimura, 2001) and the socialisation of Baka children (Kamei, 2002). While the Japanese output has been influential and substantial, the kind of information given is clearly influenced by a research methodology which utilises behavioural observation strategies used in

primatology (Ichikawa, 2004), where writing tends towards the quantitative – listing numbers and kinds of spirits – with less emphasis on description or theory.

Due to a long history of colonial presence in the region, French anthropologists have perhaps been the most visible force in anthropological studies of Central African foragers. According to Ichikawa (2004), French interests have tended to cluster in three broad areas: ethnomusicology, ecology, and linguistics. In the Central African Republic, the work of Bahuchet (1985) and Arom (1991) in particular has produced “one of the most remarkable ethnographic studies of the twentieth century” (Ichikawa, 2004). While Arom (1987; 1991), a musicologist, focused on the composition and characteristics of polyphonic music styles, Bahuchet (1985) conducted comprehensive research into all aspects of Yaka society and culture. Building on earlier work by Lucien Demesse (1969; 1978), who studied social change among Yaka Pygmies in the Western Congo basin, Bahuchet (1985) assembled an encyclopaedic body of information which remains influential today. Themes covered by his writing include environmental relations, economy, ethnobotany, territoriality and linguistics.

One important part of his work to date has been the establishment of historical links between the Yaka of Congo-Brazzaville (C10 Bantu language speakers) and their Baka neighbours in Cameroon (Oubangui language speakers). Using linguistic analysis, Bahuchet has argued that these two groups, previously believed largely unrelated, were in fact one group and diverged somewhere around the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Daou Joiris (1996; 1998), with a long-standing interest in the ritual and religious life of Baka in South-eastern Cameroon, has provided a ground-breaking analysis in her treatment of what she terms Baka “ritual associations” (1996). Specifically, she has contributed to understandings of Baka hunting ritual as central to cultural life, and to the diversity of ritual performances surrounding hunting.

The third influential tradition in Central African ethnography has been North American, though as Ichikawa (2004) writes, this has, with a few exceptions (Grinker, 1994; Kisluik, 1999) remained focused on physical rather than cultural anthropology. The work of those such as Hewlett (1991) on Aka fathers and infant

care, or Peacock (1991) on Efe women's role in subsistence practices, in addition to its value in the field of cultural ecology, has uses in providing a foundation for culturally-based analyses. Michelle Kisluik (1999), an American musicologist influenced by Arom (1987), studied the song and dance performances of Aka Pygmies in the Lobaye – Ibenga area of Central African Republic. Her interest in ethnographic narrative combined with a detailed knowledge of women's dance "cults" provides rich data on the sociality and politics of Aka music and dance. Her monograph is perplexing, however, in its lack of comment on the religious aspect of dances, and their place in a broader cosmological nexus. Ethnographers of forest people's ritual and religious life have pointed repeatedly to the inseparable nature of dance and song from religious representation, yet Kisluik (1999) gives little attention to this.

On the whole, American researchers, like the Japanese, have tended towards methods standard in primatology and animal ecology (Ichikawa, 2004) such as focal individual sampling and spot observation, using cost-benefit analyses to estimate the reproductive fitness of individuals. While the preponderance of studies have arisen from the fields of evolutionary ecology and socio-biology, Hewlett (2001) argues that cultural ecology is gaining increasing theoretical influence.

Although Ichikawa (2004) outlines three broad concentrations of method and style, there are other influential writers whose work falls outside these brackets. Rene Devische (1991) for example, approaches Aka women's healing cults using a phenomenological perspective. British writers such as Kenrick (2001) and Lewis (2001; 2002) have produced work on the social and political implications of forest conservation, and on the displacement of Pygmy groups from their traditional territories. Ichikawa (2002) poses the question: "To what extent do hunter-gatherers in Central Africa *depend* on forests" (Ichikawa, 2002: 112)? The project of cultural ecology as he sees it is about illuminating the relationship between the physical and cultural landscapes of hunter-gatherers. While there are many similarities between hunter-gatherers cross-culturally, forest hunter-gatherers do represent a unique adaptation. There are important questions therefore about how forest living contributes to the distinctive kind of sociality and ritual politics found among hunter-gatherers in Central Africa.



## THE REPUBLIC OF CONGO

The Republic of Congo, also known as Congo-Brazzaville, is a former French colony of West-Central Africa. While the economy is a mixture of village agriculture and handicrafts, the industrial sector is based largely on petroleum, which has supplanted forestry as the mainstay of the economy. Of Congo's 342,000 square km's, 60% is forested and over half of the country's 3 million inhabitants live in the cities of the South. The North remains densely forested and sparsely populated, although this is rapidly changing due to the incursions of logging companies and the illegal but thriving bush-meat trade. Missionary influence has had a profound impact on forest hunter-gatherers in this part of Congo.

My fieldwork experience was with the Mbendjele Yaka, who live and travel widely throughout Northeastern Congo, concentrated in the Sangha and Likouala regions.

Lewis (2002) points out that Mbendjele describe all other Pygmy groups as Yaka and "consider them to be *bisi ndima* (forest people)" (Lewis, 2002: 50). Early accounts of Yaka derive largely from doctors, colonial administrators and missionaries (Lewis, 2002). These accounts, inspired by colonial curiosity, were concerned with variables such as physical characteristics, demography, and language, though some offer insights into current issues, such as the difficulty in encountering Pygmies due to villager reticence about losing exclusive bartering privileges (Bruehl, 1910). Trilles (1935) noted Pygmies' aversion to spilling human blood, and commented that they were "regularly hunted and eaten by their neighbours" (quoted in Lewis, 2002: 25). He hypothesised that they must represent "the remnants of an ancient Pygmy culture whose language is gone, leaving only its dance and song styles" (Lewis, 2002: 25).

While Bahuchet (1985) is the longest-standing and most prolific ethnographer of Yaka peoples, Jerome Lewis (2002; 2007; 2008) has contributed a sustained and focused exploration of Yaka ritual associations, religious representations and cosmology. Lewis (2002; 2008) also, like Turnbull (1978), connects these to the politics of gender in Yaka community, elaborating on a seminal relationship for hunter-gatherers throughout Central Africa. With his wife and young son, Lewis conducted three years of fieldwork in the Republic of Congo with an Mbendjele

community travelling through the Ikelemba area of the Ndoki forest. During his research he was initiated into a number of Mbendjele ritual associations, and this experience added considerably to his understanding and interpretation of Mbendjele men's associations. His work on Mbendjele religious categories and ritual practice, and particularly his sensitivity to women's performances, has substantially informed my own ideas.

The basic Mbendjele socio-economic unit is the camp, which "provides the basis for the organisation of collective activities, sharing and distribution" (Bahuchet, 1992). Theoretically, camps tend to cluster round a patrilineal core, but the reality of continually shifting group composition, with much inter-group visiting, and the tradition of bride service, tends to make communities more bilateral in nature. Both Joiris (1996) and Lewis (2002) have argued that ritual and dance performances form the backbone of Baka or Yaka community life, serving also to cement groups through regional networking. Baka ritual associations, states Joiris (1996), are fundamental to group identity. In these, members of a camp affiliate, according to preference or skill, with particular ritual associations, each of which organises ceremonies, possesses particular dances, and clusters around certain spirits. Lewis (2002) notes that *mokondi massana* (spirit rituals or spirit dances) perform multifunctional roles within and between Mbendjele communities.

As in many hunter-gatherer communities, Mbendjele women spend the majority of their day together. Whether during collective visits into the forest to gather roots, berries and nuts, on fishing expeditions, or in the late afternoon preparation and consumption of gathered foods, women maintain a loud, sing-song conversation with each other and the community at large. The physical structure of camp is conducive to such conversation, with small stick and raffia shelters winding in a single long lane through walls of forest, in contrast to the wide, opened space of the village. What this means is that houses, rather than being separated by a large clearing, lean in on one another, overhung by strands of foliage and separated only by a few yards. While women congregate in small clusters around their hearths, they remain within one compact communal space. The continuity of these shelters with the forest, as with each other, is visually striking. As evening deepens and the light abruptly disappears, the cooking fires from each *oma* illuminate the encroaching forest darkness. Men,

back from the village or from the forest, sit along the central camp space nursing infants and chatting in small groups.

Almost without exception, the banter and repartee of the women gathers momentum until it slips from “speech” into song, from song into dance. The energy of camp shifts and tautens as a small group of (usually younger) women either forms a circle, or assumes a more formal interlocked band that storms the length of the camp, chanting, squealing and laughing. People of all ages and both sexes watch and either join the singing or simply enjoy the antics of the young women. On some occasions, a counter-aggregate of young men is mobilised, and a new melody, drawing on forest sounds is generated. On certain evenings, the dancing fizzles out within an hour. On others, it continues long into the night and towards dawn, assuming, for the listener, a life and puissance of its own. Most dances are initiated by women, who dominate the singing and cajole or provoke men to a response. Forming a close (physically intertwined) group, women use their song to converse with the men. As a kind of language, these dances exceed the possibility of lexical forms, and are used almost interchangeably with speech.

Lewis (2002) has commented on the beauty of women’s dance performances - the sensory and aesthetic increase they achieve, and the simultaneous opening of observers into a social space marked by a clear sense of harmony and well-being. This is not a detail. As Woodburn (2005) noted, while ritual and religion were until recently considered “symbolic by-products of the real and the material” (Woodburn, 2005: 25), in communities such as Mboule, where the line between the sacred and the profane is so ethereal, one can not be studied apart from the other. The dance performances of women, incorporating the entire community, are effective on several levels simultaneously. In these dances, there is the sense of slippage, a feeling of borders blurring, the oddness of fluidity. Woodburn (2005) has this to say: “Sharing in this context is not merely analogous to the secular sharing of meat. It is consecrated sharing...a potent dramatisation of the production of the egalitarian community that has manifest appeal both to the reason and to the emotions of the participants” (2005: 25).

## HUNTER-GATHERERS IN WESTERN THOUGHT

Barnard (1999) charts the progression of European thought on societies which would later be termed “hunter-gatherer”. In contrast to recent writing on hunter-gatherers, subsistence practices were of little interest to 17<sup>th</sup> century commentators. Some debated communal versus individual ownership (Grotius, 1625), others the natural state - “fear, poverty, nastiness, ignorance” - in contrast to civilisation – “peace, security, wealth, splendour, taste, benevolence” (Barnard, 1999). Thomas Hobbes’s often quoted life of man as “poore, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes, 1651) although not referring specifically to hunter-gatherers, was later used to describe that life. Rousseau (1755) saw the foraging way of life as peaceful and happy but short lived – with the advent of agriculture, private ownership of land and social inequality became enshrined in civil institutions. It was not until the Scottish Enlightenment that a clear notion of “hunter-gatherer society” crystallised. Here, material and social concerns were intermeshed within the concept of society. Based on a four-stage model running from gathering to agriculture, economics were privileged, instigating a definition of society that would later prove unpalatable to many (Ingold, 1999). Adam Ferguson (1767) and William Robertson (1777) noted the absence of private property among hunters, alongside the communal distribution of gathered or hunted foods. John Millar was the first to consider “the importance of property with respect to sex and gender relations” (Barnard, 2004).

But it was not until the work of Lewis Henry Morgan (1964 [1877]), developed subsequently by Friedrich Engels (1884), that information about the lives of hunter-gatherers began to be used to suggest political alternatives to capitalist systems. *Ancient Society* established Morgan as an evolutionary anthropologist, committed to the discovery of historical laws. In it, he attempted to construct a system of stages documenting the progress of humanity, from “savagery” through “barbarism” to “civilisation”. In *Houses and House-Life* (1965) Morgan depicted the unilineal descent group as a social collective perfectly pitched for female autonomy: “An extremely simple, resilient and pliable institution...that is charged with political or legal life in the growing community; it can be the unit of economic production and distribution; it can form the basis of the ceremonial and ritual of society; it can

provide education, social insurance, and emotional security...but it specifically cannot direct the more intimate functions of the family and household: control and expression of sexuality, reproduction and socialisation of children, domestic division of labour” (Bohannon, in Morgan, 1965: xiv - xv).

Morgan was clear that the group he described was a society, one oriented around the social motion of the longhouse, where women were key political agents and “mother-right” was the ruling ethos. The domestic architecture and social ethos he describes could be applied to any Mbendjele or Baka camp, with “people living in small houses or cabins, but in clusters...the smallest of their towns having from ten to forty houses...Each cluster of houses contains a clan or family of relations who eat and live in common” (Morgan, 1965: 68). Morgan’s explicit connection of egalitarian sociality to “communism in living”, his lengthy descriptions of communal life and women’s extraordinary judicial power within this, attracted the interest of Marx and Engels. The original theoretical connections Morgan made between kinship, sex and the growth of private property were used by Engels (1986 [1884]) as the backbone of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Here, Morgan’s (1964[1877]) evolutionary framework was employed to attribute changes in the form of family, kinship and marriage to changes in the relations of production and the concurrent development of social inequality.

The matrilineal clan as presented by Engels (1986[1884]) was the direct opposite of the nuclear family – collectives of women and men united by kinship responsibilities shared children, land, and any other valuables communally. The family, private property and the state were the antithesis of matrilineal organisation, which Engels viewed as fundamental to “all being equal and free” (1986[1884]: 129). The implications of Engels’ argument for capitalist societies were not insignificant. Caricatures of the lives of hunters as “poore, nasty, brutish and short” were being challenged, and the implications for the institution of the family and the whole “civilised” edifice of private property, were clear. More provocatively still, Engels (1986[1884]) placed matrilineal coalitions of women at the core of his argument: “The communistic household in which most or all of the women belong to the same gens...is the material foundation of the supremacy of women, which was general in primitive times” (Engels, 1986[1884]: 114).

The establishment reaction to Morgan's "evolutionary" anthropology was the discouragement of any attempt to engage in "system-building" (Leacock, 1982: 86), and the move instead towards a twinned approach of cultural relativism with detailed empirical studies. Franz Boas (1911) in particular objected to Morgan's sweeping generalisations of whole culture areas, often on the basis of flimsy or inaccurate ethnographic references. Although important theoretical work continued to be produced by writers such as Durkheim (1912) and Mauss (1954), the attempt to develop broad, cross-cultural models was largely abandoned. In a recent summarisation of this, Adam Kuper (1988) declares that the age of grand theory is at an end. One gets the impression that this is timely and proper, when we consider the long reign of grand narrative extending from those such as Rousseau (1755), McLennan (1865) and Morgan (1964[1877]) to more recent thinkers such as Freud (1950) or Durkheim (1912). What all these writers had in common, claims Kuper (1988), was a political need to identify a viable alternative to the social order in which they lived and to which many of them objected. "They had particular views about modern society and constructed a directly contrary account of primitive society as they imagined it inverted the characteristics of modern society as they saw it" (Kuper, 1988: 240).

Until recently (and still in some "backwaters" and "twilight refuges") anthropology was held in thrall by a succession of flawed attempts to elucidate the origins of human society, and through this, to apprehend contemporary society. The concern was to establish some essential truth about human nature using early (and often inaccurate) accounts of "primitive" society. The basic trajectory adhered to was of kin-based matrilineal communities which gave way to territorially based patrilineal associations, which later developed into states (Kuper, 1988: 231). The implicit subtext, regardless of the story related, is that the attempt to tell a story at all was not only misguided and politically suspect, but largely irrelevant. That we have all moved on to the more sophisticated pursuit of local cultural hermeneutics and the reflexivity of the ethnographer comes across as a necessary maturation.

## BEYOND RELATIVITY

“Anthropology seems to be a discipline terrified of its own potential” writes Graeber (2004: 98). Mauss’ (1925) “Essay on the Gift”, he claims, used ethnography to present a “moral critique of capitalism” by exploring the nature of giving in alternative kinds of systems to those driven by capital and private profit. “Economies without money or markets...were not based on calculation, but on a refusal to calculate; they were rooted in an ethical system which consciously rejected most of what we would consider the basic principles of economics” (Graeber, 2004: 21). There is, he continues, a contemporary reluctance, even discomfort, with critically contrasting “egalitarian” and capitalist societies, mainly due to the danger of simplification inherent in setting up monolithic caricatures of specific cultures (see also Kenrick, 2002). But Graeber argues there is an urgent need for broad, communicable theory capable of answering basic questions such as “what, precisely, are the possible dimensions of non-alienated experience” (Graeber, 2004: 75)?

Until 12,000 years ago all human communities were hunting communities. As Lee (1999) states: “The worlds hunting and gathering peoples...represent the oldest and perhaps most successful human adaptation” (Lee, 1999: 1). Living in relatively small-scale groups, without the imposition of states or other forms of authority, and using modes of subsistence and distribution which actively preclude disparate accumulation of wealth, contemporary hunter-gatherers offer insights into ways of organising and kinds of sociality alternative to the increasingly monochrome version of consumer society offered by industrial capitalism.

Ethnographic and theoretical reflections on hunter-gatherers have never refrained from asking the kinds of questions assumed obsolete by Kuper (1992), though they have perhaps taken a more modest approach. A series of debates have attempted to outline what it is that makes such groups able to self-regulate in the absence of state control, or to uphold distinctive “modes of thought” despite relationships with non-hunters. Writing has been produced about the unique environmental sociality of hunter-gatherers which shapes sharing practices, and about the origin and universality of the sexual division of labour. The need to dispense with inveterate terms and assumptions on the nature of gender, power, and the symbolic has been stressed. None of these are small questions. All deal with the nature of what it means to be human, and with political alternatives to “our” systems. Occasionally, the word

“communism” floats up to the surface (Lee, 1999; Leacock, 1982; Barnard, 2003; Ingold, 1999). Thus while it’s difficult to find anyone proposing that what hunter-gatherers are doing is actually a revolutionary counter-proposition to capitalist modes of production, thought and organisation (though some make this the cornerstone of their thought (cf. Graber, 2004; Knight, 1991)) essays like Sahlins’ “Original Affluent Society” (1972) continue to generate much interest and discussion.

Ingold (1999) brushes on the idea of “communism in living” suggested by Morgan (1964[1877]), using it to illustrate the social, relational nature of sharing, but proceeds to drop the “society” from such collectives. Perhaps this is in part because if we allow that hunting communities are societies, albeit not of the kind familiar to state apparatuses and their ideologies, we must allow that Lewis Henry Morgan’s (1877) “communism in living”, or for that matter Kropotkin’s “equity, mutual aid, and mutual support” (1993 [1902]: 101) is not so far away from us. All this rests upon being able to argue convincingly for Morgan’s original thesis about the “pooling of effort and sharing of produce” (Ingold, 1999: 400) as signalling an active preference for egalitarian organisation and sociality. The thesis, popular among “revisionists” such as Wilmsen (1989), that hunter-gatherers are really just incidental – opportunists or scavengers surviving on the edges of an all-pervasive capitalist machine - effectively strips such peoples of the intentional, political impetus of their societies. Ingold (1999) emphasises that hunter-gatherers are not simply “stateless societies” as though “their social lives were somehow lacking or unfinished” (Ingold, 1999: 408). The principle of their *society*, he asserts, “is fundamentally against the state” (1999: 408).

Hunter-gatherer communities are not premised upon nuclear family units individually accumulating and exploiting resources, nor upon social relations of exploitation, but on the continual exchange between collectives of women and men. But rather than redefine society (thus retaining a useful term), Ingold (1999) does away with it altogether. Thus while it is clear that hunter-gatherers frequently do embody the “communism in living” ethos described by Morgan (1964 [1877]), they occupy a category beyond our own societal landscapes and structures. Ingold’s point is a useful one, and the case he makes for shedding the “society” label (rooted in different historical, economic and power trajectories) is a good one. The extrapolation of



“communism” to “large-scale, industrialised states” subverts Morgan’s original view of it as intrinsically embedded in domestic, kinship relations. But if we think about this, the logical conclusion is that hunter-gatherers are so special, so far beyond anything “we” could identify with or experience, that they represent a fascinating exception to a more general human proclivity for structural inequality and violence.

Lee (1988) was at pains to counter such logic in his exploration of the phenomenon of “primitive communism”: “Is primitive communism something we can define as a quintessential otherness, in negative terms, in the absence of leadership, absence of inequality, absence of property” (1988: 264)? In the absence of society? But isn’t the term “society” separable from the state, capitalism and hierarchy? Surely it depends on the definition? *The Collins Dictionary* (2000) offers as one possibility: “Those with whom one has companionship”. As another: “The totality of social relationships among organised groups of human beings” (2000: 1456). Ingold (1999) objects, rightly, that for hunter-gatherers the brittle divisions that separate human society from nature, people from things, are not valid. Society extends beyond human communities and into the world of animals and forest. “Things” are not objectified in the same way that people living in systems based on private property find normal. Clearly, when talking about hunter-gatherers, we need to expand our notion of society. This can be a positive, a statement of agency, a redefining of society itself. As Overing (2003) reasons: “The anthropological problem is that we have equated the vision of collectivity as a coercive force with the notion of the social itself. Society becomes by definition the prescriptive order, and the institutions of hierarchy through which the rules of this ordered whole are played out. There are, however, many peoples who view collectivity and the sociality it engenders in other terms” (Overing, 2003: 311). I labour the point because I want to follow Lee (1988) and Leacock (1983) in resurrecting the idea of communism, not “primitive”, but “communism in living”. And retaining the term “society” helps point up the theoretical and political implications of communistic societies for other types.

Writing about the experience (as opposed to the theory) of alienation, Graeber (2007) makes the point that the ability to *conceive* of alternate experiences – an integrated sense of self, a situation in which one controls one’s own labour – is central to challenging the experience of alienation. Structural violence depends upon a

narrowing of the imagination to preclude such re-visioning of social and political orders. And this is why it is important to be clear about evidence for alternative conceptualisations of self and community. Barnard (2003), in his essay on Peter Kropotkin's *"Mutual Aid"* (1902), highlights the current absence of the word "communism" from discussions of hunter-gatherers. This is at least in part the political reluctance of anthropologists writing in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. Kropotkin's vision of Anarchist-Communism is in fact ethnographically relevant, with its emphasis upon "liberty of the individual" and "social co-operation of the whole community" (Barnard, 2003: 39).

Cross-cultural writing on hunter-gatherers, regardless of the theoretical disposition of ethnographers, does indeed reiterate these qualities. If we argue for an understanding of hunters as communistic, what becomes of analyses in which privatisation and male privilege take priority? Another way of asking this is: What constitutes "the core of primitive communism" (Lee, 1988: 264)? Engels (1877) argued long ago that the ascendance of the nuclear family and private property is relatively recent in human history, and that the first right of ownership is of women over their fertility (cf. Knight et al (1996)). Surprisingly, given references to the centrality of kinship ties, to intense sexual joking as a levelling mechanism, to the pervasive evidence of female vigilance over male hunting labour and yields, to the value placed upon children and affective bonds, and to the strong political presence of women in day-to-day organisation and decision-making processes, women as a body are rarely if ever credited with constituting or maintaining "the core" of egalitarian systems.

## SHARING AS DEMAND

In order to look more closely at the nature of sharing I examine three approaches to it by Woodburn (1982), Bird-David (2005) and Ingold (2005). Woodburn's (1982) model with its emphasis on the "internally coherent and viable" systems of peoples such as the Hadza of Tanzania, was directly implicated in the revisionist challenge. His writing on the "immediate-return" system has profoundly influenced the development of much subsequent theory, and despite criticism, remains useful in its generation of a set of characteristics peculiar to communities such as the Mbendjele (Lewis, 2002), the Baka (Joiris, 1997; Bahuchet; Terashima), the Mbuti (Turnbull,

1961; 1965) or the BiAka (Kisliuk, 1998). These are: the social and ideological imperative to share, epitomised in the distribution of the meat of large game animals; direct access to material resources, knowledge and skills by all members of the community; relative gender and age equality; and an unparalleled degree of individual autonomy and freedom of movement. Not only are such communities usually highly mobile, mobility is of central importance and value. Even where it would not be difficult to store food, this is not done, the off-loading of excess simultaneously acting to prevent inhibition of movement and individual accumulation.

The attributes defined by Woodburn (1982) compose strands of a single experiential fabric mitigating above all against privatisation, whether of people, things, or items of knowledge. Woodburn frames this as the “disengagement” of people from property, and follows the logic to a more subtle disengagement of people from restrictive social commitments and dependencies. In all this the theme of sharing, whether of meat, arrows, knowledge and skills, territory, or political power and its benefits, is recurrent and profound. The impetus assumed by the material and economic obligation to share is further validated by a ritual and symbolic preoccupation with sharing, whether it be the healing *n/om* of the Ju/'hoan trance dancer, or the ritual tracking expertise of the Mbendjele female initiate. Although Woodburn (2005) more recently has identified ritual and religion as the weak link in immediate-return systems, and therefore the potential pivot from which privatisation and hierarchy emerges, his citing of such rituals as exemplifying the sharing ethos contradicts this. The rituals of such peoples are acknowledged to have considerable time-depth. Were they harbingers of hierarchy, we would expect it to have emerged by now. I will argue that evidence from ethnographies of Central African hunter-gatherers favours a view of female ritual as working to enshrine and safeguard the more informal equality of day to day life, performing an adaptive function for the group rather than threatening its survival.

There is in much recent writing on hunter-gatherer sociality a focus on oneness – the end point - without an allowance of the process *towards* it (enthusiasm for *communitas* that sidesteps structure). With the term “sharing” at the centre of discussions about hunter-gatherer society, it is necessary to examine further what is

meant by it. Barnard (2003) cautions against setting the ethnographer's conception of sharing on to communities for whom it may be a less harmonious issue: "Sharing is an emotive word, and one must be careful not to misconstrue its ethnographic meanings" (2003: 30). The continual social vigilance and even aggression that accompanies "sharing" in hunter-gatherer communities highlights the demand as much as the giving. Then, the question takes on the activeness of agency: Who is demanding; why are they demanding? What is most prized, and by whom?

## BIRD-DAVID AND THE GIVING ENVIRONMENT

Bird-David's (1990) "The Giving Environment" heralded a shift in thinking about the economic and environmental perspectives of hunter-gatherers. Writing against the belief in hunter-gatherers as indistinguishable from their close neighbours because of subsistence overlaps, she began by setting the difference in approaches to the environment: hunter-gatherers conceive of the natural world as a "giving parent" with whom they are in continual conversation; farmers relate to it as an ancestor. These fundamentally different metaphors about relationship shape the respective economic systems of the two groups, and spill out into other domains. In objecting that "the kind of economic system that the Nayaka exhibit has not yet been recognised...giving has not been analytically distinguished from reciprocity" (1990: 195), Bird-David (1990) opened the question of metaphor and cosmology as underpinning economic approaches and differentiating hunters from cultivators.

Nayaka ideas about the environment gravitated around a root metaphor of "forest is parent" (Bird-David, 1990:190) which in turn represented a "local economic model...Unlike Western models, exotic economic models are constructed about primary metaphors that are frequently drawn from the human body or family" (ibid: 190). Nayaka, like the Mbuti, refer to the forest and its constituent parts – rivers, hills, particular rocks – as *dod appa* ("big father") or *dod awa* ("big mother"). Hetaya, the nature deity worshipped by both Nayaka and Bette Kurumbu is for the former a "birth-giver" or mother, and for the latter "the old man who died first", or an ancestor. The environment for Nayaka then is first a parent who provides, irrespective of their child's conduct. This "giving" environment, furthermore, reflects people's social sharing practices. Nayaka refer to themselves collectively as siblings

– *sonta* – instituting an informal compulsion to give, a readiness to request, and an expectation to receive all in keeping with the root metaphor explored by Bird-David (1990). Nayaka do not “give resources to each other in a calculated, foresighted fashion, with a view to receiving something in return, nor do they make claims for debts” (1990: 191). In contrast, cultivator groups such as the Bette Kurumba perceive nature as “providing food in return for appropriate conduct” (1990: 190), similar to a reciprocating ancestor.

Bieseke (1993) has worked extensively with the idea of Ju/'hoan oral and expressive forms as adaptive strategies. “Expressive forms are important in codifying both attitudes like reciprocal sharing as well as a great volume of subsistence information...The cognitive ability to represent situations removed from the immediate sensory field is...basic to the social hunting and gathering adaptation” (Bieseke, 1993: 42). While she doesn't touch directly on Ju/'hoan symbolic views of their environment, she does insist that the use of metaphor and symbol systems among hunter-gatherers are core practical tools for the carrying, embodying, and sharing of crucial cultural knowledge.

Conventionally, sharing is assumed to signify the dividing of something into portions, which are then meted out between individuals. Bird-David (2005), in a critique of the analytical language used by theorists such as Woodburn, claims that this notion of division is inappropriate when talking about hunter-gatherers. The focus on sharing as an economic event, particularly the sharing of game animals, disguises “the vitality of the joint event” (Bird-David, 2005: 204), and therefore the experience of the people who affirm their connection to one another and the animal through participating in it. She draws the discussion of sharing back to local Nayaka experience and cosmology, wherein she argues “sharing” is an integral feature of a wider reality of “connectedness”, rather than an ideologically imposed sanction. Her focus on local perceptions of the environment and of game animals as one with Nayaka society, gives further depth and meaning to the term “sharing”. Here, the distribution of meat from one hunting episode expresses “a gamut of relations, among people and with the environment...an embodiment of forest-feeding; a concrete manifestation of forest-caring” (Bird-David, 2005: 214). Thus it is “relational levelling” as opposed to (or in addition to) Woodburn's “assertive egalitarianism”

that generates practical equality. It is not because of an *idea* of sameness that people, as discrete individuals, agree to share, but because they are on a profound level, and by a plethora of social and symbolic experiences, connected. This she describes as “the property of relations” rather than the “relations of property” (2005: 205), in an attempt to draw the focus away from conventional notions of property and back to a concern with the quality of relations. Bird-David criticises the examination of local phenomena through “the prism of the Western concept of property”, as she argues Woodburn (1982) and others have done.

In a similar vein Ingold (2005) examines the roles of memory and time in forestalling the appearance of property in hunter-gatherer society, arguing that it is inappropriate to speak of “property” at all in this context. Concepts of property and ownership, whether we view things as communally or individually “owned”, belong to a language of occupation with which, Ingold (2005) maintains, hunter-gatherers are not familiar. He argues instead for an understanding of hunter-gatherer social process in which people, material items, land and knowledge are all interwoven in the same complex and kinetic web, no part of which can satisfactorily be disconnected from another. The mind that apprehends property as a selection of discrete, inanimate items to be distributed or not, depending on the ideology, misses the point.

For Ingold (2005), “sharing” itself must be stretched to embrace the entire human and non-human universe, and must set aside simple materialist connotations in favour of a philosophy of shared meaning, or shared process, in which things, people and environment continually manifest each other. Ingold (2005) uses the examples of hunting and storytelling to illustrate the way in which hunter-gatherers create a continuum of memory, connecting the act of hunting or narrating to all previous acts of hunting or narrating. This is achieved by a recursive assembling of the strands of past lives “in the very movement of carrying forward their own. There is no point at which the story ends and life begins” (Ingold, 2005: 171). This is a crucial point, but Ingold does not elaborate on how or why hunter-gatherers “pick up the strands of past lives in the very movement of carrying forward their own” (2005: 171). The politics of the fact that they do so, in contrast to peoples who have conceptually separated from (or objectified) memory, is not discussed, though I believe this is the point at which Woodburn’s (1982) and Ingold’s (2005) ideas meet and complement each

other.

I do not see Woodburn's (1982) more materialist model as invalidated by the insights of such perspectivist arguments. Rather, it seems that each stance illuminates the other. While Woodburn (1982) is not explicit in his acknowledgement of the categorical biases and assumptions inherent in his argument, or the prospective ontological shift facilitated by working with local thought structure and idiom, writers such as Ingold (2005) and Bird-David (2005) for their part present eloquent arguments which successfully critique conventional theory without offering a practicable alternative. They tend also to neglect the concrete, political impellent of economic and inter-sexual tension, something which *does* transcend the differences between cultures. While sharing is certainly visible on the phenomenal level, it is also an economic event. The fact that it is so assertively and carefully monitored, and the fact that there is considerable haranguing and indignation when it does not occur, tells us that a "sense of connectedness" is not enough to generate sharing on this level and at this magnitude. To suggest otherwise, in an attempt to liberate hunter-gatherers from an over-emphasis on property and economy, in fact threatens to rob them of the genius that is their own economic and political system. However a community conceptualises or engages with the human and more-than-human world, there remain vital tensions sprung at the interstices of social and economic life which must be integrated and dealt with. Woodburn's (1982) success is in identifying and analysing the systemic mechanisms egalitarian society has devised for this purpose. The contribution of writers such as Ingold (2005) or Bird-David (2005) is in building upon these, fleshing out and giving aesthetic tenor to practices which should never have been defined in purely material terms anyway.

#### SO WHAT'S MISSING? ROOT METAPHORS AND POLITICS

A more pertinent criticism of all three writers is the almost complete failure to factor in sexual politics as a causal mechanism in the *creation and maintenance* of both systems and kinds of relations. Crucially, Ingold mentions the issue of "possession" as against "property" – the argument between caring and being cared for, "*the dialectic of emotional life*" in which people continually strive to reconcile trust and love with the insecurity of suspicion. (Ingold, 2005: 174). But this is mentioned in

closing, and how the dynamics underlying such tensions are played out between the sexes is not discussed. Given the striking evidence for gender parity in immediate-return societies, it is crucial to establish how and why this endures when in almost all other known types of social aggregate it is largely unknown. Hewlett (1999) has researched the intergenerational maintenance of trust and equity through particular kinds of parenting practices, but none of this answers questions about why such practices continue to be chosen and how they evolved in the first place. In examining the continuance of social and gender equality, we must ask how women are actively demanding or asserting their right to it, rather than simply state that the “system” favours it.

The political aspects of this argument are developed in Eleanor Leacock’s 1981 collection of articles on women cross-culturally. In this, she set out to challenge what had been until then (and with few exceptions, continued to be) the widely accepted and theorised subordination of women in hunter-gatherer society and beyond. A Marxist feminist with a comprehensive knowledge of Morgan’s (1975[1877]) work, the core of Leacock’s appeal was that egalitarian social systems differ qualitatively from all other known types. In their relationship with the environment, in their kinship applications, in their political systems and in their economy, hunter-gatherers should not be confused with even their closet neighbours. One of Leacock’s (1982) concerns in *“Myths of Male Dominance”* was to construct a historical vista that would illuminate the original nature of women’s autonomy among the Labrador Montagnais-Naskapi, among whom she had conducted fieldwork. Although the Naskapi, by the time of Leacock’s research in 1950, had broken down into single-family units in which individual men had assumed responsibility for trapping and fur trading, she reconstructed Naskapi social life using missionary diaries and ethnographic accounts, prior to the advent of trade. Her argument – that despite a long-standing but flexible division of labour, women were powerful, autonomous agents in their own right – is pertinent for contemporary hunter-gatherers.

In an effective riposte to feminist theory of the time, Leacock argued that differences between egalitarian and “class” societies were not merely quantitative, but qualitative, and that therefore “altogether different sets of relationships from those involving



economic power” (1982: 134) should be allowed for. Writing at a time when the study of hunter-gatherers was flourishing, with terms and concepts under investigation by a range of scholars from those favouring ecological approaches to political economists, and when the prevailing feminist consensus was on universal female subjugation, Leacock (1982) brought a Marxist feminist slant to the debate. What this meant was altering the very terms of the discussion about “universal male dominance” and “the public/private dichotomy”. As Leacock (1982) saw it, a division of labour along sex lines need not in itself culminate in the subordination of one sex. This was only inevitable where property, hierarchy, and female exclusion from public realms were integral features of the system. Aware of feminist sensitivity to her critique, Leacock noted:

The possibility that women and men could be separate but equal is seldom considered, albeit not surprisingly, since it seems to tally with the adjuration to women in our society to appreciate the advantages of the liabilities maternity here incurs. That an equal status for women could be interwoven with childbearing is a notion that has only begun to be empirically examined (1982: 136).

She reiterated that what we are talking about is not the equality of hierarchical societies – “equality connotes rights and opportunity specific to class society and confuses similarity with equity” (1982:134) – but rather *autonomy* – individual mobility, freedom of access to resources, and political agency. Complementarity here is key, along with a whole different corpus of relational terms. Leacock’s ideas were a timely intervention both in the burgeoning field of hunter-gatherer studies and in the more general feminist conversation about difference. Yet her insights remain underutilised in the ongoing discussion about gender and the sexual division of labour. Ironically, this may be due to the nature of her analysis, which dealt with contradiction by citing “culture contact” or ethnographer bias. These are valid points but as Mukhopadhyay and Higgins (1988) argue, had the effect of making her own assertions unfalsifiable. Further, and more problematically, she did not expand on the politics of women’s *reproductive*, as opposed to productive, labour and autonomy. Mukhopadhyay and Higgins summarise this position: “Relations of reproduction...are determined by relations of production” (1988: 477).

I utilize Leacock's (1982) insights independently of their historical grounding, and expand her understanding of productive autonomy, contending that it is not only in the *history* of hunter-gatherers that we find gender parity. When ethnographers have focused specifically on sexual politics among hunter-gatherers, they have frequently noted the theme of "different but equal" - a "muscular balance" (Bieseke, 1993) resting on a pivot of economic autonomy *and* intra-sexual solidarity. Bieseke (1993), whose work I return to, has examined women's control of their own labour alongside their keen interest in that of men. Her exploration of Ju/!hoansi women's ideological claims to meat from hunters commences, like Leacock's (1982), from the importance of recognising the collective nature of women's agency. Students of hunter-gatherer society frequently comment upon this, whether in relation to gathering, food preparation, childcare, resolution of disputes, or ritual performance. Yet the prevailing approach is often either to portray foragers as a single, amorphous body which converses as one with a "giving" environment (Bird-David, 1990), or women become the individual associates of men, the conjugal unit becomes the main relationship, and the division of labour is the result of "discourses of male privilege" (Brightman, 1996: 688).

It is not commonly asked whether the noticeable qualitative difference of these societies from others is related to women's relatively autonomous position within them. Rather, the fact that women enjoy such status and freedom is attributed to the benevolence of the system, and any threat to this freedom as coming from male ritual power. As though such systems could endure by the sheer force of their own tenacity, apart from the daily physical needs, rivalries and compromises of the people who render them real. As though the acceptance of a holistic structure – a series of interlocking mechanisms creating a working whole – overshadowed the competition, agency, aggression and passion of individuals and coalitions. This was the beauty of older, now largely unfashionable attempts at system-building: they asked blunt, provocative questions about sex, conflict, the origins of the family, the functional purpose of kinship rules, the inevitability of property or the state.

In hunter-gatherer society it is precisely in the "passion of performance" (Ingold, 2005:172) that profound inter-sexual conversations and agreements are being played out, conversations and agreements moreover which structure and animate the entire

socio-political landscape. My argument is that where an immediate-return system is gradually changed to a delayed-return system, it will be women as a political body who stand to lose most. Without some awareness of the *competitive* role played by sex and its perpetual prospective of imbalance, questions about the roots of immediate-return systems, or any systems, remain partial. That such systems make sense to the people who manifest them is obvious. That these people maintain an extraordinary fluency with their world is also clear. But this is indeed, in Woodburn's terms, *demanding* equality, in that it is a labour recursively performed by those who stand to lose most from its neglect. Jerome Lewis (2007), in a recent paper on Mbendjele communicative culture, implies that in Mbendjele society, these are in fact women.

Lewis (2002) has written previously on the centrality of Mbendjele women's public oratories, and their intense loyalty to one another when under attack. He argues that women's public communicative techniques – repetitive expressions of solidarity and concurrence, a monopoly on mocking speech styles to confront tension – give them great political power in their communities. Like many hunter-gatherer ethnographers (see for example Bird-David), Lewis (2002) has also highlighted a recurrent theme in Mbendjele society whereby a conversation is maintained across and beyond the borders of the human community. It is well documented that hunter-gatherers do not enforce the same categorical exclusions that Western thought does. Mbendjele women are known to be expert in locating and “tying” game animals, who themselves are particularly drawn to menstruating women (Lewis, 2002: 108). Similarly, voracious *edio* (ancestral) spirits who roam the parameters of Mbendjele camps must also be placated with gifts of raw meat, they too being partial to menstrual blood (Lewis, 2008: 121). The forest itself manifests as *Ejengi* during that dance. These are brief allusions to the sociality extending beyond human communities and embracing diverse and related “others”. The noting of this is one thing. But of equal importance is asking how and why this vast web of intersubjectivity or shared sociality is communally rendered and sustained, given it is not the rule among human communities.

To state that we may have been partial in our way of knowing the world, in our deterministic assumptions or our categorical myopia is not difficult. What is

interesting is that anthropologists *have* proceeded with such exclusive myths and for so long, given the breadth and mutuality apparent in other cultural perspectives. This takes us back to questions about structure, comparison and cause, and ultimately to questions about the origins of systems. While the fieldwork tradition initiated by Franz Boas has produced an extremely rich ethnographic record, the simultaneous reluctance to attempt the system-building required by “big” questions has tended to mute dialogue and hinder connections between fieldworkers from diverse (and related) subjects. Where a consensus alternate to the one we rely on is evident, it seems primary to ask how it is being funded and generated. How is political and symbolic power being distributed, using what social imperatives, and on whose behalf? The available literature suggests that for many Central African hunter-gatherers a strong communal ethos upholding shared status and rights is at the centre of the kind of extensive, inclusive sociality described by writers such as Ingold (2004; 2005), Bird-David (2005) and Viveiros de Castro (2000). The view of sharing as emergent from a sense of connectedness or embodied memory is partial. The sharing ethos is underpinned by a perpetual movement against individual ownership. It is this reiterated *claim-to*, and the potential to actually withdraw consensus on a large scale, that is pivotal to the balanced reciprocity so prominent in Mbendjele or Mbuti communities.

## COUNTER-POWER AND THE SHARING ETHOS

Time and again those who have studied and lived with hunter-gatherers urge in their subsequent writings a fundamental shift in our approaches to environment, economy, sociality, kinship, territoriality and politics. These things among hunters, they insist, are simply too different to be accommodated by Western conceptual systems. Trying to imagine “the possible dimensions of non-alienated experience” (Graber, 2004) directly challenges the ontological and political experience of hierarchy. The argument about counter-power that this chapter has advanced is that in non-capitalist, non-hierarchical societies, this arises and is sustained by women’s coalitions. The move to reassess areas such as territoriality or politics exposes an area in which theorists rarely argue for different approaches, and often quite the opposite: ritual. Here, say some (Woodburn, 1982), is the weak spot in egalitarianism. Here is where gender inequality, age inequality and knowledge discrepancy threatens to tip the

balance, to calcify into systemic hierarchy. While allowing for the complexity of the issue – there are indeed cases in which men monopolise ritual power; but what then are women doing in their collective performances? - I argue that if all other areas of hunter-gatherer life deserve new theoretical approaches, so should the use of ritual.

“Communitas”, and by implication ritual, while keeping the same general processual form, may not perform the same function in all societies. If the mode of thought and production is radically different, the function of ritual, and the use of ritual symbols, should also differ. Biesele (1993) makes the point that for hunter-gatherers “certain social tasks may be accomplished exclusively in the special world of expressive forms...Expressive forms may perhaps accomplish things for society, in other words, that can be done in no other way. In the region of “special realities” lies a huge reservoir of adaptive potential for our species” (Biesele, 1993: 193). Bird-David’s (1996) insight into Nayaka perceptions of the environment as manifest in the “local economic model: Forest is parent” has resonance beyond environmental relationships. “Unlike Western models, exotic (*sic*) economic models are constructed about primary metaphors that are frequently drawn from the human body or family” (Bird-David, 1996: 190). The expressive forms that accomplish “things...that can be done in no other way”, and the manifestation of such forms out of the human body, will be elaborated upon in subsequent chapters. What I want to do here is keep visible two themes: ritual action in hunter-gatherer society; and female social power.

Graeber (2004), using a synthesis of Mauss (1925) and Clastres’ (1977) work, makes an important assertion about counter-power in egalitarian societies: “Counter-power, at least in the most elementary sense, actually exists where states and markets are not even present” (Graeber, 2004: 25). Counter-power then, conventionally believed to signify in opposition to the state and capital and therefore because of state, capital, kings, plutocrats, etc, is actually active in “institutions which ensure such types of person never come about. *What it is counter to, then, is a potential, a latent aspect or dialectical possibility if you prefer, within the society itself*” (Graeber, 2004: 25 Emphasis mine). He highlights an important “blind spot” in Clastres’ (1977) theory that Amazonians organise intentionally against the emergence of the state: the neglect of inter-sexual relations and what these illumine for people. But Graber (2004) falls into the trap of seeing gender inequalities (in particular the threat of gang rape against women), as illumining *men* about what the infliction of arbitrary, unquestionable

power would feel like.

Is it not more likely that those to be found organising against the prospect of structural violence are those who periodically feel its breath on their faces? Lewis (2002) mentions an episode in which an Mbendjele woman who had wandered onto men's secret *njanga* path was allegedly gang raped, commenting that murder wouldn't have been an unusual punishment for such a transgression. This is a key point. I don't argue for an understanding of egalitarian societies as untroubled by the potential of violence; on the contrary, I see their adaptive strength as precisely the way in which collectives of women mobilise against such systemic coercion, or power-over (cf. Turnbull, 1972; 1978). Graeber (2004) acknowledges that there are certain ineradicable dilemmas and tensions within all communities, egalitarian or otherwise, and hypothesises that the reason egalitarian counter-power works is precisely because it confronts this fact continually. This point comes through strongly in Kisliuk's (1999) ethnography of BaYaka in the Central African Republic. In a chapter on egalitarianism among hunter-gatherers, she explicitly connects women's continued ritual power and cohesion, expressed in collective dances, to their social autonomy.

## CONCLUSION

Outside the context of dances, and on several occasions, I witnessed the immediate, vocal intervention of women on behalf of one another. These interventions seemed to be supported by women's nightly performances. It is not clear whether without periodic collective reinforcements individual women would be capable of asserting their needs with such confidence. The vigilance and nagging of an old woman supervising the distribution of cigarettes or the intervention of Mgonye to ensure the equal division of salt – these myriad moments were the daily, recursive labour of equality, the hard work of sharing and insisting upon sharing. But the nightly performances, with their crescendo of song, the fluency of their choreography, their hub of laughter, the presences coming in from the darkened forest, the transgression of boundaries and bodies even within the celebration of them – this was the genius and persuasion of the dialectic in full, free swing, the imaginative commentary on the tension between caring and being cared for, between sexual factionalism and the

intelligence and completeness of one's community.

During the time I lived at Mboule my language abilities were almost non-existent. Debilitating as this was, it also served to unfasten another, alternative space for the apprehension of events. Early on in the fieldwork experience, our efficient but politically problematic interpreter absented himself from camp. I was left to rely on the graciousness of the community, who spent hours supplying me with appropriate terms. Thus I became attuned to the physicality and effect of these almost nightly performances, their humour and superb communicative potential. On several evenings the same groups of women I had seen leaving for the forest coagulated into tightly branched bodies. The dances *were* passionately performed or asserted (Ingold, 2005) in that they framed a collective statement directed unambiguously at men. During "*Elanda*" (discussed in detail later) men formed a separate line, facing the women, and replied with their own, complimentary song. During "*Ngoku*" they were consigned to the role of grudging admirers, as women monopolised the social space.

Yet always they were involved, whether implicitly or explicitly, their observation and participation central foci of women's theatrics. Bearing in mind Knight's (1991) argument for the dynamism of female solidarity, and Ingold's (2005) idea of the tension of possession, the core issue should be with matters of alliance. As wives, women's collective political power is relatively weak. What these performances seemed to be reiterating was their corporate ability to influence community decision-making and camp equilibrium. Barnard (1980) and Knight (1991) both prioritise the imperative of kinship in organising and influencing sex-roles, and in particular the relationship between siblings which is "the antithesis of the husband/wife relationship" (Barnard, 1980:123). In such contexts, women's ritual life provides form for a daily, diffusive solidarity, the central message of which is concerned with sharing, of political and symbolic power, as of cigarettes.

Symbolic power is so frequently theorised as power-*over*, yet in this context it is more helpfully understood as power-*to* – an enabling performance, an assertion of authority and solidarity with a social network incorporating game animals, forest spirits, and the forest itself. Women use these influential others to bolster and underpin an argument on the behalf of shared status. By the very nature of the

collective community performances, Bourdieu's minority power-mongers are displaced. The terms of symbolic power as conventionally understood are indeed the terms of the "accumulation mode of thought" – relations viewed in terms of control-over, a plethora of ontological, social and emotional fences erected not only to contain but to exclude. Hunter-gatherer thought structure challenges this mind, with its deliberate and consensual interest in clear-seeing, in inclusion, and in fluidity. In order to comprehend the dynamics extant in egalitarian sociality, we need therefore to re-situate ourselves as seers and thinkers, even as we retain a common language that will allow us to communicate within our own intellectual community. Here is where the project of anthropology and the instrument of Mbendjele ritual may fruitfully meet – in borrowing from the collective imagination that successfully and continually re-situates *without* tearing the fabric of the formal social web, a kind of clear-seeing reminiscent of this mind may be possible.

By exploring local systems and exegesis we are provided with a significant counter to the "universal subordination of women" that is relevant beyond anthropological knowledge-making. Close attention to empirical studies which dissemble the public/private or ownership/alienation dichotomy means we can begin to rethink the naturalness or inevitability of sexually based inequality. The use of anthropology as cultural critique is legitimate provided theoretical concerns are continually measured against ethnographic testimony. Yaka, Baka or Efe models of gender and hunting can, if carefully assembled, be used to construct alternative epistemological vistas about the meaning of labour roles, reproduction, gender ideologies, and symbolic power.



## SECOND INTERLUDE

### *Ibamba-Mobaye: Learning to go slow*

In the early morning glaze of the market, scores of small wooden stalls are laid out in rambling rows. Kitchen utensils and boiled sweets jostle with trussed baby crocodiles – a local delicacy – whose bodies slump pitifully in rusty wheelbarrows. Children dart in and out between great mountains of bananas, screeching nervously. Philippe is pointing out C.I.B's answer to the bush-meat problem – a small, squat building that houses freezers full of frozen (and legal) meat, for purchase by the local population. But next to the bustle and flow of the market, the shop is conspicuously empty.

Our guide arrives – Mr. Massampeu, a diminutive Bantu man who's travelled widely through the Ibambe forest - and crushed into a C.I.B land-rover, we leave Pokola behind us and head for Ikelemba. On the periphery of town, as we cross the Ndoki river on a makeshift ferry, a handful of white egrets are scattered up into the air like confetti, illuminating the condensed green of the forest. A small troop of Mbendjele children with two old women stand transfixed as we pass. As the weariness of the logging town begins to slip away, I notice thin trails cutting off into the foliage intermittently. Mr. Massampeu points out elephant dung, gorilla tracks, two wild boar frozen in the groundcover. The verges look to me like an impenetrable riot of plant life, but Mr. Massampeu shakes his head knowingly – “*c'est une illusion*”. At Ikelemba, a small village on the banks of the Sangha river, we stop to collect Jean-Pierre, the area Chief, and his son Ludovic. They want to accompany us in order to confront some Pygmies they claim have occupied their land, but it becomes clear their presence is more to do with novelty than any serious land dispute.

We arrive at Ibamba-Mobaye, a small Pygmy roadside camp, late in the morning as the sun begins to beat down relentlessly. The fifty or so adults here have travelled down from Ikelemba, attracted by the newly opened logging thoroughfare. The road itself is aesthetically brutal - a wide red passage the verges of which are marked by

torn trees and tree stumps - the carnage of bulldozers. In the midday sun, a group of women of varying ages lounge unperturbed in the middle of the road.



**Figure 8: Women on the logging road at Ibamba-Mobaye**

Mr. Massampeu, fluent in Mbendjele, goes to negotiate with the men. After five minutes he returns with six companions, including the seven year old son of the one of the men, and we commence the fifteen kilometre trek that will take us to our camp for this evening.

As we leave the road behind and wind down hill beneath the canopy, the air changes to a deep, pellucid green. After a few hundred yards of tangled vegetation, the floor of the forest clears. Under the umbrella of canopy, the groundcover is sparse and the only obstacles are the treacherous stray lianas that flail out unpredictably over the path. Occasionally we're compelled to cross a column of ants, presaged by the men at the front of the caravan yelling delightedly "*Njauku! Njauku!*" at which we all begin the ridiculous mincing dance that ensures only a few insects have time to stick. After two hours unbroken walking, the Pygmies abruptly throw down their bags and disappear into the trees. Philippe explains they've found honey and won't go further till they've smoked the tree. Intrigued, I follow. Keshamay, an unusually tall, shy

young man is already half way up a large Sepo, a thin rope of liana vine around his waist. He places a bundle of smoking leaves in a hole in the trunk, then leans out as the furious bees begin to abandon their nest. Poba, his seven year old son, sits cross-legged in a cluster of shrubs, gazing up at his father. For the duration of the operation he neither moves nor acknowledges me. When the men rejoin us, they hand around chunks of warm comb - prized food for the Mbendjele.

After another hour the men again digress, this time to climb for pine nuts – ingredients for tonight's soup. They stare at us while we stumble round the foot of the tree snapping cameras. Finally, after another two hours of walking, we arrive at an abandoned Mbendjele camp and pitch our tents for the night. We wash in a muddy stream and sit to dry at the fire, where Philippe is distributing chunks of bread. Languid with tiredness and drunk on the dense, resinous dark, none of us wants to succumb to sleep. We linger for hours, drinking sugary tea, staring at the frosting of stars over the forest canopy, the Mbendjele bantering among themselves, their voices meandering through camp like a melody - hypnotic, comforting. Later, deep in the night, I wake in the tent to hear them singing softly outside.

We wake at five a.m. in damp, dirty clothes. Swarming bees are besieging our tent. The Mbendjele have long ago risen from their makeshift shelter of branches and a sack-sheet, but crouch companionably in the dawn glow. An odd, copper light trickles from the canopy in lazars and puddles. After a breakfast of smoked fish and coffee, wooden-limbed, we pack up and abandon camp to the fractious bees. But almost as soon as we set off the Mbendjele have disappeared on another honey hunt. While we linger on the path, there's a sudden, rending crash from a few hundred yards away as a tree is felled. Philippe shakes his head in disgust – *"All for some honey!"* And when I arrive to see Keshamay with his arm in a freshly fallen Sepo up to the elbow, digging out honeycomb while bees swarm, my first thought is of waste. But then I think from a world characterised by the see-saw of consumerist gluttony versus environmental anxiety. For these men, the forest simply offers abundance; they take without guilt, plunder or the need for profit.

When they've stocked up on more honey, we head off again towards Bokamba Island, where the community of Pygmies should be, traversing a wide, endless

swamp. After what seems like hours of waist-high glutinous black mud, and as Germano and I flounder in a root-strewn and precarious stretch of water, our guides toss down their



**Figure 9: Keshamay climbing for honey**

bags and head off through the trees in pursuit of honey. We stand dazed and exhausted, faces strewn with dirt and sweat. Around us - a deep, tea-coloured pool fringed with leaves and lianas and hundreds of tiny blue butterflies that stipple the air. I haul myself up onto a narrow island and sit dripping, hungry and sullen. We've run out of sugar now, and the mood is sober. In contrast, the Mbendjele are in perpetual high spirits, evidence that they're very much within their element. They seem delighted to be away from the road, and with such novel companions. But they aren't indifferent to our suffering. After they return and we begin again, Keshamay stops me mid-swamp and unwraps a parcel of leaves. Smiling, he proffers a big chunk of honeycomb.

At 4.00 p.m., we arrive at the place where the camp should have been, to find nothing. Two large, abandoned shelters, a troop of chimps squealing in the distance. Silence. We open the tents, prepare coffee, scratch our heads. It isn't clear whether

the families camped here left for their own reasons or because word reached them of our approach. There are the remains of a fire in the centre of the clearing, but the oddly eerie stoppage of sudden desertion. All around us, the engine of the forest whirrs. Where have the people who were camped here gone? They're a community who've not left the forest for some years, and it's becoming obvious that they wouldn't have invited our attention.

As night falls, the manic chatter of the chimps quiets and the comforting blue smoke from the cooking fire flutters upwards. Fireflies quiver like a wall around camp, marking the forest darkness; a soup of cocoa leaves, palm nuts and smoked fish simmers. Perched on logs around the soup pot, our Mbendjele companions observe us assiduously. Poba, curled up between the bodies of his father and uncle, begins to sing in a clear, wavering alto a dreamy child's song, and it moves in and out of the men's talk, the perpetual strings of the cicadas, the fragrance of wood-smoke and tobacco. All of us here have grown still, idling by the fire, and there's only Poba's voice now, growing frailer as sleep covers him. I never paid serious attention to the possibility that simply existing in relationship with such an environment might have contributed to a kind of sociality anthropologists have attempted to analyse using tools formed by economic imperatives and interests. The argument about the "giving" environment, and subsequent refinements of it, didn't seem relevant to my ideas post-Congo. As we crawl into our tents, none of us speak.

After another day rooting around in the area and a few more honey hunts, we give up the search for the lost community and decide to head back to the road the following morning. We wake on our forth day at 4 a.m., pack our things, pass around coffee with slices of cold manioc, and begin the 20 kilometre trek out of the forest. The day passes in a blur, exhaustion and the need for haste invoking silence. There are no more honey-hunts now that we're back in a clock-demarcated schedule. In the middle of the day, my right foot begins to fester and ache. At the last swamp, one of the men, Daboka, offers more honey, and we persevere, mud lacquering our faces and hair, our clothes sodden. It's thus that we come upon a group of women and children collecting water at a spring near the road. They comment discreetly to each-other as we troop past, but whoop and cackle with our companions. Immediately, the men

begin to relate what I suspect are anecdotes focused on our habits and mishaps, and the whole group laughs raucously.

Out on the roadside, where we sit to unpeel socks from raw feet, a sudden despondency descends on our group. People crouch in the ditches made by bulldozers and a few skeletal dogs lie prostrate in the heat. Those children who wander over are all stricken with skin diseases and sores, and our jovial, insouciant guides are sombre. They've left the forest, but what have they gained? There will in time be small, discretionary compounds of land, maybe a school where the children will learn to speak French. This is something the Bantu-speaking population have seized upon as a measure of Mbendjele "civilisation". A logging truck has pulled in to speak to Philippe and a few *bilo* have wandered down to take bundles of cassava leaves from Mbendjele women. These people came willingly to the roadside. They remain here by choice. Yet other, similar communities have made the same choice, only to find that when months later they want to return en masse to the forest, access has been closed. There are many cases, particularly in Cameroon, of forest peoples lured out to new logging thoroughfares by curiosity or the hope of barter (not to mention those muscled out by central government) who find themselves stuck in a no-mans-land, somewhere between their old life and the system they've been thrust into. People in these cases are resilient and industrious, and evidence suggests they retain central aspects of their political and cultural life. "Culture" - far more fluid and mutable a thing than the term allows - adapts, finds new avenues of expression, sheds obsolete limbs. But to view people's culture as separable from their lands, as though everything, including language and its unique sociality, were not intricately bound to those landscapes, is to miss a profound point. To witness the beginning of the process that will see "forest people" reinvented as "roadside dwellers" is to see the health and authority of motion succumb to stasis.

An ancient woman squats down beside me, and a few younger women follow. Looking directly into my eyes, she begins to speak earnestly. Her eyes are shrewd and dark, her cheekbones fine lines strobing her face, and an elaborate blue tattoo rises up from both cheeks and pans out across her forehead. She wears the traditional *malembe* raffia skirt favoured by Mbendjele women - a red bark belt supporting thick



layers of coralwood-dyed leaves that sway and crackle as she moves. I shrug a few times gesturing helplessness, and cast around for Mr. Massampeu. But he's nowhere



**Figure 10: A logging truck kicks up dust at Ibamba**

to be seen and she becomes agitated, cutting the air emphatically, impressing her voice on me. I've no way of knowing what she's telling me or why – it may be as mundane as the request for salt or a bra (treasured items) – but I understand the frustration described by anthropologists locked outside language. It takes almost ten minutes for her to give up in disgust, and she turns her back on me to complain loudly to the other women.

Meanwhile, Philippe has decided to hold an impromptu meeting with the community to elicit their views on C.I.B's presence in their area, and any issues or requests they may have. Interestingly, he first asks the Bantu, including Ludovic and Jean-Pierre, to leave. The presence of Bantu at these "*reunions*" is now recognised as a shutter on Mbendjele communication. Mr. Massampeu returns and I ask him about the facial markings of the old woman, who's now disappeared. He replies curtly: "*C'est tradition*" and leaves again quickly. Meanwhile, in answer to Philippe's question of what they need on this roadside camp, the Mbendjele have answered not schools or a

hospital, but tobacco and wine. At the centre of a universe I barely comprehend, from the broader political periphery to the cultural nucleus of the Mbendjele, I feel minute. Germano comes and crouches with an arm around me, and we forge a small island, encompassed by the curious Mbendjele and their sundered forest.

Back in Pokola, the rain starts in earnest. I'm sorting clothes and equipment for our journey to Bangui-Motaba when a message arrives from Philippe that there's someone waiting to meet me at the C.I.B offices. Kibembe Bienvenu or "*Kibino*" is a small, compact man with an alert face and prehensile feet, who spends most of his time scouting the Northern forests for WCS, his current employers. But he's not happy. He has an interest in Mbendjele ritual, having worked with Jerome Lewis on the subject years ago. He's hoping we'll offer him employment as a research assistant. Then he mentions a figure – close to £400.00 per month. And a contract – no less than a year. This is reasonable enough – he has a wife and family. But my plan has always been a short-term arrangement to avoid the pitfall of living through the lens of an interlocutor.

He accepts my decision good-humouredly and as tea has arrived, we continue talking. It's clear his knowledge of Mbendjele culture is extensive. He mentions that at Mobanza, near Bangui-Motaba, where there is a great deal of female ritual, the men recently "stole" a women's ritual and a violent altercation ensued. Things are changing he says, as loggers carve up swathes of forest and previously independent groups come under pressure from Bantu-speaking neighbours uncomfortable with Mbendjele women's political position. He tells me the subject of women's ritual is "*tres sensible*", and vast. He scrutinises me a moment, then says: "*The trouble for you will be translating concepts – do you understand*"? I tell him I do, and he nods kindly.

After three days of unrelenting, vicious rain, the sky composes itself again, and we wake to begin our last day of preparation for the journey to Bangui-Motaba. The mud lanes that map Pokola are swamps now, along which I wade to appeal for supplies from the C.I.B shop. In the public market we've bought cooking utensils and large quantities of rice, salt, tinned food and porridge. I've also assembled a small stash of gifts. Tomorrow morning at 7 a.m. Philippe will drive us to the end of the logging



road, near Loundoungou, from where we'll commence the 20 kilometre trek towards Bangui. The sunset runs coral and blood into the river. We've both spoken to our



**Figure 11: Abandoned Mbendjele shelters in the Ibamba forest**

families in what we imagine will be our last contact for several months. Whatever is ahead, we're united in our desire to leave Pokola and its bare, muddy streets, its jostling of longings and disappointments.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### RITUAL HUNTING AND THE POWER OF ANTIPATHY

*I shall take the universal secondary status of women as a given, and proceed from there*

Sherry B. Ortner

In the first chapter, I put forward two theses which I develop here: Firstly, that in order to begin to understand hunter-gatherers, we must mark out what it is that differentiates theirs from other types of systems. This is in itself a complex task that requires delving into and seeking the interconnections between hunter-gatherer modes of subsistence and egalitarian sociality – what Barnard (2004) calls “mode of thought”. The second point is that one major consequence of such an enquiry is the analytical emergence of the women’s collectives which dominate the social landscapes of Central African forest hunter-gatherers.

In order to concretise these terms, I work with three interconnected questions about female reproduction, the production of meat, and the complex symbolic relationship mediating both. Firstly, I examine research from biological anthropology which focuses on women’s collective responses to reproductive pressures. Following this, I look at ethnography from several Central African hunting communities involving what I refer to as women’s “ritual hunting”. The theme of the chapter – the connection between reproduction and hunting rules – is drawn from a recent paper by Robert Brightman (1996), in which he concludes that the division of labour among foragers is the result of male dominance and cultural hegemony. Women are excluded from the most prestigious domain in foraging society – hunting – by male coalitions monopolising social and symbolic capital.

There clearly *is* a relationship between women’s role as the producers of people and their ambivalent relationship with game animals and hunting technology. But the core argument of this chapter is that there has been a general lack of anthropological

enquiry into a) biological demands and collective, cultural responses to these and b) antipathy as power. Mbendjele communities throughout Northern Congo-Brazzaville meld together in one core symbolic complex called *ekila* reproductive health and potential, hunting practices, and moral edicts (Lewis, 2008). A polysemic term, *ekila* refers to both women's menstrual blood and the blood of game animals, expressing a profound taboo against the mixing of these substances. This in turn echoes ethnography of Southern and East African hunter-gatherer groups, where female procreative fluids are in continual ritual conversation with male productive fluids – game blood, semen, arrow poison: “Submission to certain observances with regard to hunting and menstruation are widespread among the Bushmen groups” (Bieseke, 1993: 92). Exploring the pervasive antipathy between a core concatenation involving women, blood, the moon, honey, fat, and game animals on one side, and male hunting prowess on the other, Bieseke (1993) cautions that “the danger to hunters does not come from a condition of “uncleanness” in the woman. Rather, she is in a state of extra-ordinary power” (1993: 93).

In *ekila* we have a core cultural concept inseparable from the body and drawing an explicit connection between childbirth and hunting, female blood and game blood. The power inherent in *ekila* is “the name of the medicine *Komba* sent women when women put in the moon (menstruate). The business of *ekila* was first with them. It is all about children” (Lewis, 2008: 299). This resonates with Rival's (1997) connection of the Huaorani idea of “shared flesh” within the longhouse economy to widespread couvade restrictions. The field of social reproduction hinges on the life-transmitting function of procreative sex (Rival, 1997). Describing couvade restrictions strikingly similar to food restrictions associated with *ekila*, Rival situates the birth of Huaorani children at the centre of a social and ritual commentary on life transmission, affinity and power. Ichikawa (1987) too details the elaborate food restrictions observed by Mbuti parents on behalf of newborns. Nursing infants are still vulnerable (if fully social) persons in the process of becoming. Accordingly, both parents refrain from eating animals which are *ekoni* prior to birth and *kweri* after.

The interesting point made by both Ichikawa (1987) and Rival (1997) about such food restrictions, shared by parents around the time of birth and in the years

immediately following, is their role in “materialising the conjugal tie” (Rival, 1997: 635). It is when a man undergoes the food restrictions associated with a newborn that he is socially recognised as a father, illustrating that “the birth process is a rich cultural domain” (Rival, 1997: 635). Simply to restate the “male dominance” paradigm then is not enough. Alongside selected Central African data I draw in this chapter on the theoretical insights of Amazonian ethnographers (Rival, 1997; Gow, 1982; Viveiros de Castro, 2000) and Barbara Bodenhorn’s (1990) work on Inupiat female ritual hunting. These writers have in different ways grappled with the symbolic relationship between subsistence and procreation in societies based on hunting and gathering, and their work has produced a rich theoretical repository. Chris Knight’s (1991) theory of the origins of symbolic culture and in particular his writing on the hunter’s “own-kill rule” has significantly influenced my approach to the politics of parenthood.

#### PRELIMINARIES: QUESTIONS AND CLAIMS

Are there communities in which sexual difference and maternal labour is positively valued, and where women *collectively* achieve political power on the basis of this? Can we challenge traditional beliefs about women’s physical debarment from hunting by focusing on their ritual contribution? Can we rethink hunting taboo as evidence of a powerful bodily relationship which signifies first and foremost the cultural volatility of shared blood (cf. Knight, 1991; Power and Watts, 1999)? And how is what begins as a biological imperative moulded into a symbolic, ritual complex that *revokes* the border and limitation of individual bodies? This is a two-step movement, both back towards the ground of the female, reproductive body, and forwards, to an alternative (and culturally defined) conceptualisation of what it means to *be* the female, reproductive body. I argue against much feminist anthropological writing of recent decades (Ortner, 1972; Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Collier and Rosaldo, 1981), which has begun with the universal subordination of women (either on the basis of physiological, reproductive constraints, or cultural prejudices) and theorised from there.

Collier and Rosaldo (1981) in a seminal and still widely cited paper, put forth the thesis that while Ortner’s (1972) universal equivalence of female with nature cannot

be upheld, women are nevertheless universally disempowered by their immersion in domestic spheres and (echoing Levi-Strauss) by their marital exchange value for men. Thus, having overthrown Ortner's (1972) assumption of a universal vilification of the natural and with it women, Collier and Rosaldo (1981) argue that while it is not as mothers that women in "simple" societies are dominated, it is by virtue of their sexual/marital value for men. Not only is there an assumption about the *value* of the domestic and the collective agency of women here, hunting power is attributed to men alone. The subtle equivalence of complimentary social roles, and the ritual involvement of women with hunting is overlooked. As many ethnographers of hunter-gatherer thought (Leacock, 1982; Overing, 2000; Biesele, 1993; Bodenhorn, 1990; Power and Watts, 1999) have insisted, using Western theoretical tools formulated in the experience of gender inequality, or of passive, natural biology as against active, super-natural culture to analyse the social relationships of egalitarian peoples simply does not work. Beginning with "gender" is the equivalent of building a house mid air.

Worthman (1995) draws attention to recent debates on biological causality, and the re-emergence of the body and sexual difference as themes in the social analysis of gender. She contextualises the relationship between sex and gender by delving into biological research on hormones and genetics, and on how these determine sexual differentiation. Feminist anthropologists, she argues, have tended to overlook the complexity and relevance of biological and physiological factors in their desire to privilege social construction and to detach gender from inherent biological traits. This is understandable given the longstanding Western association of women with a denigrated nature (Ortner, 1972), and given also the general neglect of cultural influences by evolutionary psychologists. But Worthman (1995), appealing for greater anthropological understanding of biological causality, states that:

Incorporating biological and material factors into social theory and developing constructive as well as critical views of the relations of culture to individual are major epistemological challenges for cultural anthropologists, and ones scarcely engaged as yet (Worthman, 1995: 609)

She argues that the sex-gender dichotomy arises from a “reified biological-cultural dualism” (1995: 610) not meaningful to many local populations. Her analysis ends there, but it is possible to follow it through to contexts in which the body is inseparable from culture, not in conflict with it, and where cultural concerns explicitly draw on and privilege bodily substances and metaphors. It is the neglect of biological and reproductive tension as *foundation* for cultural analyses that I want to address here. This requires first pulling the terms back to the body. Where there has been much talk of “embodiment” in recent years, I refer here to the individual biological body. As Worthman (1995) shows, if we are to move beyond reductionist perspectives, we need first to establish the “facts” as understood by current consenses in evolutionary and biological anthropology.

Following recent writing from within biological anthropology, I explore the politics of sexual difference as it gives rise to cooperative group behaviours. This is not to re-trench sexual difference as the great demarcating variable and leave matters there; it is to make allowances for biological difference and inter-sexual conflict (and cooperation) in theorising social constructions of gender, motherhood and power. As such, I work towards a new understanding of “gender”, one which reattaches it to biology but releases it from hierarchy. One which conceives of it not as equalling female, but which places it in its proper context of discursive complementarity. Thus we begin with the conversation between a *pair*, at the place of becoming. “Gender” in this reading is a perpetual dialectic, the dynamo of which compels so much else. The theoretical attempt either to multiply or erase it fails to take cognizance of the social, ritual energy produced *by* it in contexts where the tension and negotiation between two groups is central to communal life and equilibrium. Duality, with its interest in bodily signifiers – blood, sex, birth, hunted animals – underpins the thought systems of all hunter-gatherers and tells its own story. When knowledge of biology is brought to bear on the kinds of symbolic constructs that dominate hunter-gatherer cosmology and ritual, gender becomes pendulum, negotiation, and play, not the shrinkage of social life to sex.

In order to mark a path into the relevant literature, I start with a recent paper on the sexual division of foraging labour by Robert Brightman (1996). This is worth reading closely because it constitutes a wide ranging analysis of the subject, and because it

constructs a persuasive step-by-step argument for why women's "exclusion" from hunting produces "asymmetric distributions of prestige and authority between the sexes" (1996: 687). Brightman's paper can be divided into two main sections, one dealing with materialistic, biological theory, the other tackling the issue of symbolic antipathy and taboo. But the crux of his approach is set out in the first paragraph, where he quotes Meillassoux as stating that: "The division of labour is imposed on women by constraint" (1996: 687). This imposition, according to Brightman, derives from widespread taboos proscribing women's hunting, which in turn are underpinned by "authoritative discourses of male privilege" (Brightman, 1996: 688).

While he presents a wealth of relevant information on the division of labour, Brightman's (1996) paper thus begins, like many such analyses, from its conclusion. If one starts with male power and self-interest it is almost inevitable to arrive at male power and self-interest. But what if a competing group is introduced? If we pluck women out of their individual obscurity and commence with two, equally assertive and strategising collectives? A more fruitful approach consists in weighing up the sexes *first* (allowing women the same cooperative agency as is assumed for men), and attempting to gauge which group may have had most interest in a division of labour. And this in turn requires some awareness of current ideas on human conflict and cooperation from within the field of biological anthropology. A recent paper on intra-female and male-female cooperation by biological anthropologists Key and Aiello (1999) is particularly pertinent.

#### COOPERATION: COSTS, BENEFITS AND SEX

Key and Aiello's (1999) paper explores the evolution of cooperation in humans by setting the primate context. Noting that all primates are inclined to live in social groups, they point out that these are almost everywhere reinforced by female cooperative behaviours, such as allocare, grandmothering, and occasionally, food-sharing. Unrelated female bonobos establish friendships which demonstrate "remarkably high" levels of cooperation (Key and Aiello, 1999: 16). Taking energetic costs as a significant determinant in cooperative behaviour, Key and Aiello (1999) found that among female primates, who bear the responsibility of gestation and lactation, the energetic costs of reproduction are always high. Intra-female

cooperation is most likely to emerge where high reproductive costs are combined with dependency on a meat-based diet. And it is this – a shift to a meat-based diet – which the authors argue may have “fuelled the development of the cooperative strategies currently seen in humans” (1999: 18). Female cooperation in the form of allomaternal care and babysitting is widely reported for most primate groups, but the provisioning of off-spring is highly unusual. While female-female cooperation is the easiest type to establish (since females share a common concern, with infant care and well-being), male-female cooperation is less likely. Key and Aiello (1999) cite two influential factors in the establishment of male investment. The first is where female energetic costs are considerably higher than males; the second is where males who *fail* to cooperate are punished by a collective, long-term female refusal to cooperate.

What has all this to do with contemporary human communities? Knowledge of the social behaviour of other primates allows us to contextualise the origins of cooperative behaviour among humans. It also shows up uniquely human patterns of cooperation and interaction. For instance, while it is rare in the primate world to find both intra-female cooperation and male care in the same group, this pattern is standard among humans. Key and Aiello (1999), assuming an evolutionary history in which human females, like other female primates, developed cooperative networks, ask why, in the human case, males also began to cooperate significantly. Their answer is that while an imbalance in male and female energetic costs may for a considerable time have been off-set by extensive female cooperation, there came a point when more was required.

Between 500,000 and 100,000 years ago there was an exponential increase in brain size which would have escalated female energetic costs far beyond those found in *Homo erectus*. During this time period, the first unequivocal evidence of large game hunting also appears in the archaeological record...It seems likely that during this period there would have been strong selection for male cooperation, particularly for providing animal food for females and their off-spring (1999: 25).

This analysis depicts a potential scenario in which females are autonomous agents with their own energetic constraints, political concerns, and strategies. From the perspective of a heavily pregnant or lactating woman, the ideal situation is one in



which there is no compulsion to hunt – an activity which requires significant speed, risk-taking, travelling long distances from camp, and frequently working alone or in small units of two to three individuals. Even better if there exists a symbolic antipathy between female blood and the blood of game animals (Knight, 1991). Under such circumstances, not only are women exempted from hunting, but their male relatives who do hunt are ritually compelled to return meat to the community.

In her book on the folklore of the Kalahari Ju/'hoan *Women Like Meat*, Megan Biesele (1991) explores women's perspective on male hunting labour. Concluding a hilarious tit-for-tat sequence in which two women compete with the male trickster Kaoxa to obtain meat from him, besieging him with body parts, blood, excrement, and urine, Biesele comments: "Women are in a strong position in Ju/'hoan society. That they "like meat", for instance, is not just taken as a whim, to be gratified or not as males choose, *but as a biological and social fact with which men must creditably reckon*" (Biesele, 1991: 184 Emphasis mine). Frequently, in fact, hunters will summon women to help transport carcasses back to camp where they can be safely butchered, cooked and rendered eatable (Peacock, 1991). Meanwhile, women work hard but collectively (a crucial point in the provision of allomothering), in large social groups who move in concert, singing to forewarn large animals, digressing to examine new plant sources, transporting infants in hip and back slings, stopping periodically to roast a few tubers.

When it is argued that women are "excluded from society's most valued food-producing labour" (Brightman, 1996: 688), there is a failure to factor in the copious literature describing shared access to hunters' meat, and the series of controls which distance a hunter from his own kill (the "own-kill rule" in Knight's (1991) terms). True, egalitarianism may be most pronounced in "immediate-return" (Woodburn, 1988) societies, but Brightman (1996) includes these in his general analysis. However much theorists want them to, women in such communities do not *need* to hunt in order to receive meat. Here, Leacock's appeal for differentiating between equality and symmetry is useful. As for the prestige accruing to individual hunters, in immediate-return societies there is a collective ethos working *against* individual prestige, boasting, or greater authority on the part of hunters. Individual hunters who excel do attract greater respect. This may be one of the reasons men tolerate a system

which so obviously sidelines their own immediate interests. Conversely, and logically, there is no rule against women catching small animals, birds or rodents during foraging expeditions. Clearly some women, at some points in their reproductive cycles, are capable of hunting if they need to and if the opportunity arises. The point – a point which in order to function must be enshrined as social rule – is that they are exempted from having to do so. Were women excluded from hunting in a situation where they were also excluded from its yield, or able to scavenge only an insignificant portion of this, or edged into subordinate positions by posturing hunters who used distribution to acquire power, then we might view the system as exploitative.

In the same way that hunters are obliged to share their meat, men too have an equal stake in the much overlooked and equally valuable child-producing labour of women. For just as there is in Brightman's (1996) argument an over-emphasis on women's *physical* lack of involvement with formal hunting (they are in fact deeply involved on a ritual, ideological level), there is an under-emphasis on men's *ideological* contribution to perhaps the most valued of all returns – the conception, gestation, and delivery of children. The Amazonian literature abounds with examples of male procreative effort, through the continual contribution of semen throughout pregnancy, and through observance of couvade restrictions which culturally render fathers. Lewis (2002) draws attention to this in his discussion of the Mbendjele concept of *ekila*. Associated primarily with menstrual blood and the blood of game animals, *ekila* weaves together successful hunting with successful child-bearing. Through women's ritual tracking and tying of game, they "give" men meat. Through men's repeated contributions of sperm throughout pregnancy, they "give" women babies. In this manner each sex contributes to the others valued activity. In fact, states one Mbendjele elder in conversation with Lewis: "Ekila is...the name of the medicine Komba sent women when women put in the moon (menstruate). The business of Ekila was first with them. *It is all about children*" (2002: 103). I will return to the complex of rules, beliefs and practices associating hunting with women's sexual, reproductive energies. I introduce it here to up-root some tenacious categorical assumptions which permeate the terms of the debate around hunting and gender.

Having set out his central argument, Brightman (1996) commences to a critique of physiological theories for women's non-hunting. Querying research from evolutionary ecology, he sets out to detail why a heavily pregnant or breastfeeding woman could, if necessary, participate in protracted large-game hunts. The whole point of a culturally sanctioned division of labour here is missed. Why not simply wean infants very early on and leave them behind with caretakers, he asks? There are numerous good reasons for not doing so, not least of all the immediate health of small infants, for whom weaning foods represent a poor substitute for maternal milk. Citing cultural adaptation and improvisation as against natural selection, Brightman fails to consider the ways in which people's cultural constructs take heed of and use the powerful underlying pointer of biological difference. Thus his conclusion – that the transmission of non-hunting behaviour “as though it were a heritable trait” is in fact a cultural device – arrives back at the original negative. If biology is not involved at all, if physiology is ultimately irrelevant, then the cultural end-point is men's trump card. There are two responses required here. The first concerns the argument that there are no substantive reproductive costs underlying the division of labour. In order to answer this I digress to another, earlier paper on the same subject by Peacock (1991).

#### WHY BODIES MATTER

A biological anthropologist, Peacock (1991) set out to examine women's role in subsistence practices among Efe hunter-gatherers of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her underlying interest was with the generalised patterns that “might be used to explain cultural features across societies” (1991: 342), and in the origins of contemporary human behaviour. She was particularly interested in the extent and origins of male dominance, as theorised by feminist anthropologists (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Collier and Rosaldo, 1981). Peacock's (1991) approach, however, was to examine the sexual division of labour using research methodologies (including time-allocation analysis) designed to throw light on women's behaviour. While she believed that women's reproductive labour did impact on their subsistence activities, she drew an important distinction, highlighting *energetic* as opposed to logistic constraints. Thus, while women are in theory capable of performing high-energy, high-risk activities, even while pregnant and lactating, “both pregnancy and lactation

are extremely demanding in terms of energetic requirements...and women may have to “choose” between the performance of energetically demanding tasks and the successful production and feeding of an infant” (Peacock, 1991: 347). The question then shifts from whether women are *able* to perform the same tasks as men, to whether they *choose* to.

Responding to the suggestion that early weaning and use of alternative care-takers is the only means by which women may make a substantial contribution to subsistence, Peacock (1991) cites !Kung mothers, whose contribution to subsistence is high, but who also keep infants and small children close, nursing frequently day and night, and not introducing weaning foods until late on (Lee, 1979; Howell, 1976). The crucial deciding factor appears to be whether women are able to work collectively, making use of other women’s support, and engaging in labour which does not require them to leave small infants for long periods of time. Peacock’s (1991) research confirmed that while women perform childcare tasks simultaneously with other subsistence activities (intensifying workloads considerably), both pregnant and lactating women do curtail strenuous work activities, cutting back on energy-intensive tasks. These findings, she states, “contradict newly emerged feminist wisdom that in its extreme portrays the subsistence work of women in foraging societies as being unaffected by pregnancy, the birth process, or childcare” (1991: 351).

Noting that activities curbed because of childcare include agricultural labour (in Lese neighbours gardens), wood and water collection, and hut building, Peacock asks how mothers manage to care-take dependent children *and* meet their subsistence needs? The answer, one noted by many hunter-gatherer specialists, is cooperative mothering. Caretaking as we conceive of it requires leaving infants for extended periods of time, and is incompatible with continued breastfeeding. But Efe women nurse each-others babies while working cooperatively, and are therefore able to employ a flexible, dynamic kind of collective caretaking in which babies are passed around continually between mothers, depending on what task a particular woman is engaged in at any given moment. This is not a minor detail in contexts where continued breastfeeding and late weaning can make the difference to infant survival. The cooperation of other women, as well as older daughters, Peacock (1991) found, is in fact integral to Efe

women's ability to meet their family's subsistence needs while bearing and raising children.

The Efe case demonstrates that an intricate and varied pattern of cooperative work and mutual caretaking among women permits combinations of subsistence work and childcare that would at first glance seem unworkable. This illustrates the importance of looking at behaviour from a collectivist as well as individualist perspective; it also suggests an important lesson for scholars of human evolution, who all too often make the assumption that only cooperation between males was crucial for the structuring of early human societies (Peacock, 1991: 354).

Again and again throughout Brightman's (1996) paper he cites evidence suggesting women's reproductive cycles – menstruation, pregnancy, birth, lactation and weaning – impinge directly upon the division of labour. Again and again a close reading of his own (meticulously assembled) material throws up the spectre of women's collectively made choices and strategies. But without drawing a connection between the two – physiological demands and female cooperative responses to them – he is compelled to begin and end with a culturally constituted exclusion. The central flaw in his argument is in fact this blindness to women's collective, contractual relationships, both with other women and with husbands and male relatives. In persisting with an "every-woman-for herself" ethos, he misses the possibility of cultural consensus, negotiated between groups in order to elicit male provisioning, ensure sharing, and enable women to remain close to vulnerable infants.

Peacock (1991) demonstrates that the subsistence and childcare work women do already exacts a high price, and requires continual intra-sexual solidarity. Moreover, her work points to the value which women in hunter-gatherer communities place on infant nurture and well-being. Brightman (1996) explores the subject mechanistically, as though simple logistic constraints were all that mattered. Having acknowledged the importance of fertility trends in affecting ability to hunt routinely, he then adds that these "do not render hunting *impossible* but only limit in variable degree the percentage of work-days which individual women could allocate to it" (Brightman, 1992: 698). Theories which assert a causal connection between biology and culture, he claims, characterise women as "sedentary rather than mobile, passive

rather than aggressive, weak rather than strong, unable to reconcile maternity with a career outside the home” (1996: 704). All of this leaves untouched the issue of whether hunter-gatherer women *want* to prioritise hunting – apparently the only “career outside the home” - over other kinds of labour which may be more conducive to remaining with their children.

## IMPLICATIONS OF COMMUNAL MOTHERING

There is a profound philosophical and political assumption here about the nature and status-value of the work women do, about maternal care as signifying “weakness” or “passivity”, about hunting as signifying “mobility”, “strength” and “career”. Phrases such as “outside the home” used with reference to hunter-gatherer women are redundant. Morgan’s analysis of “communism in living” over a century ago made that clear. While Brightman speaks about the “constitution of the labour process as a symbolic form” (1996: 704), he fails to explore sufficiently either the launch-pad for that symbolic form, or what coalitionary force in forager society might be pushing it. Moreover, there is in all the writing on the division of labour among hunter-gatherers - on the weighing up of reproductive costs and maternal responsibility, on “career” opportunities, prestige, and the choices women make - the odd absence of maternal emotion.

Of the powerful affective ties that compel women to choose, where possible, not to employ alternative caretaking strategies that would mean prolonged absence, little is said. Within egalitarian societies the value placed on children and their centrality to social life are still overlooked as *reasons* as to why women (and many men) would not choose to be separated from them. Yet still we find, in a recent paper reconstructing prehistoric mothering, children described as “burdens” (Bolen, 2007: 9), energy-expensive but status- redundant drags on prehistoric women’s sociality. It is not only gender that needs to be re-thought here, but Western cultural representations and perceptions of reproductive and maternal labour. “Woman-at-home” and “woman-as-mother” (Bolen, 2007: 8) cease to be negatives when home is the community, and when mothers are vocal, autonomous and ritually powerful.

This is an issue that bears enormous emotional freight (as Leacock (1982) knew) in societies in which the choice comes with an immediate value-judgement and loss of status. But for most hunter-gatherers this is manifestly not the case. Despite (or because of) their labour choices, women in these communities enjoy considerable social, political and symbolic power. Thus while there is a clear biological rationale for a division of labour along those lines mapped out by all hunter-gatherers, this is elaborated into a cultural stipulation which assumes a creative, ritualised life of its own. The symbolic energy given over to discussion of this point by hunter-gatherers themselves – the abiding interest in relationships between women and game, menstrual blood and meat, sex and power (Gow, 1982; Biesele, 1993; Knight, 1991) - indicates the centrality of the negotiation of labour power, loyalty and sharing. The kinds of work women can and do perform in egalitarian societies are conducive to the communal mothering fundamental to their children's survival, not to mention their subsequent political cohesion.

Women in this account are working as a body in order to maximise both productive and reproductive potential. Peacock's (1991) conclusion on her findings is the urgent need for an awareness of women's collective behaviour in structuring gendered work patterns. Her research throws up important questions about the social and psychological repercussions of this intensely communalistic style of mothering. It also potentially roots the conversation about hunter-gatherer sociality and sharing practices in the female reproductive body. When the division of labour is theorised with the conjugal family in mind as primary constitutive unit, it is almost impossible to resist the leap to a sense of tipped scales, of "public" and "private", power and its complement. Evidence increasingly suggests we think about the division of labour among hunter-gatherers – however residential patterns pan out – as facilitating women's cooperative, collective labour; a pool of productive energy controlled by those who exercise it. In these contexts, the breaking into effective productive units, of which there must be a "head of household" or a "house-keeper", does not make sense. Just as the division of labour here (and it is not the division itself which is disempowering, but what is made of it) does not privatise meat, neither, importantly, does it privatise children. The usual terms slip, and "the body" itself must be rethought.

Jackson (1982) argues that knowledge of the body, particularly in non-literate societies, should not be approached first from the perspective of “patterns of social organisation, institutions, roles...or symbolic meaning” (Jackson, 1982: 339). He argues instead for the body as subject, where meaning is in the act and knowledge is above all practical. The rationale for certain kinds of bodily conduct during ritual action may be in latent “conditioned reflexes” and “modes of comportment” (ibid, 1982: 335). I agree, particularly with reference to hunter-gatherer sociality, that we must first bring the terms back to the body. But this should not mean confining all action to the realm of the purely concrete. It means allowing bodies to speak their full range of chords, from individual biological and anatomical imperatives to the intentional politics of the common body. Why should “the body”, or bodies, not be political as well as biological (cf. Blacking, 1977)? Why should the body not be capable, alongside modes of comportment or muscle reflexes, of imaginative action? It is in the instant that the body becomes plural that the field of communicative possibility blossoms. Thus, while I have grounded the discussion thus far in reproductive and energetic constraints, I see these occurring simultaneous with the kinds of social organisation and meanings with which the *collective* body answers them.

Johnson (1987) stipulates that it is through bodies that imagination works, and only through bodies. “The total absence of an adequate study of imagination in our most influential theories of meaning and rationality is symptomatic of a deep problem in our current views of human cognition [wherein] the structure of rationality is regarded as transcending structures of bodily experience” (Johnson, 1987: ix). Given that the conceptual systems underlying many non-Western cultures are incommensurable with Western conceptual systems, Johnson (1987) urges a focus on “those structures of imagination and understanding that emerge from our embodied experience” (xiv). If the experiences and processes of the biological body directly influence the symbolic field, it is only insofar as these are amplified and animated by collective action. The coalitionary activity postulated for early modern human mothers (Knight, 1991) then assumes a new dimension: the bodily processes used to cement and flag collective power or counter-power – blood, gestation, birth – could be seen as the female body, pluralised through metaphorical elaboration, thinking.



The value of understanding those kinds of relationships created by the biological imperative to bond characteristic of female primates or early human females, is in expanding and enriching socio-cultural conceptions of bodily knowledge. If we acknowledge the importance for hunter-gatherer women of collective action, based on response to reproductive demands, what light is shed on that most pervasive of bodily oppositions in hunter-gatherer society – the antipathy between female bodily fluids, most particularly blood, and the bodies of game animals?

Chris Knight (1991) draws attention to what he terms the “hunter’s own-kill rule” (1991: 29). This describes the prohibition, widespread among hunter-gatherers, upon individual hunters hoarding and consuming their own catch. The “own-kill rule” raises related questions to do with women’s ritual and symbolic involvement in hunting. Most analyses of women’s relationship with hunting have focused on their physical “exclusion” from it, or, if the argument seeks to counter this, on evidence of women’s foraging of small animals and references to those few contexts in which they do engage in group hunting (Bieseke, 2001; Estioko-Griffin, 1985; Bahuchet). I do not challenge arguments about the widespread abstinence of women from hunting, nor do I attempt to argue the case for female involvement in *physical* hunting in various contexts. Rather, I examine evidence for women’s hunting power as ritually expressed.

#### DEFINITIONS OF HUNTING AMONG INUPIAT

Barbara Bodenhorn’s (1990) analysis of Inupiat hunting cosmology, while not regionally relevant, deserves attention here. The ideas and relationships it explores run parallel to Yaka concepts elaborating women’s ritual relationship with game animals. In a paper entitled “I Am Not the Great Hunter, My Wife Is”, Bodenhorn (1990) contends that hunting, for peoples of the Alaskan North Slope (and beyond) cannot be reduced to the physical catching of animals, but must be understood as a cumulative and complimentary process involving both women and men. Hunting “includes a whole set of activities, both technical and symbolic, in which the interdependence of men and women is fundamental” (Bodenhorn, 1990: 55). Bodenhorn (1990) compares Inupiat models of gender with traditional anthropological models, which tend to follow the lines that men hunt, men “work”,

and men dominate “public” spheres. Each of these assertions rests on unexamined assumptions about what it means “to hunt, to be married, or about how persons are gendered” (Bodenhorn, 1990: 57). In fact, the cosmology of marriage in Inupiat society centres on the complimentary hunting labour of husband and wife. While there is a clear division of labour in terms of activities men and women perform, men and women can and do take on each others tasks if necessary.

The point is a working relationship, the mutuality of which ensures the most effective outcome. Moreover, hunting “is a sacred act”. While men have responsibility for catching large animals, “it is the woman to whom the animal comes” (Bodenhorn, 1990: 61). Inupiat women stand in special ritual relationship to large game animals, particularly whales. Without cultivation of this relationship by women, their husbands simply cannot operate as successful hunters. This point should be stressed, for it illumines the disjunction between anthropological notions about what it means to hunt, the status-value of hunting, or “gender”, and the beliefs and practices of local hunting communities. Thus we find Inupiat women “calling” whales to their husbands, butchering and distributing the meat, transforming the hide into a “second skin” for the hunter. “Wives” writes Bodenhorn (1990), “had ritual responsibility to ask for the animals”, or again, “a traditional *umialik* (whale hunter) cannot operate without a woman partner” (ibid: 62). Women’s activities here – physical and ritual - are *formally classed by Inupiat as hunting skills*.

Hunting then becomes something other than what Euro-American models have imagined. It expands far beyond the mere seeking out and killing of animals, taking on a complex of social, ritual, and religious significations. It’s not surprising that hunting would for so long have been viewed in purely material-productive terms; most ethnographers are the product of societies which value private ownership and results over sharing and process. But like McCreedy (1994), Bodenhorn (1990) highlights the belief, prominent in Inupiat society, that work is something a person does *for* someone of the other gender. She cautions:

The sexual division of labour is culturally constructed as one in which all participants have crucial ritual responsibilities...Women’s labour and their role in

sharing hunted meat places them at the centre of productive/distributive relations, not on the periphery as marginal dependents (ibid: 65).

The point is that for hunter-gatherers, “hunting” is not what we have traditionally imagined it to be. In fact, it is as much a ritually mediated, symbolically defined activity as a material, economic enterprise. When expanded to allow for this, women become visible as “working” hunters, alongside husbands and male relatives. It is Western theorists who have cut women out of the picture, by imposing a discordant gender grid onto hunting communities. Even the term “hunter-gatherer” defines such communities by economic terms alone, and erects a fence between people who in reality are inextricably involved in each others productive and ritual labour. Using three ethnographic examples from Central Africa I employ Bodenhorn’s (1990) insights to argue for an understanding of women’s physical antipathy with hunting and its technologies as the reflection of their deep ritual relationship with game animals and associated spirits. Rather than reiterate the hunting-as-exclusion thesis, I see antipathy and absence as relationship, here the marker of great metaphysical potency.

#### ANTIPATHY AS POWER; ABSENCE AS RELATIONSHIP

Marian McCreedy (1994), in her examination of net-hunting ritual among the Biaka of the Central African Republic, finds women are “the arms of the *dibouka*” (McCreedy, 1994: 15). The *dibouka* refers to the throw of nets made during collective hunting expeditions, when women perform the *bobanda* ritual to ensure hunting success. Although women are not physically involved in the kill, “if they refused to participate in the *bobanda*, it could not take place, because it is the women who are responsible for the spirit of the *bobanda*” (McCreedy, 1994: 15). McCreedy uses her discussion of the *bobanda* ritual to frame Biaka ideas about the division of labour as interdependence, an expression above all of “the work men and women do for each other” (McCreedy, 1994: 20).

The *bobanda*, always called in response to a lean period when men’s hunting luck is considered poor, involves mobilising women’s ritual labour – singing, dancing and

conversation with game spirits – in order to restore community equilibrium. Women must be convinced to contribute this valued labour by men – it is not something they engage in lightly. McCreedy (1994) emphasises that it is the collective ritual energy of women that breaks the perceived impasse, symbolising as they do vitality and movement with their large-scale singing and dancing performances, during which power is “transferred” to a selected male *nganga* or ritual leader by beating him with leaves (1994: 31). Given the considerable commitment required of women to what may be days of hard physical and ritual activity, they demand the recognition of men:

The men (and the entire community) are at the mercy of women and must convince them to perform. The women cannot be coerced...and it is up to the men to convince the women that the situation requires their cooperation. They are called upon and formally recognised as the most powerful remedy to solve the problem. When the individual magical knowledge of the men in camp breaks down and fails to remedy the hunting failure, the collective energy and power of the women are needed (McCreedy, 1994: 33).

Likewise Joiris (1996), in an important account of what she terms Baka “ritual associations”, is unequivocal about women’s centrality to the hunting enterprise. She also draws explicit connections between social cohesion, regional networking and religious life. Baka ritual associations, she states, are fundamental to group identity. In these, members of a camp affiliate, according to preference or skill, with particular ritual associations, each of which organises ceremonies, possesses particular dances, and clusters around certain spirits. Joiris (1996) uses the terms “ceremonies” and “dances” interchangeably, demonstrating the ritual significance of dancing for Baka. The ceremonies organised by each ritual association (whether to cure illness, identify sources of evil, contribute to the preservation of peace and social harmony or, most commonly, to intercede in hunting success) are known by the name of the dances performed (1996: 249 – 250). Most ritual associations are in practice multifunctional, and many are open to initiates of both sexes, but interestingly, only the exclusively female *yeli* and *yenga poto* associations focus primarily on large-game hunting. The main initiates or *ngonjia* are those whose responsibilities include divination, oneiromancy and organisation of ceremonies.

*Ngonjia* in general may be individuals of either sex, and often spouses work together, sharing knowledge and skills (1996: 252). Yet even where a *ngonjia* “spirit guardian” – usually a former elephant hunter – achieves elder status, he is considered a camp guardian whose work is to act as peacekeeper, and not a permanent authority of any kind (1996: 253). Joiris (1996) points out: “There is so much overlapping within the ritual and political spheres that it results in a selective sharing of responsibilities, a multiplicity of male and female actors, and an organisation that is most notable for being flexible and fluid” (1996: 254). Baka women are centrally involved in the large complex of rituals surrounding the hunt, which are designed to locate and attract game, designate specific hunters who will make the kill, and thank game spirits. While ceremonies are usually performed in public prior to, during, or following the hunt, the female *yeli* and *yenga poto* ceremonies take place largely in private. During divination in preparation for hunting, the *yeli ngonjia* performs a rite to establish where the game will be found and which direction the hunter should follow (1996: 259).

Rites performed in order to attract game are very elaborate in the *yeli* ceremony. Powerful hunting prowess is attributed to the “yodel” polyphonies performed by the principal *yeli* initiate soloists. Some of the *yeli* songs refer to the first hunt as it is described in the *tibola* song-fable; that story explains the origin of this hunting power, by virtue of which *nganga* women cooperate with the *me* spirits to locate and call animals (Joiris, 1996: 263).

This relationship – of female initiates with game spirits – is elaborated in the context of hunting, where it is overwhelmingly women who locate forest animals. It is through privileged relationship with spirits (who themselves are deceased initiates) that women participate in the hunt. These spirits, upon hearing *yeli* initiates begin to sing, start dancing out in the forest, preparing for the hunt. During this time, *yeli* initiates prepare a ritual beverage which is consumed by the whole community, in order to reinforce the ability of the song to draw game. Women also apply substances to the bodies of hunters in order to “make them invisible” and bring luck (1996: 264).

Immediately prior to the hunt, the *yeli nganga* will use trance and divinatory techniques to determine the master-hunter who will kill the game. During the hunt,

while there are no formal rituals performed, individual *nganga* of both sexes use visionary power, communicate with spirits (made visible by consumption of ritual substances), and guide the hunting procession using divinatory rites. *Yeli* initiates, in the aftermath of the hunt, offer raw meat or cooked food as gifts to the spirits. While *yeli* is just one of many ritual associations used to assist successful hunting, it is the only one which focuses solely upon the hunt, and Joiris (1996) points out that it affords women substantial power in subsequent claims to meat.

## RITUAL HUNTING AND THE POWER OF BLOOD

McCreedy (1994) and Joiris' (1996) descriptions of Biaka and Baka women's song and dance performances as *ritual hunting labour* is of relevance for the general literature on Yaka ritual and dance (Harako, 1984; Bahuchet and Thomas; Tsuru, 1998; Sawada, 1990; Bundo, 2001) which has tended to categorise performances by confining them to the realm of aesthetics, or by setting up a distinction between men's "formal" spirit performances and women's "joyful play" (Bundo, 2001). Japanese ethnographers in particular have conducted meticulous empirical studies of Pygmy ritual and dance, listing even children's "*be*" or dance performances. What McCreedy (1994) and Joiris (1996) contribute is the expansive, polyphonic sociality of women's dances, which operate on several levels but most immediately as ritual interventions in the hunting enterprise.

Joiris's (1996) findings are reiterated by Lewis (2002) in his discussion of Yaka women's participation in elephant hunting through the *mokondi massana* of *yele*. While in trance prior to the hunt, *yele* initiates "tie up" the elephant's spirit, and later direct men to it: "In effect women catch the elephant first. This accounts for this type of hunting journey being called "*mwaka ya baito*", a woman's hunting trip" (Lewis, 2002:170). Following the successful hunt, the *massana* of *Eya* is called to mark the elephant's death, during which spirits associated with it converse with women through song. For Lewis (2002), women's ritual involvement in hunting and subsequent claims to meat are part of an ongoing distribution of power represented by *massana* activities of all kinds.

*Mokondi Massana* are sophisticated, many dimensioned, aesthetic achievements...*Massana* deliberately glorifies the forest, the gender groups, and the joy and inherent beauty of their coordination and mutual cooperation in distinctive but complimentary ways (2002: 172)

If we recall Bodenhorn's (1990) description of Inupiat women as ritual hunters, McCreedy's (1994) analysis of Biaka women's peculiar ability to summon game, and Joiris's (1996) writing on the ritual associations of *yeli* and *yenga poto*, the widespread antipathy of the female body with the flesh of game animals assumes a new significance. Viveiros de Castro (2000), writing on Amerindian perspectivism, notes that: "Perspectivism does not usually involve all animal species...the emphasis seems to be on those species which perform a key symbolic and practical role such as the great predators and the principle species of prey for humans" (Viveiros De Castro, 2000: 471). Thus it is in the realm of hunting and hunted animals that equivalence is stressed. For Mbendjele Yaka there is an explicit and obvious interplay between women's blood, voracious blood-eating forest spirits, and game animals (Lewis, 2008: 307). When a hunter whose wife is pregnant kills in the forest, he must throw certain parts of the animal's intestines into the undergrowth to mollify the *edio* spirits who normally enjoy women's menstrual blood. In having "cut her moon" (Mbendjele for conception) the husband of a pregnant woman has interceded directly in this relationship, and must make some gesture towards the spirits. Hence the offering of the bloody innards. "An older man might also add the words "Take it"! or "That's yours" (Lewis, 2002: 307)! By giving up his meat the hunter bargains with the forest spirits and animals for the safe delivery of the infant. Likewise, Lewis (2008) has described how failure to respect game animals (either by going hunting while one's wife is menstruating or by laughing at a dead animal's carcass) will result either in lack of success or in direct danger to the hunter from enraged animals. The personhood afforded game animals by hunters has been noted by various ethnographers (Bieseke, 1993; Lewis, 2002).

Viveiros de Castro (2000) takes this further by asserting that: "Amerindians postulate a metaphysical continuity and a physical discontinuity between the beings of the cosmos...One single "culture", multiple "natures" (Viveiros De Castro, 2000: 478 – 479). Taken to its conclusion, this suggests that mixing human blood and animal

blood would be tantamount to slipping back into a single culture, losing hold of the security and root of the body, returning to origins. It is rarely the anatomical bodies of women and game animals that are in a taboo relation, but their fluids – blood, sexual excretions, breast milk, amniotic waters (Bieseke, 1993: 93). Moreover, the blood that is shed bears special resonance for hunter-gatherers, who believe that women are at the peak of their fertility during menstruation (Bieseke, 1993; Devische, 1991; Lewis, 2002), and it is then that children are conceived. As Bieseke notes: “It is not merely female power as exhibited in menstruation which is antithetical to hunting, for the Ju/’hoansi. A hunter should also avoid contact with his wife’s breast milk and her clothing if she is nursing. All that is connected, then, with female procreative power is out of the men’s realm and to be kept apart from their hunting” (Bieseke, 1993: 93). Cosmologically, the confusion of women’s menstrual blood with the blood of game – the only “other” who routinely bleeds – should signal an impending violation of the laws of social and somatic containment. If substance reveals equivalence, and bodies are the great differentiators, the human community itself stands at risk through intermingling menstrual or other female fluids with animal blood.

Knight’s (1991) work pulls together a vast array of information on blood taboos to suggest an originary rationale for all this: women’s identification with game animals is in fact extremely useful in inciting hunters to return meat to camp, where it can be safely purified through cooking. In expressing a taboo, one thing is negatively *connected* to another. “Negative” here need not equal simple devaluation. All hunting communities are concerned with ritual mediation of and relationship between powerful substances or entities. Brightman (1996), in his discussion of hunting taboo, identifies menstruation, parturition and female sexual fluids (all bodily markers) as components in a general semantic construction of “femaleness” with which hunting must not be mixed.

“Femaleness and hunting are thus represented in foragers ideologies as existing in a condition of metaphysical antipathy that threatens the hunting enterprise” (Brightman, 1996: 706). This is correct. But how we choose to read that antipathy means everything. According to the data provided above, we need to explore those ways in which women *are* involved with hunting without threatening its success. While it’s



true that great pains are taken by hunter-gatherers to prevent metaphysically charged substances – such as menstrual blood and the blood of animals - from merging, to the extent that hunters whose wives are menstruating may not participate in the hunt, this is conceived of as one of the most powerful, if not *the* most powerful, of relationships in the cosmological and religious sphere. The concept of *ekila* (Lewis, 2008) demonstrates this. *Ekila* refers to a series of particularly potent substances and to the proper rules of etiquette pertaining to them *for both men and women*. Here, the husbands or sons of menstruating women assume the potentially disruptive and powerful effects their blood may have on game. But *ekila* is not the narrow exclusion of women from hunting; it signifies a vast array of interconnecting relationships between menstrual blood, the moon, hunting luck, game blood, forest spirits, sex, and childbirth (Lewis, 2008: 298). By focusing exclusively on taboos against women's participation in hunting, one patch is ripped out of a much broader tapestry. In her concluding comments on Baka ritual associations, Joiris (1996) returns to the issue of identity “based on a wider ritual perspective” (Joiris, 1996: 274). Complex relationships of local groups with game spirits serve to facilitate regional political cohesion. Relationships, whether at the level of individuals or groups, are *ritually* mediated. “Because Baka camps are linked according to the class of spirits they guard, their relationships do not depend solely on economic and ecological adaptation, but also on social and religious structures. Consequently, religion extends well into the structure of entire social connections within the Baka culture, perhaps to a greater degree than subsistence or economic concerns” (1996: 274).

## CONCLUSION AND ANALYSIS

We are not talking here about occasional festivities punctuating a social landscape otherwise dominated by disparate power relations, by “the experience of alienation”. Nor are we talking about small, daily acts performed by individuals – Lewis (2002) describes these as “magic” and makes a distinction between them and ritual. The ritual and dance complexes of forest hunter-gatherers in Central Africa are major, communal, iterative performances; they are fundamental aspects of the social structure of such communities, providing a collective forum for continually re-assessing current orders. They express a complex, kinaesthetic relationship between a series of metaphors appropriate to women's creativity and power, and their

complementary male counterparts. “Only in their interaction, it seems, can a whole story be told” (Bieseke, 1993: 85). As I have described them, however, these dances are also a fundamental part of the community labour that goes into successful hunting. Women are the prime sirens for game animals and spirits both, and they mediate using song, dance, and ritual trance between the camp space in which the human prevails, and the forest world, in which humans are but one group in a dense society. What is stressed in these performances is the intense lure and supernatural power of the female body and its fluids and affinities. On women’s side is blood, milk, sex, but also meat, honey, powerful game animals, ancestral spirits, and the moon itself – “women’s biggest husband” (Lewis, 2008: 299). Such a resonant cluster, employed by large groups of women themselves, cannot justifiably be read as the imposition of male hegemony.

There is a logic and story woven into antipathy in these contexts. Women are not physically debarred from hunting with no other comment made. Their absence signifies power. I suggest, following Knight (1991) and Power and Watts (1999), that it is in this very move – away from the bodies of game animals - that women collectively are conceptualised as sacred. This is illustrated by the fact that in times of hunting crisis, they alone can use their ritual presence to intervene (McCreedy, 1994), and by the fact that they generally are believed to maintain a privileged conversation with large game that both attracts and (the point seized upon by most Western theorists) if not correctly managed, repels animals and the spirits integral to their capture. This “conversation” is a richly performative, kinetic interchange involving women’s bodily fluids and sexual energies; a *ritual* dialogue. On a symbolic level, if substance is shared but bodies are differentiators (Viveiros de Castro, 2000), then the bleeding bodies of women and game suggest an equivalence that must be circumscribed, dealt with, separated. Blood here assumes an intense signification, with its ability to collapse bodies into one another. Hence the warnings, widespread among hunters, of general social and environmental catastrophe presaged by the intermingling of female and animal blood.

In the story assembled by Chris Knight (1991), female blood is first used to signal a relationship between animals and women – meat and sex – important to women in their collective capacity as mothers. Knight (1991) insists that it is impossible to

theorise the cross-cultural relationship between women and game animals without a prior understanding of the constraints placed upon women by reproductive demands, and their collective response to these. The intense signalling power of female blood represents for Knight (1991) the first taboo: the moment it is pooled and pluralized, culture commences. While my interest here is not in developing a perspective on his origins scenario, I have used the insights provided by Knight's model to challenge the treatment of equivalence and antipathy as imposed upon passive, individual women by active, collective men. Men, as productive or ritual agents are powerful actors in hunting societies. But equally powerful is women's productive, reproductive and ritual work. "The things we care most about – our loves, passions, rivalries, obsessions – are always other people; and in most societies that are not capitalist, it's taken for granted that the manufacture of material goods is a subordinate moment in a larger process of fashioning people. In fact, I would argue that one of the most alienating aspects of capitalism is the fact that it forces us to pretend that it is the other way around" (Graeber, 2007: 12). Against the assumption that the power to be is the only power, rests the power of withdrawal, the power *not* to be.

When Brightman (1996) writes: "While men do not universally compromise the outcome of women's activities and in some societies are even held to exert necessary ritual influences over female spheres of labour and procreation, women's influences on men's labour seem everywhere to be reckoned as harmful" (1996: 708), he expresses a concern understandable when the full ritual and symbolic corpus of beliefs are not made explicit, and when an academic preoccupation with women's "subordination" is used to analyse radically different political systems. When he refers to foragers adherence to hunting taboos as "mystified consciousness" (1996: 709) he strips both sexes of their creative and political agency. The schism between mind and body replicated by the sex-gender dualism is not "universal", though it is pervasive. In the explicit recognition of materiality and reproductive difference, materiality and difference are made available for cultural, symbolic manipulation. The press into oneness, the diminishment of difference and the disavowal of sexed bodies, ironically, precludes understanding of the imaginative, symbolic work of *creating* oneness, the development of strategies for disarming difference, and the potentially rich template and source of sex. While so much debate on the subject of

gender commences with the intellectual effort to unshackle it from sex, ethnographic findings contradict this urge.

“Gender”, “nature”, “dualism” – these are terms it has become standard to critique on the basis of an a priori assumption regarding their negativity. In the most extreme analyses, biology itself is rubbed away. Gender is made endlessly mutable, or non-existent; sex is unmade or re-made; sexual difference is contested, reproductive difference hypothesised as reducible to nine months and birth. What do we do with all this argument and abstraction when we find ourselves faced with communities whose core mnemonic devices hinge on menstrual blood, and who highlight and positively value sexual, bodily difference? As Lewis notes: “Mbendjele ideology creates interdependencies between the sexes by attributing the highly valued production of one gender to the activities of the other. Thus women grow men’s children by turning semen into a foetus and men kill and butcher animals that women’s mystical activities have enabled to be caught” (Lewis, 2008: 310). Daily lives are mapped around a series of shifting complementarities that pan out over formal, ritual templates as clear symbolic duality (cf. Bieseke, 1993; Barnard, 1980). Labour roles and constraints focus explicitly on the power of menstrual blood, gestation, sex, the bodies of game animals, the blood of game animals, the relationship between women and meat (Lewis, 2002).

In closing, I want to return to something that arose in the discussion of women’s ritual hunting power: the idea of “work” as something done for the opposite sex. Rival (1997), Gow (1982), Overing (2003), Bodenhorn (1990), McCreedy (1994), Bieseke (1993) and Lewis (2002) all make reference to this as an explicit conviction among the egalitarian peoples with whom they work. It runs through the realms of hunting, childbirth, ritual hunting, childbirth rites, and general sociality: productive action is what one does willingly as part of a flow of complimentary, creative effort between the sexes. Gow’s (1982) analysis of this is particularly useful in clarifying the trajectory from subsistence to bodily metaphor and meaning. He notes: “The unmarried adult does not produce, or produces very little and sporadically, *because he or she has no-one for whom to produce*” (Gow, 1982: 572). Echoing Bieseke’s (1993) use of the Ju/hoan adage “women like meat”, Gow (1982) reiterates that people’s desire is what binds them. These are not “abstracted desires that can be satisfied in a

variety of different ways”, but desires which “link people inevitably to certain other people” (Gow, 1982: 568). Desire, hunger, and sharing are what animate the lines running between women and men, sex and meat.

Like Lewis (2002), Gow (1982) double-frames the bio-cultural flow of items and substances between women and men, giving the impression of a relational twining and froing: Women produce manioc beer; men distribute it. Men produce meat; women distribute it. Women secure meat; men produce it. Men secure babies; women produce them. Thus “productive labour is gender-identified...But at the level of circulation the gender-identity of a product is transformed” (Gow, 1982: 571). The construction of the person as a producer in the subsistence economy is systematically connected to sexual desire, in a persistent “metaphoric relation between food items and sexual substances” (1982: 574). The equivalence of eating with sex, or of particular, prized foods with male genitals, is made sensible through the impellent of female desire. Hungry women greeting an empty-handed hunter exclaim: “Let’s eat penises” (1982: 575)! All of this is linked by Gow (1982) to the young women who, with protective kin ties to rely upon, “control their sexual partners, thus wielding a great amount of *cultural* power in the realm of production, sharing and desire” (1982: 575). The intense sexual interest of all men who are not their kin endows Piro women collectively with powerful social leverage.

Gow (1982), in common with Central African writers (Devische, 1993; Ichikawa, 1987; Lewis, 2002; 2008) describes a system in which corporeal processes are already part of a general social concern, and questions why this is the case. His answer, resonating strongly with Knight’s (1991) assertions, is that the power of corporeal idioms derives from “the importance of the sexual, productive and consuming body and its pleasures in the structuring of the subsistence economy...*The body and its desires lies at the heart of the economy, serving as a point of attachment for social concerns*” (Gow, 1982: 580 Emphasis mine). Amazonian societies do not operate around the creation of subjects who “own” particular goods (proprietorship), nor around the gift-exchange idioms familiar to bride-wealth societies, but rather “through the relations established between people by means of their different bodies and corporeal desires. The idiom is not proprietorial since people are not seen as subjects who possess their bodies or labour power” (ibid: 580). This is a useful place

to leave the chapter: It is in the relational, dialogic space between “different bodies and corporeal desires” that sociality, and hence society, is made. Women’s ritual relationship with game animals and meat is inseparable from the politics of mothering in such communities, and from men’s corresponding ritual involvements in female fertility.

### *THIRD INTERLUDE*

#### *“These people are our servants”: Navigating a Passage*

Waving to Philippe Auzel on the roadside, I fight back panic. For miles around us, the rainforest is a live, dispassionate creature whose sounds have replaced those of the human. When the truck disappears, we’ll be scores of miles from the nearest village, the nearest telephone. Philippe was reluctant to leave, and insists he’ll find a way to visit us at Bangui before the month is out. On the early morning drive here, he related for me the story of his own close shave with a gang from Makao, whose plan was to kidnap him for ransom money. This part of the forest is, he claims, “*bandit country*”, conjuring up for me my home in Armagh, once designated “*bandit country*” by British soldiers on tours of duty there. Fabrice is fussing with our guides – four Makao Mbendjele who’ll help transport our equipment and supplies to Bangui. They wear shredded T-shirts, one of which bears the omnipresent smiling face of Denis Saussu-Nguesso.

We set off through a dense raffia thicket which opens onto more swamp forest. This walk is an estimated eight to ten hours, and we need to reach Bangui before dark. The camaraderie of our Ibamba walk is conspicuously absent, and we barely lift our heads, stopping every three hours to rest and eat. The men with whom we travel are subdued, though it’s true we’ve lost the medium of Mr. Massampeu. Fabrice lacks the older man’s humour. After six hours, we come upon the first small village on the edge of the Motaba river – Bey. The forest has been cleared to contrive a rectangular yard with a few houses. A handful of Kaka men sit smoking under a lean-to in the fierce sun, and further along the path we can see a small Mbendjele dwelling. This will be a consistent feature of all those villages we pass through en route to Bangui, however modest – a small core of horticulturalist villagers and on their periphery, a

Mbendjele camp. Often the Mbendjele camp is composed of a single extended family, though these small islands seem to be outposts of the main camp at Mboule. Further along the river at Seke, Anikou, and Molapa we pause again to allow Fabrice to confer with the local men. The last stretch of path towards Bangui is swampy and chaotic, and we are all wet, hungry and exhausted. We troop into the village just as night falls.

The residents of Bangui have been warned of our impending arrival and circle us curiously. A tall, beefy man with a lazy eye and clenched fists stands apart from the crowd, waiting to be acknowledged. This is Mitiko-Alain – the Chief of Bangui. When Fabrice explains we're exhausted, and need to pitch our tent before darkness makes it impossible, he growls a response and strides off abruptly into the shadows. As we crawl into our sleeping bags, weak with hunger and aware we've violated some essential etiquette, the entire project seems mad. In the darkness outside the tent, I hear children cackling and voices whispering in a strange, social silence that tells us we've abruptly cut peoples thread by our arrival in their midst. Sleeping fitfully, besieged by nightmares, I wake at dawn to an intense nausea. Fabrice, who slept in the house of a villager, arrives to summons us to a meeting with the Chief. In a tiny mud shelter whose windows are adorned with ancient net curtains, Alain sits rigid with his palms spread on an old school desk. We sit before him like interviewees, and indeed this is what we are. He dispenses with small talk and begins by telling us we will pay him £750.00 in taxes for the privilege of pitching our tent in his village and fraternising with his Pygmies.

There's a long silence while we hesitate in the pungent, shimmering heat. Flies bounce manically off the walls. Then, as both Fabrice and Germano are speechless, I say, not having anything else to say: "*No*". I'm aware of our relative wealth, and the injustice of arriving into the community without some exchange. But the sum he's asked for is absurd, even by our standards. My budget is already etiolated almost to breaking. He stares at me for a moment, unspeaking, inscrutable. Then he shrugs: "*Okay, £200.00*", and I realise we're on a precarious path. We don't know yet whether we'll stay here – the community may not be appropriate. It's also clear that Fabrice has been ingratiating himself with the Chief by exaggerating the formality and wealth of our project. It takes half an hour of negotiation, but finally we come to

an agreement whereby one of Alain's wives will provide us with two small meals a day for a generous daily sum. After a few weeks, if we decide to remain at Bangui, we'll make a further gift to the community. This way at least we're involved in an exchange. The community we travelled here to meet and work with lies another



**Figure 12: Bangui-Motaba**

kilometre South of Bangui, but the Yambe have placed themselves like gate-keepers before us, blockading and delimiting our access to it. Already, we're involved in bartering with a group of people we don't want to live among, as though in support of their belief that they are the "owners" of the Mbendjele.

Lunch that day is smoked fish with "fou fou" – a village staple of manioc and semolina rolled into gluey dumplings. We eat in silence in a bare, clay-walled room with a single high window, while flies fling themselves relentlessly at the bowls of food. The first of Alain's three wives has laid the table and withdrawn, to where she lingers sullenly by the door. I'm acutely aware we've trespassed into her home, probably without her consent. We eat quickly and escape back out into the sun, the village rimmed with palm trees and balancing on the dark, golden Motaba. With Fabrice, we make a small tour of the area around Bangui, visiting small Mbendjele



camps that satellite the main one, Mboule, where we'll go tomorrow. The forest surrounding the village is dark and cool - dry walking abundant with fruit and game. Each Mbendjele camp we arrive at erupts into laughter, and one old woman rushes forwards to embrace me, clasping my face, rubbing my shoulders vigorously, so the return to Bangui is even more subdued than before. There are a few Mbendjele from Mboule here, clustered in small groups, but they remain quiet under the village air of suspicion and hostility. We wash in a small enclave in the river, wading out to beyond where yams are steeping. That evening, dinner is again silent, Alain sitting in a small room adjoining the dining space, smoking and whispering with a group of men. Occasionally, one of them wanders through to observe us eat.

The air that night is an intermingling of manioc, blood and excrement. Earlier, two men slaughtered a chicken, chasing it round the village green with a machete in a macabre comedy, cackling at its panicked death-cries. Now as I crouch in the gloom, trying to make some last notes, there rises from far in the forest to the South of Bangui the sudden strain of a choir. Then nothing. I stand up. After a few seconds it rises again – transfixing and surreal – a complex, voluptuous chorus composed of what sounds like many voices. But the forest itself is dense, black, with no sign of firelight. I follow the direction of the singing. As I cross the village and cut down a long clearing where the last houses lie, the melody becomes clearer and more consistent. The wonder of this sudden orchestra is almost eclipsed by its strangeness, emanating as it does from such a vast, dark expanse. It must be the community at Mboule. With the odd authority and precision of its chorus, the song seems almost a summons.

We're woken that night by the sound, way out at the edge of the village, of a solitary drum beat: Ponderous, repetitive, unaccompanied by human sound. There are no voices, no lights, only the low, ominous beating of the drum. As we lie listening, there comes without warning and a few yards from our tent door, a single, piercing shriek, then silence. The sound is potentially identifiable as a cat, but there are no cats in this village – the villagers associate them with witchcraft. Now my scalp is prickling, the pulse thumping in my ears. But the drum has stopped abruptly, and there are no more sounds. After a long time, baffled, we drift back into sleep.

The next morning, a few curious men from Mobanza – a small Bantu village down river - have arrived to visit, and we take the opportunity to join them. I bring out my precious supplies of coffee, powdered milk and biscuits, and Germano and I sit under the village pavilion with Alain and his guests. I unfold the large maps Jerome gave us for forest navigation and spread them out in the sand before the men. How much they understand is debateable, but that's not the point. We hunker across the maps pointing out place names and as I pronounce them, the men exclaim in recognition and mention the names of friends or family. Sonza-Theogene, the Chief of Mobanza, is considerably older than Alain, and emanates an easy authority I see Alain struggling to replicate in his own relationships. When Sonza speaks, Alain leans in attentively. Sonza has warmed to Germano, and they joke together as water is brewed for more coffee. For the first time since our arrival in Bangui, the tension softens. Over the two hours that we sit together in the pavilion, Alain's attitude shifts subtly so that although he remains cold with me, he begins to enter the banter with Germano. Two of his wives come, silent and downcast, and he barks instructions at them, snapping violently at one when she spills water.

After the visitors have gone, we move our tent from its conspicuous central location to the gable shade of a low, white-washed building locally referred to as "the hotel". Here we're at the very lip of the village, marking the start of the trail that winds through the forest to Mboule. The new location, because of the overhang of foliage, is cooler, and considerably more private. Alain wonders whether any of my university friends will come to stay at Bangui, reasoning aloud that even if *we* insist on living with Pygmies, we can't expect it of our potential guests. For a modest fee, he'll provide them with a room at his hotel. He adds that he has "*une grande idee*", to canvas C.I.B and the government for funds with which to raze the forest around Bangui and build a "real" hotel. Fabrice tells us later that this shelter was erected about a year ago when an American documentary maker and his crew passed through en route to film Mbendjele dances. The Americans too declined the use of the "hotel", and this is understandably a sore point. It is inexplicable to the Yambe that any interest from without centres on the Mbendjele. Why would Europeans travel all this way to study people who live in the forest, refusing to speak French, or cultivate gardens, or send their children to school? Fabrice has already issued this plaintive, and it is reiterated in the indignation of Alain. In fact, the ethnographic refrain of

Pygmy-Bantu “symbiosis” is beginning to seem like a gloss on a more troubled relationship. Both Fabrice and Alain express resentment about the fact that few Mbendjele parents send their children to the village school.



**Figure 13: Mboule**

The next two days are spent waiting for some barrels of provisions we left behind at Loundoungou, and which Philippe has promised to have brought to us. We won't attempt to make the move to Mboule until these arrive, and are temporarily released from the strain of trying to negotiate any further moves. We're besieged by what I worry might be Tsetse flies, who leave any uncovered skin peppered with tiny wounds that quickly become infected. As relief from this onslaught, we borrow a thin pirogue and paddle out every morning with Fabrice into the middle of the Motaba to swim. On these morning excursions, Fabrice stands authoritatively at the prow of the boat, regaling us with tales of all the women vying for his affection. There's only one, he says, worth marrying – her father is a senior military man in Brazzaville. Then he wants to hear about Scotland, where *“les homes portent des robes”*! and Ireland, in England, where people are all shooting each other. *“Pas vous, naturellement”*, he nods respectfully. We float below him in the cold, leafy water,

reluctant to scramble back out into sun and tension. After a breakfast of porridge, we scrub clothes on a plank of wood in the river and hang them to dry on branches around the tent. All our drinking water must be collected from a small spring in the forest and filtered, then boiled, a task that consumes a large chunk of the afternoon. Later, we sit in the shade of the hotel, writing and swatting flies in the heavy afternoon heat. The Mbendjele gather around our tent in the evenings, emboldened by our relative isolation from the village, and I try out my makeshift dictionary on them.

Pygmies are diminutive, compact people who move with an almost fluid gait. They have the knack of appearing soundlessly, not even the snap of a twig to presage their arrival. From the gable of the “hotel”, they grin widely at us, showing mouthfuls of perfectly filed teeth. While the men wear T-shirts in various stages of decay, the women wear only raffia skirts, long strings of the plastic beads they barter from the *Bilo*, and occasionally a dozing infant in a hip sling. Unlike anyone I’ve encountered in Congo or elsewhere, they return our gaze unflinchingly, beaming back to us our own habitual evasion. I’ve learned “*engende bo*”? – “what is this”? - and repeat it endlessly, much to the amusement of our audience, who cackle in concert when I repeat after them a word or phrase. Wanting the word for “sky” I point at it and ask, “*engende bo*”? To which they reply, “*komba*”, Mbendjele for “God”. When I ask again, trying to elicit another term, they tell me “*dadi*” – “sun”. When I point to the forest, looking for a generic term, there’s a chorus of voices giving me the names of different trees. Only after a few minutes do I hear “*ndima! ndima*”! During all this, cigarettes are distributed periodically, so that we find ourselves becoming the main source of recreation for an entire community.

On our third day camped outside the hotel, our provisions still haven’t arrived and we decide to make our first official visit to Mboule. Although we’ve passed through a few times in our wanderings around Bangui, this morning we’ve asked Fabrice to arrange a formal meeting. Mboule lies half a kilometre into the forest South of Bangui and the community numbers approximately one hundred people - a large camp by Mbendjele standards. The trail that joins Bangui and Mboule is clearly worn and easy to follow though it traverses thick forest. It is a symbol of the relationship between the two communities, as well as of their segregation. Mboule itself is a long,

narrow lane hedged on either side by foliage, in contrast to the wide, circular opening of the village. Flame trees and palms jostle with wild manioc and liana. It's here that the Mbendjele converge during the wet season, when they work in the Bantu village or fields, making short forays into the forest to hunt and gather. But this is temporary – by late November, the people living here will have dispersed into smaller groups – clusters of families related by kinship or friendship - who'll spend four to six months living and travelling in the forest. The community is vibrant. It is clear people have recently returned from months of forest living, and are getting reacquainted. There are many adolescent women, who roam in authoritative bands, and gaggles of rowdy children.

Immediately we enter camp, Fabrice begins counting children. Under questioning it transpires that his friend, the Yambe school teacher at Bangui, is having trouble getting Mbendjele children to attend school. Fabrice has agreed to conduct a head count. It's the final straw in a whole sequence of transgressions and disappointments. Since our arrival at Bangui we've been navigating the community alone while Fabrice concentrates his energy on flattering Alain, mainly by devising elaborate strategies with which to extort money from us. I've already spoken to him about this, trying to reason with him that his role is to help, not hinder us. His carelessness has inflicted on me the role of the scolding, peevish white woman. Now, as he sulks in the middle of camp, I ask him to leave us. The women, from whom he'd begun to demand the whereabouts of the "Chief", are bristling. No-one has responded to him and it's clear he's a liability. He rounds on me with his thin face animate for the first time. "*Ces personnes sont nos serviteurs*"! – he hisses, "*They won't go to school, they live on the land like they own it, they take meat from the forest! The Government should make them pay, they think everything is free...*" on and on till I hear and see in him the rancour of Alain and the other villagers. Before I have a chance to answer, and just as suddenly as the outburst began, he composes himself. To lose the prestige and salary of his role as interpreter would be disastrous. He turns to a young man nearby and speaks sharply in Linghala. The man turns and disappears down a path between two shelters. We walk away along the central lane that is Mboule, leaving him to glower. I'm struck by the vitriol of his sudden outburst.

Women rest on the ground grinding palm kernels on large, flat *ngongo* leaves, or hunker in the interior of houses. Two women sit together outside a house breastfeeding twins, their legs warming in the sun while they lean back in the shadow of the wall. The younger woman, whose wide, heart-shaped face is half my age, stares up at me proudly. As we walk back down the long clearing, a smiling older



**Figure 14: Mgonye baths one of her daughters**

man approaches us with the teenager Fabrice had dispatched. This is Dsenga, a Mbendjele “*kombeti*” or elder and respected hunter. The nursing women are his wives – Saape, the elder, and Mgonye, the babies’ biological mother. A quick conversation ensues in which Fabrice clarifies he will not be staying with us but will remain at Bangui – this has been his stipulation from the outset – and once Dsenga realises this, he begins gesturing excitedly to an empty shelter next to his own. He tells Fabrice we can pitch our tent here for as long as we want. We discover later that an eccentric French man, captivated by an Mbendjele woman, lived here some years ago for a few months. They later married and moved to Mobanza. Appropriately enough, this shelter was dubbed “*oma mundelle*” – “house of the whites”.

All my reading previous to leaving Scotland suggested the Mbendjele have no formal leaders, no individuals who consistently occupy decision-making roles. Rather, respected elders or skilled individuals may be temporarily elected to make decisions on behalf of their community, though even this is not done voluntarily. In egalitarian societies, personal freedom and autonomy are highly valued and any potential compromises to these strongly resisted. For Dsenga to have so easily consented to our presence the community had probably anticipated our request and made their decision. Dsenga has told Fabrice that tonight, to welcome us to their community, the Mbendjele will dance “*Ejengi*” – one of the most common and widespread *mokondi massana* or “spirit performances”. When we arrive back at our tent, the barrels have finally arrived, along with a note from Philippe Auzel. In it, he tries to reassure me all will be well, and tells us under no circumstances to give money to the villagers. “*Etre bravent*”, he finishes. Already the world he represents is fading.

We’re woken late that evening by singing from Mboule. Fabrice arrives, and the three of us stumble off along the path towards Mboule wielding torches. The forest at night is a riot of smells, all the perfumes and resins of the day thickening in the undergrowth. The damp air reverberates with the voices of hundreds of species of insects. We’re still walking when we realise we’ve entered Mboule, the black silhouettes of houses looming abruptly on either side of us. We turn a bend in the camp clearing to find the path either side of us alive with millions of tiny lights. At the end of this runway, a large group of people have gathered around a single fire, right at the edge of the forest and at the farthest possible point from Bangui. A circle of young men sits to the left of the fire, taking turns to drum – a long *mokinda* drum and a short, two-sided *ndumu* drum - and women have clustered on the other side, singing and clapping while they jiggle babies and small children. Older men form a semi-circle around the fire. The women’s singing is a rich polyphony of voices and melodies through which the *ndumu* beat weaves. We sit behind the men, where we can observe without trespassing, and Dsenga comes to hunker beside us.

An old woman – Moonga - rises from her group and dances into the centre, then veers off jerkily into the darkness on the left. As she moves, she issues sharp bird noises, and her arms float upward, then back to the group of singing women, who intensify the melody. She dances a while longer, then resumes her place, and another elderly



woman swings up from the group. As she moves into the central space, she scoops up an infant and fixes it to her back, so that it bobs rhythmically with her as she dances - the same rough cursive as her predecessor, the same bird-like cries. There's a new concentration on the faces of the drummers and singers now, and the older men have inched closer to the fire. When the first woman re-enters the clearing, she's focused on the forest to the left of the fire, dancing out into darkness until we can barely see her. Suddenly, she rushes back in, closely pursued by a whirling figure in a pyramid of leaves. Chaos erupts as the figure flies round wildly, sending on-lookers and singers scattering. Dsenga, agitated, leans across pointing and says to Germano: "*Dika Ndim*" - "That's the forest".

The old woman now hops around the figure as though the earth burned, issuing her hoarse, bird-like warning shrieks. When it unexpectedly spirals towards the grouped women, and they scramble back in panic, she rushes forward dancing provocatively in a new, sideways motion, jiggling her hips to make her skirt bounce, calling out till she attracts *Ejengi*'s attention. The Mbendjele say that *Ejengi*'s touch can mean death to the uninitiated (Lewis, 2002). She's clearly protecting the younger women, even as she encourages the spirit. Only two women perform this role during the dance, moving fluidly in trance-like state. They waver back and forth between *Ejengi* - enticing and policing - and the women - waving their arms, calling encouragement, coaxing the singing to a stronger level. They're the eldest in the group of women, one so ancient she's permanently stooped, her face ribboned with lines. As the women's singing concentrates into a voluptuous chorus, *Ejengi* becomes more animated and unpredictable, and a few of the older men rise and begin to dance around him, hemming him in. From accounts in the work of Jerome Lewis (2002) and Daou Joiris (1996), it's known that these men are *Ejengi* initiates and possibly "spirit controllers", older men whose task it is to contain and modify the dangerous power of the *mokondi*. During the main women's ritual - "*Ngoku*" - elder women perform a corresponding role. When *Ejengi* spins suddenly toward a group of children, they all run screaming, then one by one return to dance behind him, till he lunges again, and again they flee screaming. In the firelight, the masked figure is a whirling dervish of leaves that rises to an impossible apex as he darts around the clearing.



There's a large corpus of such *mokondi massana* among the Mbendjele, each one representing a different spirit and controlled by a particular gender (Lewis, 2002). These dances are a fundamental part of community life and well-being. Each *mokondi massana* carries its own significance and is appropriate for particular occasions. The reality however, is impossible to categorise. While *Ejengi* is a "men's" *massana*, women are clearly central to the performance of it. The casualness and subtlety with which men contain their *mokondi* illuminates the complimentary nature of Mbendjele performance. It is



Figure 15: Dsenga, on the left, dressed for a photo

clear that the full initiation sequence does set boundaries sharply around male power, yet the female dancers in this *mokondi* are also key players. The mood wavers at times between a children's Halloween game and a serious ritual display of older women's attractiveness and power. It is an explicit dialogue between male and female, human and spirit, and a musical masterpiece, the harmony and skill of what is a human performance overspilling, leaning towards the divine.

*Ejengi*, above all, seems to represent the community's ability to unite in order to harness and host some other, broader society – the forest itself – whose wild,

diffusive energy has infected all of us. Germano's face is rapt and serious as *Ejengi* dances out of the human clearing, back into the blue-black of the forest. The singing and clapping have ebbed but continue, and the bodies around us have relaxed again. Something is finished, but the continuation of the singing suggests the dance may erupt intermittently through the night. This is clearly not the *Ejengi* organised to initiate neophytes - a formal, three-day ordeal. But the dances belonging to *Ejengi* are above all to do with the celebration of abundance. It is often precipitated by a successful elephant hunt. On this occasion, it seems, we are the "meat", the abundance reeled into camp by the beauty of women's singing. Which makes sense of Dsenga's *djoki* or "speech" earlier today, in which he cried: "Look at the good things that have come to camp"!

Struggling with a now familiar nausea, I ask Fabrice to convey my apologies to Dsenga and the community, then, gripping my torch, head back with him towards our tent. The singing follows us along the path, but the nausea intensifies, and I crawl into the tent with the distant strains of music still rippling the forest.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE POLITICS OF EROS: SEX AND THE SPEAKING BODY

*Who desires peace, let him make ready for war*

Vegitus

The previous chapter illustrated an odd discordance in the reading of Western gender theory alongside ethnography of Central African hunter-gatherers. The two do not sit comfortably together. The complexity and plurality of Judith Butler's (1990) gender tends to hover unconvincingly above empirical data that stays rooted in sexed bodies and their metaphors. Where power is expressed in ritual context, it is the visceral, libidinal power of the body in motion. Students of African societies have commented on this symbolic preoccupation with the very terms recent Western gender theory disposes of at the outset – sex, menstrual blood, gestation, birth and parturition, to which can be added meat, fire, hunger, moon (Turner 1969; Moore 1999; Beidelman 1997; Kaspin 1999). These are elemental, organic terms, words that conjure up earth and skin rather than mind. Moreover, they are particularly resonant with the female reproductive system. Henrietta Moore (1999) in an essay on African gender symbolism notes a widespread concern with “the power of sex and with issues of sexual access and denial” or with “the relationship between body processes and social processes, the way that the inner rhythms and functions of the body have an established set of concordances with social structures and cosmological understandings” (Moore, 1999: 3). Among many Central African forest hunter-gatherers, it is the relationship between female bodily processes and social processes that commands a substantial amount of energetic and conceptual time.

The aim of this chapter is to reassess the terms of both “gender” and “symbolic power” by allowing them to remain within the materiality and politics of the body. While symbolic power, in the hands of Bourdieu (1977; 1990) particularly, has tended to retain a strong visceral element, the theorisation of its embeddedness in bodies as a kind of *disempowerment*, an organisation of bodily sense implicitly working against the person, clashes with Central African ethnographic evidence where it is through ritual hexis that power is brought into the person and assimilated. I begin therefore by examining certain assumptions integral to Bourdieu’s (1990; 1992) theory of habitus, founded as it is on a kind of (non-egalitarian) sociality alien to forest hunter-gatherers. Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s (1990) writing on the bodily enactment of memory in non-literate societies informs much of my analysis, and I use his stress on the political ethos instilled through practical belief to frame Colin Turnbull’s (1978) description of the Mbuti body.

Where productive relations with their *felt* divisions and constraints are not the norm, what kind of “body” are we talking about? The very notion of “having” as opposed to “being” a body derives from an ideology of ownership not appropriate to egalitarian societies. When we speak about “the sexual division of labour”, or “unequal” gender relations, profound ontological and affective assumptions of a split or discordance at the level of the person are triggered. These are emotive issues for us because they are experienced as painful, disempowering - injustices to be addressed. But we cannot argue for analytical sensitivity to “qualitatively different kinds of society” (Leacock, 1982), without exploring the repercussions of qualitatively different kinds of bodily experience and response.

Of particular interest are Bourdieu’s (1990) statements about the evocation of feelings through “the orderly disposition of bodies, in particular the bodily expression of emotion, in laughter or tears” (Bourdieu, 1990: 69). The conduct of the “laughing body” is central to Mbuti, Baka, BaYaka and Mbendjele ritual conversations about reproductive and hunting power. The symbolic repertoire that is condensed out of such dialogic performance holds and reconstitutes a core somatic experience for successive generations. In Mbendjele society, material culture is at a minimum, and valuable beliefs or hermeneutics are passed on not through material items but through the collective body, symbolised and signified in ritual praxis (cf. Lewis, 2008).

Michael Jackson (1983) argues that close engagement with bodily praxis in preliterate societies, particularly in the realm of ritual performance, may bring us closer to the sense manifest by such communities beyond linguistic meaning. If there is such a sense - “communicating, codifying, symbolising, signifying thoughts or things that lie outside or anterior to speech” (Jackson, 1983: 329) - then the study of body language should be integral to the study of ritual. Yet as Jackson (1983) comments, “there seems to be a dearth of studies on the body-as-subject” (Jackson, 1983: 330). I work with four ethnographic synopses, the purpose of each of which is to develop an alternative argument for experience and agency, one which not only commences from the body – “rooting the most fundamental structures of the group in the primary experiences of the body” (Bourdieu, 1990: 71) - but which stresses the discursive, and subversive, potential of the *collective* body manifest in Central African gender ritual. While I use Bourdieu’s (1990) insights into bodily comportment and embodied memory, I believe the Yaka body inverts the political logic of habitus; what is absorbed through a long process of bodily pedagogy is the importance of maintaining symbolic power in the hands of the community.

Bakhtin’s (1983) theory of language in which “the forces of dialogue struggle constantly against the forces of monologue” (Hill, 1986: 89), and his stress on the polyphonic nature of speech communities are particularly apt in the context of Yaka cultural life, where polyphonic speech and song styles are the norm and contribute to a social dialogic imagination. The constitutive power of dialogue as developed by Bakhtin (1983) is central to my argument about ritually mediated conversation in Yaka communities: “In dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, *but he becomes for the first time that which he is*” (Bakhtin, 1983: 252 *Emphasis mine*). Polyphony here is part of a politics of multiplicity and not merely one literary genre. This is of course what Bakhtin (1968) comes to in his writing on the cosmic comic principle manifest in *Rabelais and His World*, and I use it to reflect on the implications of Yaka or Mbuti dialogics for our understanding of the ritually articulate body. The trope of rhythm – a social pendulum instigated by dialogic conversation – recurs throughout this chapter as part of an attempt to describe an egalitarian habitus in which motion, from the biological body to the collective cultural domain, is consistently privileged over resolution. Perhaps polyphony then is

the proper language of the *social* body – a series of voices moving simultaneously, fluidly, bearing multiplicities of meaning within a common confluence; Bakhtin’s “corporeal logos” (Mihailovic, 1997: 46).

Whereas Butler (1990) interprets Kristeva’s (1984) “pre-discursive libidinal economy” as maintaining a status prior to language, and therefore insignificant as an alternative to hegemony, I use ethnography on Central African hunter-gatherers to argue for an expansion of our understanding of language and discourse. The flourishing of a libidinal economy in ritual exchange or barter is a key part of the dialectic which enables Yaka and Mbuti ontology to privilege becoming over closure. This is, in turn, interlinked with a general and widely noted hunter-gatherer emphasis on personal autonomy, freedom, and sharing.

Aparecida Vilaca (2005) has noted that most analyses of the body tend to begin with a stable, universal substance “impregnated with dispositions and affects (mindful bodies or embodied knowledge) rather than a way of being actualised in body form” (Vilaca, 2005: 449). What the literature on Central African forest hunter-gatherers (and on most current or recent hunter-gatherers) tells us, is that the body itself has a voice, clearly discernible in ritual burlesque. The “pre-discursive, libidinal economy” marked by Kristiva (1984) is only pre-discursive as long as we fail to perceive the possibilities of discourse. By naming the body actualised through collective female ritual performance as instigator and agent, the politics of that body become visible. I use the term “the politics of Eros” to capture Mbendjele, BaYaka, Yaka or Mbuti women’s visceral manifestation of “the world that laughs” (Bakhtin, 1968: 134), and that in laughing, asserts the power of motion – the world of blood and breath – over the order of hierarchy and closure. While the ritual assertions Mbendjele or BaYaka women routinely make concerning somatic power are clearly directed at a corresponding ritual coalition of men, I have not incorporated men’s contrapuntal rejoinders. This is due both to the constraints of space and to a desire to privilege female ritual praxis and voice.

I close the chapter with a discussion on the usefulness of “gender” as a term, fixed as it is both in abstraction and in one particular experience of domination. The struggle to set it aside will be clear in my analyses, yet failure to do so threatens to obscure

something more powerful – the “play of forces” (Turner, 1969: 84) – that fizzles continually in hunter-gatherer communities. The dominant terms slip therefore in the process of this chapter from gender and symbolic power to sex and laughter - the more earthy, unfinished arguments of the body itself.

#### “THE BODY BELIEVES IN WHAT IT PLAYS AT”: REPERCUSSIONS

What would it mean to re-think Bourdieu’s (1990; 1992) insights into the “enacted belief” of the habitus from a cultural field in which such belief not only fails to reinforce hegemonic epistemology, but articulates its antithesis? Throughout Bourdieu’s (1990) writing is the deferential, domesticated Kabyle woman who must “walk with a slight stoop...looking down...avoiding the excessive swing of the hips”, and embodying restraint, reserve, a complex “that orients the whole female body downwards, towards the ground, the inside, the house” (Bourdieu, 1990: 70). Bodily hexis is “political mythology realised, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (1990: 70). But what are the implications for a society when women do *not* occupy this “low”, “inferior” and “submissive” bodily space? When the political story that is ritualised through bodily comportment highlights female reproductive anatomy, bodily fluids and desire, and refracts these back to the community as cultural power?

As Bourdieu notes: “The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief...What is “learned by body” is not something that one has, but something that one is” (1990: 73). To hold such comments in one hand and the ethnographic data from Central African forest peoples in another, means asking what women, when they collectively mime erotic and unavailable, are playing at, and what belief is marked out? The way in which women’s dances are organised and enacted stresses above all the collective body. Despite differences between groups, there is a recurrent and striking social play involving the female body that challenges many of the presuppositions of Euro-American theory on the nature of symbolic power, gender and bodily signification.

Understandings of “gender” in recent decades have undergone a substantial change. (Strathern 1988; Ortner 1996; Butler 1990). The work of Judith Butler (1990; 1993) in particular has destabilised the feminist subject of “woman” and claimed to replace it with a re-imagined, “troubled” and potentially gender-less or gender-multiple person. Yet if we remain faithful to Butler’s (1990) plea for cross-cultural sensitivity, we must begin to explore not only those contexts in which binary gender is rebelled against but those contexts in which the gender that is argued for by women themselves capitalises upon the sense of the biological body. If the gender of recent Western theory pertains to biological bodies at all, it does so in the guise of hierarchy.

But gender as a term is so heavily loaded with the *experience* of inequality it is almost impossible to think outside it. Its transposition to other cultures is therefore problematic. I do not wish to dismiss the work of feminist theorists who have worked hard to problematise the construction (and infliction) of “gender” in cultural settings where it has been synonymous with oppression. But what BaYaka or Mbendjele women are constructing *is* precisely the body, albeit not the closed, discrete body familiar to Western science, ostensibly pre-discursive and pre-sensible, derived as it is from notions of a delimiting “nature”. When one begins to examine what is being done and said by women in forest communities during large, collective performances, there is a new voice, which slowly becomes recognisable as the voice of the body itself.

Sex, blood, procreation, birth – in Yaka ritual lyric and cosmology, these are already resolutely cultural items (cf. Gow, 1982; Bieseke, 1993; Rival, 1997). The long-standing feminist attempt to break away from or deconstruct them has been formed in response to one historical trajectory. With such understanding, the critique of “phallogentric” hegemony remains valid, but it loses its authority. It’s no coincidence that the phallus has become the metaphor for gender oppression. But compare this taunt sung with relish by BaYaka women who have just seized the public camp space: “Eloko tembe ya polo, a mou wa lai! Eneke ganye”! - “The penis is no competition, it died already! The vagina wins” (Kisluik, 1998: 131)! Here, while the body is clearly at issue, the phallus is *de*-centred in the most graphic of terms. Weber, cited by Bourdieu (1990: 73), refers to a “disengagement of the body, which most ancient



musical systems use as a complete instrument” (1990: 73). If we follow this through, observe this stepping back of the body, we see how difficult it is to grasp the somatic reality of people for whom the body may still be, and consciously so, “a complete instrument”. My argument here is not that BaYaka communities are not concerned with the balance of power between gender groups. It is more that their ontology seems to privilege sex as the nodal point and the conversation between sexes as the ritual motif. In the words of Colin Turnbull (1978): “Gender is relatively unimportant” (1978: 190).

## THE POWER OF THE BINARY

Nowhere is the embodiment of symbols more clear than in the work of Victor Turner (1969). Turner’s work on Ndembu ritual symbolism has been one of the most influential analyses of Central African hermeneutics undertaken. His writing on structure and *communitas*, his understanding of contradiction within the form of ritual, and his elaboration of the concept of liminality have all been influential in the subsequent study of ritual. His understanding of symbolic opposition derives from the tension between matrilineal and virilocal structures in Ndembu society. However,

Opposition does not appear as such but as the confrontation of sensorily perceptible objects...The symbols and their relations are not only a set of cognitive classifications for ordering the Ndembu universe. They are also, and perhaps as importantly, a set of evocative devices for rousing, channelling, and domesticating powerful emotions...the whole person, not just the Ndembu “mind” is existentially involved in the life or death issues with which *Isoma* is involved (Turner 1969: 42 – 43).

In Turner’s (1969) writing a clue as to the centrality of the female body is in his description of “a tensed unity or Gestalt” (1969: 83) between the claims of the uterine sibling group and the marital bond, between the principles of matriliney and virilocality, all of which points to the implicit debate over children and their affiliation. Turner’s analysis of symbolic meaning through contrast illumines the ritual, performative activity of Yaka gender groups. The “tensed unity” he describes is constituted and bounded “by the very forces that contend within it” (1969: 83). Vitality, these “mutually involved irrepressibles belong together” and may “constitute

strong unities, the more so *if both principles or protagonists in the conflict are consciously recognised and accepted*” (ibid: 83 Emphasis mine). The respective group interests represented here “do not break each other down; in a way they provoke each other” (ibid: 83). It is this deliberate *ritual* provocation, as it represents and articulates bodily integrity that I see as constituting “gender” for Mbendjele or Mbuti communities.

While a reading of feminist perspectives on the construction of gender commences from the hierarchy and constraint of duality, and presses on from there to a disembodied realm of multiplicity in performance, Yaka, Baka or Mbuti narratives on gender seem to commence from a realm of multiplicity and fluidity and *draw back*, in ritual performance, to a sharply defined gender showcasing sexual appetite, desire and inviolability. The body takes over. What is happening here? Rather than begin with an answer, I want to allow the ethnographic evidence on local conceptions of sex to take precedence. I utilise the data of four long-term ethnographers on the region who have each in various ways privileged gendered metaphor and meaning (Turnbull, 1972; Devisch, 1993; Kisliuk, 1998; Lewis, 2002). Alongside this empirical foregrounding, I attempt to present a different, Yaka-centred understanding of what sex signifies, where power lies, and what the political implications are of the ritual conversation encompassing both.

Pulling our analyses back to the *terra firma* of the body in order to see beyond it requires an intellectual motion reminiscent of the ritual motion I explore among hunter-gatherers. Various writers have stressed this pendulum-like motion almost visible in African hunter-gatherer socio-political life. For Bieseke (1993) it is the muscular balance between sexes that *is* the deep structure of community. The concept of the dialectic then is valuable in beginning to grasp the relationship between sex and ritual in Central African communities.

## TURNBULL AND THE THEATRE OF CONFLICT

Colin Turnbull (1978), in a detailed essay on the politics of non-aggression among Mbuti forest hunter-gatherers in the former Congo-Kinshasa, cautions that neither aggression nor non-aggression can be understood without recourse to the socialisation

and learning practices within a community. To this end, he begins his analysis with a description of pregnancy and the treatment of the unborn child as a sentient being whose relationship with forest and community has already commenced. Shortly after birth, infants are passed around a variety of complementary “mothers” so that the child’s experience of parenting expands to incorporate “a plurality of mothers and safe territories” (1978: 177). Circlets of vine are placed around an infant’s wrists and ankles, a special bark cloth is beaten out by the mother, nights are spent on a bed of leaves between parents. No infant is ever left alone.

Barry Hewlett (2003) comments that Central African hunter-gatherers are notable in the night-time presence of both parents, in contrast to village neighbours, and in the remarkable extent to which babies are held and carried. Turnbull’s (1978) work implies that this sensuous incorporation of the infant’s body into the body of the community, and beyond that, the body of the forest, has profound consequences for the kind of bodily kinesis we see later in the ritual domain. His work suggests that this kind of sociality derives as much from a concrete, bodily imperative instilled from the moment of birth, as an ideological one.

The way in which the Mbuti infant’s body is handled and tended collectively, the learning of a tangible trust or sense of being continuous with a larger social body, the opening of an intersubjective space in which relationship *through the sensuous* is fore-grounded, lead to a later experience of the body that directly contradicts Western ontology. If it is true that the absorption of a particular habitus (Bourdieu, 1980) rests on a plethora of subtle bodily indicators and perceptions - the treatment and experience of one’s skin early in life – then this intensely communistic mode of parenting by forest hunter-gatherers remains oddly under analysed. It is common knowledge among ethnographers of Yaka peoples that breastfeeding is not an individual woman’s prerogative (Peacock, 1992). Mbendjele infants are nursed routinely by women other than their biological mother. Again, the socio-political consequences of diffusing such somatic intimacy and labour out into the community early on – of literally sharing substance - has received little attention by social anthropologists.

What is striking in Turnbull's (1978) description of Mbuti concepts of self and well-being, is the way in which such notions are always tethered to the body. Thus the idea of a sphere or radius of energy carried by the person through life, the term for which is the same as the word for "womb" (1978: 167). The "womb" is what moves with one, bringing a sense of security and bodily composure to new situations. Sudden or aggressive action can result in this centre being pierced and in individual disorientation or imbalance. Even as the adult is absorbed into an often fraught social field, navigating multiple responsibilities and loyalties, they remain centred in the uterine matrix.

All this is preamble, however, to the main source of "*akami*" (conflict, noise and hunger): sex. Turnbull postulates that it is the potential conflict between the sexes that is from the moment of birth onwards being prepared for by parenting and socialisation practices which emphasise the need for cooperation, the integrity of the community and the perpetuation of uterine ties. More specifically, it is the potential for *organised adult male violence* that is being controlled through a variety of social, ritual and cosmological institutions: "By stating at the outset our potential for harm, they diffuse that potential to a major extent" (1978: 163).

Turnbull differentiates "sex" from "gender" in speaking about conflict: "It is sex and sexual relationships that are important to the Mbuti both as a potential source of aggressivity and as a principle of social organisation" (1978: 190). Tellingly, while parents recognise gender in terms of address, it is confined to the husband/wife relationship – siblings and grandparents are not subject to it. It is at the moment that male youths begin to hunt seriously and girls to menstruate that "*akami*" rises to the level of the performative. The opposition of the sexes is clarified by those rituals which formalise and showcase difference. Ostensibly, it is the need to avert conflict between the sexes that is performed. Yet this is achieved in the ritual *theatre* of conflict. As Turnbull points out, conflict among reproductive age adults is expected (1978: 203), and a variety of "games" and formal dances explore this.

The tug-of-war, played by adults rather than children during the honey season "expresses the major line of potential conflict between male and female" (Turnbull, 1978: 204 - 205). Men pull one end of a rope, women the other, while each sex sings

in antiphony. Once men appear to be winning, one will abandon his side and run to the women, calling encouragement in a mock falsetto, fixing his bark cloth like a woman. Then, when women begin to regain power, one will cross over to the men's line hoisting her skirt to become "male", shouting a deep bass mimicry. "Each person crossing over tries to out-do the ridicule of the last, causing more and more laughter" (1978: 205). Eventually, the whole thing collapses under the sheer weight of collective mirth. Through the comedy of performance, profound tensions are communicated, mocked, challenged, and placated.

The "honey-bee dance" is even more explicit in its exploration of the tension of desire and "the individual quest for pleasure" (1978: 205). The dance is a bodily commentary on the social interweaving of sex and labour, the way in which themes of complementarity and sharing mediate both. Sex and honey as metaphors are used interchangeably in many Central African cosmologies, the sweetness of both being something one must hunt and share. Men are the prime honey hunters, and are expected to return caches of it to their wives. During the honey-bee dance then, men in one line, brandishing bows and arrows, advance on women, wielding burning firebrands in another. In Mbuti communities it is women who control fire, and the intention of men during the dance is to steal this. By stealing fire, men steal women's cultural power over food brought into camp. As they approach however, women break lines and attack men aggressively with burning torches, spraying them with sparks and coals. "Unlike the tug-of-war, this dance has a rather more definite conclusion in that the men never succeed in their attempt to "steal" honey" (1978: 20).

The dance concludes when an older woman presents a leaf cup of honey to the men, who must share it with the women. The message is clear: Men can steal neither fire nor honey, but must be given these willingly by women and on condition they be returned to the collective. Here, the giving out and pulling back rhythm is tangible in the ritual barter between the sexes. Turnbull is explicit in his view of inter-sexual tension as "the major line of potential conflict" for the Mbuti (1978: 207). This is in contradistinction to stereotypes confining political conflict to men and intra-male power struggles. Women in Mbuti negotiations of power are equal coalitionary

agents, not consigned to the role of spectators, trophies, or victims of male violence. They form a significant half of the dramatisation of conflict.

Interestingly, any marriage resulting from the *elima* celebration of a girl's first menstruation involves little formality and no community ritual. It's the *elima* itself – the pre-marital festival – that the community privileges. This is said to mark “the birth of a mother” (1978: 209). Blood and its gift to the group is recognised through a coordinated display of female solidarity and vigilance. The potential conflict involved in the realm of sex, desire and loyalty is highlighted. It is no coincidence that marriage here – and by extension romantic love – is downplayed. As with theatre in any context, the lasting plays are those which express the root concerns of the community. Turnbull (1978) comments: “At the height of his sexual potency the adult male finds himself, socially, remarkably impotent. This is largely minimised by the values learned from childhood onwards, the value of dependence and interdependence” (1978: 212).

Despite all this, he is careful to acknowledge the affection and trust that flourishes between spouses throughout adulthood. His point is simply that for Mbuti, the marital relationship is not that which requires ritual, communal elaboration and comment. What requires a large, amplified statement is the centrality of blood relations, women's collective control of fertility, and the burlesque of inter-sexual aggression that underlies such statements about power.

*Ekokomea* (1978: 215) “the most formal of the rituals of reversal” demonstrates this by its explicit spotlight on sex. “In *ekokomea* the sex norms are all cast aside, reversed and ridiculed...As groups women and men are able to ridicule the opposite sex, most often in terms of sexual behaviour and cleanliness...Until the ridicule itself goes so far beyond the realm of reason that aggressivity itself becomes unthinkable” (ibid: 215). This brings out what I believe is the key point in all such collective performances of tension through burlesque. By a concerted, circumscribed mockery of each others biological selves, of sex and sexual bodies, the core *social* issue is flagged and overturned in one move. Sex at that moment becomes cultural, just as culture is injected with the blood of sex. The employment of comedy as opposed to any other platform through which to gibe is not accidental. As Bergson (1911) notes,

there is an odd *absence* of feeling which usually accompanies laughter: “To produce the whole of its effect...the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple. This intelligence, however, must always remain in touch with other intelligences...Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo” (Bergson 1911: 5).

While I depart from Power and Watts (1999) in their conclusion of gender inversion as central to ritual displays of power, it is clearly present in many contexts as an important variable. When friction reaches a climax in the community, recourse is sought in a wholesale confusion of normative sexual features, recourse not only to ridicule but to the ridiculous. Two things are being commented upon then in sequence. One is the announcement and power of female controlled reproductive appetite and body. The other is the paradox of the *twisting* of this, the refraction back at men (and for men, at women) of the pantomime of sex and sexual identity. Bergson (1911) notes too that there are few things more satisfying to the comic imagination than the deliberate parody of the most grave moments or matters. The real emotion of a moment, the real danger of its overflow into the collective domain, is checked by a performance that stumps emotion yet allows tension to be released.

Turnbull’s (1978) analysis of the communal achievement of non-aggression is striking in its interpretation of things conventionally assumed to be male privileges, as *burdens* or demands upon men by the community. What comes through in his writing is not the omnipotent, virile hunter accruing economic and ritual prestige, but men as *relational* beings - sons, brothers, fathers – who are always involved in a gendered debate entailing compromise, self-control and attention to communal well-being. Thus, during the *molimo mangbo*, when men ostensibly dominate camp with their music and performance, Turnbull focuses on their exhaustion and the symbolic disenfranchisement of their ritual status by women, who enter the ritual arena at the eleventh hour and usurp the men’s song, “tying the men up with *nkusa* vine from which hunting nets are made, so that they say women have tied up the song, and tied the hunt. Only when men make an appropriate propitiatory gesture will the women release them” (1978: 217). In highlighting the community, as opposed to simply adult gender groups, Turnbull draws in male youths and elders, each of whom do

exercise significant jural authority. Thus it is adult, reproductive-age men who are hedged on all sides by vigilance.

And it is adult, reproductive-age women who assume the power to “tie up” the hunt, to control “the fire of life”, to police the becoming-women of the younger generation, and to engage in coordinated mockery of male virility. The adult woman is coded as “life-giver” while the adult man becomes “the bringer of *akami*” (1978: 218). In a crucial insight, Turnbull comments that “*it is just as vital that he plays that role as it is that the female plays hers*” (ibid: 219 Emphasis mine). These then are not inevitable dispositions. They are carefully constructed and circumscribed roles, the making and fulfilling of which achieves a critical balance of power. There is in all this the injection and entropic loss of power, an oscillation between the sexes and between individual desire and group equilibrium.

But the sexes are themselves to a large extent *made* by the social, political and ritual conversation between them. In order to enable the injection and recession of power, poles are *required*; a pulling back into the sexed body is necessary. This is why ethnographic evidence can seem ambiguous and confusing: At one moment women are the hyper-feminine sirens seen by Kisluik (1998) and Lewis (2002), their bodies oiled and painted, buttocks padded, their dancing intensely erotic. At the next, they are pretend-men, barking out the bravado of their husbands, employing the most predatory of sexual language. But the body at play is both itself and more than itself. In the “culture of laughter”, the drama of bodily life does privilege sex, growth, birth, blood, eating, defecation. “But of course it is not the drama of an individual body or of a private material way of life; it is the great generic body of the people” (Bakhtin, 1968: 88). And the political statement achieved by that synergetic motion is remarkably effective. This is not mere theatre. These are real bodies, real agencies, people moving through webs of relationships who stand, with the loss of the dialectic of power, to lose authority over their own and their children’s bodies. How does this tension manifest in lyric and gesture? If it’s true that for Yaka women the reproductive and sexual body is the nodal point in negotiations about power, we should expect them to articulate this in collective ritual and dance performance.



“THE PENIS GIVES BIRTH TO NOTHING, ONLY URINE!” RITUAL  
TAUNTING AND THE CONTESTED BODY

Michelle Kisluik (1998) spent several years studying BaAka dance and music in the Central African Republic. In an essay on the meaning of gender for BaAka, she examines the “ongoing, informal negotiation and disputed expectations” that are a normal part of BaAka daily interactions (Kisluik 1998: 129) and which gender relations particularly encapsulate. Sharing is paramount in BaAka interactions, so much so that Kisluik cites occasions such as that when one cup of hot chocolate was scrupulously divided among twelve or more children, or when a single wedge of tomato was carved into tiny segments so no-one would miss out (1998: 132). While there are recognised categories of specialisation such as *kombeti* – elder, *ntuma* – master-hunter, *nganga* – healer, or *ginda* – master of an *eboka* dance repertoire, the status attached to any of these is transient and confers no lasting or transferable privilege. Egalitarianism in BaAka contexts is a relationship rather than a static term, within which there is continual bargaining and disputation. Individual autonomy and freedom, as in all hunter-gatherer communities is prized, so that the *social* ethos of sharing and the perpetual motion against dominance must be continually reinvented. This tension is what gives the egalitarian relationship its fluid, dynamic quality. Consensus is always being reached for even as individuals safeguard their autonomy.

Kisluik (1998) highlights the concerted sexual teasing with which women’s songs occupy themselves. One popular *dingboku* chant, directed at male spectators cries: “The penis gives birth to nothing, only urine” (1998: 131)! An obvious but sometimes neglected point is made by Lewis (2002) concerning women’s ritual elaboration upon the ability to grow and produce from their own bodies new human beings: “Making babies grow in their wombs from men’s sperm is a miraculous feat that mystifies Mbendjele men” (Lewis, 2002: 194). “Biology” here does not necessarily bear the reductionist connotations it holds for us. The body, particularly the female body, is a powerful cultural player. In its creativity and doubling capacity, it serves as a key metaphor for ritual and cosmological transformation.

Another well-known Elamba song, stripped back to its lyrical bare bones consists of just one word: “*Dumana*” – “Sex”, though Lewis (2009) claims this word is more

accurately interpreted as “Fuck” (Lewis, 2009, Pers. Comm). When Kisluik later relayed these songs to some non-BaAka Congolese men they were, she reports, horrified that BaAka men “would put up with such humiliation” (Kisluik 1998: 131). So why *do* BaAka men engage with women in a ritual, performative dialogue which assertively undermines their own ability to dominate? Why do they not respond violently to these deliberate provocations? “Remarkably” says Kisluik (1998), “the anthropological literature has usually set aside the question of gender when discussing egalitarianism” (1998: 133). Most theorists have failed to explore root connections between the two.

While Kisluik’s (1998) primary interest is in BaAka musicology, and gender does not form the major part of her analysis, she has pointed to a lacuna in hunter-gatherer studies. Her description of the choreography of women’s dances as embodying the negotiation of power between the sexes also illuminates the broader egalitarian ethos. During a performance of *dingboku* organised by two experienced dancers – Sandimba and Djongi – two closely entwined lines of thirteen women each (including grandmothers and women carrying infants) open the performance with a rendition of *dumana*. No boys or men are involved and in contrast to almost all other BaAka dances no drummers are used. The two lines of women – each closely interwoven with arms draped over each others shoulders – moves back and forth stepping rhythmically. Moving into a rendition of “The vagina wins”! the lines turn to face each other and with one line moving backwards “they move together as a unit across the space” (1998: 137). Later still, they recommence meeting and separating, meeting and separating until the lines actually touch.

Then, “Sandimba’s line circled around at close range to face in the same direction as the other line, only a foot or so between each line, and the women all ran forward together, then backward together. Mandudu leaves bobbed on buttocks, and dust rose from tramping feet” (1998: 137). Kisluik views *dingboku* as “an aesthetic abstraction of love-making” (1998: 134). Yet in contrast to other “courtship” dances, no men or boys are involved. Power and Watts (1999), in their analysis of gender as ritual power, pose the question of whether the cultural significance of gender “emerged in a performance of compulsory non-heterosexuality” (Power and Watts 1999: 103). They proceed, in common with other theorists of African initiation ritual, to suggest

the reversal of normative sexual characteristics as integral to gender. But rather than performing “male” during *dingboku* (and similar dances described by Lewis (2002)), it seems women are performing a distinctively and exclusively *female* sexual appetite and prowess.

Non-heterosexual, non-marital sexuality, but not necessarily one coded as male. Gender here *is* “a function of ritual, performative power, not of biological sex” (Power and Watts: 1999: 103) because biological sex presupposes heterosexual relations. It is the way in which the body directs its desire, and more precisely the affinity of its desire, that matters in these moments of female “communitas”. Is it possible that *dingboku* is the pantomime of a lovemaking that excludes men without discarding the intense (and ritually important) attractiveness of the female body? The male gaze is being invited and toyed with here: it seems logical that women’s coalitions would exploit to the full the politics of Eros.

In asking why men consent to play their part in this complex dance rather than employ force to subvert it, we need to step into the context of community ritual, particularly as this is choreographed by women. The Mbendjele believe it is the beauty of women’s polyphonic song and the eroticism of their collective movement that lures spirits in from the wider community of the forest. Women, through bodily comportment and intelligence captivate non-human entities and enchant them (Lewis, 2002). Having experienced these performances, most memorably *Biboudja* – the “dance for joy” - what occurs to me is the corresponding potential “enchantment” of Mbendjele men, the way in which they too might be “tied” by the power of communal female Eros. Jackson (1983) commenting on the *sui generis* power of dance and music in indigenous dialogue, notes that “movement and music promote a sense of levity and openness in both body and mind...which verbal and cognitive forms ordinarily inhibit” (Jackson, 1983: 338). Aside from the symbolic message of performances, the innovation of individual dancers, or the political repercussions then, is this: The force or muscle of beauty. The ability of a kind of aesthetic or ecstatic attention not merely to placate underlying tension, but to propose an alternative order.

Turnbull (1978), Kisluik (1998) and Lewis (2002) each comment at length on the trance-like state achieved by participants during these dances, though only Turnbull explicitly connects such experience to the politics of the dances. Kisluik (1998) recalls “dreamy, trance-like states”, “harmony”, “euphoria”, and “the transcendent moment” (1998: 138). Kimura (2004) writes: “My brain is filled with endorphins, creating an almost narcotic effect” (2004: 6). Lewis describes “a sort of dreamy, heightened experience and appreciation of sound and movement” (2002: 150) and an atmosphere that is “extraordinary, an aesthetic delight that lifts the spirits of all present” (2002: 151). He adds that for the Mbendjele it is self-evident that the forest also “loves” women’s singing and the magnetic lure of their dance. This is something that requires further examination. But there is clearly a connection between collective joy and the engagement of adult men with such scripts. When lines such as “the penis is no competition” or “their testicles are broken” are delivered from within the erotic, ecstatic moment, their sting is somewhat softened. But the fact they have been spoken is important; the words and gestures have flooded out into the public domain. People dance them, children absorb them, women have reinforced their coalitionary voice.

#### “NGOKU” AND THE POWER OF WITHDRAWAL

Lewis (2002) narrates a Mbendjele origin myth still popular among groups in the North-West of the country, emphasising the contested nature of men or women’s power among the Mbendjele: “Each gender group continuously subverts the potential prestige the other group might accrue from their role in society...Massana (Mbendjele ritual associations) celebrate gender and emphasise independence yet interdependence, antagonism yet desire, separation and unity, subversion and respect” (Lewis, 2002: 196).

Women’s version of the Mbendjele story of origins describes how the gender groups were living separate existences in the forest, with women fishing, gathering and reproducing by dancing *Ejengi* and men hunting, collecting honey and reproducing by copulating with a large forest fruit (*mapombe*). Toli, a female elder, goes into the forest in search of men’s camp following a dream in which *komba* tells her of its existence. She tracks male hunters back to the camp where she makes love to them,

and urges them to return with her to meet the other women. Toli leads men back to her camp where each man presents a woman with a parcel of honey. Later, men, impressed by women's use of *Ejengi* to produce babies, request the dance for themselves and women give it willingly (Lewis 2002: 176). The men then discard the *mapombe* fruit. Thus the sexes are bonded by women's need for men to procreate and by men's corresponding preference for women.

Lewis (2002) notes that in men's version of the myth, Toli is a male elder who stumbles upon women's camp, and *Ejengi* is seized by force from women: "The women interpret their gift of *Ejengi* to the men as demonstrating their strength...Men emphasise that they took *Ejengi* by force" (2002: 177). The discrepancy in telling is typical of the ideological rivalry between the sexes. More particularly, rivalry over the myth brings up the spectre of male violence. Women emphasise Eros, collective power, and willingness to "share" dances. Men emphasise the potential of force to over-ride all this. Both sides constitute aspects of an unfinished dialogue but it is the possibility of concerted male violence in any inter-sexual negotiation that makes women's collective responses so profoundly serious. The fact that dancing, singing, celebration, hosting of forest spirits, and comedy are employed by the sexes in their exchanges should not obscure the fact that one side has the power to resort to violent repression.

In fact, and in keeping with the myth, during ritual time both sexes create a secret "*njanga* path" in the forest, which draws individuals back into gender coalitions and stresses the value of this political regrouping. Of women's *njanga* path Lewis acknowledges his ignorance, focusing rather on the public aspect of *massana*. *Ngoku*, referred to as "the primary dance" by an informant of mine at Mboule, is believed by women to be the most powerful spirit (Lewis 2002: 191). *Ngoku* is the *mokondi* who represents women's collective spirit and like *Ejengi* is dangerous to men. When *Ngoku* is summoned by women into camp, men are expected to retire to their huts or leave for the forest (2002: 193). Women and girls band together and charge up and down the length of camp singing "*Ngoku! Ngoku!*" Older women lead the songs, most of which focus on sexual insults to men or declarations of women's reproductive and sexual superiority.

The female body and its joist with male claims to authority is the substance of the ritual commentary being elaborated. Examples of songs sung are: “*Doto ba die ebe*”! – “Old men are no good”! and “*Mapindi ma mu bola*”! - “Their testicles are broken”! While remarkably little is known about *Ngoku* – Lewis’s (2002) brief commentary on it is the most substantial in the literature - there is a wide repertoire of dances connected to this *mokondi*, most of which “have sexual connotations” (Lewis, 2002: 193). During one performance Lewis observed women lie together on their backs in the dust, “rubbing their thighs together until they become frenzied and are lifted up from behind one at a time by one of the elder *Ngoku* initiates” (2002: 193).

It is important to ask why women, having seized the public camp space, proceed to perform a kind of collective masturbation. Here the poverty of the terms at hand shows up. If we say they are not performing “wrong-sex” (Power and Watts, 1999) but no-sex it is not quite true; if we say they are not performing masculinity but a kind of hyper-femininity, it is as though nothing has altered. Yet clearly everything has. There is, as Turner (1969) and Power and Watts (1999) note, a turning, a paradox, a confusion of normative signals. These are not wifely, available women. Yet they are in that very instant at their most alluring (a point which Ndembu recognised and gave much thought to (Turner, 1969)).

This seems, therefore, to be a remarkably frank commentary on women’s inviolability and sexual autonomy. That they *can* so flagrantly flaunt their desire, yet do so only with other women, does not reverse gender roles. *Unless gender roles are the stuff of mundane or quotidian life*. Loose cross-cutting divisions of labour which structure economic production and marital relationships, but simultaneously tug people into an amorphous whole. In day to day life Mbendjele and other forest hunter-gatherers are meticulously egalitarian. It is during ritual that the community splits sharply into contending coalitions. The ensuing conversation, involving the most bawdy of insults, resonates with Bakhtin’s (1984) assertion that true polyphonic dialogue demanded “the opposition of one person to another person as the opposition of “I” to “the other” (Bakhtin, 1984: 252). The dialogic repartee was not an end but a means in itself: “Dialogue here is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself” (Bakhtin, 1984: 252).

The ritual association of *Ngoku* centres round women's reproductive and sexual skills (Ingrid Lewis, pers. communication). While the biological body clearly provides the template for ritual thought, it is seized upon and surpassed by the collective female body which works on the matter and politics of biology. Laughter, synchrony, polyphony and Eros – the carnivalistic experience of dance and song – are how the individual reproductive body is “cooked” by the collective. Cooking is not only an obvious metaphor for hunting communities, I use it to refer to the complex action of the heat of the collective imaginary upon the material of the body. Jackson's (1983) Kuranko informants stated that their performances were “just for entertainment” (Jackson, 1983: 331). But Bakhtinian (1968) “entertainment” was itself political, subversive and voiced. The breaking of normative moral or postural modes and the infusion of public space with the topsy-turvey, the spectacle of carnival, was itself an assertion of new meaning, the body become pathway, event, cipher.

One of the most popular *Ngoku* songs is explicit about the political dimension of this *massana*. Women parade up and down camp singing: “*BiYaka-i! BiYaka-i! Bibale mayelle*”! We the Yaka! We the Yaka! Twice the intelligence”! Like *Ejengi*, *Ngoku* alludes to the source of women's power “and how to use it” (Lewis, 2002: 194). As well as ideological taunts, the ritual advertises women's solidarity and their intimacy with one another. As such, it pulls at the husband/wife fabric, unravelling those loyalties and affections temporarily but routinely and decisively. Furthermore, the ritual fortifies day to day uses of mockery, ridicule and collectivity. Lewis is clear about the socio-political uses of *Ngoku* and the connection running from these periodic statements to each individual woman and her self-possession. Speaking about the ability of individual women to shame a problematic husband Lewis comments: “The solidarity that underpins such behaviour is based in *Ngoku*” (2002: 195). During *Ejengi* men explore fear, threat of physical harm, the potential of brawn. In *Ngoku*, women use satire, parody and ambiguity. “The tension made by creating desire, yet denying it fully to men, is explored vividly during *Ngoku*” (2002: 195).

What comes through in Lewis's (2002) data is that *Ngoku* cannot be read by itself. *Ejengi* and *Ngoku* together express the politics of the same-sex solidarity central to Mbendjele egalitarianism. They constitute two halves of a whole conversation that

plays out first in large-scale ritual spaces and subsequently informs more informal relationships and interactions. Thus they, and other *mokondi massana*, are not *additional* to political life and the absence of hierarchy, but central to these. It is in the bodily conversation between the sexes, a shifting, cyclical debate or “weave” in the words of Devische (1993) that power is made and the nature of power measured, policed, celebrated. In the same way that someone procuring a slice of tomato will portion it up into the tiniest fragments, rather than be charged with having monopolised it, so the sexes, pulled back into the festivity and flux of the sexed skin expend great amounts of time and energy on the business of collectively distributing social and symbolic power. Symbolic power – the ability to capitalise on complex inter-weavings of meaning and authority through bodily conduct – is never allowed to rest in the hands of one gender group. But the formation and expression of the gender groups is seminal in the continuation of equilibrium.

#### EROS AND COLLECTIVE ATTUNMENT

Says Bourdieu (1991): “Symbolic systems are fundamentally distinguishable according to whether they are produced and thereby appropriated by the group as a whole or, on the contrary, produced by a body of specialists and, more precisely, by a relatively autonomous field of production and circulation” (Bourdieu 1991: 168). But if “kinaesthetics are a form of mnemonics” (Moore, 1999: 10) what are the implications when symbolic power – held in collective bodily motivation and motion – is scrupulously, vigilantly shared? When Mbendjele women dance, they assert their total presence by forming a tightly branched body. The lyrics of their most prized songs relish bodily fluids, appetites and productions. This assertion of bodily meaning makes sense because on a daily basis they *are* so intimately part of each other’s skin, pooling milk, nurture and children.

Crucial to Turnbull’s (1978) argument was the widening of the net of sociality and love beyond the dyad and ultimately, beyond the human community itself. Like Ehrenreich (2007), he viewed conventional notions of the hold of affection, loyalty and desire to the couple as insufficient. For Ehrenreich, “the self is a parochial concept”, which has blinded us to the possibility of “the love that may exist among dozens of people at a time” (2007: 14). In her focus on the ritual experience of



ecstasy, she argues for a theoretical perspective on the social phenomenon of collective joy, exhibited in group dance and other festivals. Her ideas are important here in bolstering Turnbull's (1978) insistence on the erotic exchange possible across large communal gatherings, within ritual seclusion, and between people and forest. And on the way in which this "love" is rallied against the perennial shadow of individual or group violence.

Women's dances pivot on a contradiction that emphasises sexual attractiveness and unavailability simultaneously. The female body is intensely present, though I question the appropriateness of the term "gender" with reference to these. As a term, it *is* necessary, not least because it refers to a whole complex of roles and registers that require a term. But it seems to sit better in these contexts as marking the loose division of labour in everyday life. There is indeed more than sex at play when women collectively showcase female sexual desire at precisely the moment it's most unavailable to men.

A review of these performances show women publicly mocking male sexual prowess. These are not blind bodies – matter moving as the puppet of mind – but articulate bodies in a state of heightened awareness. They link arms, sprawl on the earth, work up erotic frenzies (Lewis, 2002), sing and dance choreographies the beauty of which is believed to summon forest spirits and captivate game animals (Joiris, 1999; Lewis, 2002). They declare the victory of the vagina and its appetite, the miraculous division of skin from skin (Kisluik, 1998), celebrate sojourns with the moon, rush at men and boys beating them gleefully, hitch up skirts and *perform* men and boys with ruthless humour (Turnbull, 1972). This is the body at work, the *person* of the female body at work. "Culture" comments Kirsten Hastrup, "exists only in practice" (1995: 77). A focus on the experience and politics of women's ritual and dance – what it achieves and defends - has led me to think of them as articulating (rather than the power of gender) the power of Eros.

By this I mean the body as the creative matrix of ritual action. Eros encompasses both libidinal economies and the intense, uninhibited enjoyment of life. If we retrieve the concept from its Freudian dyad and place it within collective experience, it is apt as a description of women's public performances and the irrepressible sense of well-being with which they flood the community. What is assimilated in these moments of

female “communitas” is the ability of each participant’s self-possession, sexual expression and fertility, conjoined with and in defence of all others, to set culture in motion. There is no evidence that hunter-gatherers subscribe to the mind/body distinction as we know it. This has to have profoundly influenced what “gender” is, what “the body” means, and the power of bodily metaphor and agency. We should expect women, in ritual performance, to be declaring the significance of reproduction, blood and sexuality – the very things a Western feminist focus on cultural constructs starved of biological currency sidelines. What then if “symbolic thought” is *literal*, sensuous, a creative shoot from the sexed body?

### THE “MOLECULES” OF RITUAL

For Rene Devische (1993), whose ethnography focused on the bodily manifestation and command of symbols during initiation into Yaka women’s fertility cults, the body itself is “the weaving loom of life” (1993: 55) and as such is the obvious site at which transcendent moments are made and expressed. Devische conducted two and a half years of fieldwork among Yaka in the southwest of the then Zaire during the early 1970’s. He describes how dance, chant and song “give the body over to the senses and the life-world” (1993: 259) through beating a rhythm that intertwines “erotic transport, sexual communion and reproduction”, a “lustful collective celebration of body and solidarity so as to enhance the flow and force of life” (1993: 259). Devische (1993) points out that music and dance are always employed at transitional moments in the life of the group, mediating between poles as a kind of collective flux. So rather than a thoughtful or “mindful” motion – something organised at the level of cognition - women’s community performances are a body-full manifestation of power and its correct comportment; a somatic, sensual acknowledgement that everything living is moving. Dance with chant, rather than a formalised, ossified form of communication, is the primary libidinal form of exchange.

Devische (1993) like Turnbull (1978) refers to the metaphor of the womb – *ngoongu* – as central to Yaka cosmology and healing. During the *khita* ritual, the fracas and complexity of relational life is simplified, pared down to what is most essential – “*ngoongu*” – “the womb of the world” – and the uterine life flow that issues from it. Healing “frees and taps the life-flow through a metaphorical reweaving of life’s

diverse dimensions into a resonant whole...It is the weaving, by means of the body-senses, of bodies with each other and of bodies with the world” (1993). The weave, emphasises Devische, *is* the healing method, made manifest by and through the actions of the body itself. This evokes the rhythm or dialectic of power as appropriate to the body moving as a “complete instrument” in the world. Structure remains important, but it is a consensus based, body-full structure, examined and renewed daily. This is not mystification but enlargement; not a move away from political meaning and negotiation in the community, but a radicalisation of political meaning and community by pulling these back to the fertile, bleeding ground of the maternal body and the uterine line.

Initiates decorate themselves with red paste – prime symbol of female fertility and coalitionary strength (Knight, 1991). They observe highly stylised bodily proscriptions. They are closely related to the moon and its cycles, used explicitly as a ritual clock or barometer. They enter into conversation with ancestral shades and spirits whose assistance is required to restore harmony and fertility. Night, blood and concealment in a hut also called *ngoongu* are the key signifiers (Devische 1993: 255). Here it is the body that functions as “the basic deposit and embodiment of cultural traditions” (1993: 255). These thoughts from the body are not cognitive reflections on diurnal social order, but commentaries on the primacy of blood and the generative capacity of sex. Like Turner’s (1969) work, the data here highlights female well-being and fertility as deeply dependent on bodily enactments that privilege maternal ancestors and blood ties.

“*Khita*” healing takes the human body as the principle key that opens the process of weaving together three bodies: the physical body, the group, and the cosmos. The movement of the weave is simultaneously back to the terra firma of sense, blood and desire, and outwards to the social body. Through the motion set up between “distinct binary oppositions” (1993: 276) there is a communal shift towards a broader, more slippery domain of wholeness or oneness. This unification can only appear out of the hard bodily and imaginative work of dialectical opposition. The “sacred” itself is held to be “*ngoongu*, the uterus of the world” (1993: 277). All this casts the eye back to biological recognition, and questions a prevalent feminist consensus which refutes the relevance of the sexed body. For Yaka, some of the most valuable currencies are

formed in and articulated by the female body; the creative potential of women's ritual arises precisely out of a celebration of female reproductive capacity and bodily sense.

Here, says Devische (1993), "cultural symbols and metaphors are operative through the body...Ritual symbols are not images but primarily corporeal devices" (Devische, 1993: 280). Focus on the body during *khita* is not as a means to privilege individuals, but as a means of opening up contemplation of the shared body and its cultural import and power. "The patient, her kin, and the life-world are linked up with *ngoongu*, the uterine, primal source" (1993: 281). Turner too describes symbols as "the molecules of ritual" (Turner: 1969:14). Yet molecules are the stuff of matter, the building blocks of the body. I argue therefore for an expansion of our understanding of bodily epistemology, bodily ways of seeing, knowing and speaking, most particularly as these illumine complex inter-sexual conversations and disjunctions.

Hastrup (1995) speaks about cultural messages "getting under the skin" (1995: 93). While she does focus on the "body's ecstatic faculties", she confines this to the interaction between "two human beings" (1995: 93). But it is this very shrinkage of integrative power or communion to the dyad that Mbendjele and Mbuti data challenges. In Central African societies, gender does not belong to the individual and nor does it constrain them. Gender, insofar as the term is relevant at all, belongs to a powerfully resonant ritual realm (Power and Watts, 1999). I argue that there can be an intense mutual incorporation that resonates on the level of groups. As Hastrup notes: "The body is a nodal point in our attention to the world" (1995: 95). The emphasis here is of the body as a path of access rather than a thing, and of the socially experienced and speaking body. The prime interpretative material of the thinking body in motion is metaphor.

Johnson (1987) is clear on this point. In keeping with the literature on African hunter-gatherer ritual thought, he describes "a vast realm of meaning structure...that lies beyond concepts" (Johnson, 1987:167), a domain in which symbols are living entities drawn up from the body. "Concrete bodily experience not only constrains the "input" to metaphorical projections, but also the nature of the projections themselves" (Johnson, 1987: xv). Image schemata and metaphor are both "embodied imaginative structures...forms of imagination that grow out of bodily experience" (1987: xiv).

Metaphor is the way in which bodies, acting together or upon each other, communicate and bring out of inarticulacy the *sense* of action.

This brings to mind Mbendjele or BaAka women's dances and the parsimonious nature of their songs – allusory, scatological, libidinal. Pared down to the bones: “The vagina wins”! “Their testicles are broken”! “Sex”! If the female body could articulate a repartee to the ideology of the alpha-male, the perennial shadow of hierarchy, this might be what it would say. So many analyses begin with the logic of the mind, the ordering and categorising of these bodily statements. The body as object to be examined, dissected, peeled away from the finer and more complex sense of “the mind”. Mbuti, Mbendjele and BaYaka women's rituals lead us toward another kind of analysis, and I follow their essentialism in pulling the terms back to the sexed body. But as with the people themselves, this is an essentialism privileged only in order to transcend it. As was noted by Durkheim (1912), what is collectively imagined and integrated - brought into the field of the pluralistic body - goes far beyond individual meaning-making capacities.

#### “CERTAIN ESSENTIAL ASPECTS OF THE WORLD ARE ACCESSIBLE ONLY TO LAUGHTER”: CONCLUSION AND ANALYSIS

With Turner (1969) and Power and Watts (1999) I see contradiction and counter-dominance as central to the ritual performances of women, but I don't believe sexual reversal is central. Power and Watts (1999) present a sophisticated analysis of gender in which they begin by asking the core question of what it is. Their answer, constructed on the foundation of Knight's (1991) origins story, lifts gender from the sectionalism of many feminist analyses while pulling it back to the duality of African ethnographic context. They challenge the multidimensional slide of performance theory (Butler 1990), without sacrificing its substantial insights into the ritualisation of gender. What is happening in ritual time is not gender as we know it, but a performative of counter-dominance expressed through symbolic contradiction. They focus on initiation ceremony in various contexts in order to support their argument. This may be why I digress in finding same-sex messages within ritual as vital to it: I work from an ethnography and ethnographic literature that deals primarily with large, collective displays rather than more private, esoteric aspects of performances.

Mbendjele women's performances of sexual strength and satire are taken back to each woman's hearth and husband as missives from the liminal. I see the body here at its most attentive and articulate, the person snapping into full presence. "The person as bodily presence is the locus – and the pre-text – of action" (Hastrup, 1995: 80). Symbols in the context of Mbuti or Yaka dances could almost be argued to be the thoughts of the body: blood, fire, meat, sex, death, birth. The world, not rendered more abstruse and complicated but stripped back to its bare bones, its reflective core. Symbols could be seen as the body's letters, brail for the skin, the reading of the unreadable. As such, and contra Levi-Strauss (1981), ritual – the body in full flame – should be the place we first look for sense, not the last, not the antithesis of sense but the origin of it, the dense, wavering core of meaning, culture itself wrung out of the blood and meat of material acting upon material, body upon body, the liquid of the forge that only later cools into an effort at language.

Both Bergson (1911) and Bakhtin (1984[1968]) noted the mediatory power of laughter, capable of representing counter-culture while circumscribing and defusing powerful tensions. "All fears and lies are dispersed in the face of the material bodily festive principle" (Bakhtin, 1984[1968]: 94). Bakhtin used this principle with its instability and contradiction, as a contrast for the world whose ethos it punctuated, defined by control, hypocrisy, and violence. Foreshadowing Turnbull (1978) and Devische (1993) he used specifically the analogy of the mother "which swallows up in order to give birth to something larger" (Bakhtin, 1984[1969]: 91). "Warm blood", the genitals, the womb, the nipples, are what give flesh to and unify the comic principle as it attacks "all that oppresses and restricts" (1984[1968]: 92).

The cosmic laughter of this body "could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hands" (ibid: 94). Importantly, Bakhtin sees the contorting of this principle in the hands of later writers who were shocked by Rabelais' "sexual and scatological obscenity, his curses and oaths, his vulgar quips" as the beginning of a move in which folk humour, and the jokes representative of it, were "torn away from the original stem, the ambivalent material bodily lower stratum that supported them. Thus they lost their true meaning...the broad social and political ideas were broken off this original stem; they became literary, academic" (1984[1968]: 109).

All that remained was the obscenity, rendered “narrowly sexual, isolated, and individual” (ibid: 109). I cite this here as a caution in approaching the ethnographic material in this chapter. The body we confront in large, licentious Yaka dances is closer to the Rabelaisian person: An open, ambivalent body whose jokes are “particles of an immense whole, of the popular carnival spirit, of the world that laughs” (ibid: 134). The body normatively at work in Yaka ethnography has a kinship with the body that only occasionally breaks through the moral and systemic veil of hierarchical culture. Imagination requires a sense of humour, a sense of possibility, of the body’s music and rebellion. This resonates with the work of Viveiros de Castro (1998), who foregrounds Amazonian experience of the body as unfinished, unstable, a trickster-like figure always threatening to slip out of place. In the world of Rabelais, laughter is what makes sex cultural.

Kristeva’s (1984) theory of the semiotic, summarised by Butler (1990), is that it expresses “that original multiplicity within the very terms of culture...in which multiple meanings and semantic non-closure prevail. In effect, poetic language is the recovery of the maternal body within the terms of language, one that has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law” (Butler, 1990: 108). The lyrics sung by Mbendjele or BaAka women during *Ngoku* retain and privilege not only the maternal body, but the *politics* of its collectively oriented desire. For Bourdieu, “male domination tends to restrict women’s verbal consciousness...their discourse is dominated by the male values of virility, so that any reference to specifically female sexual interests is excluded” (1990: 77). The data cited in this chapter suggests that the “verbal consciousness” of Mbendjele or BaYaka women is manifestly not restricted by dominant male discourse. The relation of continuity expressed by the collective female body and its contradictory signalling power does seem to speak to a corresponding principle whose urge is to break off or close. Yet as long as the two groups remain in dialogue, balance is maintained.

What the work of Turnbull (1978), Kisliuk (1998), Devische (1993) and Lewis (2002; 2008) cumulatively assemble is the speaking body at the pivot of this pendulum. This is the body that must be held back or silenced by orders in which hierarchy and structural violence prevail. Take away the static ideology of such orders and the body begins to sing, or as Bakhtin (1984 [1968]) might have had it, to laugh. His writing

on carnival and its raucous, fleshed laughter sheds light on those places where official veneers split – whether in life or thought – and laughter and blood spill through. This is what Yaka community shows us: A space where “carnival” is part of the official order; where “the great generic body of the people” prevails; where blood, sex, desire and cosmic laughter exist not in the crypts of the social or the psyche, but in diurnal order as its engine and purpose. This is not mere frivolity, the reign of chaos. “True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it...from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified...from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy” (Bakhtin, 1984[1968]: 123). Always, working on the periphery of dominant discourse and status-systems, exists this subversive, fleshed resistance; the defiant doubling capacity of the maternal; the mess and incantation of body-sense; the blade of laughter waiting in the shadow of state gravitas and its law.

The work of Turner (1969), Devische (1993) and Lewis (2002) is central, in their emphases, despite differences of approach, on the formative, almost visceral power of Central African ritual. Hastrup’s “field of embodied motivation” (1995: 77) and Jackson’s (1983) “body-as-subject” take this further and have resonances for ritual experience in egalitarian, non-literate cultures. Knight (1991) and Power (1999) point us firmly in the direction of the female body – the lacuna in most symbolic analyses. When Yaka women go again and again into that state of attention, that original and originating drama, there’s both assertion and meaning, brawn and imagination. At once the thump and drum of tradition, and the magnetic upsurge of dissolution, of joy. It is Eros – the raw meat of sex and its import coupled with the alchemy of communal rapture – that holds women’s dances together and makes them compelling to the other gender group and relevant to each dancer, who is also sister, mother, daughter and wife - the thinking body caught in a web of loyalties and tensions. “From this standpoint the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in an activity field” (Turner, 1982:22).

The double meaning or contradiction generated by these performances – the push/pull, lean-in/lash out – is at the heart of them. The streamlining into gender for us conjures up partiality, disjunction, alienation of self from self, realm from realm. But in a situation where one does not “have” a body but *is* a body? Where the whole



edifice of meaning attached to the individual body is not imprisoned within it? Where the pendulum has not been frozen, flagged eternally on one side or another, one body or another? Where *being* the body, with all its effluvia, productions and desires is experienced as empowering - the fundamental condition of living and loving? These are communities in which being sexed is an advantage, a claimed and reclaimed political perspective. The habitus of gender therefore needs to be detached from traditional notions of “the domestic”, the “public/private” dichotomy and all other assumptions of a negative, delimiting split. Duality is integral to Central African cosmology and symbolism, but it is the *engine and impetus* of duality rather than a calcified echo of it. Turner (1969) saw this in his meticulous empirical presentation of Ndembu ritual - where contradiction acts upon itself to instigate motion.

Women’s power is contingent on men’s power and vice versa. The conversation between the sexes then constitutes a kind of pendulum or dialectic that continually highlights the tension of differing interests without resolving these definitively, so that “the truth is not their lack of distinction, but that they are not the same, that they are absolutely distinct, and yet unseparated and inseparable, each disappearing immediately in its opposite. *Their truth is therefore in this movement*, this immediate disappearance of the one into the other, in a word, Becoming” (Hegel, 1929 [1812 – 1816]). Ironically, resolution is potentially the point at which the dialectic freezes, motion is stopped, and hierarchy floods the interpersonal field.

For Turner (1969), everything within the ritual sphere (however liminal) was temporary and functional: it served as a valve which bolstered an ongoing hierarchy. In contrast, I see women’s public performances among the Mbuti, BaYaka or Mbendjele as operating as a means in themselves, not as mechanisms triggered by a normative order in which linearity and male supremacy prevail, but as a powerful bodily statement on behalf of egalitarian reality. Women’s rituals are a means of *creating* society, not one of society’s tools. The conversation they ignite between the sexes *is* the structure (albeit a fluid, fizzling structure) of social life itself. This is dialogue

not as a means but as an end in itself. Dialogue here is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself. It is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the

already readymade character of a person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but *he becomes for the first time that which he is* (Bakhtin, 1984: 252)

Rather than normative, centralised political structures utilizing ritual time in support of their authority, ritual time and correlated forms of collective female presence sustains the kind of social order found among hunter-gatherers. The body in this context is not a mere vehicle for the ritual drama. It is “a genuine source for the emergence of symbols” (Devische 1993: 252).

The antagonism or tension of sexual difference is managed by simultaneously privileging it and subjecting it to an imaginative, theatrical or ritual motion. This is one of the fundamental dynamics underpinning BaYaka, Yaka or Mbendjele community life. And it suggests that antagonism is explored as part of a cultural conversation that is necessary and positive: Tension being continually juggled as a creative force. It is normal to try to conclude or resolve social and sexual antagonism from an ethical stance formed in a belief about dualism not as a conversation but as a permanently closed door. Evidence suggests these communities neither detach gender from biological imperatives, nor confine it to them. Rather, “gender” is a mutual and ongoing construction based on difference but transcending it. A ritual conversation is maintained between the sexes in which one sex may temporarily and collectively claim supremacy, only to relinquish it to the other. The social and ritual vigilance of Mbendjele women, who commonly move as one body, utilising the stage opened by dance to articulate the ambivalent power of “the material lower bodily stratum”, could be thought of as a festive pre-emptive strike. The epigraph to this chapter then assumes the sense of a living context.

*FOURTH INTERLUDE:*

*Mboule*

On the day of our move to Mboule, none of the villagers come to say goodbye or to watch us leave. One woman, whose house is a few yards from our tent, screeches histrionically at her children all morning as we pack, storming out into the sun occasionally to glare at us. There's bitterness in Bangui about our defection to Mboule, inevitable as it was. The Yambe see white loggers extracting wood from their forests, white conservationists and researchers arriving, then leaving, all of them in some way wealthier. Meanwhile, they themselves work for a pittance in the saw-mills, or survive from their gardens, as woven into the earth they revile as the Mbendjele, but without the Pygmies' affinity for it. This village on the edge of the Motaba radiates dissatisfaction and frustration.

A Mbendjele delegation has arrived to accompany us, murmuring among themselves approvingly. As we arrive in Mboule, women sitting outside their houses watch and smile cautiously. One local wit prances up and down beside us, pulling faces, springing suddenly into the bushes then re-emerging with his thumbs up. The others watch him, laughing at his antics and our befuddlement. Every question Fabrice directs at him is met with a resounding – “*Oui!*” Mid-way along the camp, we arrive with our entourage at a vacant shelter next to Dsenga and his family. We deposit the bags and barrels in our new home - a structure of mud walls with occasional wooden poles and a sloping raffia roof. While we unpack our tent, the men tie liana's around raffia fronds and fix them to doorposts to close off the front section from outside. One of our new neighbours, Sanga, scrambles onto our roof to replace some broken

branches. It's our first "home" since arriving in Congo. Leaves vine through the walls and light seeps through chinks in the raffia, drawing lasers across the room. Behind us, a path snakes into the forest through a cacophony of dense, scrubby foliage and orange flowers.

Outside, to our incredulity, Fabrice has recommenced his search for a Chief. He goes importantly from house to house demanding to know where the Chief is, persisting as our neighbours become increasingly impatient. At each house, the same response: He's in the forest; he's chopping wood; he's gone to the village. Fabrice is infuriated – there can't be multiple chiefs! But for these people there are none. Trying to answer him, they misinterpret his question (perhaps deliberately) until I tell him to stop. Standing in the midday sun with a gaggle of children gaping at me, I realise we have to unshackle ourselves from our increasingly problematic companion. It's clear now that language is not the main barrier. Insensitivity and disinterest are far more debilitating. The women who were relaxing outside their doors have either withdrawn, or are complaining loudly about Fabrice. Not knowing how to handle him, and reluctant to broach the subject now, I suggest he leave us to unpack and rest.

As darkness descends on Mboule, we manage to ask Dsenga, recently returned from the forest, to help build a fire outside our "*oma*" where Germano makes a tasteless soup of rice and tinned vegetables. We've agreed with Alain to continue the arrangement at his house for lunch, but we'll fend for ourselves from now on in the evening. Men and women, back from the village or the forest, where most adults spend the day, sit around outside their houses, the men cradling or rocking infants. An ancient, hunched man in a faded cache sex with a mischievous face and a wooden stool clasped to his backside, makes his way along the camp, calling out to people in their houses. He walks slowly, clutching his stool, up and down the length of camp, listing what sound like grievances and announcements. To some parts of his soliloquy, there are calls of concurrence. To others, a loud racket of indignation and dissension. Impossible to know what's being said, but with the predictable ego of the paranoid we're convinced it's about us. I leave Germano smoking with Dsenga, both men nodding and laughing at each other by way of communication, and go to sleep. Somewhere in the night, rain arrives, and I lie awake wondering about the robustness of our roof. I'm beset now by a continual, low nausea with a dull headache. Edging

in and out of sleep, I find myself in a dream in which my sister has phoned from Ireland to wish me a happy birthday. As she speaks, someone lifts a second extension, and a child's voice says directly to me:

*"Do you want me or not?"*

We wake abruptly at four a.m. to the camp speaker. His speech is as impressively rendered as last night. If someone complains, he goads them by pausing outside their



**Figure 16: Mopondo - the camp speaker**

house and repeating the offending information. Women cackle gleefully out in the first light while a hapless man raves at the speaker. Two babies have begun wailing in unison, and we hear Dsenga next door beating a drum softly while he croons to his fretting daughter. The resident cockerel at Mboule – a scrappy, peevish creature who must have wandered in from Bangui seeking amnesty, has positioned itself in our

doorway to crow loudly. Only a mile from Bangui, it's as though we've woken in another world.

Although most of the adult women left early for the forest, baskets on their backs, the two women next door have remained, each nursing a baby. Two older women arrive, and taking the twins from their mother and "allomother", begin a slow, shuffling dance, singing softly. Mgonye leans back against the wall, scratching a thigh contentedly. Saape stands and stretches in morning air laced with wood-smoke. Then Mgonye breaks the spell and swiftly reclaims one of her daughters, flopping onto the earth and filling her lap with big, oval *ngongo* leaves in the same movement. As the child begins to shit, she holds her upright. Afterwards, she parcels the waste adeptly and hurls it behind her into the undergrowth, then wipes the infant clean with fresh leaves. She puts the whimpering baby to her breast and watches her feeding for a few seconds, absorbed. Neither of the children have left an adult's arms at any point.

After a few moments, the baby's head flops back in a doze, and passing her to a nearby child, Mgonye gets up and comes across to me with a raffia frond in hand. It's her first direct acknowledgment of me since we arrived next door – odd, inexplicable neighbours. She sweeps the area just inside our entrance, then in a semi-circle around the house, all the while glancing over at me shyly. I find a frond leaning against our gable and join her in this oddly satisfying if pointless exercise. The ground as we stroke it throws up more red dust, but Mgonye eventually assembles a small pile of crumbs and pebbles, which she sweeps adeptly onto a woven grass mat and tosses into the undergrowth. Satisfied, she returns to her friends. No words have been exchanged, yet it's understood that I'm required to demonstrate some appreciation of and care for this modest home. Although the people will abandon these houses for the forest in a few months, they return annually to their "semi-permanent" base camp.

After dinner that evening, a large group of women, men and children have coalesced around our door in the firelight. We sit on plastic sheets on the earth with our language notes, trying out words and phrases, and a few enthusiastic individuals endeavour to give us new words: "*nja! mieti! monapa!*" - "*path! stars! machete!*"

Then, when Germano points to a woman's raffia skirt, a slide of laughter and a chorus of "*malembe! malembe!*" Followed by some wit shouting – "*mwito*"! – "*woman*"! Then back to: "*sapata! motadi!*" – "*shoes! fire!*" Through our foolishness and novelty, our assimilation into the community commences. The more they laugh at us, the more we find ourselves hilarious, till there are forty people, including children, all cackling infectiously in the firelight.

One of the *Ejengi* dancers, the stooped old Moonga, has been sitting beside me for hours, occasionally accepting a cigarette and nodding sagely at me. Every so often, she speaks affectionately in a long stream of Mbendjele. Now, she begins to rub her silver head and says, with great gravitas: "*I am the mother of all women, I am so old, you are my daughter, look at my hair, I am your mother...*" Just as I begin to nod respectfully, she erupts into laughter, jumps up sprightly as a girl, and runs off hooting, much to the amusement of the others. Fabrice is insulted on my behalf, and on his own. He interpreted her *djoki* carefully. But it's impossible not to smile. It's the only time I'm so explicitly teased, but it is effective. I resolve not to ask the women, as I'd intended to do, whether I can join them when they go to the forest tomorrow. There has to be a period in which we allow ourselves to be the spectacle we are, rather than pressing ourselves, in impatience, onto the community. The word "*mundelle*" frequently circulates as they confer among themselves. They're assigning us some kind of temporary position from which they can begin to understand our presence.

The following evening, after the women have arrived back from the forest, baskets heavy with yams and cocoa leaves, and as the last trails of brilliant green fade overhead, a small group of young women, including Mgonye, begin to sing outside our house. Sitting together between the two dwellings, they clap to keep time as their voices snake up into the night. After twenty minutes, they rise and form a shuffling line, and almost immediately, a corresponding line of young men materialises. As the singing becomes more formal, the interchange between the sexes sharpens. While the women's voices are silky and high, the men's rejoinders are guttural and rough, interspersed with animal grunts and shrieks. Then two drums join in from the darkness on the far side of the clearing. There's something almost Celtic in the rapidity of the rolls, a hint of the Bodhran.





**Figure 17: Moonga**

As the dancers face each other, lost in conversation, and older women and men begin to congregate, my now habitual nightly affliction of nausea, coupled with intense fatigue, begins to swell. Forced inside by it, for two hours I drift in and out of sleep while singing spirals around the tent. Germano stays outside with Dsenga, crouched on a low wooden stool loaned to us by Sanga. Somewhere after midnight the singing proper stops, but the din continues with people chatting, bursting into song at random, and arguing loudly. When I recover around two a.m. and rise to investigate, there are still voices further along camp, and a few fires flicker, but the singers have dispersed.

At 4.30 a.m. the cock begins to crow in sympathy with a wailing baby, and the camp speaker arrives. As he pauses dramatically outside our house, a gaggle of women heckle him in the grainy light. All that day we lounge outside the house or take turns to wander up and down camp forlornly, struck by a sudden, debilitating homesickness. Late in the morning, as Saape and Benika grind palm nuts in the punching sun, Fabrice arrives, full of resolve. He urges me to use his skills as an interpreter. *“Pourquoi voulez-vous travailler seul”*? he asks. Last night’s dance,

*Biboudja*, is the “*dance for joy*”. When I ask Fabrice why it was performed, he snorts dismissively: “*Ils n’ont pas besoin d’une raison! Ils dansent toute heure*”! Then, as an afterthought: “*That’s why they won’t go to school*”. His questioning of the nearby women elicits no more satisfactory a response. As soon as he saunters over, they close ranks and stare at him blankly.

The village is quiet during the day, with most of the women and girls gone to the forest to gather. Some men have left to chop wood, and a few have headed off towards the village. In camp with us are the old people – Moonga, Mpondo, Essango, and a few other women. Mopondo, the “camp-speaker”, wanders from door to door with his stool, appearing on the fringes of any group but maintaining an absolute, smiling silence. I’ve never heard his voice outside his circumscribed deliveries. Saape and Mgonye are becoming our main source of company. During the day, they sit together at their door feeding the twins, or wander off along camp to visit. Along with a large band of children and a few aimless teenagers, we form the daily nucleus of camp. A quiet young man with a lame leg and a chronic limp has befriended Germano, who spends some time each day sketching outside our door. Makanja is fascinated by the colours and spends hours watching in silence while Germano’s hand moves over the paper. Eventually, Germano offers a sheet along with a few crayons, and Makenja, in response to Germano’s gestured request, draws a tree. At the apex is a bouquet of branches fringed by blue, and at the bottom, more blue branches. We’re wondering why he’s drawn the tree reflected when Fabrice arrives and Makenja explains that the top is branches in rain, and the bottom, roots in earth water. There is no dividing line for the ground.

We’re watching Makenja when a delegation of four men, including Dsenga and Sanga, arrive to inform Germano they’re going hunting – “*mwaaka*”. They’ve removed their customary T-shirts, and show him their net and spears for examination. It seems they’re reassuring him, in a gesture of friendship, that they’ll perform this role on his behalf. They’ve no doubt observed us eating our daily staple of rice with vegetable stock. It is late evening as they file out of camp and watching them, I wonder for how much longer they’ll be able to hunt in this forest so fiercely contested by Western conservationists and loggers. There’s word of a new logging road being cut through from Makao to Bangui. If this happens, easy though access will become,



**Figure 18: Men leaving for the hunt**

the lives of the community at Mboule will be transformed. As the men leave, a woman passes returning from the forest with a basket of leaves tied across her head, and a few paces behind her, a small girl with a miniscule basket of her own and a few items inside it. The mother's arms are hitched up to steady her heavy basket, but she glances round encouragingly at her daughter.

It's after dark when Dsenga arrives at our door bearing a large tin pot. We didn't see the men returning, nor was the meat distributed in public, but the pot contains a hind leg with a chunk of thigh, covered with the soft fur of a young duiker. I stare into the pot a moment, thanking the men profusely but horrified at the prospect of skinning the animal. I reach in gingerly and touch the leg; the flesh is still warm. Sixteen years of vegetarianism, and I look up into their faces that are luminous with pride and satisfaction. They've salvaged the dignity of their new friend and rescued us from the drudge of rice. I point to the pot and shrug my helplessness, and understanding immediately, Dsenga produces a small blade, hunkers down, and begins to skin the meat. While he works, another man prepares a small cooking fire, and Germano opens a few tins of tomatoes. Saape lingers approvingly by our door, calling out

instructions and suggestions to the men. The meat is rich - salty and tender - and as we eat the hunters sit hunkered around our fire, smoking and watching us.

This is the eating of food as a ritual act - something performed slowly and with an acute awareness of the matter. It is clear the phenomenon of packaged meat detaches the buyer from the reality of what they're eating, and of the process that has culminated in this. But the loss of the affective experience of consuming food that is no longer "food" – some abstract quantity to forestall hunger, something to be taken because now is the prescribed time – but a living entity, a thing with which one is in relationship, is less obvious. The men occasionally accept small pieces of meat but seem reluctant to do so. The antelope must have already been distributed among them. In Dsenga's house, someone begins to beat a drum slowly, and a group of women sitting at a nearby house shake a rattle and sing softly in time. Three girls rise and stamp in rhythm, grinding their heels into the earth and shimmying loosely. I hang our candle lamp on a beam above my head, and Germano goes off to smoke with Dsenga, who's resting outside his house with a baby daughter asleep in his lap. Cicadas strum in the darkness and small fires waver inside the surrounding dwellings. Directly across from us, a young couple – Benika and Makanja – quarrel playfully outside their house while their child, a moon-faced toddler, teases a scrawny dog till it whimpers and flees. Germano, on his way to bed, manages to call: "*Ame diya kobebe, na kouto*"! – "*I'm tired, see you tomorrow morning*" and the women shout, encouragingly: "*Na kouto! Na kouto*"! We've assumed the position of children – uninitiated, clumsy, without language or kin. It will take months, if not years, for us to elicit the response befitting an adult.

As the days slide by, we're absorbed into the landscape at Mboule, and become less willing to venture into Bangui. We've also been influenced by the Mbendjele perspective on their "*bilo*" – "uninitiated" - neighbours. This is well demonstrated by Essou, the comedian who entertained us on our first day here. After a week in his company, we realise Essou is in fact one of the most astute and articulate individuals in camp, whose pantomime is reserved for villagers. It's testimony to the flexibility of his charade that Fabrice, who spends a few hours a day with us at Mboule, calls him "*l'idiot*" never having witnessed anything else. Although Fabrice remarks begrudgingly that Mbendjele are respected herbalists, the *bilo* view is predominantly

of bumbling, thoughtless children whose main redeeming attribute is their hunting prowess. Rather than bother to be offended by this, the Mbendjele play to it, often exaggerating it, in the same way that they are known to pay lip service to *bilo* rituals and work ethics. It's fascinating to watch the posturing and derision of the *bilo*, who are in fact being subjected to a masterful collective mockery. We've witnessed on several occasions Dsenga, respected "*kombeti*" and master hunter, and twice the age of Alain, being imperiously ordered here and there by the Yambe Chief. The good humour of the Mbendjele in the face of such treatment baffled me until I began to realise that they have re-conceptualised *bilo* aggression in such a way as to render it benign or amusing – something to be quietly teased then set aside. This is an observation that arises repeatedly in descriptions of Pygmy responses to *bilo* attempts at dominance. We're learning that the Mbendjele value above all the ability to laugh at oneself, to over-ride the auto-cue of vanity in favour of good humour.

One damp, overcast morning, when we've been at Mboule two weeks, a small WCS party, including Kibino, arrives in Bangui. He appears in the doorway like an apparition calling "*Bonjour*"! Commissioned to conduct some kind of forest survey for WCS, he has come to see how things are progressing. We boil a pan of water for coffee, and Kibino invites Dsenga, Mgonye and Essenga to sit with us, something Fabrice has never done. I appreciate for the first time what a relief a willing, sympathetic translator is. It's clear the Mbendjele like and respect Kibino. Within an hour I know precisely when they will disperse for the forest, and an arrangement has been brokered whereby two local women will begin helping me to gather and cook our meals here in camp. Dsenga has also offered us the chance to travel with his family when the time comes to leave for the forest. I tell Kibino about the problem Fabrice has become, and when he mentions this to the now sizeable crowd squeezed into our house, there's an excited response. "Le Juge" tells Kibino the community is uneasy about Fabrice's presence in camp – apparently he's been reporting on local children who don't attend school. Kibino tells me what I already know – that with Fabrice in tow, the women will never go beyond the requisite courtesy with me. When Kibino explains to the people gathered that I'm interested in understanding women's dances – the most direct we've been - the women stare at me intently.





**Figure 19: Some of the Elanda dancers before the evening performance**

That night, as though in response, a group of girls and women gather a short distance from our house and summons the younger men in camp to dance “*Elanda*”. Earlier in the evening, the men returned from another successful hunt with a duiker. This time, Dsenga arrived with a few cuts of meat, showed them to us, then began to skin the animal himself. Now, sitting with the usual circle of teachers in the fragrant dusk, everyone is in good spirits. After some loosely coordinated singing, a coalition of women begins to charge up and down the length of camp in a wide line, their arms entwined. A few moments into this challenge, a group of young men assembles and halts the runners. The women and men face each other only a few yards apart, each chanting a different melody. The men utter a bass, growling chant, stamping the earth in time, then breaking into song, and the women retort with a bright alto that keeps collapsing into laughter.

The joy of the dancers is as infectious as it is palpable. After a few more minutes of this conversation, a young girl abruptly darts out of the women’s line, races to the men, and strikes a boy on the chest. He races back after her and strikes her, and again she leaves her line, shoots across the dividing space, and strikes a different boy. He

paces to the line of women and chooses a girl, then turns and flees with her in pursuit. Back and forth it loops while the men cheer and whoop, and the women scream with laughter, and all the while the two distinct melodies are maintained. The animal chant with which the boys pepper their song is strange and beautiful. Occasionally, the girls in chorus make a loud quizzical sound and the men answer with a resounding “IE”! – “Yes”! The only words I can discern are “*Elanda! Elanda*”! repeated in chorus by the women.

Gradually, I notice even boys of five or six have joined the men’s line, and girls of the same age appear in the women’s. The song assumes its own energy and seems unable to end. Watching it, the impression is of a pendulum constituted by both body and sound, a thread or string being woven back and forth, back and forth. Older people gather round the dancers, standing and clapping or sitting on the ground and joining the singing. Finally, after almost an hour, the choreography disintegrates into the uncontrollable laughter of the women, who stagger about clutching each other, squealing with mirth. Composed, the men sit down together in a tight circle, singing softly and clapping. One woman, reiterating a single chant, leaves her cohorts and approaches them. She rounds the circle, searching each boy playfully as she goes. There’s a rising tide of cries from both the boys and nearby girls until, finally, she throws one hand triumphantly into the air, as though she’s found something, and the men all scramble towards her. Shouting victoriously to the other girls, she dodges the men and makes off. Feigning disgruntlement, the boys settle back down and resume their singing until another girl steps forward and commences the same circular search. The format is repeated three times until the whole thing drifts apart.

*Elanda*, categorised in the literature as a non-spirit ritual (Tsuru, 1998: 53), is found throughout the Northern forest and beyond. A well-known women’s *massana*, it was described to me as “the courtship dance”. Often triggered by a successful hunt, it seems to fall somewhere along the line between game and ritual. Both Daou Joiris (1996) and Jerome Lewis (2002) list it in their writing on Yaka women’s ritual associations. Yet there is no *mokondi* attached to it - a feature of more formal rituals. *Elanda* like so many Mbendjele public dances slips through the categorical net set to demarcate ritual from non-ritual. It clearly belongs to a particular symbolic repertoire that derives its meaning from ritual performance and time. Yet it can’t be

categorised, marked off as “functional” in the way many initiation rituals can. Watching it, I’m struck by how precisely it corresponds with courtship dances described by Turnbull (1969) for the Mbuti. Like so many *massana*, it involves a throwing back and forth of power, a continual barter or exchange. There’s a strong rivalry emergent in the latter part of the dance, when the boys close ranks and are forcibly searched by individual girls. The triumph and feistiness with which girls eventually make off with their prize suggests “courtship” here is an aggressive repartee between the sexes, in which girls take a clear initiative.

The discursive aspect of the dance is what stands out. Women in their line form a striking front. The oldest, whose breasts are flattened and bound after many years of nursing, entwine arms with adolescent girls whose upright breasts and planed abdomens signal a different, more fertile and volatile power. Women’s line, as it undulates and stamps out its percussion, reads as the bodily amplification of a consensus and solidarity clear in everyday encounters and disputes within camp. Men, for their part, face women in an equally formidable line a few yards away, growling and snarling intermittently through a smooth bass of repetitive melody. From them, there is the barely held contradiction of raw power circumscribed by *jouissance* – their own collective willingness to be held at bay. At one point, just before the lines disperse, the space between them tautens and pulls so you can almost see the elastic etiolating. The interplay between non-spirit and spirit dances is becoming ever clearer. What is played out “for fun” here will later be elaborated “for real”. Jerome Lewis (2002) in particular provides a rich account of the full initiation sequence appropriate to *Ejengi*, in which violence and male power become extensions of one another, and the fear of male force run amok is visited on the social space of camp. Even in *Ejengi* however, as is evident at Mboule, elder men themselves are ultimately tasked with containing this raw power that comes to the human domain from the forest. Showcasing the potential for concerted violence while being made responsible for the consequences of it renders this a community resource rather than a threat. While male power is manifest and explored in all its potential destructiveness, its ultimate use is in support of the community.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### SPIRIT DANCE: THE BODY EXPANDING

*The Bushmen's letters are in their bodies:*

*They speak, they move, they make the Bushmen's bodies move.*

//Kabbo, a /Xam Bushman, 1863

“Why do you dance”? Daisuke Bundo (2001) asked the Baka in Ndimako village in East Cameroon whose performances he had been observing and trying to categorise for months. “Awa joko” they shrugged – “Because it’s a good thing”. Or “Awa e nde we” – “Because there’s no problem” (Bundo, 2001: 96). Like many who spend time in Pygmy camps, Bundo (2001) was struck by the sheer volume of dances taking place as well as by the lack of a formal frame for these: Often, at a moments notice and after a large crowd had been assembled, a dance would simply evaporate without further comment. What perplexed Bundo (2001) about such moments was the lack of chagrin shown by participants, who would good-naturedly shrug and disperse. Even the spirit who was to have danced “never got angry” (Bundo, 2001: 95). The apparent nonchalance here is deceptive. As Jackson’s (1989; 1998) work has shown, the fact that such rituals do not generate much verbal reflection is their whole point: They are practical, somatogenic knowledge, belonging to a common communicative fund broader than the conceptual or linguistic. Moreover, the stress put by people on “lack of anger” is indicative of a socially cultivated collective body for whom “emotions are less matters of inward disposition than of interactive performance” (Jackson, 1998: 12). The “good” or joyful nature of such occasions and the pull away from formalising or forcing them is integral to their power.

I want to stay with the notion of the laughing body and the social power of the sensual, but I continue to expand “the body” out beyond the parameters of the Western subject - “that unbearably spoilt child” whose epistemological ascendancy Levi-Strauss lamented (Levi-Strauss, 1981: 687). Evidence from Central African forest peoples demands greater attention to the ongoing negotiation of a kind of collective personhood, assembled recursively in the confluence of flows between relations. Centrally placed in both flow and relationship is the body and its

“olfactory, acoustic, motor and visual fields of transaction” (Devische, 1993: 133). The finished, immutable self familiar to Western ontology has little bearing in contexts where it is through social relationships with others – marital bonds or tensions, sibling loyalties, friendship, parenthood – that people manifest themselves and are made manifest in community living. According to data examined in the previous chapter, there is a potential path through which to examine such systems: “In dealing with relations between the sexes, one is dealing with social relations at large” (Strathern, 1988: 35).

The first argument of this chapter is that the elusiveness of the ostensibly “finished, immutable self” in Yaka community is neither lack nor coincidence: it is the political *raison d’être* of such systems to work against fences of any kind, without sacrificing the siren of procreative sex. Which leads to the more specific proposition that the “politics of Eros” described in the previous chapter is spliced to a broader super-human society, one opened and mediated by spirit dance. The purpose of this chapter then is to make explicit and explore the social consequences of motion. My understanding of women’s dance and spirit ritual is simultaneously Durkheimian and phenomenological: With Katz (1982) I see these as “orienting and integrating events” which illumine the central features of the culture; the Mbendjele or Baka are peoples eternally in flux. Motion – individual, territorial, social, somatic, political and metaphysical – is at the heart of their adaptation.

The longstanding Western philosophical and scientific approach to bodies has of course never signalled a different kind of body, but through the prolonged inculcation of the myth of “imperfection, misery and lack” (Sahlins, 1996), perception and corporeal self-knowledge has been profoundly shaped. Perhaps, as Sahlins (1996) suggests, the tongue has been severed from our own experience of the body’s ambiguity and range. It is not that we are incapable of a more fluid body; it is that the epistemological and scientific architecture that surrounds us gives such a body no voice, no language.

The achievement of all those centuries of thought-hegemony Sahlins (1996) details was to repress the radical social voice of the body and a related cultural vocabulary composed of items such as blood, sex, meat, laughter, tricksters and spirits. The

“history of sadness” forever tethered to the sinful body is summed up by Pierre Nicole: “Jesus never laughed” (quoted in Sahlins, 1996: 415). Sahlins (1996) works accordingly to unshackle us from “the biological determinism [which] is a mystified perception of the cultural order” (1996: 401), and which he identifies as the cause of the entire malaise. Culture is what unifies; biology is what separates. His plea is in keeping with feminist and postmodernist projects of recent decades, which instinctively strain away from “biology”. Yet while it’s true that “the human body is a cultural body” (Sahlins, 1996: 403), I’ve argued throughout this thesis that we need to expand culture to *encompass* the biological. Ultimately, the line set by Western thinkers at which culture ends and biology begins is itself arbitrary.

By identifying biology with capitalist demand, lack and general melancholy, and dissociating it from “culture” in an attempt to remedy this, we dispense with our ability to understand the kind of folk “biology” prevalent in non-capitalist cultures (cf. Bieseke, 1993; Rival, 1997). In the realm of procreative sex particularly, there is an increasing ethnographic recognition that separating biology from culture is akin to tearing limbs from a single creature. Sahlins (1996) makes clear that he is talking “about male writers who themselves spoke mainly about men and to men” (1996: 395). His argument, assembled against such men, accepts their ideology (the insatiable hunger of the body, signalling individualism and lack, is the genitor of capitalist culture) and battles it. Out goes the biological body along with capitalist hegemony. What I hope to achieve here is in a sense prior to that countering urge: I do not accept the ideology. Hunter-gatherers in Central Africa and beyond offer living counter-examples to it. Biology does not inevitably lead us towards fragmentation and lack; indeed, recent work emerging from the field of biological anthropology suggests the opposite (Hrdy, 1999; Key and Aiello, 1999; Knight et al, 1996). Here, in a refraction of hunter-gatherer perceptions of the creative cultural meter of the body, certain biological predispositions may in fact provoke intense communistic behaviour. The scramble of Western philosophy against a perceived ontological lack rooted in the body (Sahlins, 1996), may be seen from the vantage of hunter-gatherers as reaction against a ghost.

In the previous chapter I dealt at some length with the public lyrics and gestures used by women’s dances. Now I want to turn to the spirits. Their relationship to dancing,

to social life, and to sexual politics. There has been a double amputation on the full range of human experience. Just as the “biological” has been cut away from the “cultural”, so the spirits have been cut away from their place in human social politics. “Since for most anthropologists the spirit entities posited by their subjects do not exist in reality, interpreting spirit-oriented behaviour has tended to lead them into explanations which present “spirit” agencies as colourfully disguised representations of more mundane, “real” societal forces and phenomena” (Willis, 1999). Willis (1999) is unconvinced by explanations of spirit experience which attribute this to altered patterns of electrical activity in the brain, stimulated by certain percussive rhythms used in trance dance. The decisive factor for him is in the quality of relations between those in the dancing group, one purpose of which is to tune in to the wider social sphere in which spirits reside.

My aim is to provide another dimension to the analysis given in the previous chapter. There, my argument focused exclusively on what was being said and done within the human community. Here, I maintain a perspective on social and ritual politics by looking at a kind of “super-human” power (Sawada, 2001) usually evaded in theoretical discussions of “ritual” and asking a provocative question: What if the spirits are real? My asking of this is provoked by data on both Yaka and Ju/hoan healing dances, which bear striking similarities to Mbendjele spirit dances, and which describe vividly the transformative, expansive power of bodies moving in concert. While ethnography of Central African dancing is less explicit on this question, many writers refer to the *communtias* aspired to by people working with spirits as a real experience, one, it is implied, occasionally glimpsed by ethnographers themselves (Katz, 1999; Kisluik, 1998; Lewis, 2002).

This chapter retains the question of sex and intra-sexual solidarity, but sets “gender” to one side. Indigenous interest in and manipulation of bodily registers – such as blood - occurs within a world where what we have called the “social”, the “biological”, and the “political” are inextricably intertwined. The Mbendjele, by all accounts, do not agonise about the essentialising potential of sex. On the contrary, it would seem they worry about it not being essential enough. The formal relationship – or weave (Devische, 1993) - between the sexes is the substance of a sustained ritual commentary which focuses above all else in pulling similarly sexed bodies back

towards one another. Because of the clear conversation being articulated by same-sex ritual associations during performances, I focus in greater detail here on the general literature on dance and spirits in Central Africa, where bodies are already – even before birth (Turnbull, 1978) – socially implicated. As Strathern (1988) urged two decades ago: “We must stop thinking that at the heart of these cultures is an antinomy between “society” and “the individual” ” (1988: 12).

## RADICAL JOY

Before broaching the subject of spirits, I examine the phenomenon of women’s informal or “non-spirit” dances, found among all forest hunter-gatherers. Such dances are usually named and recognised by ethnographers, but because they differ in scale from community dances involving “spirits” and managed by groups of initiates, they have tended to be dismissed with the aside that they are “mainly for amusement” (Tsuru, 1998: 65), or “non-spirit performance is principally for women and children...In this sense, the non-spirit performance is joyful play” (Bundo, 2001: 93). I want to challenge this approach not by arguing with the propositions themselves but with the assumptions underlying them, and by looking in more detail at the role played by dance in everyday life. I use Johan Huizinga’s (1950) insights into play as ritual capacity to rethink the general anthropological neglect of women’s ongoing somatic commentary. While Pygmy dance has often been studied as something “remarkable” and thereby cut from the grain of daily domestic life – as Overing (2003) has written with reference to Amazonia “the dishes to be cleaned, the children to feed” (Overing, 2003: 298) - recent studies have begun to emphasise the diffusive potential of performance in contexts where it represents a major stream in daily life.

I do not suggest that there is no difference between ritual and normative time. What I want to bring out is the thread that runs from large *eboka* celebrations – community wide events which provoke collective initiations – and the kind of close acoustic eye women collectively keep on camp relationships and sharing practices. At Mboule, adolescent women routinely broke into lavish song and dance repertoires, incited by older women. As we saw in the last chapter, the lyrics that pepper such productions are explicit and particular – the lines that slip through in moments of “joyful play” reiterate female sexual power and bodily solidarity. Women’s dances in such

contexts form a kind of fluid backbone to community life. These happen on an almost daily basis, erupting and settling again often in the space of an hour. In contrast to large, formal events, organised by ritual associations and directed at specific *mokondi* or spirits, most ethnographers comment on the sheer volume of “non-spirit performances” (Tsuru, 1998; Bundo, 2001): Spontaneous, collective song and dance performances involving mainly women and children.

Because this form – continual, small-scale, spontaneous – is less dramatic than larger spirit performances, it would be easy to dismiss it as simply an augmentation of men’s more formal performances. But recent writing, most notably on Amazonian community, warns us away from such a dismissal: “Everyday reality is a polyphonic, symbolically layered environment” (Overing, 2000: 8) in which the more formal motion of dance melds easily with the bustle of life. The world described by Overing (2000) fuses poetics and aesthetics with daily subsistence and social movement, and presumes an ontology of the imagination embedded in the practicality of life. Rather than pulling back from the “remarkable” to the everyday, however, why not *include* in ritual politics the matter of labour, subsistence and childcare (cf. Rival, 1997)?

Song is a stream running seamlessly from women’s most “mundane” activities – gathering, childcare, food preparation – to the most defined ritual occasions. In discussing Mbendjele communicative behaviour, and its explicit endorsement of humour – “a good camp should ring out regularly with laughter” (Lewis, 2006: 8) - women’s cultivation of a particular speech style employing mimicry and mockery is key. “*Besime ya baito*” – “women’s talk” (Lewis, 2006: 8) – ideally involves laughter, timed interjections, rhythm and stylised body language, and goes on throughout the day while women gather in the forest or in groups around their hearths. This type of cultivated collective speech, a polyphonic “song-like and raucous banter” (Lewis, 2006: 9) can turn sharply on anyone who provokes individual women, whether a lazy spouse, a stingy camp member, or a posturing villager. “Most elaborately, such talk takes the form of theatre, mimicking those discussed” (Lewis, 2006: 10) with ruthless and hilarious detail. Women stride into the central camp space to parody the person being targeted, “mimicking with increasing skill the key facial expressions, the eyes and stare, the mouth and accent, the gait and other foibles

of the person being re-enacted...In effect, women are using mimicry in the social context of *moadjo* as a very effective means of social control” (2006: 10).

Bundo (2001), in his examination of Baka community rituals was struck by song and dance extravaganzas as *social* occasions. Baka refer to such performances as “*be*” (Bundo, 2001: 86) but do not discriminate between spirit and non-spirit events as do almost all ethnographers (though see Lewis (2002; 2006) for an exception to this). Rather than follow their example into his analysis, Bundo (2001) categorises the dances into “formal”, costumed or masked performances led and controlled by adult men alone, and the almost daily “non-spirit performances” (Bundo, 2001: 88) in which participate mainly women and children. Thus a split and a value-judgement is established at the outset. Lewis (2002) and Kisluik (1999) point out that in BaAka and Mbendjele communities women are active in many of the major dance performances and occasionally command these exclusively. But what matters here is to examine more closely, as in fact Bundo (2001) himself eventually does, the purpose and impact of the ongoing dance managed by adult women in Baka community. Spirit performances are larger and more dramatic but may not occur for long periods. In these, women play the role of singers and constitute the audience. Non-spirit performances take place on a daily basis and are the continuous current in Baka society; while they are “joyful play” (Bundo, 2001) they are also plainly so much more. The joy of play may be a prime socio-political device in communities who value above all else the quality of relationship. Bundo observes that women’s on-going performances “deserve special attention in clarifying the whole social meaning of singing and dancing for the Baka” (Bundo, 2001: 89).

The inseparability of dance for amusement and dance to summons spirits is brought out by Kisluik (1998). In her narrative on BaAka women’s dances she describes a spontaneous performance of *Dingboku* during a funeral *eboka*. A few women began by singing on the periphery of the celebrations, and soon a formidable group had taken command of the central dance space. “Singing a sparse and eerie melody to one word, “*dumana*” (sex)” women moved rhythmically back and forth in a single line using cross-rhythmic calls, claps and exclamations to enliven the beat, through which Kisluik (1998) heard “a sound like an owl hooting; I later learned that this may be the sound of a *dingboku* spirit” (Kisluik, 1998: 41). Just as suddenly, the dance

reached its conclusion with women “spiralling into a coil, like a giant hug” (1998: 41). Here, while the formality of the masked or costumed spirit was absent, women rendered a bodily comment through which the possibility of spirit emerged.

Kisluik (1998) later describes the destructive impact missionary influence has had on BaAka spirit dances. In one camp, because of “*mondo wa nzapa*” – “the matter of god”, all the major spirit rituals, including *Ejengi* and *Ngoku*, had been abandoned. Left without their main source of medicine and disarmed of their powerful spirit allies in encounters with *Bilo*, BaYaka at Dzandza in the Central African Republic were disoriented and vulnerable. In the climate of fear instilled by evangelical threats that spirit dances and traditional medicines were “satanic”, Kisluik (1998) speculated that: “The threat of cultural annihilation for BaAka at Dzandza was looming not because of change...but rather because of a campaign that threatened to dismantle the cultural tools to *cope* with change” (Kisluik, 1998: 166). In the midst of this crisis, women confided to her that they had never intended “to throw away BaAka things” (ibid: 161), and were in fact still regularly dancing *Elanda* under the noses of the evangelists who considered this “non-spirit dance” a harmless game. The dance for joy or amusement slipped through the missionary net but kept the door open for BaAka dancers. When Kisluik (1998) returned to the same community many years later, expecting to find them fully assimilated, they had reinvented most of their traditional spirit dances and “*eboka ya nzapa*” – “the god dance” - was now poised uneasily within a wider, dynamic BaAka repertoire (ibid: 179).

Bundo (2001) comments that roles absorbed by children through participation in *be* (the only explicit teaching Baka children receive) “are not imposed upon them by any authority, but acquired through enjoying the performances” (Bundo, 2001: 95). This is a crucial point about Yaka cultural life in general: Social relationships are embodied in the performances, but “if participation in *be* was solely compulsory to reflect the social orders, the Baka may not sing and dance so lively or often and at such length” (ibid: 96). Like Ju/hoan participation in a wide range of healing dances, the compulsion to participate is in the pleasure and freedom of involvement. No person, adult or child, can be coerced or cajoled into playing a part.



The insistence of Baka informants that neither people nor spirits “got angry” about cancelled or abbreviated performances suggests a different understanding of “performance”. There is little investment of ego here for one thing. This opens another trajectory. We tend to analyse ritual through the lens of our own assumptions or intuitions about key areas of conflict, tension or contradiction. These are *our* tensions and issues, things transposed from the system and relationships familiar to us. We assume similar if not identical kinds of feelings on the part of Baka, and consequently set about trying to discern how people placate this or that. But what if the feelings are not the same? When ethnographers create a split between formal and informal rituals not generally made by locals, justifying this by the marking down of “joy”, “play” or “amusement” – (“because it’s a good thing”) – they assume that joy bears the same individualistic or flimsy connotations it does in societies in which it has ceased to signify the activation of counter-power.

#### “RITUAL”: HELP OR HINDRANCE?

There is a question to be made about the usefulness of the term “ritual” in conveying the kind of public dance performances that are the only public ritual events in Mbendjele life. Bell (1992) makes a similar query about the value of ritual studies in approaching other cultures. Theoretical descriptions of ritual have traditionally regarded it as action and distinguished it from the “conceptual” aspects of religion such as beliefs, symbols and myths. Rarely is the sense of this bifurcation considered. But for communities such as the Yaka, “conceptual” life itself is often transmitted via bodily semantics. Sawada (2001) points to the absence of “specific rituals for worshipped beings” and the prevalence instead of myriad ancestral spirits “who help the living to kill game” (Sawada, 2001: 35). In the context of Pygmy performance particularly, where collective song and dance *is* the only public ritual, the issue is complicated. Lewis (2002) has made a useful distinction between private, individual magico-medicinal acts and the large-scale spirit performances which dominate and transform the landscape of the community (Lewis, 2002: 136). While I rely on local terms for such performances, with or without associated spirits, I return periodically to the theoretical anchor of “ritual” both for the purposes of communicability, and of marking out the politics associated with it.

Lakoff (1987) prefers not to distinguish at all between the social and the biological, prioritising instead the pre-conceptual structuring of experience which in turn “structures the conceptual categories with which human beings think” (Lakoff, 1987: 12). Basic logical categories are “fully rooted in the sociobiological body” (1987: 12). As was noted in the previous chapter, there is for Yaka peoples no “biological” in the Western scientific sense. Many of those items assumed to be “natural” are the substance of greatest cultural fecundity and comment. It is in the relation between social and ritual practices that the body operates as conduit and agitator. Bell (1992) describes “a ritualised social body, a body with the ability to deploy in the wider context the schemes internalised in the ritualised environment” (Bell, 1992: 107). This explains women’s almost daily song and dance performances and embroiders these into the more explicit ritual context. If between socio-political life and ritual action there is no breakage but rather a continuum, and if ritual action in its most amplified form is tasked with keeping the power dialectic moving and the camp “open” (Lewis, 2006), and if the point of all this is a bio-cultural negotiation about fertility, “hunger” and affinity (see also Rival, 1997; Gow, 1982; Knight et al, 1996), then we should expect social fluidity to be stressed through bodily conduct.

#### CATEGORISING SPIRITS: THE THORN OF INCOMMENSURABILITY

Forest hunter-gatherers throughout Central Africa construct their religious and ritual grammar (Barnard, 1992) around a multitude of different spirits. For Mbendjele these are *mokondi*. For Baka, *me*. For Efe *tore*. For Mbuti, *molimo*. These are variously interpreted by ethnographers as hunting spirits, nature or forest spirits, ancestral spirits, or communities of the dead. For Lewis (2002), it is the relationship between *massana* activities and spirits that is ritually significant. *Massana* is a Mbendjele concept roughly falling somewhere between play, ritual labour, dance, and community celebration (Lewis, 2002: 125). *Mokondi Massana* or spirit associations are the means through which Mbendjele identity is negotiated and sexual politics voiced. For Tsuru (1998), *me* are representatives of a parallel community of the dead, perennially in conversation with the human community through the medium of dance and song. Bundo (2001) views spirit performances as refractions of social relationships and sets up a partition between men’s “formal spirit performances” and women’s “joyful play” (Bundo, 2001: 93). Joiris (1996) meanwhile sees spirits as

primarily ancestral beings tied to hunting practice and cosmology. What is striking in reviewing the ethnographic bricolage is the capacity of communities to incorporate all the above and more in a single term. Despite obvious differences related to context, each of these interpretations bleeds into the others, so that the truth straddles all of them.

There is a proviso to be made, however, about the terms themselves: As Sawada (2001) cautions, *beginning* with terms such as “spirit”, “god”, or “supernatural” obscures local world views by postulating an equivalence not supported by ethnography. The African philosopher Wiredu (1998) emphasises that the material/immaterial dichotomy inherent in Christian derived terms and concepts steals power from systems of belief in which ancestors are “quasi-physical” beings who operate within the same landscape as the living (Wiredu, 1998: 6). Sawada’s (2001) paper, writing against the assertions of Schebesta and Vorbichler concerning a “supreme being” or “creator-god” for the Mbuti, stresses rather the “outstanding importance of the dead...in religious belief” (Sawada, 2001: 30). He uses the critique of Schebesta to query the use by contemporary ethnographers of the term “spirits” as equally misleading. Despite this, no better appellation has emerged to describe in general terms those non-human personalities which frequent Mbendjele or Baka ritual terrains.

Tsuru (1998) describes *me* as strange, trickster-like figures who interact with Baka in various ways, appearing in dreams to impart new ritual songs or dance repertoires. Joiris (1996), Bundo (2001), Sawada (1990), Kisluik (1999) and Lewis (2002) all comment on the “finding” or “seeing” of spirits, and consequently new ritual songs, through dreams. Baka have a clear understanding of spirits as living a parallel life outside camp, hunting, eating, forming villages which Baka occasionally chance upon while moving in deep forest. In contrast to their agricultural village neighbours, Baka do not appear to view *me* as harmful and neither is there any connection with sorcery or witchcraft (though in Central African Republic the evangelical Grace Brethren Church has labelled BaAka spirit dances “satanic” so that those who continue to perform them are now open to accusations of sorcery (Kisluik, 1999)). Spirits have pale white skin, large heads and protruding eyes “which rustle when they blink” (Tsuru, 1998: 60). They wander naked in the forest, occasionally appearing on the

periphery of an audience during major dance performances. Painfully shy, *me* are attracted to the polyphonic choruses and dances of Baka, particularly women's choreographies which are believed to lure them out of deep forest like fireflies.

With them, *me* bring to the human community various gifts. Those who are successfully "captured" and persuaded to enter camp have their own dance and song styles, their own costume, personality, distinctive voice, and a name which they share with the ritual association linked to them. Baka stress the "speech" of each spirit, which issues from the *njanga* path in the forest just prior to its entry into camp (Tsuru, 1998: 62). The voice of *me* may manifest in Baka, in non-Baka, in cries of varying pitch, in whistles, and in hand-clapping. On most occasions, the spirit converses directly with women, encouraging them, flirting, occasionally insulting. Any vocal or bodily sound issued by the spirit is responded to as speech.

The large number of spirit performances are created following the "seeing" of a spirit in one of three contexts: In the forest, in a dream, or where children are playing (Lewis, 2002: 142; Tsuru, 1998: 73). Interesting here is the breaching of the line between domains. The landscape of the dreamer is made synonymous with that of the non-human forest world, and both with the space where children play. For Baka, music and ritual are one, the term used for ritual also meaning "to sing" (Tsuru, 1998: 52). This is similar to the BaYaka as described by Kisluik (1999), where the term for ritual and that for dance are the same. And it calls into question static notions about ritual's remarkable qualities. Furthermore, claims Tsuru (1998), separating "ritual" from "play" presents equal analytical problems, a point made by other writers on Baka spirit performances (Harako, 1980; Sawada, 1991). While there is clearly a break with normative temporality, most particularly where sexual solidarity is stressed, in recent writing on Pygmy spirit performances definitions slip continually from ritual to play (Tsuru, 1998), from play to politics (Lewis, 2002), from politics to dance (Kisluik, 1999), and from dance back to ritual (Tsuru, 1998; Bundo, 2001; Devische, 1993).

#### TRICKSTERS AND SPIRITS: A PROPOSITION

Before approaching the *mokondi* of Mbendjele religious cosmology, I consider first the Khoisan trickster as portrayed by Mathias Guenther (1999). Following this, I look briefly at *massana* activities in Mbendjele communities, intimately linked as these are to spirits. The term trickster is misleading in that this figure manifests in Khoisan thought as a multiplex figure, “known by no single name common to all Bushman groups” (Guenther, 1999: 97). The trickster appears in various guises, human, animal or therianthropic. Frequently he is depicted as unusually short and misshapen, with “huge, round, baleful eyes and a bloated head...either yellow or white skinned” (Guenther, 1999: 98). Like *mokondi*, the trickster “has a special affinity for large-game antelopes” (Guenther, 1999: 100). Guenther views the central and defining characteristic of the trickster as ambiguity: “//Gauwa may be corporeal or he may be “just like the wind” or the sunshine “which is all over”. He may be a single or multiple being. He may be human, animal or divine, or he may blend these three ontological traits...Whatever his guise, it is never stable” (1999: 101). Tricksters here are personifications of motion and expansion, metamorphoses in the nature of reality. It is not clear that such creatures are rendered mere metaphor by their obvious embroilment in intra-human conversations and crises.

The trickster, like the moon, is male, and invariably involved in a dispute or repartee with women, usually provoked by his “profligate flouting” of hunting or sexual decorum. “The trickster, the Nharo say, is a man who “likes the women” (1999: 107). Like Sawada (1998), Guenther (1999) objects to Christian distortions of the trickster motivated, he asserts (echoing Sahlins (1996)), by a religion “where the very possibility of god laughing is already blasphemy” (Guenther, 1999: 121). The Christian god, reflecting the social ethos of the societies he represents, is characterised by order, structure and gravitas. The Khoisan trickster on the other hand is a Rabelian character – “the personification of ambivalence, the embodiment of self-contradiction, and the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries” (Guenther, 1999: 121). Like their Central African spirit equivalents, “*mokondi*”, “*me*” or “*tore*”, the trickster figures (plural, Guenther emphasises) “are the central element of the Bushman belief system” (1999: 122). Interestingly, Guenther (1999) argues for a simultaneous reading of Khoisan myth and folklore with contemporary society, which is “shot through with like (anti) structural strains, amorphousness, ambiguity, and

ambivalence”. Like Mendjele *mokondi*, Efe *tore* or Baka *me*, “the trickster-god is a divinity consistent with experience” (1999: 125).

Contrasted with the piety and suffering of the Christian god, whose blood “opened the way for sinners to draw near” (Evangelist statement to the BaYaka, quoted in Kisluik, 1999), is the multi-faceted trickster-god *komba* whose blood, semen, snot, excrement and testicles are the visceral frame on which hang the popular *gano* fables that detail his foibles and adventures. Like the Khoisan trickster, this deity commands neither guilt nor recompense but rather teaches through his own foolishness, mutability and humour, an intense bodily presence brought through in the lyrics of women’s ritual chants which savour in poetic metre: “The cadaver of Komba’s mother...The penis of Komba’s father...The vagina of Komba’s wife...The shit of master Komba” (from the popular *gano* “Komba, Aboy, and Kpinya the Boar”, in Kisluik, 1999). Overing (2000) in particular has commented on the use of “obscenities” in Piaroa women’s sacred chants, the employment of graphic, condensed language to signal the collective transfer to a different territory or awareness, what Turner called *communitas* and Willis (1999) “spirithood”. Such words are for the Piaroa “good, strong words” conducive to the “fecundity that allows for the creation of good food and healthy children” (Overing, 2000: 77). In the second chapter we saw that the confusion of sexual organs with food is as prevalent in the folk domain as is the anxiety about confusing female with game blood. The fact that trickster spirits (mythic or manifest) are brought to bear at precisely this point tells us something about the social politics inseparable from them. Willis (1999) describes the loosening of temporal and spatial constraints effected by ritual dance as “spirithood”, emphasising that “I am here pointing towards an expanded sense of *communitas* from Turner’s sociocentric conception of a state of “anti-structure”...When I say “spirithood” I refer to a ritual experience which, to a Westerner, appears as a strange fusion of the spiritual and the erotic” (Willis, 1999: 123). Set alongside the traditional Christian hymns with which missionaries approach BaAka, the vast gulf between cosmological worlds is apparent.

The Mbendjele term “*massana*” encompasses children’s informal play, children’s role-play, women’s informal dances, and large, community rituals involving same-sex clusters of initiates in concert with spirits (Lewis, 2002: 125 – 126)). According to

Lewis (2002), all *massana* activities are defined through a relational lens – “the joking, laughter and cooperation between the participants enjoying the activity” (Lewis, 2002: 125) is what is most significant. Mbendjele themselves don’t differentiate between these “levels” of *massana* activity, viewing them rather as a continuum through which people learn appropriate modes of behaviour. It is tempting to say here “through which people become social beings”, but there is some question about whether these activities are creating harmonious social relations or disturbing them. The stress in all *massana* activities seems to be simultaneously (in general terms) upon fluid interaction and mutuality, but also (in precise terms) upon roles dictating the affinities of the sexes (Lewis, 2002: 132). In this sense, *massana*, while stressing *ideologically* smooth relationships between the sexes, are the very force which pull the sexes decisively apart. Even within the *mokondi massana* of *Ejengi*, when adult men get to play at dominance, there is a complimentary motion turning between the sexes as *Ejengi*’s “raw” energy is delivered by men into camp where women’s dancing “cooks” him so his energy can be distributed (Lewis, 2002: 190). The spirit compels people to share not only in the practical sense then, but to share social power. Initially epitomising the “raw” power of male force, *Ejengi* is cooked by the irresistible Eros of women. *Ejengi* asserts men’s value in the procreative process but tethers this to the compliment of female fertility. Inter-sexual tension mediated by spirits is a recurrent theme. There is only a conflict here if we remain constrained by our own notions about what is social and what is not. The return to the sexed coalition and the exaltation of anatomical and procreative capacities may be as fruitful a social move, and as constitutive of community, as the perpetual flow of affinities and devotions in non-ritualised moments. For Yaka, it is likely that these are equally valid moments in the expression and creation of identity.

The emphasis in *massana* is resolutely collective: “Mbendjele do not perform *massana*...to celebrate the life-cycle of individuals...*Public Mbendjele rituals celebrate communities, not individuals*” (Lewis, 2002: 126 Emphasis mine). In fact, neither birth nor marriage are marked by any *massana* activity, these being seen as practical, individual concerns. Neither are there the calendrical rites commonplace among *bilo* agriculturalist neighbours. So what is it that drives the intense singing and dancing performances of the Mbendjele and other groups in the region? This is a question tackled by Sawada (1990) in a paper largely devoted to Efe-Lese interaction.

He reaches the conclusion that the techniques used by Efe during *obe* strive toward “an unusual and extraordinary state of consciousness” in which song works back and forth in a muscular motion between solo and response and dense polyphony, which eventually, after many hours, dissolves individual singers into a single, communal body. “In this phase, some participants are seen tottering out of the circle as if intoxicated” (Sawada, 1990: 186). The main point of *obe* for Sawada is in its aesthetics: “In making a beautiful chorus with other people and in dancing to the rhythm...At the climax...adults laugh heartily in each others arms and frequently shout in a high-pitched voice out of joy (Sawada, 1990: 177).

For Mbendjele, there is a complex relationship between groups of initiates, named spirits, costumes, dance styles and sex. Each *Mokondi* or spirit in the community repertoire is controlled exclusively by either men or women (Lewis, 2002: 139). In Lewis’s (2002) account, women exclusively control and dance three of the most widespread *mokondi* – *Ngoku*, mentioned in a previous chapter, *Yele*, and *Djenguma* (2002: 139). Men control all others, though in practice, most of these require women’s participation in order to work. Katz, Bieseke and St. Denis (1997), writing on Ju/Hoan healing dances in which women and men form complimentary collectives, note: “To the Western eye, it may seem that the men, most involved in the dramatic role of dancing, are more important to the dance than the women. This is not so, say the Ju|’hoansi. Men and women make different but equally valued contributions. The singers and dancers need each others help to activate the healing energy” (Katz, Bieseke, St. Denis, 1997: 23).

In contrast to most other writers on the subject (Joiris, 1996; Tsuru, 1998; Sawada, 1990) Lewis (2002) describes *mokondi* as “a type of forest spirit” (Lewis, 2002: 141). Like Baka (Tsuru, 1998), Mbendjele describe *mokondi* as short figures with large heads and white skin, who wander naked through the forest and can be “captured” (Lewis, 2002: 142) by opportunistic humans. Most often however, *mokondi* are encountered in dreams, and later shared through initiation and performance of the song and dance styles they bring to their *konja* -“spirit-controller” or “guardian”. *Mokondi* interact with the community rather than individuals by “eating” singing and dancing. The *konja* liaises between the community and the *mokondi*, only temporarily and provisionally occupying a special relationship to the spirit. Lewis’s



(2002) description, along with others (Devische, 1993; Tsuru, 1998), resonates strongly with the Khoisan trickster figures Guenther (1999) describes. Are *mokondi*, *me* or *tore* then – overwhelmingly “male” entities in dialogue with primarily female performers – the trickster personified, carried into the world of community and sexual politics? Representatives of the abjuration of boundaries, who bring their own existential gifts – trance, healing, hunting luck - to the dance? The Baka spirit *emboamboa* is a clown who personifies “marginality and ambiguity” (Tsuru, 1998: 78), typically engaging in ribald sexual joking with women dancers. *Ejengi*, representing abundance, is a more volatile, formidable character whose power terrifies non-initiates (Lewis, 2002: 187; Tsuru, 1998: 77). *Ngoku* (about whom so little is known) brings Eros into camp, enchanting and transporting women.

## DUALITY AND MOTION

The elusive nature of such entities is highlighted in Lewis’s (2002) description of them: “They can assist in the food quest, protect initiates, transform negative emotions and tension in the camp into laughter and cooperation, disharmony into coordination, cleanse bad luck...create ecstatic trance states, and empower men, or women, or the whole community” (Lewis, 2002: 144). This is a long list, and it is in keeping with descriptions offered by other ethnographers. The power of performance here moves effortlessly from precise, functional ends – *Yele*, which opens the camp for food prior to hunting – to renewal of community humour, all the while drawing the eye back to sexual politics and solidarity. The *njanga* secret forest path, where same-sex groups of initiates withdraw to prepare for the arrival of their *mokondi*, is central to the gender fissioning that ritual requires (Lewis, 2002: 146). Here, while ostensibly preparing for the entree of the spirit, “understandings about men and women and their different powers and abilities in relation to society, spirits and the forest” (2002: 147) are worked through. So sharp is the disconnection of the sexes that were one sex to trespass on the other during this time “capital punishment could be justified” (Lewis, 2002: 147). In the mass of data on spirit performances throughout Central Africa, I view this as a fundamental point.

The teaching that occurs on the respective *njanga* paths, whether about hunting expertise or female erotic and procreative power is stressing a break, an almost

aggressive social motion tugging the sexes back not only into a focus on bodily power but on the ideology of separateness; the strength claimed by difference. It is at this point that we need to pay close attention to the issue of loyalty. What occurs subsequently – the extraordinary community synchronicity and euphoria into which the spirits step – comes out of this impressed sexual duality. Even in moments of “dense polyphony” (Tsuru, 1998: 62) and transcendence, a form is maintained which emphasises women and men, male and female. Thus:

Women lie across each other, legs resting on each other, shoulders touching, arms lying across their neighbours lap, melting into one another physically and acoustically...Certain women may begin to sing antiphonal duets in nasal voices that sound like seal barks...These women make reference to their hunger, or others hunger since *Malobe* opens the camp for meat...They may even go into trance and begin mystical conversations with the moon (women’s other husband)” (Lewis, 2002: 151).

Lewis (2002), like other writers notes the “journey” of each song from its appearance in individual dreams to its communal manifestation in large *eboka* celebrations. This has parallels with descriptions of Ju/hoan healing dances which are also often “found” in the dreams of individuals and brought into community performance. These dream songs are never the preserve of the individual through whom they arrive. While such guardians may retain responsibility for organising and initiating others into a dance, the dance and its healing properties is assumed by the community, in the dual but complimentary form of sex groups. No song or dance can be credited to the individual who first reveals it to the camp. Spirit dances are a potentially rich opportunity for the accumulation of political leverage. It is no coincidence then that the most individuals can claim is the finding of these; credit for the composition of such gifts lies with the spirits.

For Lewis (2002), it is “the opposition between personal autonomy and community” (2002: 171) that is the dynamic compelling almost all social interaction among Yaka. *Massana* then, stressing personal autonomy and community simultaneously, are a means of negotiating between the two possibilities always in tension. But this seems

too general an explanation for performances which consistently reiterate, through the medium of spirits, the simultaneous polarisation and parody of sex. Lewis's (2002) own vivid descriptions of the unfurling of the *mokondi* of *Ejengi* or *Ngoku* beg the question of whether the gender roles he refers to are being enhanced or created, and whether through the form of *mokondi massnana*, the complementarity of the sexes is being facilitated or uprooted. Recall Bell's (1992) reading of ritual - it is not simply a functional mechanism in the service of social solidarity and control. It also, importantly, "promotes the forces that have been traditionally thought to work against social solidarity and control" (Bell, 1992: 216).

Let me summarise some core aspects of spirit rituals throughout Central Africa.

Spirits may be representatives of a parallel community of the dead (ancestors) residing in the forest, or organic forest spirits. They are clearly distinguished in all cases from the spirits of game animals. It is they who are responsible for all the song and dance repertoires of forest hunter-gatherers. Some are too ancient to be traced, but many are recently acquired songs and these are invariably found either in deep forest, in dreams, or less frequently, during performances of the children's *mokondi massana "bolu"*. The terms given to spirit performances in most communities are synonymous with the terms for music, song, or dance, indicating a lack of distinction between these. There are no "conventional" religious rituals in Yaka, Baka or Efe society – collective song and dance is the focal point of communal life.

All initiations are collective events occurring within these dances, wherein groups of neophytes are absorbed into particular spirit associations. Songs and dances are considered "medicine" for the entire community; they maintain or restore community well-being and balance. Descriptions of such events by ethnographers focus on their aesthetic and sensory effects, the extraordinary climactic phases during which a discernable shift is made from the rhythm of duality expressed in utterance and gesture to a fleeting but sharp communal moment of merger or unity. The spirits themselves retain form and presence through unique dance and song styles, costume, voice and personality. (Lacking in the ethnography of the region, unfortunately, is a comprehensive description of women's *mokondi*).

COMMUNICATION AND PERFORMANCE

In Mbendjele communities, much of life happens through the medium of song and ritualised dance. Music is the common thread sewn through subsistence activities, production, learning, social politics and ritual. In the forest, where people rely more heavily on vocal communication, it is inevitable that the social emphasis will be on auditory rather than visual communication. But this is not enough to explain the continual re-weaving of life and relationship into song, and from song, into dance, documented for most African hunter-gatherers. Sawada (1990) describes the sensitivity of Efe hunter-gatherers to sound, where one person may begin their answer even as the first calls: “The interval...was so little that I sometimes wondered who uttered first” (Sawada, 1990: 166). He believes this high level of vocal kinesis is maintained in all Efe activities and reflects a general attention to synchrony writ large in ritual dance performances - *obe*. The focus during *obe* is on the process from solo and response, where one individual leads the singing, to “simultaneous utterance” when words disappear completely. “In the “dense polyphony” choral pattern of *uwara*, the distinction between a solo and response is lost, and they all utter non-verbal sounds heavily overlapping each other”. At the point that solo and response slips into dense polyphony, “the participants start dancing simultaneously” (ibid: 183). In this description the *technological* expertise of dancers is clear; one can almost see the body-instruments working synchronically and in precise patterns to achieve an extraordinary communal dissolution. At the moment the energy is densest, the spirits begin to cry out around the camp periphery. This then is work of the most serious and diligent kind; yet it is also the means by which social rapture is attained.

What does it mean to be personified in a world where one sings and dances many of the major lines of being, relationship, or conflict, and where daily life rings with the music of the collective? To embody the mobility of the fence-less? Sawada (1990) recounts a moment when, during “*kamara’s oberoche*”, the leading woman dancer whipped up such passionate frenzy that “all the participants broke the circle and marched round the camp” (Sawada, 1990: 184) after her. While Sawada elsewhere is cautious about applying the term “power” to such ritual contexts, and particularly to spirit manifestations within them, there is nevertheless a tangible increase in the human community itself during these moments. Mbendjele dances are essential consensus-producing bodies, in the absence of state authority. One of the reasons

they are continually performed, whether in micro or macro scale, is that this *kind* of negotiation – taking into account the multiple and deeply complex nature of “community” – requires continual work (Graeber, 2007). The imagining of other subject viewpoints - what Viveiros de Castro (2002) calls “seeing-as” - the interpretative labour which functions in place of structural violence, must be both vigilant and persuasive.

Lewis (2006) sees the vigour of performance as inseparable from the forest environment in which humans are implicated. In particular, he sees the form provided by polyphonic song with dance as the manifestation of a social voice designed to converse (and when the synchrony is exact, commune) with the forest itself. In an analysis reminiscent of Bird-David’s (1990) “giving environment”, he examines Mbendjele accounts of their relationship with the forest in order to explicate broader structures of sociality. In fact, his analysis shows up a clear relationship between subsistence - hunting in particular – human social politics, gendered ritual associations, forest spirits, and the forest itself as encompassing, multi-vocal organism. An explanation consistently given for the reason behind dances is that the forest “likes” these and in its pleasure, “opens” the camp for food. “How to keep the camp open” is the subject of an ongoing conversation within the community and between people and forest. “When people really want to please or charm the forest they turn their part of the conversation into a song, a song which involves their whole bodies, and mimics the forest back to itself. This can only be done by singing polyphonically and dancing” (Lewis, 2006: 18).

The spirits who arrive because of such performances do so in response to the synergistic harmony humans achieve, but they in turn enchant people enabling “the profound *communitas* they experience” (2006: 19). Lewis’s description of the full range of techniques used by Mbendjele during ritual performances evokes Weber’s “body as a complete instrument”: hand signs, clapping, singing, whistles, animal sounds, and ritualised dancing are all part of the “vocabulary” used by performers. This approach to language is characteristic of a general approach privileging inclusion and openness.

## DANCE AS COMMUNITY MEDICINE

I look in this section at the way the body expands not only into the larger flesh of a communal body, but into capacities and energies which present a considerable challenge to Western ontology. Such capacities need not be approached as obstacles to understanding; incorporation of them into our analyses may enliven debate about ritual hermeneutics and power. Richard Katz (1982), in his early research with the Ju/hoan in 1968, found that experienced healers shared certain personal characteristics such as a rich fantasy life, an ability to cope with unfamiliar visual images, and a propensity to emotional arousal: “All these qualities prepare a person to accept an enhanced state like *!aia*” (Katz, Bieseke, St. Denis, 1997: 26). *!Aia* itself is the trance-like experience achieved by healers during community healing dances. *N|om*, the spiritual energy or heat that builds in the bodies of healers is shared with those present as both medicine and a more diffuse spiritual well-being. Rifts in the community or conflicts between individuals are directly addressed during the healing dance, these being viewed as social malaises equivalent to individual afflictions.

*N|om* expands as it begins to “boil” in the stomachs of individual healers who distribute it throughout the dance circle, often through direct hands-on healing. “Boiling *n|om* is likened...to the sparks that break out into the dark night in all directions when the burning coals in a fire are stirred roughly with a stick” (Katz, Bieseke, St. Denis, 1997: 26). Ju/hoansi healers, like Yaka, carry on conversations and struggles with spirits of the dead, who arrive during these moments as emissaries of “the gods” to lure the sick out of the living community. A major part of the healing process is the ability to “see properly”: “You dance, dance, dance. Then *n|om* lifts you up in your belly and lifts you in your back, and you start to shiver. *N|om* makes you tremble, it’s hot. Your eyes are open but you don’t look around...because you see everything” (ibid: 109). The idioms surrounding the healing dance are visceral. Heat builds and expands in the stomach and spine, it rises up vibrating the arms and hands, sometimes exiting the top of the head. Healers as they draw sickness from the bodies of others experience intense abdominal pain externalised through loud moaning, crying, wailing and the characteristic *kowhedili* shriek (Katz, Bieseke, St. Denis, 1997). The breath rasps, the eyes become staring and blank, the legs shake violently as the healer coalesces and vision expands.

Interesting, given the parallels with the process of labour – intense abdominal and back pain, heat, uncontrollable trembling, the expulsion of pain through loud cries, a heightened state of consciousness – is Ju/hoan women’s concern that they should curb their *n|om* during their reproductive years. The energy and motion of *n|om* in the body is widely believed to endanger the health of babies, both *n|om* and children materialising out of activated and transformed bodily power. During *!aia* “the reality of the unseen dominates” precisely through its working on the body. The experience and sharing of *n|om*, “this primary force in the Ju/hoan universe” (1997: 18), is only available through the conduit of the human body. In a description remarkably similar to Lewis’s detailing of the Mbendjele equivalent “*ekila*”, Katz, Bieseke and St. Denis (1997) state that *n|om* has many referents, even the word itself carrying power. The use of the term alerts people, whatever its form or function, to the presence or activation of a particular medicinal potency related both to corporeal and unseen substances. A spiritual energy surpassing medicine, it is best understood in terms of its referents: “Things of power...herbal medicines, menstrual blood”, dance or ritual fire, lightening, particular songs, and the stomachs of healers all have *n|om* (Katz, Bieseke, St. Denis, 1997). Like *ekila*, *n|om* itself is invisible but manifests in specific bodies and moments, a quality inhering in life itself. “*N|om* is not personalised or personified. No-one can possess it exclusively nor control it completely” (ibid: 18). It is pure bodily experience which permits movement beyond the body, as healers employ intense physical sensation to flow out beyond individual skins.

Rene Devische (1993), in his analysis of Yaka healing dances in the Democratic Republic of Congo stresses that “trance is not an out of body experience; neither should it be seen as a loss of consciousness” (Devische, 1993: 262). Trance-dance, for the Yaka who routinely use it, entails the kind of profound somatic “heat” reported by Ju|’hoan healers. It is through the intermingling of rhythm, dance and “dense polyphony” that matter is attracted to matter, and the resulting collective energy measured and utilised. Jackson asks: “How can the word “I” be put in the plural? On what grounds can empathy, transference, or analogy bridge the gap between me and you” (Jackson, 1998:11)? Kuranko people, he points out, meet this question “by practicing social wisdom and cultivating copresence...“working together” and “moving as one”...In such a world, civility, etiquette, and emotions are

less matters of inward disposition than of interactive performance, and “we” replaces the discursive “I” (Jackson, 1998). Important for my argument here is Jackson’s view of the bodily solidarity evoked or revealed through ritual motion: “We understand others first not through cognition and intellectual interpretation but through recognition of reciprocal gestures, common metaphors, parallel images, and shared intentions...We are embodied social beings before we are anything else” (Jackson, 1998: 12).

The learning entailed in ritual is of a specific type, focused on the navigation of different relationships and affinities. Durkheim (2001[1912]) wrote that “the true function of religion is not to make us think, to enrich our knowledge...*but to make us act, to help us live*...Society can make its influence felt only if it is in action, and it is in action only if the individuals who compose it are assembled and act in common” (Durkheim, 2001[1912]: 311 Emphasis mine). Those concepts carried by communal rituals are physical creatures, live things nevertheless “set apart from all agitation”, unable to move on their own but held in the collective body to which they bring sense and social puissance. While the real, flesh and blood life of bodies are eternally in flux, their collective representation is stable: “A word contains a condensed version of a whole body of knowledge” (Durkheim, 2001[1912]: 330).

When people experience something impossible to convey in ordinary language, special, metaphorical speech styles are drawn upon (Hastrup, 1995). A compressed form of language, signifying *through* or *as* other items is employed. Experience is condensed into a single sign or series of signs which crystallise the corporeal unsayable. In this sense, “symbols” are live creatures, replete with the pulse of the bodies out of whom they were originally drawn. Economy and security are simultaneously achieved by setting onto the symbolic field those trickster elements of collective experience (particularly of collective ritual motion) otherwise potentially incommunicable. If we carry this into the imagistic realm, the spirits are both sign – polysemic entities intensely ambiguous and evasive of “logical” understanding – and breath. When the perfumes and whistles of *emboamboa*, *ejengi* or *ngoku* begin blowing in from the night forest, dispersing though the dense acoustic fabric held by the collective human body, something familiar is returning to the community. The costumes of leaves and cloths painstakingly arranged by initiates on their secret



*njanga* path should not deceive us into reading these as “mere symbolic correspondences” (Huizinga, 1950). The “man behind the mask” scenario is well known; what I aim for here is the mask behind the man; or rather, the spirit behind the body ritually transformed and readied for a dialogue involving energies and capacities potentially ambivalent to the human community.

Tensions and entities disruptive of human sociality, but for this very reason integral to it, are given expression during spirit rituals. Whether these are metaphorical and allusory or “real” is not the point. They are deeply involved in human relational life. Viveiros de Castro (2000) cautions against viewing the masks or other ritual clothing of Amerindian shamans as “mere disguises” or “fantasies” (Viveiros de Castro, 2000: 482). These are instruments, pieces of equipment, the meaning of which used in the correct ritual context is akin to donning a wet suit, rather than a carnival mask. Devische (1993) posits that Yaka spirit dance, viewed as an experiential whole, “embraces the body’s illuminations in dream and heightened sensory awareness: it is a sensing out and passionate celebration of the body as species, the ancestral body in each individual tapping the ancestral life source in rhythm and in the imaginary register” (Devische, 1993: 258). This emphasis on the bodily reaching towards, the visceral occupation of ancestral authority, is crucial, but we can follow it through to the intentionality of people who are clearly opening and being empowered by the body-symbolic though a deliberate (and I suggest, political) withdrawal into sexed coalitions.

Bieseke (1993), Rival (1997), Gow (1982) and Devische (1993), though working in diverse ethnographic contexts, each note a core structure within egalitarian communities that perennially circles sex and meat, hunting and childbirth, desire and hunger. It recurs so often, and in so many different guises, as to be almost invisible: everywhere and nowhere. I have privileged in this chapter the “spiritual” motion enacted by Yaka communities. But underlying this is the corporeally moving system of food items and marriage partners, kinship loyalties and procreative fluids, blood and semen, the exchange of hungers, desires, satisfactions. Those tensions sprung at the interstices of social relations, particularly tensions relating to fertility and consumption, are causally related to the rich and complex spirit life traced out in sensuous and lyric patterns. Devische (1993) writes:

Healing entails the “biological” interweaving of the various layers of body, group and world: the one *is* the other, in an alignment of becoming. It is a very concrete, fertile, and powerful endeavour through the libidinal and imaginary registers, the senses, the body, engaged in communal action. The crossing of boundaries...forms the basis of the healing method (Devische, 1993: 257).

The understanding of imagination I have been trying to work towards here is far from the condescending imaginary that stops at fantasy. Devische’s (1993) libidinal (erotic) and imaginary (spirit) registers are real and formidable forces, accessed through the synchronicity of bodies, and through the surrendering of bodies to the more diffuse but equally real matters of forest, dream, and playground. For Huizinga (1950): “The ritual act, or an important part of it, will always remain within the play category, but in this seeming subordination the recognition of its holiness is not lost...The hallowed spot is a playground” (Huizinga, 1950: 20).

There is a dialogue then unfolding on several levels simultaneously: Women with men, spirits with initiates, forest with humans. Having looked at one medium for the occurrence of the dialectic – song with dance, I want to briefly explore another, related point at which conversation manifests, equally linked to spirits and their power: Communal laughter. What is it that music with dance and collective laughter have in common? They are both means of maintaining elasticity and movement. Lewis (2002) reports that “how to keep the camp open” is a major Mbendjele preoccupation. This could be read metaphorically too: How to keep the door open, how to keep the pendulum swinging, how to prevent social rigidity. Fascinating about ritual is its ability as a form to contain symbolic conservatism within fluidity. It is a vehicle perpetually moving yet clasping as it moves the core items of worth to the community. How does a group of people prevent the almost magnetic pull of stasis, the damming of the flows which effectively break down the collective body into discrete bodies which are then vulnerable to control? “Keeping things open” is a general preoccupation of hunter-gatherers. But how things are kept open, and why things are kept open, is the fundamental question.

## ON THE MATTER OF PLAY

Alongside their attraction to women's polyphonic singing and erotic dance, spirits covet the power and rapture of human laughter, and incite the community to laugh loud and often. Challenging notions of play as something "light", set apart from work or religion and engaged in primarily by children, much of the community life of forest hunter-gatherers is about the social power of collective adult play, its ability to reach otherwise elusive realities and states. The fact that *mokondi* may be apprehended during children's massana such as *bolu* is evidence of this (Lewis, 2002). Johan Huizinga (1950) noted: "The apparently quite simple question of what play really is, leads us deep into the problem of the nature and origin of religious concepts" (Huizinga, 1950: 25). He argued strongly against the use of the term "symbolic correspondence" to describe the transformation effected by ritual play wherein the human dancer *becomes* animal or spirit.

The identity, the essential oneness between the two goes far deeper than the correspondence between a substance and its symbolic image. It is a mystic unity. The one has become the other...In play as we conceive it the distinction between belief and make-belief breaks down. The concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness (Huizinga, 1950: 25).

The visceral imagination or "seeing-as" of the trancer who *becomes* the lion, or the female *Yele* initiates who fly out into the forest before hunters, is a profoundly serious endeavour, although as always in hunter-gatherer society, one laced with laughter and ambiguity. So too when the spirits arrive in camp, and in the midst of the transformative moment, engage in a bawdy exchange with women singers. Imaginative play, laughter, and the transformative are part of the same complex, an extreme perceptual fluidity within the formal dialectic of duality. Johnson (1987) offers a perspective on imagination closer to that used by Viviero de Castro (2000) for Amazonian shamans than the conventional Kantian view of imagination as a creative faculty largely irrelevant to logic. For Kenrick (2002) too, everything depends on the status we give the imagination. "If we consider the imagination from a Cartesian perspective, as obscuring our view of the hard facts of life, then the most it may achieve is a status as craftsmanship or art. If the imagination is experienced as

centrally important, then it may be a way of understanding, mediating and experiencing the world” (Kenrick, 2002: 201).

But just as we begin to come to terms with the physicality of imagination, we find a subsequent, more radical door blows open: That through profound knowledge of and attention to one body, other bodies (and other kinds of body) may be experienced. It is this Ju|’hoan healers describe in their odd, transfixed state prior to drawing the sickness out of others, to embarking on shamanic journeys, or to “becoming” the lion. It is this women anticipate when in *Yele* trance they leave behind their corporeal selves, rocking in the dark of camp, and move out through the forest to find game (Lewis, 2002). We cannot claim to respect the knowledge of such peoples by attending to the fluency of their social structure and religious thought, without giving credence to the expressed fluidity of their bodily experiences. In such a reading of imagination, to know is as much to see-as, as to see *that*. “The play mood is labile in its very nature” (Huizinga, 1950: 21). Laughter – collective, ritualised laughter – performs the same function as spirit dance and ritual chant: it destabilises and opens the body. Here, what is stressed is the ability of the body to remain “open”; capable of reorienting its affinities, of pluralizing its reproductive, creative energy.

Overing (2000), discussing the nature of the ludic in Piaroa cosmology and everyday life, claims most theorists have neglected laughter because of their own lack of a sense of humour, and declares that analyses of Amazonian myth suffer from “the illness of gravitas” (Overing, 2000: 65). Piaroa myths “centre on the risible, the erotic and the obscene...the scatological and hilarious side of godly behaviour”. Like women’s *Ngoku* lyrics, “their strongest obscenities and most colourful dirty words are found in the sacred language of chants” (Overing, 2000: 65). Turner (1969) found this in Ndembu ritual life, and his analysis was later verified and echoed by his wife Edith (1987). Crucially, “laughter, in an extraordinary Christian physiology, *was understood to have a dangerous relation to the body*” (Overing, 2000: 66). Interesting to contemplate, given the banishing of the bawdy, the slap-stick, the burlesque from Christian religion, is the predominance of precisely these qualities in hunter-gatherer religious life and thought. Hunters too recognise the dangerous power of laughter if not correctly managed. But this awareness does not reject laughter, on the contrary, it has resulted in sophisticated social tools for the collective

use and deployment of humour. Conviviality (or Eros) is not a “natural” state that occurs unproblematically and must simply be released from the confines of gravitas; it is a carefully rendered communal state requiring work and attention to boundary. “Conviviality is an ethical value intrinsic to Piaroa sociality, but it also has its dangers...*Jokes have power*” (Overing, 2000: 70 *Emphasis mine*). Laughter brings things to life, occasions surprises, injects process and breath into the social landscape. In this sense, the laughter roused through mimicry, song and dance, or trickster spirits, is far from uncontrolled.

## CONCLUSION

Strathern (1988) notes in the final pages of *The Gender of the Gift* that what gives men purchase over individual women’s bodies, in a field defined by interacting agents, is their ability to displace all other relationships in favour of same-sex (ritual) collectives: “The plural nature of their collective ties” is what enables men to dominate “by taking advantage of the men at their back” (Strathern, 1988: 334). Similarly, it could be said that women, in drawing on a plurality of influential others to animate camp politics, are emphasising the multiplex nature of *their* networks. In this case we might say they are taking advantage not only of the women, but of the spirits at their back. This is an alternative reading to the one conventionally given, where spirits “belong” to male cults and are evoked to sanction male power. Looking at these things as they move across the social landscape provides a different perspective than if we imagine them as static creatures. A focus on the dialogic aspect of spirits with humans shows up entities who are indeed “male” but whose business is often with women.

Moreover, this business emphasises the kinaesthetic power of collective female song and dance. Turner (1982) examining the etymology of “play” comes up with “pleyan” – “to dance” or “plega” – “a fight, a battle” (Turner, 1982: 33). He then goes on to refer to the idea of “a danced out or ritualised fight” (1982: 33). In the previous chapter, the gendered aspect of this “play-fight” was highlighted. Here, I have incorporated other agencies and bodily capacities, equally influential in the conversation. Lewis (2006) notes that women’s laughter in such contexts is equivalent to a kind of “mobbing behaviour” that combines mimicry, comedy and

solidarity to “co-reconstruct the moral universe of society” (Lewis, 2006: 10). It is interesting to look at Bergson’s (1911) writing on the social power of laughter, which “always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers” (Bergson, 1911: 6). Musing on the nature of what is funny to the imagination of the in-group, Bergson (1911) settled on the “mechanical inelasticity” of the comic: “Laughter...softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical elasticity...This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective” (Bergson, 1911: 20 – 21).

When Mbendjele, Baka or Yaka women move as a social force, coalescing in that movement, pulling in the tentacles of agency to snap back into one body, (a body which later will assert its integrity though mixing sex and hunger under a flag of blood), they are also in that movement working the plane of laughter on the spectre of social rigidity, stasis, gravitas. The spirits, though dominated (with important exceptions) by men’s associations and clearly providing a male perspective on power, are centrally involved in this play. They are implicated in networks of relationship and resistance which criss-cross the social landscape. In Yaka healing cults, they liaise between forest and human worlds, placating troubled kinship/conjugal relationships, interceding between fertility and hunting, ultimately realigning bodies with cosmos. Crystallising out of the forest or the world of dreams, they mediate between the sex groups and between the human and more-than-human world. They converse directly with women as a song-group, and are willing to enter camp only when summonsed by women’s music and erotic dance. Like the Khoisan trickster, “the more you learn...the more puzzling [they] become (Schmidt, quoted in Guenther, 1999: 97).

I return, as a closing thought, to Sahlin’s (1996) “history of sadness”, the isolation and lack which he argues haunts the Western philosophical tradition. When we step back from the literature on spirits among Central African hunter-gatherers, what we see is society dilating out beyond the domain of the human. Lewis (2002), Sawada (1990) and Tsuru (1998) demonstrate that *mokondi*, *tore* or *me* lie at the heart of the social economy. Knight’s (1991) story, mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, made visible the intra-sexual and kin networks integral to women’s ability to assert collective inviolability. But in fact, as is made explicit in local cosmological and

religious testimony, there is a wider kinship network flowing across and beyond the Yaka, Baka or Efe camp. When women, in ritual trance, commence their dialogue with the moon, they are serenading their “other” husband. When Turnbull’s (1969) young assistant stepped out into the moonlit forest to “make love” to it, he danced. Mbendjele women mirror the polyphony of the forest back to it in song, and the forest responds by keeping camp open. When *ejengi* spun into camp on our first night at Mboule, Dsenga wanted us to understand what he understood: That this *was* the forest. The clown of *emboamboa*, the enchantress of *ngoku* – for forest hunter-gatherers these are as much a part of the daily social vista as game animals, or *bilo*, both of whom they are also in perennial conversation with. The social universe Central African hunter-gatherers have access to is rich and fluid. This is in itself something that requires further examination. But there is an unavoidable politics circling such sociality, one that reminds the Western imagination of alternatives to its own exclusivity and confinement. Jackson (1998) argues that we are manifest through relationship with others. But for hunters it seems that those “others” may just as reasonably be aspects of the natural environment, animal others, or spirits. The social world does not stop at the camp’s edge.

Think now of the melancholy and anxiety of Sahlins (1996) Western subject, “trapped” in the riddle and strain of the mono-social world. The sense of compression or diminishment inherent in human alterity to a larger, multi-dimensional society. There are profound ontological consequences in the cutting off of all that movement, relationship, and conversation evident in the ethnographic record on current and recent hunting communities. Of course, as Willis (1999) shows, the ideology of lack is only one, if influential, possibility: There is increasing consensus from the field of infant psychology that even newborns demonstrate “an innate sense of the self-other relation, a sense based in a similarly innate concept of body-schema” (Willis, 1999: 190). Willis uses this suggestion alongside his ethnographic experience of Lunghu spirit healing to propose “the capacity of the human self to expand beyond the confines of the social to embrace para-social and para-human otherness. It’s as if the innate – and thus universal – impulsion in the human organism to identify situationally with the other not only enables that organism to engage in its adult work of creating and maintaining intersubjective reality; the same innate impulsion remains as a potential ability to reach experientially

beyond the social and human” (Willis, 1999: 191). The question I posed at the beginning of this chapter – what if the spirits are real? – was part of an attempt to engage these agencies as real and powerful players in Mbendjele social and inter-sexual dynamics. The politics of their involvement in human corporeal dilemmas and dramas are not insignificant. Whatever else they signify, and attention to local practices and accounts suggest they are not *confined* to human meaning, as embodiments of motion, they animate and colour the conversation between female and male ritual coalitions, bringing aesthetic and existential increase to the dialectic.



*FIFTH INTERLUDE:*

*“Mbendjele women are the boss” and other misconceptions*

Time meanders past now at an ever more leisurely pace. During the day, most of our energy is concentrated on the basic requirements of hygiene: Collecting water, filtering it, washing pots, disinfecting the miniscule bites that pepper our arms and legs, sweeping the house and tent. In this perpetual progression of small tasks, we find ourselves slowing into the cadence of camp life. In the evenings, after people return from the forest or village, a small assembly forms around our door where words are proffered and cigarettes distributed. Difficult as it is to sustain this exposed existence, it's unavoidable in the process of being integrated into the community. The oft-cited public/private dichotomy that characterises most other societies has little meaning here, unless applied to ritual.

The “domestic”, or the “personal”, is played out continuously through the community and its social spaces. Reading this is one thing; living it is another. At any given moment, day or night, its possible somebody may wander up to our door and peer in. On one occasion, when a sudden downpour strikes, we emerge from our tent (pitched inside the house) to find a large crowd sitting companionably on our floor. When there's a domestic grievance to be aired, this invariably occurs out in the centre of camp where the orator, usually female, will parade up and down gesturing furiously, repeating the same staccato phrases over and over while other women contribute what amount to verbal nods – a range of ideophones and expletives that bolster the resonance and music of the speaker. Meanwhile, various interlocutors or humiliated men bawl loudly. During these eruptions, the noise and confusion seems to be an integral part of the process. They're usually followed by a period of calm, as though the tension has been successfully placated. Aside from the daily broadcasts of the “town-crier”, the easy unravelling of existence is punctuated by these small disputes and encounters.

One old lady erupts almost daily into a loud, aggrieved *djoki*, which worried me at first. I was convinced she found our presence objectionable. Now she's becoming as

reassuring as the “town-crier”, her neighbours often obliging her by becoming involved in the theatrics. Two days ago Germano spontaneously presented Dsenga with a carton of cigarettes as they sat together at Dsenga’s door. Almost from nowhere two women, swiftly joined by this elderly orator, descended on both men, their voices flying up in indignation. “*Bo.kos.e*”! – “*Cheat*”! I heard, amid a stream of abuse. We’re being carefully observed to ensure our friendship with our neighbours not assume a nepotistic dimension. Once every few days, Essango or “*le juge*” materialises outside our house and takes up a position from which he peers intently in. He’s a solitary soul, whom I suspect is an inveterate drinker. The air around him tastes of palm wine. And yet he seems particularly respected by the other men. He has always been included in any meetings with or about us. When I return his gaze, he nods curtly, then turns away.

But the main and consistent entertainment is the almost nightly singing of the young women in camp. On most occasions this lacks the formality or choreography of named dances such as *Ejengi* or *Elande*. By nightfall most nights, a small gaggle of girls and women gather somewhere along the central camp space, some lounging on the earth, others standing and clapping. After half an hour, the women may drift apart. On those nights a more formal dance is being prepared, it’s immediately evident in the women’s physical command of space. Those formal dances I’ve observed, with the exclusion of *Ejengi*, have begun with women banding together to clear and monopolise the centre of camp.

The contrast of camp with village life grows clearer each day. Because we’re obliged to walk to Bangui daily for lunch, I’m able to continue to compare the two communities. Alain’s first and eldest wife has thawed somewhat and we exchange a few words most days. She has learned silence in her husband’s presence, but continually throws him resentful glances. One day, leaning in the door, she tells me she wants to leave him, return to her family down river in another village. The next afternoon, we arrive to find her leaving with a battered holdall. “*Je suis toujours la derniere*” – “*I’m always last*” she sighs, glaring at the third and youngest of her co-wives. She has decided to shock Alain into appreciation by abandoning him, but is too afraid to do so with him present. She has to be gone before he returns from a trip



**Figure 20: Mbendjele boys and adolescents pose proudly**

to Makao. Even the face of her rival, the Chief's youngest wife, is shuttered. She too is frequently chastised by the Chief, and has the comportment of a wary child.

But then this - the domestic space of the Chief – is a microcosm of the village. And we've come to realise that in contrast to Dsenga, who at best represents a respected spokesperson, Alain rules by fear. He's a nervous, inexperienced leader whose authority has an underline of violence. Juxtaposed with the community at Mboule, the power of force is evident against the power of humour and respect. Polygamy is the norm here and most Yambe men have more than one wife. Strikingly, I've never observed a village man holding an infant. While this could be due to less time spent here, or to lack of access to houses other than the Chief's, Mbendjele men and boys are routinely seen cradling infants. On returning from the forest or village in the evening, men are as eager as women to hold and play with babies, and teenage boys are as happy as girls to don the cloth slings used for transporting them. Barry Hewlett, an ethnographer who spent considerable time studying Yaka father-infant relationships concluded that fathers in Yaka society are in contact with their children five times as much as any other known fathers. Unlike *bilo*, Yaka fathers sleep

alongside their children at night, taking responsibility for soothing or cradling small infants. Many ethnographers of Pygmy communities have noted that while the division of labour is widespread and relevant, its lack of power to privilege one sex or the other is in the flexibility with which roles are assumed and relinquished. Late at night, when the babies fret next door, it's invariably Dsenga we hear beating a small drum and singing softly, lulling them back into sleep.

The contrast between the communities was demonstrated by a small episode yesterday. We decided it was time to make a formal gift to both communities, primarily to forestall the continual demands from Bangui. Germano gave Essou and Dsenga a large sack of salt, some tins of tomatoes, a bag of boiled sweets for the children, bolts of cloth for the women, two cartons of cigarettes, and a few highly prized machetes. Instantly both men began bellowing excitedly and a large group of men and women were assembled. Each man received a handful of cigarettes, and each woman a small, carefully measured parcel of salt and tomatoes. The men fell into intense discussion about the machetes while the women began to allocate cloth and round up their children. I immediately regretted the sweets when it became clear the children were terrified by this sudden formality. Some were carried screaming to the sack of sweets by parents who didn't want their child to miss out. I later learned that the only other occasion on which they're lined up like this is to receive vaccinations. But the point was that nothing was to be withheld from the community. Although Dsenga took responsibility for distribution, every adult was involved in the process, pointing out a parcel of salt needed here, a few too many tomatoes there, till everything had been fairly distributed. It all assumed a carnival-like atmosphere, accentuated when Germano produced a forgotten bottle of bubbles. Astonished, Dsenga forgot his customary poise, seized the bottle, and began puffing frantically. As bubbles materialised, everyone clapped and cheered. Later, we carried an identical sack to Bangui and handed it to Alain under the village pavilion, in full view of the village. He accepted it nonchalantly, and left it lying at his feet unopened. When we went to his house, he carried it under one arm and deposited it wordlessly in the back room. Fabrice tells us he's sold the cloth, salt and machetes.

I'm trying to clarify my impressions about the two communities, and about Mboule in particular when Fabrice, almost on cue, decides to lecture me on the similarities

between white women and Mbendjele women. Our relationship with him has been deteriorating over the weeks, to the point where a whole day may pass without us seeing him. We haven't yet formalised a termination of contract with him simply because he represents our last link to Pokola. But our acceptance at Mboule has hinged on our disconnection from Fabrice. While we sit at the river this evening, he and a few other young Yambe men smoking, me soaping clothes, he expresses mock surprise that I'm washing at all. "*Ou est Germano*"? he asks. "*Il n'est pas le nettoyage pour vous*"? I shrug and continue scrubbing the knees of some trousers. "*You European women*", he muses, "*are like Mbendjele women – you're the boss*". His voice tells me this is not a compliment. "*Mbendjele women*", he says, "*do what they want. Their husbands are afraid of them. White women are the same*". I keep scrubbing, aware my silence is riling him. "*Well*", he sighs, "*we men know how to treat our women. If she says too much, a good beating calms her down*".

His audience sniggers and I finish washing, parcel the wet trousers in a plastic bag, and leave. The suggested violence in his monologue leaves me nervous. During our first days in Bangui, on our early morning excursions on the river, there was a humour and camaraderie between us that has since soured and evaporated. This is due partially to his explicit distancing of himself from us and the Mbendjele, and partly to our growing distrust of him. It occurs to me that we employed Fabrice to help us navigate and discern an already difficult situation. That he himself has come to represent a threat seems absurd. That evening, we tell him his "job" will finish in another week. I can't continue to subject the community to his almost daily visitations. Although I trust his linguistic abilities, I no longer trust the accuracy or honesty of his interpretations.

The knowledge we'll be alone as of next week prompts me to try out our satellite phone, the most expensive piece of equipment I bought and the most necessary. We're at least a few days walk from the nearest outpost with a phone, two or three weeks walk from Pokola. I want to let Philippe Auzel know about our change of circumstances, and arrange a pick-up for more supplies. Almost immediately, the battery light begins to flash ominously. We'd used the phone in Pokola, and Germano charged it prior to leaving for the forest. Now, for reasons neither of us can fathom as we fiddle with the handset in the beating sun, it's flat. Panic balloons in

me. This means we have no way of contacting anyone beyond Bangui, nor of leaving suddenly should we need to. Fabrice arrives while we're staring uncomprehendingly at the useless handset. While Germano and I wonder what to do, he suggests travelling to Makao, where there's a WCS base that may have a phone charger. We look at him, stricken – Makao is three days by canoe, and the local ethnic group there are hostile. Moreover, we can't abandon all our other equipment here, and to pack up everything we own and carry it up river would be absurd, not to mention unsafe. Fabrice proposes that he take the phone, charge it, and bring it back to us. This plan is obviously flawed, the phone being worth twice what we'll pay Fabrice next week. But there's no satisfactory alternative. He leaves an hour later, with cfa 10,000 and our state of the art phone dangling across his chest.

His leaving, and our unexpected incarceration in the forest, forces another issue to the surface. That evening I'm faint with nausea, and for the first time Germano and I drop the usual suspects of food poisoning or malaria and broach the possibility of pregnancy. The words of the child in my dream are plaguing me as an absolution. I'm growing weaker each day, unable to face protein because of the nausea, and surviving on a twice daily diet of rice. We set out our limited options: Wait for Fabrice to return and then arrange a temporary return to Pokola for a pregnancy test; or remain at Mboule, and hope I can stay well enough to continue working, even if only for another six months. Every day at Mboule has delivered new insights – we calculate that even another few months might give me the grounding from which to write later. But we both know what the second choice means. It's unlikely my body will be able to sustain a pregnancy under these conditions. We calculate what we've spent so far in order to be here, not only the research money expended but the loan Germano took in order to accompany me. We trace the long, difficult journey from Scotland to Mboule, the points at which we could have turned back, the challenges surmounted. We talk about the people in camp – the good fortune of having been welcomed by such a vibrant community. Then we discuss my dream, as though the child were here too, interceding with its own will and hope. In the end, against the grain of ambition, we decide to leave.

We wake at 3 a.m. with a woman inside our house crying – “*njauku! njauku!*” as she races around the tent with a burning stick. There are a few seconds of bewilderment

while we stare from the unzipped tent at her pivoting figure. Then we look down. The floor of our house seems to be quivering, the earth itself trembling and alive. Germano shrieks – “*Formiche*”! – and is out of the tent in a second, as more women and men with blazing torches pour in, smashing their weapons together close to the back wall of the house to lay down a carpet of burning embers. The floor of the tent is filling with ants as I struggle out and race for the door, but even here, the entire central clearing is awash with billions of tiny bodies. It takes over an hour to deflect the ants from our house and those adjoining it, but slowly the river of insects redirects itself and moves on. Not before I notice, however, one of the women lift a pot half full of rice from the floor of our house and remove it into the darkness of the forest.

We’ve been beset with ants so many times in the forest, and have seen them throng around a dwelling in which palm nuts were being prepared. Our mantra had become: Wash everything. Yet the people who’ve come to our rescue are not only unperturbed, but seem smitten with festival mood. Benika and Saape are mimicking with great glee my mincing escape from the house, and eyeing Germano, who’s an odd spectacle in underpants and sandals. I sit down alone beside the fire used to fight off the ants. Dsenga has produced a filthy plastic water bottle filled with cloudy liquid – *chamba* - which he and Germano are taking turns to slug from merrily. Germano, who’s acquired the habit of smoking since our move to Mboule, is puffing on a local brand cigarette and extending the pack magnanimously to the other men. Short in stature and darkened by the sun, in the firelight he could be a Mbendjele man. Out far beyond the domain of camp, the lamps of fireflies flicker in absolute blackness.

One morning a few days later, we wake early with the babies crying next door. The town-crier begins to deliver his loud, melodramatic speech, full of loaded pauses and repetitions, and people hurl replies from all over camp. In the grey-blue first light, I make porridge, the only salve for my continual queasiness, then rinse out the pots in the dirt of the house. The agreement made with Dsenga when Kibino was with us hasn’t materialised, and I’m longing for some more functional kitchen arrangement. Outside, in the traffic of people passing en route to the forest or kindling fires, I notice everyone is wearing the same arc of red paste across their forehead.



Yesterday, the twin girls next door were unusually fractious, and Mgonye painted her face with a



**Figure 21: Mgonye and Saape with sick babies**

crescent of white lime dots. Today, she also wears a crimson arc across her forehead. She settles herself outside her door now with Saape, each of them cradling a baby as a steady stream of people pass. Mgonye has mixed a big vat of red paste and as people pass – from toddlers to the oldest women – they crouch in front of her, and she dips her thumb in the paste and marks them. Her tiny daughters too wear the red paint, in miniature bows above their brows. *Mongole* paste is used in a variety of contexts to signal danger, either to the individual or emanating from them, such as birth, bereavement, initiation, or illness. Mgonye, always so full of life and laughter, is stony faced. I want to sit with her, but am afraid to impose myself, suddenly worried for these precious girls. A group of older women have gathered around the two mothers and sing for a while – a slow, pensive song joined by a single drum beat. Dsenga passes with a large group of adult men, and bedecked with red paint they file out of camp into the forest. They leave solemnly, without the usual smiles and fanfare.



Early in the afternoon, an elderly man and woman I don't recognise walk down slowly from the farthest part of camp. They're an arresting pair, similar in appearance and expression. Halting in front of the babies, they begin to speak softly, one then the other, their voices urgent. They speak as though to an adult - reasoning, remonstrating. The girls are limp and sleepy, and Mgonye's face is expressionless. Casting round for some way to register concern, I remember the tiny, coloured bracelets I bought in the marketplace at Pokola. Inside our house, I separate them out into two sets of three. I hold them a while in the palm of my hand, remembering my grandmother and her various "cures" or healing charms. I've struggled to think of these as any more than cultural trinkets. Now, I find myself willing her into these minute beads. When I hand them to Mgonye, she swings her head to notice me like a woman in a dream. Moonga comes to sit with me in our customary companionable silence, and I manage to gesture a question about the babies. She replies – "*bamwasa*", then "*mokoli mapassa*", and rubs her stomach, grimacing to show pain. Although I have a sizeable medical kit, inexperience warns me away from attempting to use it. While we sit, Ejembo - a boy of nine or ten - walks past with one of the girls in a sling, cupping her against his chest and crooning to her. Everyone is now decorated with the same vermillion paste as the babies, as though a rope were being woven from them to and through all other bodies in camp. Those better able for it are sharing the burden of their sickness. The community itself is holding on to them.

Late that night Moonga returns to sit with me at our door, along with a cluster of children. The children have become emboldened now by our continual presence, and frequently arrive in small groups simply to sit near us clasping each others arms and giggling shyly. It is they who have become our language teachers, calling out words in response to my "*engende bo*"? or responding excitedly to terms read from my dictionary. As this goes on, I become aware of a chorus of women's voices singing far out in the forest. This is curious: I've never seen women venture into the forest after dark. Yet somewhere to the West of camp, a choir is singing. I look a question at Moonga, who's watching me. "*Ngoku*" she simply says. The singing fades out for a few minutes, then rises rapidly again nearer and stronger. As we listen, it gets closer and I find myself leaning forward in anticipation.

Then I see them. Closing in at great speed from the darkness, a line of young women charges with arms linked, singing now in full flow. They've tied their breasts with twine in the fashion of older women to lengthen and flatten them, and most wear



**Figure 22: Mgonye marks camp members with red mongole paste**

strips of coloured beads. With raffia skirts crackling, they descend on the centre of camp, knocking indignant children out of the way. Clapping, squealing, lashing out

mercilessly at younger male spectators, they race up and down the camp in a goose-stepping motion. Older men retreat back into their doorways, grumbling and scolding. The songs sung during *Ngoku* – women's most important *mokondi massana* - are detailed by Jerome Lewis as particularly ribald, dwelling on such themes as sexual prowess and desire, reproductive superiority, and general scorn for the genitalia of their men-folk. But this public aspect of *Ngoku* is only one. There's a private sequence which occurs in the forest, solely for initiated women and girls.

Eventually, the charging women crumple en masse in a circle on the ground outside Mgonye's house. Joined by older women who've been singing vigorously during the performance, they sprawl over each other in a single organism whose limbs tangle and knit, while their song softens and peters out. Then, they are simply a group of girls chattering on the earth, and I'm struck by a sense of anti-climax. Did the main part of this dance occur away from us, in the forest? Or has the occasion of the baby's illness muted what might have been a longer performance? Moonga has headed back up camp, and I go to bed baffled. In the early hours of that morning, Germano is woken by the sound of a large animal on the lane outside our shelter. He hears a kind of growling, laboured breath and the slow padding of feet. It pauses outside our door. There is a low snarling that terrifies him. Convinced movement is dangerous, he won't turn his head to look up out of the tent net. After a few seconds it moves off again.

The next morning while Germano goes to collect water, I find Mgonye washing one of the babies in a warmed broth of water and leaves. While the infant howls, she lathers her carefully with mashed leaves, serene despite the child's cries. It's clear there's been a significant change overnight. The second baby feeds contentedly on Saape's breast. When I approach with my camera, Mgonye smiles broadly up at me. The red paste of yesterday is gone, both from Mgonye and from all those passing out of camp for the forest. There's been no word from Fabrice after five days, and we've resigned ourselves to his loss along with our phone. Early this morning, we decided to involve Simone, a Yambe man who once helped Philippe while he worked in this area. Simone lives on the periphery of Bangui, but is on poor terms with Alain and has become somewhat isolated because of this. From our past conversations with him, we know him to be sympathetic to the Mbendjele.

He arrives now having received a message from us. We explain our situation and he's equally pessimistic about Fabrice's return. Among us, we hatch a plan to send two



**Figure 23: Germano and Dsenga relaxing without words**

men to Loundougou, three days walk from here, where there's a tiny C.I.B logging outpost with a phone. We'll give the messengers a note explaining our situation, and giving Philippe a date for a rendezvous on the road side. A Yambe man who speaks French will be accompanied by an Mbendjele guide. By now, although I continue to rise and wash each morning, I'm incapacitated not only by nausea but by an overwhelming physical inertia. The time left in which I'll be capable of the day-long trek to the road is shrinking. Added to this, we're on our last few days supply of rice. I think about Fabrice and his disappearance – how could we have been so philosophical about his departure?

It's our last night at Mboule. We've managed to inform the people of our immanent departure through Simone, a far more adept interpreter than Fabrice as it turns out. This was difficult, as I can't confirm I'm pregnant, nor give people a clear message

about returning. In Mbendjele, there's no word or phrase to describe time beyond "tomorrow". And we won't be back tomorrow. I tell them instead we have to travel out to see a doctor in Pokola, and will try to come back soon. The women ask me to bring salt, soap, cloth, and the much discussed and coveted bras. Germano leaves his drawing pad, pencils and crayons to Makanja. As evening approaches, a large crowd of people, including the usually reclusive "judge" gathers round our house.

Sitting on a low wooden stool at the fringe of the melee, Essango observes us. He gets up abruptly and strides forwards. He grabs both my hands and fixes his gaze on me without flinching. After a few seconds, he nods. Then he drops my hands, turns, and leaves the group and the fire. I stare after him. What if we can't get back here? I look at the people around us. The children, all of whom are now familiar, a few of whose names we've learned, hover shyly at our door. Magebo, Ejembo, Lika – the sweet-faced age mates, boys of no more than ten who cradle infants in hip slings as easily as they troop out of camp with the hunters. Benika - the willowy young wife and mother with the poise of an elder. Moonga, as always, is beside me. In these last weeks we've never gone beyond the most basic communication, even with Fabrice present. No doubt she's done a more thorough job of observing me than vice versa. Even now she chatters away happily while watching me with dark, razor sharp eyes. Germano is silent. He and Dsenga sit quietly together by the fire at our door, smoking. I remember some gaudy plastic earrings I bought in Pokola, and bring them out as a gift for Moonga. While she exclaims delightedly and shows them off to the others, I find another bag, filled with strings of coloured beads. I've kept these, hoping to distribute them slowly over our time here. Now, we all lean in over the sack, fingering and selecting beads, holding them up to the firelight.

At 5 a.m. the next morning, we stand in the centre of camp surrounded by bags and people. Our five Mbendjele guides distribute our cargo among themselves, and Germano struggles into his hefty rucksack. The sky is a crisp, cloudless azure blue. As we move off towards Bangui, people run down from the edges of camp to seize our hands. We call – "*buse amodwa*"! – "*we go*"! - and Dsenga laughs, having taught us this small courtesy. A few of the women rush forward to embrace us as we leave, but the rest - Saape, Benika, Mambengo – women who've spent the last month sitting beside me in the dust of camp - are withdrawn. Dsenga follows us to Bangui,



walking alongside Germano in silence. As we arrive at Alain's house, a familiar figure materialises from the interior – Fabrice. We stare at this apparition as he strides towards us clutching our phone, already issuing a salvo of excuses and accusations. This is superseded by demands that we pay him before leaving.



**Figure 24: Our neighbours watch us leave Mboule**

Expressionless, Germano counts out the agreed 80,000.00 cfa, then says a curt goodbye. As we turn to leave, Fabrice grabs my shoulder. “*Vous me contacter si vous revenez*” he nods? I wave him off, weary and aware his part in our leaving is peripheral. I tell him I need to see a doctor and reiterate that we won’t need him again. I thank him. As we step back into the forest, onto the slender red trail that will eventually meet the road to Loundoungou, we turn to see Fabrice and Alain standing shoulder to shoulder and farther to the right, Dsenga with Essou and Sanga. None of the women at Mboule left camp with us. We’ve been walking for over an hour when I clarify a vague sense of having left something behind – Moonga. My perpetual companion this last month. “*The mother of all women*”.

## CLOSING

The last light of evening evaporates on the steps of the C.I.B offices in the compound at Pokola. Olivier Desmet stands with a few C.I.B contractors discussing our predicament. After a nine hour trek through the Likouala forest, my body has slumped into an all-encompassing exhaustion. I try to stand up to join the conversation but flop back down again, defeated. Then we're back in the van, rattling round to the C.I.B mess where we must wait for keys to our room at Marien Ngombe. Late that night we arrive to a supper of boiled fish and cassava leaves with Fanta Orange. In our tiny room, once so frugal, I lie on the bed to rest before showering, and wake fourteen hours later in forest-encrusted clothes. The heat of day has seeped into the room, and voices spiral up from the river outside. There's the fragment of a dream still in my mind: Mgonye and I, cooking something in a rusted pot at her door. She reaches across to pick up a spoon and her arm is sprinkled with freckles – my arm. Germano returns with papayas, bananas, and a pregnancy test, and immediately it flares up positive. I sit at the window for a long time, arms folded across my abdomen, watching egrets step through reed grass on the river.

The next day, we sit with Dr. Antoine in his consulting room at Pokola hospital. He's just confirmed a two month old pregnancy with a scan, but my blood pressure is *"dangerously"* low. He's writing out a prescription for some tablets that will help raise it, telling me I must rest for a few days before moving. A thread of ants winds up the wall behind him and disappears into a crack in the ceiling. *"Then what?"* I ask. *"Can we go back to the forest?"* He stops writing and stares at me. He massages his temple with two fingers. *"That depends"*, he says *"on whether you're interested in keeping this baby"*. A flicker of compassion crosses his face. *"Go home"* he urges. *"If it's a strong baby it will come. If not, you'll come back; start again"*. My anxiety about not being able to return is irrelevant. I speak through a veil of privilege. This man is dealing every day with loss and the ravages of illness. The arrival of a baby to a healthy European woman is not cause for concern.

We make the phone call to Philippe asking him to book us onto the next flight for Brazzaville, and then enter a long reverie of waiting. Time dilates into one eternal

moment in the room at Marien Ngombe – the wooden ceiling being slowly devoured by lice, the jaded pink and yellow curtains, the sentinels of the water bottles lined along the walls. Our house at Mboule will be in darkness again, retrieved by the spiders and the scrawny cockerel. We vacillate continually between disappointment and delight at the newly confirmed arrival. We wonder at those words plucked out of the air at Mboule: “*Do you want me or not*”? Ultimately, there is no direction other than “*Yes*”. On the 24<sup>th</sup> July, almost four months after we set out, we step back on a plane for Europe.



## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

*Many lives reside in us: Many past lives, many future lives. If you listen carefully,  
the air is full of laughter.*

Ben Okri

“Symbols” are live creatures. What I have been building throughout the previous four chapters is an appeal for expanding our understanding of how it is that hunter-gatherers use the imaginative language of biology, and therefore, how we might begin to weigh this against a long history of Western philosophical and epistemological silencing. “The hope here, then, is for something more comprehensive than simply demonstrating the inapplicability of this or that particular Western concept...Our own metaphors reflect a deeply rooted metaphysics with manifestations that surface in all kinds of analyses. The question is how to displace them most effectively” (Strathern, 1988: 12). Following the literature on hunting and gathering peoples, from Central Africa and beyond, means paying attention to bodily conversations, played out continuously in dance, ritual gesture, polyphonic song style, and the sparse, guttural lyrics which weave through all of these, iteratively flagging the power of shared blood, of withheld sex, of potent procreative fluids, and of their joist – an unending, hilarious joist – with corresponding male attributes and powers.

In contrast to phenomenological readings of such data, I have sought to maintain a close watch on the wider politics of these performances because I follow Biesele (1993) in viewing them as inseparable from social survival. The distinction between art and science, biology and culture, aesthetics and politics, must be suspended if we wish to remain true to what people in such communities are themselves saying and doing. The body that has been gestating throughout this thesis is a body perennially in motion. An expansive *jouissance* of the kind understood by Barthes, and the raucous, Rabelaisian humour of the procreative body, are central tenets of the ongoing weave I have tried to occupy. Yet already the academic inclination to “gravitas” (Overing, 2000) distorts the reality we are trying to apprehend: Our desire to “tell” the body deflates it.

The Mbendjele Yaka who have provided the anchor for this thesis are under increasing pressure to relocate, both territorially and religiously. What I experienced in Pokola was the weight of European and national animosity to those small communities of hunter-gatherers whose presence in the hardwood-rich forests of Northern Congo is increasingly inconvenient. I chose to make some allusion to the political climate we found in Pokola without elaborating on this because it seemed a more constructive move to highlight the social and intra-cultural complexity of the Mbendjele. This should not be read as disinterest in the current predicament of hunter-gatherers. While it is true there have long been laments about the destruction of Pygmy communities, it is also true that they cannot sustain a prolonged resistance to the industrial and political machine that is working around them. If C.I.B is successful in setting up a Pygmy compound at Pokola it is conceivable that those communities surrounding the town will be forcibly relocated there, “for their own good”. If people are denied access to the forest, and thereby to the spirits themselves, can the rich cultural conversation and sociality that we witnessed continue? Kisluik (1998) noted that after even a few extra months camped near a *bilu* village, where BaAka men were systematically humiliated by villagers and plied with cheap alcohol, they became increasingly belligerent about women’s dances and began, in an unprecedented move, to intervene aggressively in these. Sandimba, the female *ginda* described by Kisluik (1998: 143 - 144) who stood braced against the drunk, frustrated men at Bagandou can only maintain her footing for so long before she, and others like her, are violently pushed aside.

My argument for the “communism in living” of many contemporary hunter-gatherers was to some extent a challenge. Using strong terms to describe the domestic, economic and cultural adaptation that is the “immediate-return society” is designed to make us think. But it is also a serious theoretical proposition. While few since Morgan (1965) have been comfortable with the term (though see Lee, 1988, Knight, 1991, and Barnard, 2003), it encapsulates perfectly the whole spectrum of sharing practices, from material and economic to symbolic and religious. Communism in living is communism in motion, and I have argued from different perspectives in each of the chapters in this thesis that hunter-gatherers are societies in motion. Having put forward that argument in the first chapter, I examined manifestations of it in the writing of various ethnographers. For Woodburn (1982), the internally coherent

systems of hunter-gatherers turn on the social and ideological imperative to share, on direct access to material resources by all community members, and on an unparalleled degree of individual autonomy. For Bird-David (1990; 2005), what matters is the relationship of hunters with their environment, conceptualised as a “giving parent”. Sharing for her arises out of the “property of relations” as opposed to the relations of property, and her work corrects an over-emphasis on property and economy. Ingold (2005) focuses on more diffusive, affective ties, woven into the collective memory of hunting communities and cosmology. “Sharing” should be stretched to encompass the whole range of social others with whom people are in relationship, and through whom human webs manifest. Everything then is about process: “There is no point at which the story ends and life begins” (Ingold, 2005: 171).

Between these perspectives we gain insight into hunter-gatherer subsistence and sociality, but what is missing from all three accounts is the dynamo of sexual politics. By introducing sexual politics into the social landscape we provide a rationale for what Woodburn (1982), Bird-David (1990; 2005) and Ingold (2005) describe: The continually demanded and protected social equity in which women form a formidable collective body. Leacock (1982), building on the insights of Morgan (1965[1877]), recognised this three decades ago. Her writing, along with Knight’s (1991) theoretical detail and Graeber’s (2004) thoughts on counter-power led me to propose that it is out of women’s coalitionary presence that the ritual forms of egalitarian counter-power emerge. Barnard’s (2003) writing on a discernible “hunter-gatherer mode of thought” provides general form for such an approach by highlighting a persistent political orientation towards inclusiveness and social fluidity.

This in turn led me to question whether ritual in hunter-gatherer groups was performing the same function as in hierarchical societies. Ideas common in the work of Gluckman (1954) or Turner (1969) about the ritual “powers of the weak”, the humbling of the strong, or the shrugging off by women in particular of constrictive gender, are somewhat stumped when they come face to face with societies in which there is little or no hierarchy to be ritually levelled. The body is played with, and signals are scrambled, but “expansion” seems a more accurate term than “inversion” in these contexts. If for societies premised on the laws of hierarchy, ritual time is a kind of “memory” of egalitarianism, in which the weak become strong, the low

become high, the voiceless speak, it may be that what we are seeing in the aggressive sexual and body-orientated displays of Mbendjele women, or the staged violence visited on camp by Mbendjele men, is a kind of “memory” of hierarchy. If the general point of ritual is the inversion of normative order, and if the normative order of Mbendjele life is fluid and egalitarian, it is conceivable (as Turnbull (1972; 1978) conjectured) that ritual turns the collective face to the shadow of sexual conflict. Only where the body is fully occupied, and its range of generative possibilities acknowledged and performed can there be an effective socio-political response to Thanatos – the other, some would say necessary, face of Eros. The conflict performed ritually may in fact be the conflict between antipathetic roles and interests: Marriage and kinship, wives and mothers, brothers and husbands.

Trying to inch closer to the particularities of such systems led me to commence the second chapter with three related questions about reproductivity, hunting, and the symbolic relationship between these. The Mbendjele concept of *Ekila*, as translated by Jerome Lewis (2002; 2008), provides a bridge between the biological body and the common cultural body, and echoes writing by Amazonian ethnographers on similarly powerful couvade restrictions. There is huge creativity in the matter of pregnancy and birth. These things sit at the heart of the social economy. It is with this in mind that I examined Brightman’s (1996) reading of the hunter-gatherer division of labour as a result of the imposition of male hegemony. My argument in the first chapter was essentially on behalf of female collectivity. Brightman (1996) allows men such agency but the central flaw in his paper is the assumption that women operate and are operated upon as individuals, confined to domestic fields and forcibly excluded from the symbolically valuable practice of hunting. His argument effectively sets a Western capitalist framework onto a radically different social and economic space.

Examination of recent findings from biological anthropology and evolutionary ecology shows up the cooperative mothering integral to hunter-gatherer subsistence success. It also shows up the energetic constraints which Mbendjele or Efe women are continually juggling. Combination of the work of those such as Peacock (1991) with that of Lewis (2002) or Rival (1997) demonstrates that while women must make choices about whether to undertake high-energy, high-risk activities, their collective solutions to reproductive dilemmas *become* their cultural, political strength. There is

in Brightman's (1996) analysis a profound value judgement about maternal care as foreclosing "career outside the home" (Brightman, 1996: 704), indicating passivity and rootedness in the lesser ground of biology. There is also, I argued, a neglect of the inherent value of children in Mbendjele, Efe or Baka society, their central cultural place, and the abundance they are believed to embody (Turnbull, 1969, 1978; Harako, 1980; Hewlett, 1989).

Hunter-gatherer women are not disqualified by their labour choices from ritual, symbolic power. They are in continual conversation with the metaphysical world *because* of their procreative capacity. While Brightman (1996) sees relationship as a direct, physical involvement in hunting, I argue for antipathy as power. Women's "ritual" hunting connects biological variables to cultural constructions in a positive, expansive sense. In fact, writes Bodenhorn (1996) of Inupiat hunting communities: "It is the woman to whom the animal comes" (Bodenhorn, 1996: 61). Without Inupait women's cultivation of a unique ritual relationship with game animals, their husbands could not successfully hunt. Hunting is a cumulative process incorporating technical and symbolic activities to which male and female interdependence is fundamental. The complimentary nature of Inupiat hunting is demonstrated by the fact that without a wife, an Inupiat man *cannot* hunt. Gow (1982) too stresses that in Amazonian societies only married adults are active in the subsistence economy. McCreedy (1994), writing about the BiAka division of labour as interdependence argues that work is defined as something done for the opposite sex. BiAka women's ritual interventions are what "open" the camp for male hunters to find meat, and women's activities are formally classed by BiAka as hunting skills.

Here we get closer to the metaphysical relationship between the female body and its fluids (particularly blood) and game animals and spirits. There is a logic woven into antipathy in such contexts. Absence signifies relationship. It is in this very move – away from the bodies of game animals – that women collectively are conceptualised as sacred. In view of the evidence cited by McCreedy (1994) and Joiris (1996) for BiAka and Baka women's ritual hunting associations, Brightman's (1996) dismissal of hunter-gatherer adherence to hunting taboo as "mystified consciousness" is insulting. If it is true that "the body and its desires lies at the heart of the economy, serving as a point of attachment for social concerns" (Gow, 1982: 580) the next step

is to scrutinise what kind of body we are talking about, and what it is saying during communal ritual conversations.

Which is where the third chapter commenced. Having looked at women's ritual relationship with game animals and hunting from the perspective of procreation and the politics of mothering, I wanted to understand better the explicit, visceral repartee unfurled between female and male ritual associations. I began with Bourdieu's (1990) writing on symbolic power: What precisely is habituated in social contexts which maintain symbolic power in the hands of ritual collectives between whom it is perennially tossed? While ethnography confirms that Central African hunter-gatherers do "root the most fundamental structures of the group in the primary experiences of the body" (Bourdieu, 1990: 71) we are talking here about an articulate and subversive body closer to that described by Bakhtin (1968) than Western biology. I focused accordingly on the polyphony that is a defining characteristic of Mbendjele camp life as the language of the social body continually agitating against closure and monovocality. I found it more helpful to speak about sex and laughter than gender and symbolic power in trying to gain some purchase on the politics of the Baka, Mbuti, or Mbendjele body.

Underlying all this was the question threading the previous two chapters: What are the implications for a society when women do not occupy Bourdieu's (1990) "low, inferior, submissive" bodily space? When the political story ritualised through collective bodily alignment highlights female reproductive anatomy, fluids and desire and refracts these back to the community as cultural power? Turner (1969) wrote that the respective group interests represented in Ndembu inter-sexual ritual "do not break each other down; in a way they provoke each other" (Turner, 1969: 83). This deliberate ritual, bodily antagonism underlies the chapter. I used it to explore Turnbull's (1978) data on Mbuti *akami* as arising out of the potential for organised adult male violence. Turnbull (1978) viewed the intense sensual incorporation of Mbuti infants as part of the response to such a potential: by centring individuals in the nurture and continuum of the wider communal body, they were made responsible on a profound, affective level to such a body. Turnbull (1969; 1972; 1978) demonstrated that so much Mbuti "ritual" was about the exploration and placation of inter-sexual conflict. By a concerted mockery of each other's biological selves, of sex and sexual

prowess, the core social issue was flagged and overturned in one movement. The bawdy, slap-stick humour so prevalent in Mbuti community then assumes a serious cultural function.

Kisluik (1999) and Lewis (2002) deal at length with women's ritual taunting, and I used their ethnography of ritual lyric and gesture to construct an argument about the "politics of Eros" and the speaking body. It is the way in which the body directs its desire, and more specifically the affinity of its desire that matters in these moments of female *communitas*. Performances such as *Ngoku* showcase female attractiveness and sexual appetite while drawing a coalitionary line around these (Lewis, 2002: 193). At the same moment, male virility is mocked through songs detailing the inferiority of male genitalia and extolling women's skill and desire. "Dialogue here is not the threshold to action; it is the action itself" (Bakhtin, 1984: 252). I argued that these performances, drawing the terms back to the body but in the same motion expanding that body, form the core of political life and counter-power. The pleasurable aspect of counter-power here needs to be highlighted: the joyful, cohesive nature of women's dance performances is what I hoped to grasp with the term "the politics of Eros".

Devische (1993), in his work on Yaka healing cults in the Democratic Republic of Congo evoked the rhythm or dialectic of power as appropriate to the body moving as "a complete instrument" in the world. He claimed that ritual symbols here are "not images but primarily corporeal devices" (Devische, 1993: 280). The intense mutual incorporation resonating on the level of the group has implications for the experience of the body in Yaka society. There is a "vast realm of meaning structure...that lies beyond concepts" (Johnson, 1987: 167) and which suggests an experience of the body as a path of access rather than a fixed entity. Again, this resonates with data on both Central African and Amazonian ideas of personhood, and with the writing of Bakhtin (1968) on the laughing, trickster-like body appropriate to carnival. The lyrics delivered by Yaka women's ritual chants are pared down, visceral body-statements: "The vagina wins! The penis gives birth to nothing! Sex"! (Kisluik, 1998: 131 – 134). But they are of course also political comments on the cultural terrain kept open by the unending round of insults.

Bateson (1958), trying to fathom the origin of a “contrasting sex ethos” in Iatmul society described a “dynamic equilibrium” composed of “processes of differentiation” (Bateson, 1958: 175) which worked in turn against their antitheses. Importantly, he distinguished between “complementary” and “symmetrical” schismogenesis. In the former, which Bateson (1958) viewed as indicative of the dynamic between the sexes, there is entrenchment into increasingly immovable identities. In the latter - “symmetrical schismogenesis” - the behaviour of one group generates corresponding kinds of behaviour in the other so that a competitive situation may develop in which the tension remains sprung even as there is motion (1958: 189). Complementary schismogenesis is inherently negative. Mutual jealousy, inability to empathise, and resentment code the other as the cause of one’s own distortion. With each stroke, each actor or group swells further into a single, constrictive character. This is a process “inevitably advancing towards such differentiation that some outside factor is bound to precipitate the final collapse” (Bateson, 1958: 190). Yet it never arrives in Yaka society. There is no collapse, no explosion. The ongoing antagonistic conversation recurs as part of the structure of life. Bateson’s (1958) symmetrical schismogenesis evokes Bakhtin’s (1968) dialogism, with its “process of change which is in some cases either controlled or continually counteracted by inverse processes” (Bateson, 1958: 190). The “dynamic equilibrium” he sees resonates strongly with the dialectical process by which groups are made and articulate themselves in Yaka community.

Strathern (1988) works to remove the “domination” from this dynamic, by highlighting the “amoral, anti-social character” of collective events, which may in fact work against a more diffusive sociality to contrive the polarity and pendulum of the coalition. Bakhtin (1968) wrote on the transformation effected on bodily parts by the humour of the graphic slanging match involving them: “They are renewed in the sphere of their debasement” (Bakhtin, 1968: 374). Not only in the world of Rabelais does laughter make sex cultural, but in the religious domains of forest hunter-gatherers where the speaking, laughing, bleeding body is given ritual precedence. The antagonism this body is tasked with exploring is managed by simultaneously privileging it and subjecting it to a ritual, theatrical motion.



Which brings us finally to another corpus of bodies active in Mbendjele, Baka or Yaka landscapes: The spirits whose manifestation is a significant aspect of the inter-sexual conversation I described above. In the second chapter I examined women's ritual hunting from the perspective of the human community. In the third chapter I looked at the body which speaks during such ritual. My aim in the fourth chapter was to view the wide repertoire of dances forming the substance of Mbendjele and Baka social and religious life from the perspective of *mokondi massana*. These forest or ancestral spirits are responsible for keeping camp "open" and game abundant, but they also mediate between the sexes (Lewis, 2002: 143 – 144). I argued that women in particular are able to exercise ritual power through a privileged relationship with spirits. The continuum running from the spontaneous, informal dancing of adolescent girls to large spirit performances is clear: the daily, ongoing dance represented by women keeps the power-pendulum swinging and the forest happy. That the Mbendjele or Baka themselves make little distinction between "non-spirit" and spirit performances is telling. The continual song and dance of girls and women in camp is part of their social solidarity; I argued that behaviour which ethnographers have categorised as "joyful play" or "amusement" (Tsuru, 1998; Bundo, 2001) is a more deliberate political strategy. The joyful song maintained in Yaka camps by women is part of their unique, libidinal language and as such signifies the activation of counter-power.

Spirits too have their own unique communicative style: Some speak in Baka, some in indecipherable tongues; some use differently pitched cries; some whistle; others speak through complex clapping rhythms (Tsuru, 1998: 62). Any vocal or bodily sound issued from their forest path is responded to as speech (Tsuru, 1998: 62). When they enter camp, some wear masks and "clothing"; others such as *ngoku*, the women's spirit, come without form (Lewis, 2002: 191). In their naked state, *mokondi* or *me* are short, pale-skinned, swollen-headed creatures with protruding eyes. They keep this form among diverse groups throughout Congo, and we find in fact that the Khoisan trickster (Guenther, 1999) is described similarly. Spirits may be "captured" and persuaded to give their dances to humans in one of three ways. They are encountered either in deep forest, in dreams, or in childrens' playgrounds (Tsuru, 1998; Lewis, 2002). Like the Khoisan trickster (Guenther, 1999) they defy categorisation, but they are plainly central figures in Pygmy sociality, cosmology and

politics. Flowing back and forth between the forest and the human community, animated by women's erotic dance and polyphonic song, they are "the enemy of boundaries" (Guenther, 1999: 121) and the embodiment of ambiguity.

In the confluence where humans meet spirits – the secret *njanga* path used by initiates – the bifurcation of the sexes is stressed (Lewis, 2002: 147). The subsequent communal transportation is born out of this sharp fissioning of the community into same-sex groups. Different bodily power is stressed and poles are held so that the resulting flux into which spirit steps is in fact a deceptively structured and formalised domain. The pendulum that swings back and forth between the sexes, driven by jokes, insults, bodily assertions of appetite, desire and skill, is the instrument which opens the field onto which spirits flood. The point is this: ambiguous agencies or energies, at once sensual and ethereal, manifest as a direct result of inter-sexual competition and complementarity. The very things Western epistemology distains on the basis of their alterity to "culture" are what permit access to the poly-social world. It is out of the bodily weave enacted by groups of initiates, and specifically in response to the female song and dance element of this, that spirits come bearing the gifts of successful hunting, unimpeded fertility, and *communitas*. Dance here assumes the nature of technical expertise, an instrument or tool wielded by communities to facilitate political fluidity.

Which leads us to the aspect of spirit dance least amenable to theoretical enquiry: dance, and spirits themselves, as community medicine. In some parts of Joiris (1996) and Lewis's (2002) analyses, we have the sense they are labouring to describe in real terms a corpus of agents outside the conceptual reach of "our" language. Likewise with comprehensive descriptions of the Ju/hoan healing dance (Katz, 1982; Katz, Biese, St. Denis, 1997). There is a physicality to "spirit" in such communities. It emerges not only in corporeal form as part the effort of initiates, but works *through* the material of the human body. During certain Baka dances, Tsuru (1998) describes those hosting the spirit as staggering intoxicated and trembling out of the dance circle. Similarly, the Ju/hoan healer becomes staring and blank, his or her legs shake violently, the breath rasps, heat boils in the stomach (Katz, Biese, St. Denis, 1997: 26). It is only through the human body that spirit may operate, which makes sense of Devische's (1993) insistence that "trance is not an out-of-body experience"

(Devische, 1993: 262). This supports the assertion made in the last chapter that “symbols” are what coalesce out of intense bodily transformations effected during moments of ritual *communitas*. I have argued because of this that symbols themselves should be removed from the abstract realm and reintegrated into the bodily field from which they emerge. As Johnson (1987) points out, the most powerful symbolic clusters are visceral, pulsating entities. They still bear the heat of the collective body and its imagistic merger with other, cosmic bodies: Blood, meat, sex, birth, thunder, moon, rain, fire. The human body itself in its meetings with spirit becomes a kind of divining rod, a “wet suit” rather than a carnival mask (Viviero de Castro, 1990).

In this analysis, “play” is lifted from its place on the periphery of social structure and religious thought: It is no longer light, leisured activity, the preserve of small children. Baka and Mbendjele adult “play” is the way in which the common body keeps the full flame of ritual motion alight. Imaginative play, laughter, and the transformative are part of the same complex: “The concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness” (Huizinga, 1950: 25). Which is why laughter has always presented a threat to the rule of law and Christian doctrine: The body it demands and animates is “the great, generic body of the people” (Bakhtin, 1968: 88) opened and mutable. The social laughter roused and encouraged by many *mokondi* or *tore* as they arrive in camp is not only controlled; it is part of a recognisable socio-political and moral ethos in which the fluency and articulation of the common body are key. Just as laughter and polyphony was removed from an “extraordinary Christian physiology” (Overing, 2000: 75), so it remains *politically* integral to hunter-gatherer life. In this context, the ongoing missionary exhortation to Pygmy communities to give up their “satanic” dances and spirits, or their bawdy, “irreverent” cosmology (Kisluik, 1999) should be seen as a deeply destructive political move.

In the work of Bakhtin (1968), there is an essential relation of festive laughter to time and to change. Laughter here is a straddling, unifying force, a composite of the life/death principles, a way of navigating process collectively and through the body. Which is why during Pygmy initiation sequences, people are drawn back to the very immediate yet universal body by laughter (Lewis, 2002; 2006). What Yaka women’s rituals speak against or to is a latent principle always hovering at the edges of human

sociality: the pull towards “unchanging established order and ideology” (Bakhtin, 1968: 81). Performance of bodily counter-power is in response to this. I argue that women’s song and dance is so rigorously maintained – rarely in the course of the day’s activities are they silenced – because absence of hierarchy in this moment is no guarantee of its absence in the next. So sharing is demanded, voice is demanded, the power of fertility, desire and attractiveness is collectively showcased. This has to happen continually in the same way that power-over has to happen continually.

Medieval parodies and feasts for Bakhtin (1968) performed a kind of alchemy on “scholarly wisdom” bringing it back, inside laughter, to the “positive material bodily sphere...Everything they touched was transformed into flesh and matter and at the same time was given a lighter tone” (Bakhtin, 1968: 83). This is a flip of the conventional process whereby flesh becomes word, knowledge, abstraction. And it is pertinent as an analogy for what the Central African data does to Western theory: Attempts to dissociate from what is implicitly considered the mess and stricture of the body are pulled back to flesh and blood. Knight (1991), Power and Watts (1999), Gow (1982), Rival (1997), Overing (2000), Lewis (2002; 2006; 2008), Devische (1993), and Kisluik (1999) each in their own way stress this: That through comprehensive knowledge of the ethnographic record on forest and other hunter-gatherers, we are brought back to the vast socio-political creativity of the sensual, procreative self. In the words of Stanley Kunitz (2002): “All is motion here”. But motion, like emotion, can be, in the hands of the collective body, the most powerful tool in the action of a society against structural hierarchy.



**Figure 25: Benika with her son**

## EPILOGUE

Time and again the person, stepping out after a straight line, finds themselves stumped by unplanned intercession. But “stumped” implies stoppage, and it’s not so much stoppage as the opening onto another, more fluid path, the incantation of affect, the body turning its own rudder to the world. Chance encounters, dreams, paradoxes, the stubbornness of fertility. I can still see the “witch” tunnelling through the forest towards us. Still feel the spongy withstanding of energy as I fought to tie her. But this is the point: If I had missed her, if I had managed to escape or been able to bind her definitively, my daughter might never have arrived. Therefore it seems to me that to turn away from the dark shape in the trees, in thought as in life, signals an impoverishment, a thinning of the world. As Hastrup (1995) notes: “In a view of culture that allows for shadows and corporeal depth, instead of reducing it to a unilineal narrative, agency is to respond to motivation, not simply to act intentionally” (Hastrup, 1995: 97). Bakhtin’s (1968) writing on the fecundity of the grotesque, the terrifying, captures this in a real, historical sense: Through the

repression and sanitisation of the “material lower bodily stratum” and its dark humour, the voice of the body itself – polyphonic, rebellious, mutable – was amputated from culture, which would now orbit ideas about moral perfection or intellectual accomplishment (Jackson, 1989). What is striking reading Bakhtin’s (1968) writing on the world of carnival and its laughing body animated by strings of abuse, curses, and bawdy jokes, is its parallel with much of the data on hunter-gatherer cultural life.

What is happening politically within such societies should be of immediate concern to anyone seeking insight into the range of organisational possibilities available to humans. There is a persistent movement against the development of hierarchy in such contexts. While the language available to us is abstract, the motion is not: There is a visceral rhythm maintained in ritual exchanges of power. “As conscious movement is in our thinking, so thinking may come from movement, and especially shared, or conceptual, thought from communal movement” (Blacking, 1977: 23). The inter-sexual barter or dialectic sits at the core of the social economy in Central African and other hunter-gatherer societies (Bieseke, 1993; Lewis, 2001; 2006; 2008). Understanding how and why this happens will have implications for our theoretical approaches not only to “gender” but to economy, territoriality, sociality, and religion (cf. Barnard, 2004). Because there is consensus among ethnographers that what hunter-gatherers are doing represents one of the few remaining alternatives to political systems rooted in structural violence (cf. Turnbull, 1969, 1978; Lee, 1968, 1999; Woodburn, 1982; Bodenhorn, 1990) their data has implications far beyond their own theoretical contexts. The “communism in living” that plays out on a daily basis is particularly relevant given that “the human condition is likely to be more clearly drawn here than among other kinds of societies” (Lee and Devore, 1968:ix, Quoted in Barnard, 2004: 1). If this is so, we have in the Mbendjele, the Baka, the BaYaka or the Efe, a significant and sustained political alternative to “the history of sadness” (Sahlins, 1996) and its many faces.

I have attempted to contribute in this thesis to both feminist and hunter-gatherer theoretical debates by involving each with the other. I have taken a perspective on women in Central African hunter-gatherer societies that begins from their collective social agency. And I have argued against the traditional feminist tendency of the last

three decades to approach hunter-gatherers with the same discordant terms used to critique enshrined male dominance in other contexts. It is in the relational weave between different bodies and desires that society is made. Given this, it seems particularly urgent that the kind of bodily power and fluency women command, rooted in procreativity and its symbolic elaborations, be integrated into broader analyses of gender, sex, “the body”, and the nature of power itself.

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