

THE ADOPTION OF THE CIRCUMCISION RITUAL *BÈKÀ* BY THE BAKA-PYGMIES IN SOUTHEAST CAMEROON

by

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Introduction

In this article, I discuss the borrowing of the circumcision ritual *bèkà*¹ by the Baka of Cameroon. I will present an in-depth analysis of the ritual system and the music that goes with it, with particular attention to the ritual's actors and their function.

From a theoretical point of view, questions arise in the domains of ethnomusicology and the study of cultural contact. The first question concerns variability within a culture of oral tradition. This investigation provides a new focus in the study of the musical forms of Central Africa, which have been deemed homogeneous, functional and ancestral (Arom 1988). Indeed, ethnomusicologists have disregarded the dynamic aspect of these forms of Central African music for a long time, especially in regard to Pygmy-music.² In her studies of Baka rituals, Daou Véronique Joiris (1996, 1997) was the first to demonstrate and emphasize the importance of intracultural variation. The relevance of her approach was corroborated by Daisaku Tsuru (1998 and 2001, cf. *infra*). Their research has identified strong variants – which I would qualify as “dialectal” – around common structural principles. Such advances in the field of ritual studies foster differentiated ethnomusicological research on the variability of the musical system.

In the present study, variability is closely linked to the phenomenon of borrowing from another culture, which brings us to the second theoretical matter to be dealt with here: the re-elaboration of a borrowed ritual practice according to the specific traits of Baka music and ritual. In order to fully grasp the mechanism of integration of this exogenous ceremony, it is necessary to introduce preliminary information not directly linked to music, extending our inquiry to other domains. Our object of study is highly complex and a certain density of the text is unavoidable: music, ritual acts, language, interethnic relationships, and symbolism interact and must each be placed in its specific context. Nor must we forget that the borrowing of the ritual is the result of the migration of a part of the Baka society.

¹ In the spelling of Baka terms, high and low language tones are marked; vowels without a mark are middle tones. For technical reasons, the open vowels are underlined. I make one exception to the phonetic notation so as to fit to the Brisson and Boursier (1979, vii) spelling system: here, the phoneme noted /j/ is pronounced [dʒ].

² Apart from three records (Arom and Renaud 1977; Sallée (n. d.); Sallée and De Fraysseix 1973), no information existed about Baka song and dance when I began doing fieldwork in Cameroon in 1999. Other Pygmy cultures are better documented, especially the Mbuti of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Brandel 1961; Turnbull 1965; Turnbull and Chapman 1957; Demolin 1990, 1993) and the Aka of the Central African Republic (Arom 1978, 1994; Arom et al. 1998; Arom and Fürniss 1993; Fürniss 1992, 1998, 2006; Sarno 1993; and Kisliuk 1996, 1998).

I will begin by situating the Baka within the inter-ethnic context in Eastern Cameroon and present the main characteristics of their ritual and musical systems. I will then describe circumcision as it is practiced nowadays by the Western Baka, as well as the original ritual and the context of its borrowing. Only then will it be possible to fully analyze the particulars of the appropriation of this ritual by the Baka and particularly some rhythmical and metrical aspects of the music attached to it.

The ethnographic material presented here includes both first-hand and second-hand data. I conducted ethnomusicological fieldwork on this subject in 1999, 2000, and 2002. My data consists of the recording of an entire ceremony as well as analytical recordings obtained during several interview sessions. The entire ethnographic and symbolic background has been shaped out through consultation with the Baka of Messéa.³ The complete first-hand data is published on a website (Fürniss and Lussiaa-Berdou 2004). The type of complex analysis presented here is difficult to do with only the data of one scholar's work. In order to evaluate the process of borrowing, it was found necessary to include second-hand material collected by scholars working in different geographical areas on Baka or neighboring societies and on other closely related domains within the Baka culture. Thus, my analysis is largely based on the cross-referencing of the different types of data that co-occur in the intersection of ritual complexity, intercultural contact, and dialectal variants.

THE BAKA AND THEIR NEIGHBORING CULTURES

The Baka live in the very southeast of Cameroon, in an area that covers around 220 miles from the border of the Central African Republic to the west and 150 miles from the border of the Republic of Congo to the north. Some Baka, known as Bibayak, live in the north of Gabon and a very small group, known as Bangombe, lives in the Central African Republic.⁴ They are part of so-called "Pygmy" populations,⁵ characterized, among other traits, by their hunting-and-gathering activities and polyphonic counterpoint singing. In the large zone they cover, they are in close contact with other populations with whom they share many activities, whether economic, social, or religious. Pygmies are the main meat, game and labor providers for the Villagers. Owing to their mobile ancestral semi-nomadic lifestyle, they are less integrated into modern society and for this reason are often considered inferior by their neighbors. Nonetheless, their vast knowledge of the

³ My main partners in this research were the members of Messéa's circumcision association: Mano Antoine (circumciser) and Gabayi Brigitte (his wife), Kongodi Jean (guardian of the spirit), Yoka (treasurer) and Nambalo (soldiers' spokesman). Special thanks to Thierry Mekana for help with translation and organization.

⁴ The Baka must not be mistaken for the BaAka (Kisliuk 1998) or Aka (Thomas et al. 1981ss) of the Central African Republic.

⁵ Regarding the "invention" of the term "Pygmy", see Serge Bahuchet (1993b). This term refers to populations living along the African equator: the Mbuti – with the Efe, Asua and Kango subgroups – from Democratic Republic of Congo; the Twa from Rwanda; the Aka from Central Africa; the Baka, Bakola/Bagyeli and Bedzan from Cameroon; as well as the Babongo and Bakoya from Gabon. Thomas et al. (1981ss) differentiate them from the "Tall Blacks"; the term that I prefer, and likewise Christian Leclerc (2001:18), is that of "Villagers".

forest confers undisputed superiority on them in matters of controlling spiritual forces for therapeutic, magical or divinatory purposes.

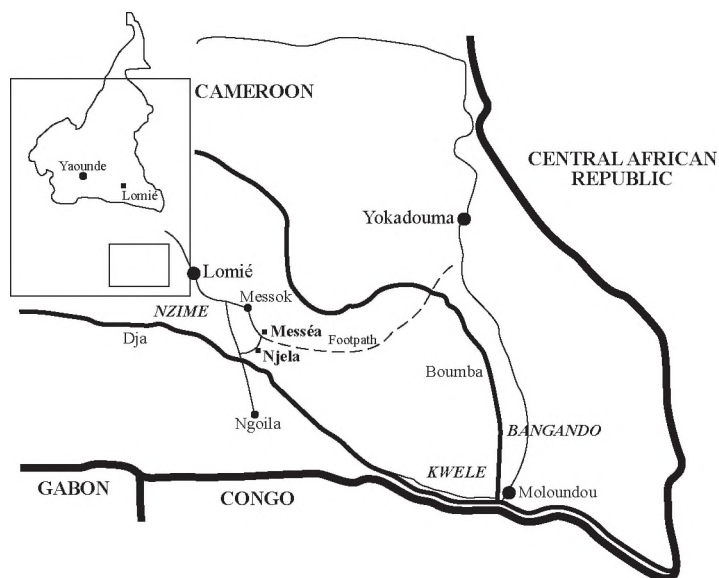


Figure 1. Map of Baka and some neighboring ethnic groups: Nzime, Kwele, Bangando

The data presented here was collected in Messéa and Njela, two villages situated 56 miles away from the town of Lomié in the western part of the Baka country. In this region, the Baka have lived together with the Nzime since the late 19th century (Leclerc 2001:138). The greater part of these Baka came from the east, from the road that runs along the border with the Central African Republic, several days' walk away from the place where they live now. Other Baka still live there now, in a territory that they share with other people, the most important for our purposes being the Bangando and Kwele. In 2006, a brief ethnomusicological field trip to Bangando and Kwele areas enabled me to collect my initial musical data for a comparative study. As Serge Bahuchet's detailed research shows (1993a), the ethnic mosaic in this region is doubled by a linguistic mosaic of about fifteen languages, which juxtaposes languages of the Oubanguian family – such as Baka or Bangando – and of the Bantu family – such as Nzime and Kwele (Bahuchet 1992:48).

Baka Ritual and Music

In order to situate the borrowed ceremony within the landscape of Baka culture, it is necessary to describe what makes up the identity of Baka music and ritual.

RITUAL ASSOCIATIONS

Véronique Joiris (1997:43–62) has shown that the Baka ritual system is based on associations grouped around tutelary spirits' powers, who appear in the form of masks. A ritual association has ordinary members, and other members with particularly important roles: the master of the mask (“guardian”), the keepers of spiritual and therapeutic knowledge, and song-leaders. Almost all rituals refer to hunting, even if they do not always occur during a collective hunting party. They “fulfill several functions at a time: healing, conflict resolution, witchcraft, hunting, etc.” (57). The force of a ritual act lies in the complementarity of men and women. Thus, ritual actors work in couples (59). Such duality operates in all types of associations, whether masculine or feminine. Collective rituals always integrate an important musical activity that requires the participation of many people. The participants are mainly members of the same lineage with their partners, which usually includes all the members of an encampment or individuals of several encampments sharing kinship.

THE MUSICAL SYSTEM

Baka music is essentially vocal, and musical instruments – rhythmic or melodic – accompany the singing. I have collected 34 repertoires in use in Messéa. Besides those linked to circumcision, two entertainment dances have been borrowed from other cultures and are not considered here.

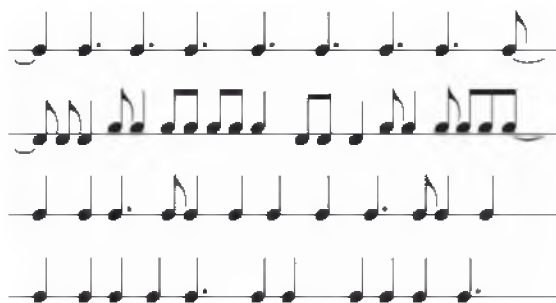
For all-important musical events, singing is performed by a women's choir, which is led by elder women as repertoire specialists. Mixed or exclusively male singing is exceptional. Men contribute by playing instruments or dancing, but as most choreographies require only a few dancers, men – as musical actors – usually stay in the background. Nonetheless, they are largely involved in the organization of the ceremonies, especially when a mask apparition is required, which is always assisted and surrounded by initiated men.

Dances are accompanied by two drums, sometimes three, and occasionally by concussion blades, vessel- or string-rattles. Melodic instruments are only played in repertoires that are not danced. As is the case for most Central African music (Arom 1991:486ss), each Baka dance has a specific polyrhythmic formula that accompanies all songs of this category.⁶

Rhythms are integrated in a regular metric structure of four or eight beats, each with a ternary subdivision of three minimal values. An example is the rhythm of the *èbùmà* dance that is the heart of the ceremony that marks the end of mourning.

⁶ “We call *musical category* a vernacular set (repertoire) bearing a musical trait which enables one to distinguish this set from all other categories. This trait runs throughout all the pieces that form this category...” (Arom, Fernando, Fūmiss et al. 2008:286).

Example 1.



The melodies fit in the same metric structure and are built on an anhemitonic pentatonic scale. Songs are polyphonic and contain two or three parts. In the large majority, counterpoint is integrated in a call and response between a soloist (*kpò njamba*, “to pick, intone”) and a choir (*na ja*, “to take”). The latter is performed in two simultaneous tessituras, the higher one of which is named *liè na tè*, “little voice”, and the lower one *ngbè liè*, “the big voice”. Example 2 is an *èbùmà*-song, *bolingo glè* (“Bolingo, my mother-in-law”), here in a modeled transcription.

Example 2.

Large overlapping and many simultaneous variations of the parts often hide the responsorial structure in such a way that it is difficult to perceive.

RITUAL MUSIC

In Messèa, the western part of the Baka area, there are nearly twenty ritual repertoires. They are mainly associated with hunting, healing, first and second funerals, as well as circumcision. In Baka culture, the relationship between ritual circumstance and musical category is complex due to the fact that ritual music is poly-functional. One musical category may serve for several circumstances when it carries a specific symbolic function required in different contexts. On the other hand, one circumstance may call for more than one musical category when specific music is needed for precise phases of a complex ritual – as is the case in categories relative to circumcision.

As we have seen for ritual associations, symbolic functions are also present in the music. They connect through the notion of “the balance of chances”, that is the relational equilibrium between the living and the spirits of the deceased that walk side by side with game, and thus give access to the forest (Joiris 1997:43–44). Accordingly, it is no surprise to find that symbolic categories relating to social cohesion, therapy, successful hunting, and communion with the spirits overlap and account for the polyvalent character of some musical categories. I have described and discussed Baka ritual musical categories in Arom, Fernando, Fūrmiss, et al. (2008).

Baka Circumcision and the *Bèkà* Ritual

According to ancestral customs, circumcision is traditionally an informal act practiced on boys entering puberty. It does not imply any particular ritual activity. Thus, the practice of the *bèkà* ritual in the region of Messéa is not innovative with regards to the act of circumcision itself, but rather in the form of its enactment, that is within a strengthened spiritual and social framework.

As Fūrmiss and Lussiaa-Berdou (2004) have shown in detail, the *bèkà* circumcision ceremony as practiced by the Western Baka is an important event. The candidates come from a large area around Messéa and are supported by members of their home village. Most times, the ceremony rallies the inhabitants of at least two villages. For three days, a complex series of singing, dancing and non-musical acts accompany the preparations prior to the circumcision itself.

THE CEREMONY IN THE REGION OF MESSÉA

In Messéa, the organization of a circumcision ceremony is in the hands of the male ritual association *wà bèkà* (the people of circumcision), a collective assistant to the circumciser. Its younger members are responsible for preparing the ritual areas, in particular the circumcision pen – which consists of an operation seat leaning against a tree planted in the center of the village and an enclosure made of thick leaves that hides the seat from spectators’ sight – and the healing area, which is situated behind the houses.

Apart from this technical responsibility, the association’s function is to introduce an aggressive psychological setting. Members are compared to “soldiers” (they are called *sojà*) and assert their status of initiated men with martial symbols. They wear mock weapons and *kepis* made out of raffia; they indulge in a series of martial activities, such as parades and mock battles against women. During the ceremony, soldiers display their strength by shouting slogans glorifying the ordeal of circumcision in order to foster the candidates’ courage. In addition to this, soldiers are in charge of various specific sonorous activities: the singing of specific soldier songs, the playing of the *mbùli* horn which announces the event and accompanies all of its phases, as well as the playing of the *ndùmù* drums accompanying the dance songs that the men perform together with the women.

The ritual association is supervised by elder leaders who hold specific functions. The most important members are the circumciser and the master of the spirit *mòngàlà*. The latter is the spiritual authority who tests the courage of the candidate and receives donations that seal his membership to the association. A treasurer is in charge of administering the funds, which are mainly used to buy alcohol for the ceremonies. The leaders' wives play an important part in treating the candidates and their parents. They give the cue for the operation by fetching the circumciser (cd 3) and ensure a safe spiritual and surgical operation by protecting him against potential evil forces on his way to the circumcision pen. After the operation, a young "mother of circumcision, of the initiated", *nyiè bèkà* or *nyiè mboni*, brings water and food to the newly circumcised boy during his healing period.

The other women are in charge of ensuring that the ceremony runs smoothly by singing, purifying the spaces and paths, and preparing great quantities of food. One important feminine activity is the *mèngbàa*: the walking to and fro through the encampment while singing. According to the Baka, the *mèngbàa* fills in empty phases between ritual acts and helps to keep the participants in place. These walking songs are also a means to distract the mothers' attention from the ordeal that will cause pain to their sons. They catalyze their worries and transform them in collective energy.



Figure 2. The women of Messèa performing *mèngbàa* (photo C. Lussiaa-Berdou)

At several moments of the ceremony, collective activities bring about the necessary cohesion for the success of circumcision. Dancing in a circle, and sharing food and alcohol require the performance of different musical repertoires. Some of these are performed at specific moments and/or are reserved for one or another group of actors. The known corpus consists of at least 32 songs belonging to the following repertoires: *bè a ndùmù*, "drum songs", mixed songs accompanied by two drums. Its polyrhythmic

formula, specific to circumcision, is usually called *bĕkĀ* even though its proper name is *njòmbò*. It accompanies dancing and the preparation of the ritual areas (cd 15); *bĕ a sojà*, “soldiers’ songs”, the soldiers’ walking songs that women may sometimes join in (cd 13); *mĕngbĀa*, women’s walking songs (cd 4 & 5); *gàlò*, “stripes”, the soldiers’ ritual enunciation of their circumciser’s name (cd 6); two specific songs that accompany the dressing and presentation of the candidates – *Aye sengbé ho konangè*, “Up with the Candidate’s Skirt, ho!” (cd 7), and *Ayé kò boma jĕnjĕkù*, “I Love Death Bumping into Me”. Two songs are not included in these categories. The Baka qualify them in African French as “*chants de chamane*” (shaman songs). These songs have specific characteristics that will be dealt with further.

Chart 1: Synopsis of the circumcision ceremony in Njela, 16–18 February 1999

<p>1st day: Morning (in Messéa)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>g`al`o</i> ritual enunciation and speech 10h30 • Sharing of alcohol • Mock battles and circumciser’s departure • Making of the soldiers’ attributes 12h00 <p>Afternoon (from Messéa to Njela)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ritual association’s trip from Messéa to Njela 14h30 • Mock battles on arriving in Njela 18h10 • Arrival and installation 19h00 <p>Evening (in Njela)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective dances 21h00 • Speech and circular dancing • Sharing alcohol 21h30 • Speech and pause • Circular dancing 21h30 • Women’s <i>m`Engb`a`a</i> march 21h55 <p>2nd day: Morning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women’s <i>m`Engb`a`a</i> march 05h30 • Sharpening of the knives and preparations 07h00 • Quarrels and claims* 09h15 • Clearing of the healing pen 09h30 • Waiting period <p>Afternoon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disturbances caused by a drunkard* 15h00 • Participants’ meeting 16h30 • First donations and remedies 17h20 • Making of the circumcision seat 	<p>2nd day: Evening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sewing of the candidates’ skirts, <i>m`Engb`a`a</i> march 20h00 • Candidates’ dressing ritual • Protective ministrations for the parents 20h55 • Speech 21h00 • Singing and dancing 21h30 <p>[• the <i>mōng`al`a</i> spirit’s arrival was due, but didn’t occur on account of a violent storm]</p> <p>3rd day: Morning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protective ministrations for the candidates 05h30 • Building of the barrier and <i>m`Engb`a`a</i> march • Distribution of chili peppers and circular dancing 07h00 • <i>g`al`o</i> ritual enunciation 08h00 • Speech and procession • Period of waiting and presentation of a Nzime candidate 08h20 • Clairvoyance remedy for all 09h00 • Retreat and scarification of the circumciser and his wife 09h45 • Mock battles • Arrival of the candidates 11h00 • Quest for the circumciser • Three operations 11h15 • Group of participants break up 12h00 and return to Messéa
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* During the whole ceremony, reproaches and claims were exchanged between the different groups of actors. These are not part of the ritual, but are side criticisms of its organization: the circumciser didn’t prepare the remedies in time; the parents didn’t bring enough alcohol and meat; the soldiers didn’t clear the healing space; a classificatory brother of the circumciser, dead drunk, upset the ceremony to the point it almost had to be suspended.

Chart 1 shows a synopsis of a three-day ceremony, as detailed in Fürniss and Lussiaa-Berdou (2004). One of the events mentioned in the chart has not yet been introduced: namely the fact that the Nzime neighbors may take their boys to be circumcised by the Baka. This is considered a service for which the circumciser and the members of the ritual association will be paid. However, the Nzime boys will not be co-initiated because they only benefit from the surgical part of the ritual. In fact, they undergo the operation without protection or magical powers, and also without prior introduction to the spirit. This means that they are not initiated into the association and therefore will not share ritual knowledge with the Baka. This common experience will nonetheless build strong socio-economic bonds between the co-circumcised boys and their lineages.

The Borrowing of the Ritual

The Baka of Messéa say that they borrowed their *bèkà* ritual approximately two generations ago from the Bangando who live in the east near the border with the Central African Republic. At the time that they migrated westwards, they would have “imported” the ritual to the region in which they now live. With this borrowing being perfectly identified, recent and historically traceable, we are fortunate to be able to observe the period during which it was introduced, reinterpreted and integrated.

HISTORICAL AND ETHNIC CONTEXT

The practice of *bèkà* circumcision exists amongst some village populations who live in the far southeast of the Baka area, in particular, the Bangando and the Kwele. Joiris observed *bèkà* ceremonies and analyzed them when she was investigating inter-ethnic alliances between the Baka and their neighbors (Joiris 1997:308–311 and 414–423). Hereafter I will present her research, occasionally strengthened by the data I collected myself among the Bangando in 2006.

Joiris retraces the history of the *bèkà* ritual association that the Kwele adopted in North Congo around 1915 in order to replace the regional blood pacts abolished by the French colonists in 1920. Because circumcision is a means to strengthen and renew the links between Villagers and Baka through preferential alliances, pseudo-kinship and mutual commitments (311), Baka boys are invited to be circumcised along with allied Villagers. However, the Baka are passive during the Bangando and Kwele circumcision rituals; they endure the operation and initiation and “traditionally, the circumciser is Kwele, never Baka” (418). Hence, Baka do not play an active ritual role and therapeutic knowledge and spiritual power remain the Villagers’ prerogatives.

THE ORIGINAL RITUAL

We will now briefly have a look at the village ritual association and the unfolding of the ceremony as Joiris (1997:414–423) describes it. The most influential initiates gather in an “office” or a “bank”. A “bugler” (in fact a bell-ringer) leads the songs; a treasurer ensures that any member who misbehaves pays a fine and gives loans to

members in need; as for the circumciser, he is likened to a gorilla. The association is under the guardianship of two *mwangala* masks and their interpreter. The members of the association meet regularly in a sacred area forbidden to women.

Apart from the candidate's younger sister, who accompanies him and participates in a "ritual of a sexual nature"⁷ in the "office" (416), no woman has an active part in the ritual. The women organize dances and are responsible for the singing and for the preparation of great quantities of food to literally stuff the newly circumcised. A "guardian" and a man who feeds him for the duration of the ritual period support the initiate-to-be. A young relative collects donations for the candidate, whereas the other women of the family perform the same marching dance as the Baka's *mèngbàa*.

The ceremony lasts for three days and three nights, with secret and public sequences. The meeting with the tutelary spirits occurs at the opening, only in the presence of men. Women participate the next day, in a "kind of joust in which the women on one side, and the men on the other, fight over a long stick" (419). The making of the candidates' skirts, their dressing, and a first spiritual and prophylactic treatment take up the afternoon's activities and the evening is dedicated to entertainment during which "the candidates, followed by their younger sisters, stride the village square up and down, to the pace of the guardian" (420). In the morning of the operation, masked beings – one male and several female chimpanzees – dance in the "office". During the dances, the male chimpanzee, assisted by the bugler as his interpreter, calls out the ritual names of the candidates and of their male ascendance. The afternoon starts with a mock battle between the young initiated men and the women in order to keep them away from the circumcision area. After the operation, the newly circumcised will be semi-secluded for several weeks during which he will have to eat enormous quantities of food.

Bangando and Kwele use two drums as rhythmic accompaniment and a bell as a signaling object. There are several specific songs and dances, as well as repertoires of masculine, feminine and mixed songs. The importance of silence should be noted here: the meeting of the masks and the operation itself take place in absolute silence. For the Bangando, this underlines the important moral and social issue of the circumcision. This point is emphasized by a parallel element: the operation takes place publicly, surrounded by a circle of initiated men. If the candidate shows the slightest sign of weakness, the men will part, thus exposing his nudity and revealing his shame.

Appropriation by the Baka

Nowadays, ritualized circumcision is a well-integrated practice within the ritual system of the Baka in the Messéa region. The people of this village introduced and continue to disseminate this innovation, and are still authorities in the domain of the ceremony and its accompanying songs. The aspects analyzed here are presented to allow

⁷ Joiris does not tell the exact nature of the ritual, nor does she specify its sexual component.

readers to understand which elements from the original ritual remain and how the Baka changed the Bangando practices in order to better assimilate them into their own musical and symbolic system.

PARTIAL INTEGRATION OF EXOGENOUS MUSICAL TRAITS

Following are some foreign musical and paramusical traits in *bèkà* music, which have been more-or-less well adopted by the Baka.

The rhythmic formula

With respect to musical grammar, the first salient characteristic is that of the polyrhythmic formula *bèkà* (cd 8). Its main component is an asymmetrical rhythm of nine minimal operational values (2+2+2+3), represented here by eighth notes:



This formula is played by the second drum, *lè ndùmù*. As we mentioned earlier, the Baka's metric structure is based on the ternary subdivision of the pulsation. Therefore, in theory, a period of nine minimal values could mean three pulsations (3+3+3), which is in fact what the rhythmical accentuation pattern of the first drum, *nyiè ndùmù*, implies:




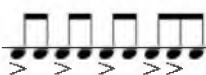
Nonetheless, this would go against another specific trait of Baka metrics, which is a periodicity of *four* ternary beats that are usually expressed by handclapping. As a reminder, the notion of beat implies an isochronous division of the period: all beats are rigorously identical. Therefore, the pattern played by the second drum does not correspond to the beat, despite its four accents: these are not distributed isochronously and regularly (2 2 2 3). In order to understand how the borrowed formula has been adapted, it is necessary to forget the simple ratios that rule almost all African music. In fact, the four regular beats seem to be such a powerful trait for Baka music that they are applied *as such* to this period of nine minimal values. They are currently expressed as regular hand claps (cd 9 & 10):

<i>nyiè ndùmù</i>	
<i>lè ndùmù</i>	
Handclapping:	
Isochronous beat	1 2 3 4 1

This is indeed an astonishing arithmetic problem!⁸ The resulting formula is based on a formal structure that is totally foreign to Baka music. However, it is always used for circumcision or funeral ceremonies for members of the ritual association *bèkà*. Hence, the sonorous form itself signifies or alludes to the ritual event, as is the case for all other polyrhythmic formulas in Baka music. This fact reinforces its status of an exogenous integrated element.


Whether the formal structure of this rhythm will be integrated in the musical system that the Baka consider as being theirs – that is, not borrowed from another culture – remains to be observed over time. Until now, the only rhythms that are clearly identified as foreign elements consist of an asymmetric formula with nine minimal values. Indeed, this same rhythm is part of the polyrhythmic formula of the entertainment dance *mbàlà*, borrowed recently from the Nzime, the Western Baka’s present neighbors:


nyiè ndùmù 

lè ndùmù 

Some signs indicate a possible progressive absorption of this exogenous parameter. The two similar formulae are used in very different and independent contexts that have no symbolic link: *bèkà* is performed during the circumcision ritual and *mbàlà* is performed as mere entertainment. This suggests that an exogenous element allows for diversification of its symbolic function. Moreover, the two rhythms have been borrowed at different times and from different places. Historically, the nine-value rhythm was introduced during the first half of the 20th century, when the Western Baka had settled in their present area of residence, but its existence was known well before the migration.

As to the Nzime *mbàlà*, acceptance goes beyond periodicity because it introduces metrical irregularity: the handclapping is synchronized with the *asymmetrical* rhythm and therefore conforms to its pseudo-*aksak* form (Arom 2004:31) (cd 11):



Handclapping: 

Irregular beat: 1 2 3 4 1

⁸ The arithmetical result amounts to something totally new, as the common denominator between the 4 beats and the 9 rhythmic impacts is the virtual minimal value of 1/36th of the period in which the dotted quarter note is executed at a tempo of 156/mn. I wish to thank Simha Arom and Guillaume Berland for their precious help in this matter, and will elaborate elsewhere the theoretical and cognitive implications of this specific adaptation process.

Metrical irregularity is a phenomenon that should be followed-up with close attention. We could assume that as memory of the borrowed trait fades, this particular phenomenon will add to the complexity of the Baka musical system.

Another borrowed ritual repertoire with foreign musical traits corroborates this hypothesis, namely the *èdiò* ritual that the Western Baka perform for the healing of severe wounds. Although the memory of the ritual's introduction in the Messéa area remains, it is no longer considered to be an exogenous element. It is presented as an intra-cultural element in circulation throughout the Baka area: "This dance is from the Baka over there." But, the musical scale (heptatonic) and the origin of the song lyrics are strong signs of borrowing. This assumption is confirmed by research conducted by other scholars in the eastern part of the Baka area: Stephanie Rupp (2003:49) insists that "...*diò* is the central ritual of Bangando men's spiritual initiation, participation, and death". In 2006, this ritual was practiced as much by the Bangando as by the Kwele. The data I personally collected among the latter underlines how exceptional it would be for a Baka to participate in such a ritual. It is Joiris (1997:56) who points out that Bangando "dancing" passed into Baka culture, to which she assigns a "divining/curing of illness" function. In borrowing this ritual, the Baka introduced a musical scale with half tones to their music. Even though its origins can be traced by the ethnomusicologist, they have faded into oblivion for the Baka who have integrated the new scale to their musical practice and no longer refer to it as being of foreign origin. Hence, it is possible that the same might occur to the periodicity of nine minimal values and to the metrical irregularity discussed above.

SINGING: PERFORMERS AND MUSICAL SCALES

The majority of *bèkà* songs are collective. Some songs are only performed by men, which is rather rare in Baka culture, as only two other repertoires are exclusively masculine.⁹

Circumcision songs are based on an anhemitonic pentatonic scale. In this respect, they perfectly conform to other Baka songs. In opposition to this, one of the soloistic "shaman songs" and one of the collective songs show a fundamental difference: both contain a scale with half tones, one pentatonic and the other heptatonic (cd 12). These songs also show marked differences in melody and have retained part or all of the original lyrics to an extent that nobody understands them – "that, we cannot understand, it's Bangando". These songs are identified as exogenous elements and there is no explanation as to their role within the ritual, nor regarding their meaning or function – "That's the way it is". These two songs stem from a second period of borrowing, subsequent to the first introduction of the ritual: each song was introduced and is still performed by one person who heard it in the east, liked it, and brought it back as such. Consequently, they

⁹ These repertoires belong to secret masculine organizations – *dòdi* and *èdiò* – the latter being also a borrowing, as previously mentioned.

are not part of the initial borrowing two generations ago. They are, rather, like individual variants that embellish the borrowing and might not outlive the death of their performers. These songs are far from showing the complex integration of signifiers, as is the case for the metric phenomenon detailed above.

RE-ELABORATION AND APPROPRIATION PROCESSES

Comparing Baka ritual practice and observations in Bangando-Kwele country reveals that the borrowing was not integrated as such, but that it required a considerable reorganization of the ritual mechanism corresponding to the Baka's understanding of the world.

Ritual Couples: Valorization of the Role of Women

As we have seen earlier, cooperation between men and women is essential for creating harmony between the living and the spirits in Baka culture. Therefore, it is not surprising to note that women gain important positions in the borrowed version of the *bèkà* ritual. Although they play a minor role in the Bangando-Kwele model, Baka women complete the actions of the master of the mask, of the circumciser and of the leader of the soldiers. The circumciser's wife shares his secrets and responsibilities in accomplishing some of the ritual duties herself. The master of the mask's wife, the "mother of the spirit" is an intercessor between the candidates and the spirit. The wife of the soldiers' leader will lead the women's group and direct their singing in order to ensure an optimal ritual efficiency. The leading women are in charge of purifying spaces and participants and watch over the equitable sharing of remedies, food, and alcohol.

As to the function of the young "mother of circumcision", an important shift has occurred between the original village ritual and the Baka version. In the original, a sister accompanies the candidate who will then be taken charge of by a married man. With the Baka, it is a potential future wife who takes care of the circumcised. In this way, she forms another ritual couple with the applicant, turned towards the future as a reminder of the purpose of circumcision, which is access to sexuality and marriage.

Ritual Language and Song Themes

Formal speeches, ritual questioning, as well as most of the song lyrics are in Baka language, understandable to all, except for some isolated words, which are in fact deformed Bangando words. It is not possible to say whether the lyrics have only been translated from Bangando or whether they are original Baka creations because the corresponding research has not been done with the Bangando songs. However, the themes developed in the songs are perfectly coherent with the given context: courage, circumcision, and marriage.¹⁰

¹⁰ Most of the following songs are accessible on Fürmüss and Lussiaa-Berdou (2004, www.vjf.cnrs.fr/lms/sf/accueil.htm).

Men's songs praise the circumcised hunter-soldier:

"I like death bumping into me" (*ayè kò boma jénjékù*). - "They are brave. Soldiers are brave, grandfather. The initiates are moving towards the circumcision seat. They are soldiers because they are initiates to circumcision" (*aye ndondo; bisojà wo ndondò dà; mboni a kita; bizimbi àwá mboni kita*)(cd 13). - "The soldiers are angry, they are mad" (*bisojà kpa kpa wunde*). - "It is shameful not to be circumcised" (*njibò à bête bòtòsonè kábò la*).

Mixed songs announce the ceremony:

"The big drum, the drum has spoken" (*ndümü ngbè, ndümü a ngomà*). - "The bugler is calling out for the ceremony" (*mómbùli wà we*). - "The *bèkà* song is echoing all over" (*bèkà hòà iye iye*) - "Rhythm of circumcision, come! Circumcision, come!" (*njòmbò yàkà, bèkà yàkà*). - "The echo of the initiates' song" (*ngkèngèlè*);

mark the successive parts of the ceremony:

"Circumciser, come!" (*nkiyàà yàkà*)(cd 3). - "The man of the situation, the circumciser, meet the circumciser" (*bo yà wè, nkiyàà boma nkiyàà*). - "Cut! My brother, be the initiate at the circumcision seat!" (*mànjàngò, bilè nè mboni a kita*)(cd 15). - "Hold this drum, I'm moving towards the circumcision knife" (*mà ké na we ndümü yèké, yèké yù, kongo sima*). - "We are meeting with the panther" (*na màkà tē sùà*) [We are about to brave the ordeal]. - "We see a strange thing in lake Mbangé" (*mbàngè màkelekele*) [We are meeting a supernatural being]. - "Now it's my turn to cut!" (*ngàngà sùò ma à yenà*) [The circumciser has many pupils, and they all want to practice]. - "Oh, mother Ndokiya!" (*mama ndokiya*) [The candidate screams out to his mother for help]. - "The water of the ceremony. We will sit for water" (*ngo yà we; ngàngà kiti ngo yà we*) [The initiate shall sit down and wait for someone to come and wash him with warm water]. - "The eddy deep in the pond is dangerous" (*ndòngò liba ndòngò màbé*) [Here the water is drawn for the remedy that will cure the wound];

or tell the circumciser's misadventures or mysteries:

"Mutokoli, is this true?" (*Mùtókòli sikindi ko*) [In the past, the circumciser had to climb up a tree inside the healing area and show himself naked in order to prove that he is himself circumcised. When it is revealed that Mutokoli is not, he is immediately circumcised by force]. - "Biba, twice, twice, two times" (*Biba ya biba biba bide*) [Biba has already been circumcised, but he is candidate to circumcision a second time¹¹].

Women's songs deal with circumcision and couple issues, such as of *mèngbàa*:

"Women, go straight ahead!" (*wòsè yaya*) [Dance well the *mèngbàa*!] - "The women come and go in order to spread discord" (*wòsè meyi*) - "Bija's feet stick to the rope" (*bijà nòmu àná a kú*) [Bija caught his feet in a rope and cannot finish the *mèngbàa*];

of the candidates' determination to face the ordeal:

"You dance slowly likes this" (*mò ndiándiá wè*) [Facing the danger, the soldier moves slowly] (cd 5). - "Diviner's whistle, the candidates to circumcision want the remedy" (*ngbèngbè tí ngbè, mbóni a bèkà wà ye kò tí mà me*). - "It is true, come knife, be prepared!" (*koà kóngó*

¹¹ This could also allude to adult re-circumcision (Rupp 2003:48; Fūmiss personal observation).

bādo, í ngò lekè tei) - “Go and be circumcised, your heart is already beating, you are already worried” (*à kindà a békà, búmá mò àbe*);

of seduction made possible:¹²

“Friend, do not pretend to be insensitive, take the woman by the arm!” (*aso malà ndé, aso we belè*) - “We will meet in the night” (*kò mbenga té nga makà ato bitì*). - “Maye, come home” (*màye go a nda*);

of quarrelling and disenchanting couple life:

“Sami, my money has caused trouble!” (*sàmi mòni alè à te e we*) [Give it back to me](cd 4).
 “Two beds for you” (*panda bide na mò*) [We sleep apart]. - “Co-spouse, you have a large vagina” (*ngbe ndjólé wáyilè*) [Insult]. - “Husband, I’ve committed adultery” (*kòlè ma ko likombè*).

Non-musical Sounds

As mentioned earlier, the soldiers announce themselves and harangue the candidates by shouting their slogans in call and response:

“Hey, hey, hey, circumcision – aim straight!” (*te, te, te, békà – hayà! hayà!*) - “Chop! You have to cut suddenly! – Wo!” (*djà yawó – wo, yawó – wo, yawó – wo, yawó – wo!*) - “Chop, soldiers! – Wa!” (*te, te, te, bisodja! – wa!*) - “Chop, I want it! – Wa! Wa! Wa!” (*te, te, te, makombo! – wa! wa! wa!*).

These slogans are shouted throughout the ceremony, as soon as the soldiers’ action is engaged. They are doubled by the horn, which replaces the Bangando bell as signalling instrument. In accordance with the ceremony’s different phases, declaiming is more-or-less spaced out: either the leader shouts one of the four phrases separately, or he shouts them one after the other repeatedly (cd 14). They form a constant sound curtain during the operation.

Theoretically, the candidates should withstand the operation in total silence. The Bangando ritual is ruthless in this respect. It is thus precisely at this point that the original ritual has been significantly rearranged. In the Baka version, the sound is at its loudest during the operation. Through the spatial distribution of the assistance, drumming, singing and shouting, the candidate and the circumciser are literally wrapped in an intense envelope of sound: the women turn around the pen singing with all their might; the drums and the horn sound continuously in front of the candidates; the soldiers and the drums are inside the pen, lined against the wall all around them and declamation is frenetic; above them, a young initiate, called “the Chimpanzee”, is in the tree which holds the circumcision seat and emits high screams in order to cover the boys’ hypothetical screams (cd 15). This is said to avoid shame for a candidate who might have cried out during the operation and to help mothers not to worry for their sons, because worry constitutes a psychological state that could jeopardize the ceremony. The

¹² Themes such as couple-life, love, even sex, are recurrent in the danced and sung repertoire of the Baka (Bundo 2001; Fūmiss 2005).

resulting clamour from this sonorous magma, as well as the physical closeness between candidates and sources of sound, act as a powerful anaesthetic and help the candidates endure the operation.

This reveals a fundamental attitude in Pygmy societies: the community as a whole assumes responsibility for the individual.¹³ Not only are the people physically very close to the candidate, but also, the Chimpanzee's screams are a means of expressing fear and pain, which thus become more bearable.¹⁴

THE RITUAL ASSOCIATION, AN ARMY

Whereas the ritual association of the Bangando ceremony reflects the hierarchical structures of the colonial administration, the Baka focus much more on military functions: the ordinary members of the association are "soldiers".

The Baka have always stayed away from tribal wars, even if they did participate in some of them as the Villagers' allies (Joiris 1997:273ss). Thus, the martial symbolism is completely atypical of Baka culture. In fact, it stems from a double borrowing: a direct borrowing from the Bangando, and an indirect borrowing from the German colonists. German colonization brought its military organization to the area, with uniforms and ranks. Although there are some confrontation between women and the initiates among the Bangando, war symbolism is not nearly as explicit in the Villagers' version of the ritual. In focusing on the military aspect, the Baka have strongly enhanced the theatrical side of the ceremony. The interpretation that is given in Messéa links such martial symbolism to the Baka's way of life: the soldier – like Baka men – is a hunter, specifically an elephant hunter.¹⁵ Likewise the soldier must be brave because his life is at stake and his activity calls for the shedding of blood, the candidate to circumcision must be brave to face the operation, his blood and his pain.

The symbolic link between the warrior and the circumcised is expressed in the ritual song *gàlo*, the aim of which is to check that all male participants have undergone circumcision and are allowed to attend the operation. This is a complete reorganization of the original questioning regarding the candidates and their male ascendants. The Baka ritual consists in a song – *àbè gào àbè kòndo; jajo kòndo jajo gào*, "I don't have stripes, I took stripes" – and a ritual question that the circumciser asks each initiate in turn – *bo kè tòpeèmù gào là* "Who is the person who gave you your stripes?" [Who was your circumciser?](cd 6). Several spatial outlays accompany this questioning, one of

¹³ Aka culture of Central Africa shows several examples of this attitude, for example: the *ndòsi* song for an unweaned child whose mother is pregnant again (Arom 1978), and the collective songs with the harp-zither *bògòngò* that express the married man's love and sexual desire for his wife (Fümiss 1998).

¹⁴ I would like to thank Zaki Strougo for his relevant comments regarding how psychological aspects may transcend speech and acts.

¹⁵ This large acceptance of a "big game hunter" seems widespread in the basin of the Congo River. It likens human beings to larger mammals and thus groups soldiers and hunters in the same category as people. My colleagues and myself met this meaning among the Lia of Lukolela in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1990.

which illustrates how deeply the image of the soldier has been integrated into the culture: during the song, the initiates hit their shoulders alternatively, showing their stripes as on imaginary epaulettes.

Finally, Baka creativity in the fabrication of the soldiers' attributes shows how the ritual has been modernized since its introduction. It also reflects the globalization of the arms market. While the first Baka to perform the ritual on their own drew example from the soldiers they saw parading in the *Sous-préfectures*, and made imitations of hunting guns, young people at the beginning of the 21st century draw inspiration from reproductions of weapons they see in specialized magazines that circulate even in the heart of the rain forest.



Figure 3. Initiates (soldiers) performing *abè galo* (photo C. Lussiaa-Berdou)

This is very remote from the Bangando model, and bears witness to the Baka's great adaptability, their taste for scenography, but also their wish to appear as modern citizens. Using raffia as raw material, they make machine guns and grenades, which is a way for them to participate symbolically in the great international military community.

Conclusion

Circumcision has always existed in Baka culture. However, the adoption of the *bèkà* ritual has introduced elaborate dramatization in its practice, as well as the involvement of the entire community in this formerly intimate act of socialization. Circumcision has

gained additional meaning by its integration into the framework of a ritual association similar to other Baka associations and through the invoking of a powerful spirit. In this sense, it has become a public rite of passage: by showing he is able to endure physical and spiritual pain, a boy will become a man and find his place in the society and among the group of initiates.

In his study on social relations embodied by dancing *bè* “song/dance”, Bundo (2001:96) underlines their relevance for the construction of Baka identity. As collective hunting parties become rare; danced events, and in particular rituals, provide the only opportunity for members of a community to assemble: “For that reason, *bè* is the main occasion where social relations manifest themselves. The Baka learn their identities as members of the community through participating in *bè*.” (Bundo *ibid.*)

Identity may be one of the motivations for such borrowing of a whole ritual. Another is the Baka’s propensity for innovation in the field of rituals and the importance of aesthetics to them. As shown by Joiris (1997) and particularly by Tsuru (1998; 2001), it is not unusual to see new rituals, masks and associations created on the basis of existing models. Such innovation reveals a taste for complex aesthetics, which is the only explanation given by the Baka from Messéa regarding the borrowing process: “Alime saw *bèkà* among the Bangando. He liked it and taught it to the Baka of Messéa.” “Kongodi and Yoka heard such and such a song and brought it back from there.”

As a result, several musical categories enrich the musical repertoire, one of which is based on a characteristic polyrhythmic formula. Used as a signifier of a specific social event, it has become a symbolic expression, as is any other Baka rhythm. Consequently, the corresponding musical categories have found their place within the repertoire. Not all the Baka consider the introduction of a new and completely different musical material – the nine-value rhythm – as part of their music: those in the east are extremely reluctant when shown this purely Baka *bèkà*.

With regards to interethnic relations, this new ritual confers additional power on the Baka. While the Villagers’ model subordinates them, in the version of the Western Baka, they are the only ritual actors and take complete charge of the Villagers. Thus, the relations of power between Baka and Villagers are reversed. The borrowing enhances a widespread representation of the Baka, which provides grounds for their ambiguous status as both superior and inferior to their neighbors. In their connection to the world of the forest, Baka are seen as specialists of the spiritual realm. They are the great masters of ritual practices, and as a corollary, of music. This is an essential aspect of “Pygmy culture” that the Baka share with other Pygmy populations. The introduction of an additional ritual enhances the representation of spiritual strength in the eyes of the neighboring populations and counterbalances the Baka’s status of being less integrated into modern society.

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