
Using avoidance to maintain autonomy. The Mbendjele Yaka in Northern Congo-Brazzaville

The Mbendjele Yaka "Pygmies" live in northern Congo-Brazzaville. Mbendjele claim shared ancestry with other forest hunter-gatherer groups in the region such as the Baka, Mikaya, Luma or Gyeli. The Mbendjele calls all these groups Yaka people. Outsiders frequently refer to these groups as Pygmies, and occasionally members of these groups do too. They are forest-living hunter-gatherers considered the first inhabitants of the region by themselves and their farming neighbours, the Bilo. Each Mbendjele associates her or himself with a hunting and gathering territory they refer to as "our forest". Here, local groups of Mbendjele travel between ancestral campsites in favoured places where they will gather, fish, hunt and cut honey from wild beehives depending on the season and opportunities available. From time to time Mbendjele camp near Bilo villages to work for money or goods and occasionally make small farms. In spite of this, Mbendjele value forest activities and foods as superior to all others.

Negative stereotypes of the Mbendjele are widely held by the diverse Bilo ethnic groups in the region, and often publicly asserted. Typically Mbendjele are said to be chimpanzee-like, backward, impoverished, lazy, disgusting, stupid, and childish. They are regularly segregated from Bilo. They may not eat or drink together with their neighbours, sit together on the same bench, or share a cup or a plate. They may not sleep in the same houses. Sexual relations are forbidden, although they occur clandestinely. Many villagers deny that Mbendjele have any basic human rights, frequently describing them as their 'slaves'. Some Bilo claimed to have the right to physically abuse and even kill Mbendjele who disobey them.

Despite such negative portrayals, Bilo value their relations with Mbendjele greatly. Mbendjele are essential labourers for the farming economy at key moments such as at harvest. They are considered great herbalists and healers, and genuine ritual experts. Their performance and musical skills are widely admired, and they perform all the major ceremonies of the Bilo. Villagers greatly value the forest foods Mbendjele provide. Wild honey, game meat, especially elephant and pig, caterpillars, seasonal fruit and wild nuts are considered the finest local delicacies.

Questions that approach their relations with Bilo from the point of view of innate inferiority and subordination visibly annoy Mbendjele. The Mbendjele ideal of their relationship with Bilo is based on friendship, sharing, mutual aid and support, and on equality and respect for one another. When Bilo do not fulfil these expectations they can simply be abandoned.

In stark contrast to the Bilo conception of the Mbendjele as their slaves, the Mbendjele consider themselves free from commitment and binding ties. Able to leave and go whenever they like, they will find new friends if they are not satisfied. In this way the Mbendjele exert a pragmatic and tangible power over the Bilo that allows them to resist domination and maintain their autonomy.

Since Europeans first observed them Mbendjele have used this power in their relations with Bilo. Travelling widely in the Mbendjele area in 1906, Bruel described his experiences at the Pomo (Bilo) village Mene on the Ndoki. When he first visited there were many Mbendjele. On his second visit the

Mbendjele had all gone and the Pomo were complaining that they no longer got meat or ivory, but that they were frightened to look for the Mbendjele in the forest. Bruel observed that these relations

‘... are voluntary and result from different needs each wishes to satisfy. As soon as relations turn to their detriment, as soon as the Babinga [Mbendjele] think they have reason to complain about their [Bilo] associates, they break the relations, emigrate and often go far away in the forest where they will make new friends.’

Bruel explained that the Mbendjele’s mobility permitted them to maintain their autonomy, and disagreed with claims by other (unnamed) European observers that ‘the Babingas are the serfs of the sedentary populations.’ The same practices are observable today, and perform a similar purpose. Mbendjele that were with Sangha-Sangha Bilo before the 1990s are steadily abandoning them in favour of the Bongili and Bodingo Bilo. They explain that these new partners are more generous and respect them better than the Sangha-Sangha did.

The use of avoidance in hunting and gathering societies is widespread and employed to deal with various problems from food shortages to dispute resolution. The facility with which avoidance is used depends crucially on people remaining highly mobile and not losing access to vital assets when they move. Without fixed assets to guard (such as fields or harvested crops), a hunter-gatherer’s entire household can be quickly packed into a woman’s basket, and new huts quickly, but skilfully built at a new location. Mobility also serves to regulate resource use, by ensuring that when natural resources are low, people move on, allowing resources to replenish.

This ease of movement makes avoidance an effective response to conflict. Rather than suffer a difficult, unpleasant or exploitative situation hunter-gatherers often prefer to move away. Maybe because of internal conflict between members of a camp, or between different camps, or in relation to non-hunter-gatherers. Movements can be permanent when people feel grossly abused.

During my fieldwork in Congo I got to know one such group of Mbendjele. In 1991 Sangha-Sangha Bilo paid Mbendjele to conduct a large three-day Ejengi ceremony for them. During the rite some young Bilo kicked dirt on Ejengi’s food as a sign of their dislike for the Mbendjele. This act provoked a huge brawl in which many were injured and fatalities were only narrowly avoided. One young Mbendjele man was set upon by several Bilo youths wielding sticks, and beaten unconscious.

Ngbwiti and Ekwese were disgusted by this behaviour and decided, along with all the other Mbendjele, to abandon the Sangha-Sangha. Some years later some Mbendjele returned and renewed their relations with the Sangha-Sangha. Ngbwiti and Ekwese never did.

Indeed, they resolved never to return to the ‘suk-suku’ (perpetual argument and fighting) of Bilo villages. They prefer to stay in a very remote area of forest known as Ibamba. Ngbwiti explained to me:

“Our forefathers had their eyes on the Bilo. Our fathers told us to do the same. ‘You children of afterwards look after our Bilo. There they are.’ But now we say ‘Aaaaa, what kind of people did you leave us with? Why did they give us these Bilo? They are always tying us up like animals [cheating and deceiving Mbendjele]. They don’t think we are real people. No, we and the forefathers are animals!

So, we left them there with that thought.

They treat us badly; their path is a bad one. So we said 'OK, that's enough, we'll never stay in the same place as them again'. So we left there and came to Ibamba. Now we are well. We took our eyes off the Bilo." (Ngbwiti, 50-year-old kombeti of Ibamba. Ibamba, March 1997).

Ngbwiti and his group have been living entirely in the forest since 1991. They have renounced regular access to the goods obtained through contact with Bilo. Sometimes visiting friends and relatives bring them small gifts of salt, tobacco and old clothes. When I last visited the forest in 2003, they were still in Ibamba.

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