

Baka Representation: Rights, Videomaking, and Indigenous Identity in Southeast Cameroon

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Contents

Introduction: Representation, Rights, and Identity	9
Chapter 1: “Pygmies” in the Western Imaginary.....	32
1. “ <i>Une salle pleine de livres</i> ”	32
2. “Pygmy-ism”	36
3. Ancient Accounts	41
4. The “Age of Discovery” and the “Scientific Revolution”	45
5. The Taxonomists	48
6. Scientific Travel	51
7. The “Noble Savage”	52
8. From Polygenism to Evolutionism.....	54
9. Social Evolutionism and Colonialism.....	58
10. “Pygmies” in Evolutionism.....	61
11. Diffusionism & Culture Circles	66
12. After Evolutionism.....	69
13. Neo-Evolutionism and the Denial of Coevalness	72
14. Hunter-Gatherer Studies.....	75
15. “Pygmies” in Hunter-Gatherer Studies	79
16. The “Pygmy”-“Bantu” Binary	82
17. Revisionism.....	84
18. Revisionism and the Poststructuralist Critique	88
19. The Political Stakes of Revisionism.....	90
20. “Pygmies” and the Poststructuralist Critique	92
21. A Hermeneutic Approach to the “Pygmy Paradigm”	94
22. Conclusion.....	97
Chapter 2: Becoming Baka, Becoming “Pygmies”	99
1. “ <i>Des hommes de petite taille</i> ”	99
2. The “Pygmy”-“Bantu” Binary, Revisited	104
3. Complementarity	107
4. Differentiation	110
5. Inequality.....	113
6. Migration and the “Atlantic Age”	118
7. Baka Identity and Migration	119
8. Baka Oral History.....	124

9. The Slave Trade in Southeast Cameroon	126
10. The Colonial Era (1884-1959)	127
11. Colonialism and the Baka	129
12. Political Authority and Autochthony	132
13. The Independence Era	135
14. Sedentarization, Authority, and Inequality	139
15. Motivations for Sedentarization	142
16. Agriculture-Citizenship-Development	144
17. Sedentarization and Land Dispossession	146
18. Ethnicity-Belonging-Participation	151
19. Baka-“Bantu” Inequality Today	155
20. Conclusion.....	158
Chapter 3: Degradation and Development.....	159
1. “ <i>It was tragic</i> ”	159
2. Degradation Narratives in Anthropology	164
3. Degradation Narratives in Popular Culture	171
4. Sedentarization and Degradation	173
5. Sedentarization and Baka-“Bantu” Inequality	179
6. Development, Traditionalism, and Modernization	184
7. Towards Self-Representation	190
8. A Values-Based Approach	194
9. A Baka NGO	201
10. New Directions.....	205
11. Conclusion.....	211
Chapter 4: Becoming “ <i>Peuples Autochtones</i> ”	215
1. “ <i>Je suis P.A.!</i> ”	215
2. The Rise of International Indigenous Rights and Identity	220
3. Africans in the International Indigenous Rights Movement	223
4. Indigeneity and Autochthony	227
5. The 1994 Forestry Law	235
6. Baka “Becoming Indigenous”	240
7. Okani and Indigeneity	248
8. Land Rights, Conservation, and Ecoguard Abuse.....	253
9. <i>Baka: Face to Face with Society</i>	261

10. Critiques of Indigenous (Self-)Representation.....	272
11. Questions of Identity	292
12. Conclusion.....	295
Chapter 5: Spokespersonship, Identity, and “Deep Actionism”	298
1. <i>Baka je suis</i>	298
2. Messe’s Story	301
3. Baka Spokespersonship.....	312
4. Constituting Local Legitimacy: “Deep Actionism”	320
5. Assimilationist Pressures	327
6. Sketch 1: A Local Challenge to Messe’s Legitimacy	329
7. Perils of Bi-Culturality	334
8. Spokespersonship and Cosmopolitanism	339
9. Constituting External Legitimacy	348
10. Sketch 2: An External Challenge to Messe’s Legitimacy.....	352
11. Constituting National Legitimacy	361
12. Inequality and Spokespersonship	366
13. Conclusion.....	370
Chapter 6: Indigenous Media, Participatory Video, and the Okani Video Project.....	372
1. “ <i>Mais il n’y a rien!</i> ”	372
2. History of Indigenous Media.....	375
3. Purposes of Indigenous Media	379
4. Indigenous Media in Africa.....	381
5. The Baka on Film.....	382
6. The Okani Video Project.....	386
7. History of Participatory Video	389
8. Methodology of Participatory Video.....	393
9. Shortcomings of PV Methodology.....	401
10. Inequality and Gender	407
11. Effects and Audiences of Indigenous Participatory Video	412
12. Advocacy and Affect.....	435
13. Video as Empowerment	442
14. Conclusion.....	448
Conclusion: Participation as Discourse	452

Abstract

Through the first ethnographic case study of an African Indigenous media project, drawing on over a year of research with a Baka “Pygmy” participatory video project in southeast Cameroon, this thesis examines the ways in which Indigenous communities and organizations conduct self-representation to accomplish various objectives, including claiming rights, attracting resources, and challenging outside narratives and discourses. When Indigenous community members produce films and videos about themselves, they take deliberate, often politically-motivated, decisions about what elements of their cultures and communities to include in and exclude from the works that they produce. In this process, questions and debates about who speaks for a community, how the community is portrayed, and the purpose and goals of self-representation often linger just below the surface of representations that portray a community or group as a cohesive, undifferentiated unit. The dissertation examines the link between political representation in meeting and bodies, and representation through the (re-)construction of an image or idea of what it means to be Baka, showing how the advancement of various political, social, and economic interests—both on the part of the Baka and on the part of the individuals and organizations representing them—involves the construction and promulgation of certain images and imaginaries of Baka identity and culture.

Resumé

À travers la première étude de cas ethnographique d'un projet médiatique autochtone africain, s'appuyant sur plus d'un an de recherche avec un projet de vidéo participative au sein des communautés pygmées Baka au sud-est du Cameroun, cette thèse cherche à déterminer la manière dont des communautés et organisations autochtones réalisent des activités d'autoreprésentation afin d'accomplir divers objectifs, notamment revendiquer des droits, attirer des ressources et remettre en cause des narratifs et discours externes. Lorsque les membres d'une communauté autochtone produisent des films et vidéos à propos d'eux-mêmes, ils prennent des décisions intentionnelles, souvent motivées par des considérations politiques, concernant l'inclusion ou l'exclusion des éléments de leurs cultures et communautés au travers des œuvres qu'ils produisent. Dans le cadre de ce processus, des questions et débats concernant qui est autorisé à parler au nom d'une communauté, comment cette communauté est représentée, et le but et les objectifs de l'autoreprésentation persistent sous la surface des représentations décrivant une communauté ou groupe comme une unité cohésive. Cette thèse examine le lien entre la représentation politique dans le cadre de certaines réunions et organes et la représentation à travers la (re-)construction d'une image ou d'une idée de l'identité Baka démontrant comment des efforts à soutenir des buts politiques, sociales et économiques – de la part des Baka et des individus et organisations qui les représentent – nécessite la construction et la promulgation de certaines images et représentations de l'identité et de la culture Baka.

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A Note on Translation and Quotations

Fieldwork for this dissertation, including all focus groups and nearly all interviews, was conducted in French. I have sought to translate these as directly as possible. In some cases, however, I have changed sentence order to make the translation flow, thereby to better convey the speaker's meaning and articulateness.

I translated idioms and colloquialisms as best I could to convey their intended meaning. So, for instance, "*sortir la tête de l'eau*" becomes not "get your head out of the water" but "get your head out of the sand." Nevertheless, the reader will surely notice the reappearance of certain phrases ("at a certain moment," e.g.) that are less common in English than they are in French.

Direct quotes from interviews and focus groups, where there is a recorded record, are indicated by double quotation marks. Paraphrases, where I have attempted to capture an informant's words as accurately as possible, but was relying on handwritten notes, rather than a recording, are indicated by single quotation marks.

For material from interviews and focus groups, unbracketed ellipses indicate that the speaker trailed off or stopped mid sentence. Ellipses in square brackets indicate that I am omitting a section of the quote to improve flow and clarity. For material from written sources, I have adopted the more conventional method of using unbracketed ellipses to denote where I have omitted words or phrases in the middle of a quotation.

Okani is a Baka word that means “let’s go forward.” This is why the image that we have in our logo is a half open circle. The significance is that you have to get out quickly. If not the world will close on the Baka and they will lose everything. Because the world is advancing very quickly. *Okani* is an association that works, in fact, for Baka rights.

- *Messe*

Introduction

Representation, Rights, and Identity

When Indigenous communities produce films and videos about themselves, they must represent their cultural identities as relatively simple and static: The filmic medium is able to capture but a small portion of the nuance and complexity that characterize Indigenous lives and cultures. This disjuncture between reality as it is represented and reality as it actually exists opens a space for strategic self-representation. Indigenous mediamakers take deliberate, often politically-motivated, decisions about what elements of their cultures and communities to include in and exclude from the works that they produce. In this process, questions and debates about who speaks for a community, how the community is portrayed, and the purpose and goals of self-representation often linger just below the surface of representations that portray a community or group as a cohesive, undifferentiated unit. Through the first ethnographic case study of an African Indigenous media project, this thesis examines the effects and dynamics of Indigenous self-representation, including how internal contests and discussions shape the form, purpose and effects of Indigenous media, and how the process of strategic self-representation can, in turn, affect individual and group identities within Indigenous communities.

Indigenous groups around the world have long been the subjects of Western discourses, stereotypes and misrepresentations, and these outside understandings have informed colonization, domination, and discrimination. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, a confluence of developments—the growth and spread of a global Indigenous rights movement, the adoption of a “participatory development” approach by organizations working in rural and marginalized communities, and the increased availability of media technologies, among others—conspired to provide Indigenous communities with the possibility to “write back” to Western

narratives; to tell their own stories, in their own ways, to outside audiences. One of the central question of this dissertation, then, is whether Indigenous “self-representation” can indeed “right the wrong” of centuries of Western misrepresentation, and bring about real benefits for Indigenous people and communities. If Western narratives, tropes, and discourses have conditioned mistreatment, oppression, and neglect, can self-representation help to advance human rights claims, foster desired forms of development, and lead to greater autonomy?

I use the word “representation” to play on its different valences: Representation refers both to political representation in meetings and fora, and also to the construction of an image or idea of what it means to be “Baka,” “Pygmy,” “Indigenous,” etc. As Spivak (1988), describes it, there are “two senses of representation” that often “run together”: “representation as ‘speaking for’, as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation’, as in art or philosophy” (70). As we will see, these two types of representation are inextricably linked. Narratives, tropes, and discourses help to produce the subject positions that are the starting point for political action. By shifting representational traditions and practices, communities can open new possibilities.

*

This ethnography focuses primarily on the Baka, an Indigenous people located primarily in Cameroon, though in some instances I have also drawn on experience working with Bagyelí communities. The Baka and Bagyelí, along with the Bakola and Bedzang in Cameroon and a number of other ethnolinguistic groups in the Congo Basin, are commonly grouped together under the label “Pygmies.” Demographic statistics on “Pygmies” are notoriously unreliable and infrequently updated. Most sources, however, seem to agree that there are roughly 50,000 “Pygmies” living in Cameroon, out of a national population of around 25 million (Vinding, 2006; see also Verdu et al. 2009). The majority of Baka live in Cameroon’s Eastern region, in

and along the Congo Basin Rainforest. Bahuchet (2014) estimates the number of Baka living in the Rainforest, in Cameroon and across the border in Gabon and the Republic of Congo, to be approximately 30,000-40,000 (6). While the Baka are traditionally semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, today many Baka are sedentary, and practice agriculture in addition to traditional hunting/gathering techniques. Many Baka also participate in the cash economy, working for the government, NGOs, as well as resource extraction companies (Njounan Tegomo, Defo, and Usongo 2012, 47).

The category “Pygmy” is a Western one, and “embraces an artificial combination of scattered ethnic groups [that are] culturally and physically different living in Central Africa” on and around the equator (Bahuchet 2012, 11). These groups have some similarities—they tend to be short statured, to practice, or have historically practiced, nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles, and to have strong livelihood and cultural connections to the Congo Basin Rainforest or other rainforest environments; however they speak different languages, have different cultural practices, and, most importantly, consider themselves to be distinct groups. Many people, Baka included, now consider the term “Pygmy” to be pejorative; however, academics, development organizations, and some Baka themselves, continue to use it as a convenient way to refer collectively to groups that share common cultural characteristics and social positioning. Throughout this thesis, I have placed the terms “Pygmy” and “Pygmies” in quotation marks to denote their constructed nature.

As we will see, a whole host of preconceptions about “Pygmies” built up in European thought and culture over centuries, long before any documented encounter between Europeans and the groups that today have come to bear this name. Klieman (2003) refers to this body of Western knowledge as the “Pygmy Paradigm.” The specifics of Western accounts of “Pygmies”

have shifted over centuries—from Homer’s description in the *Iliad* of a race of short statured people “only one *pygmae* (cubit) tall”; through the early taxonomists, who saw the “Pygmies” as the “missing link” connecting the human and animal worlds; to the accounts of European explorers, beginning in the seventeenth century, who applied the idea of “the Pygmy” to the short statured forest dwellers whom they encountered in the Congo Basin; and, finally, to twentieth century anthropology, where the preconceptions and biases of the “Pygmy Paradigm” informed a host of works that portrayed “Pygmies” as primitive “living ancestors” of Western societies. A common feature of all such accounts is the use of the figure of the “Pygmy” as a maker of extreme alterity. To paraphrase the great Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe (1994), throughout the past two millennia, the “Pygmy” has functioned as the European’s “own negated double” (xi). By inhabiting a host of characteristics that the European does not associate with himself—smallness, blackness, closeness to nature—the “Pygmy” becomes a rhetorical and discursive device used for the purpose of self understanding.

The “Pygmy Paradigm” is thus a clear example of a *discourse*. As famously explained by Michel Foucault (especially [1971]2005), discourses comprise “acceptable statements and utterances” about a certain topic. What is acceptable to *say* is, in turn, determined by a “complex structure of knowledge” that frames how people are conditioned to think about and understand a given topic (18). This has been referred to as Foucault’s “decentred conception of power.” Power, for Foucault, is not something that is *possessed* and exercised at will by specific people or groups. Real power is diffuse. It is embedded in peoples’ ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. Because power is contained in and exercised through discourses, rather than by individual wills, power inequalities can reproduce themselves without anyone acting intentionally.

While Foucault's conception of discourse reveals that it would be too simple to say that powerful groups shape history in a manner of their own choosing, however, it would be equally too simple to view various discourses and modes of thought as "master practices" "overdetermining" individual and collective thought and action (Ferguson 1990, 276). Rather, history can be conceptualized, as Gilles Deleuze (1988, 38; cited in Ferguson 1990, 276) puts it, as a "mushy mixture" of the intentional and discursive in which it is difficult to predict outcomes or to determine how these were engendered.

There is no doubt that the discourse of the "Pygmy Paradigm" has real world impacts for the Baka and other groups that have come to bear the "Pygmy" moniker: These groups' status as "Pygmies" conditions a host of interactions with the government, development organizations and other outside actors, non-"Pygmy" neighbours, and other Indigenous communities. In Cameroon today, one's status as a "Pygmy" determines who one can marry, how one is treated, and what development and government programs one can benefit from. For many Baka, Bagyelí, Bakola, and Bedzang, it also influences how one understands oneself.

Western accounts of "Pygmies," especially beginning in the mid-twentieth century, often contrast these groups with neighbouring villager or farmer communities, which are commonly referred to as "Bantu." This binary understanding of belonging and identity, in which "Pygmies" are nomadic hunter-gatherers living primarily in the forest, and "Bantu" are sedentary agriculturalists living in villages, is most commonly associated with the works of Colin Turnbull (e.g. 1965), but has been widely employed in academic and popular accounts, particularly in the sub-field of hunter-gatherer studies. Of course, the idea that "Pygmies" are "pure" "hunter-gatherers" and the "Bantu" are "pure" agriculturalists, if it was ever accurate to begin with, is today a misconception, as both groups partake of various livelihood practices.

The “Pygmy”/“Bantu” binary thus involves a great deal of oversimplification. For one thing, both categories encompass a number of culturally and linguistically distinct groups (Abega and Bigombe Logo 2006a, 55). Moreover, like the term “Pygmy”, the term “Bantu” is something of a misnomer. Not all groups that are categorized as “Bantu” speak Bantu languages. Groups such as the Bangando in southeast Cameroon, for instance, speak languages with Oubangian roots; yet, owing to their livelihood practices, sedentism, and relations with “Pygmies,” both outsiders and local people call them “Bantu” (Rupp 2011). For this reason, throughout this thesis, I also style “Bantu” in quotation marks.

Nevertheless, it is true that, throughout Central Africa, “Pygmy” groups often distinguish themselves—and are distinguished by others—in relation to various villager/farmer groups that they call “Bantu.” Certainly this is the case for the Baka. While the relationship between Baka and the various “Bantu” communities with which they interact is occasionally symbiotic, relations have grown progressively more unequal over time. Today, Baka often experience discrimination and marginalization at the hands of their “Bantu” neighbours (Abega 2006, Joiris 2003).

Owing to their marginalization, cultural distinctiveness, desire to practice traditional livelihoods, and other factors, the Baka and other “Pygmy” groups are, today, widely recognized as “Indigenous peoples” (though, as we will see, this recognition is not universal.) It is common to see representatives from “Pygmy” communities participating in international fora devoted to Indigenous culture and Indigenous rights. This was not always the case, however. Until the 1980s, there was little recognition of African groups as “Indigenous.” While this has now changed, African communities continue to occupy a relatively marginal position within the international Indigenous peoples’ movement and often have considerable difficulty having their

claims to Indigenous identity recognized by their home governments (Hodgson 2011, 2009, 2002; Barume 2014, Lutz 2007). In order to achieve recognition, African Indigenous communities such as the Baka must thus engage in “strategies of extraversion” (Igoe 2006, Bayart and Ellis 2000), performing specific cultural traits to outside audiences.

*

This thesis examines the discursive practices used to construct “Pygmies” as an object of Western knowledge, and how these practices have conditioned various forms of Western intervention. My dissertation, however, is not simply a critique of Western representations, it is an examination of the ways in which the Baka have sought to write back to these representations. Over the past two decades, a number of global phenomena—the expansion of global capital into the Congo Basin Rainforest, the changing nature of development interventions, the advent of dedicated Indigenous human rights instruments, the spread of digital information technology—have conspired to give the Baka increased access to, and ability to add to, the archive of “Pygmy” representations. Whereas, for centuries, the voices of “Pygmies” themselves have been largely absent from Western representations, these voices are increasingly in dialogue with Western development workers, anthropologists, filmmakers, etc. Through a number of means, including, notably, the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), the Baka are contributing to the (re-)construction of their own image. Growing access to mediamaking technologies and international networks has allowed people in “Pygmy” communities to participate in outside discourses and turn them to their own purposes. Mediated self-representation, I will argue, is always in dialogue with previous traditions of representation, but it can also serve as a way to challenge and reshape these traditions to achieve local objectives. As we will see, this reshaping of narratives and tropes can have concrete, real world consequences

for “Pygmy” communities. If Baka history, politics, and development have been shaped by a particular discourse—that is, the “Pygmy Paradigm”—created largely in the West, then Baka self-representation can be seen as the interjection—maybe the first interjection—of Baka voices into that narrative.

Baka engage in “strategic extraversion” for a variety of purposes: to achieve recognition as “Indigenous peoples” and claim Indigenous rights, to attract resources to their communities, to seek fame and express cultural pride, or to counter stereotypes and misrepresentations. Sometimes, these objectives are in tension with one another. Some aims, such as achieving recognition as “Indigenous peoples,” or attracting resources, may be best served by playing on or emphasizing Western tropes, while others may require debunking these same narratives. Baka self-representation thus does not involve a simple “writing back” to Western representation, a correction of the historical record, or a challenging of stereotypes and tropes. Rather, Baka cannily and strategically engage with the Western “Pygmy Paradigm,” at times challenging and at other times reinforcing Western understandings, in order to advance group and individual socio-political projects.

Of course, the internal dynamics of Baka and other “Pygmy” communities are complex and multifaceted. The term “*self*-representation,” then, can be something of a misnomer that serves to obscure internal differences and inequalities. Most of what is labelled *self*-representation is not, in fact, representation of the *self* at all. Rather, what we are talking about is representation of a particular group or community by someone who is a member of that group or community. The use of the term *self* makes it seem as though that group of community is a single, cohesive unit. This, of course, is never the case. As we will see, there are all sorts of differences, shades, and gradients between different community members. These differences

become even more exaggerated when one is talking not about a single community, but a large, geographically dispersed group.

Not all community members participate equally in the process of self-representation, and community members have different opinions on the proper form and purpose of external representations of their group. This includes contestations about when and how to deploy outside narratives such as the “Pygmy Paradigm” to accomplish strategic goals, such as attracting resources to the community, and when to challenge or seek to debunk these same stereotypes. An individual or group that will benefit from promulgating a stereotype is more likely to do so. As we will see, broader acceptance of this deployment of outside narratives rests in part on whether this benefits the community as a whole, or only a certain individual or group of individuals.

*

I began this research project due to an interest in Indigenous media—that is, “forms of media expression conceptualized, produced, and/or created by Indigenous peoples across the globe” (Wilson and Stewart 2008a, 2). The literature on Indigenous media shows how communities are using media to respond to Western stereotypes and construct their own images. This self-representation, in turn, can have real political impacts. Having researched Indigenous media for my Master’s degree, and, afterwards, worked at the Film and Video Centre of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), I had noticed a paucity—actually, an almost complete absence—of African works in Indigenous media festivals and programs, as well as in the academic literature on the subject. Wilson and Stewart’s otherwise excellent *Global Indigenous Media*, for instance, does not contain a single African example.

There are many reasons for the underrepresentation of African communities in discussions of global Indigenous media, including the relatively late spread of affordable,

portable media technologies into rural and remote African communities (Armes 1987, 214). The most important reason for the relative dearth of African Indigenous media, however, is that, as noted above, until the late 1980s, African communities did not participate in the global Indigenous rights movement. They did not consider themselves Indigenous in a global sense and were not generally seen as Indigenous by others.

As the discourse of Indigenous rights and identity spread to African communities beginning in the late 1980s, however, so too did the practice of Indigenous mediamaking. Given the different histories, practices, and other particularities of African communities such as the Baka, an in-depth study of an African Indigenous media project was both timely and necessary. I thus set out to find a media project in African Indigenous communities with which I could conduct my research. In the end, however, the project came to me. I first encountered Okani's work at NMAI, as part of an exhibition of community-made Indigenous videos from around the world, produced as part of a project called *Conversations with the Earth*. The night before the show opened to the public, we held a private screening for the three dozen or so Indigenous filmmakers who had traveled to New York to see their projects exhibited. The screening featured a number of works, including a "video dictionary" made by a Baka "Pygmy" community in eastern Cameroon.

The film begins rather unremarkably. We see a man standing next to a thatched cabin. Smoke billows into the frame from a cooking fire. There is a buzzing noise in the background. Flies? The man points at the cabin and gives the name in Baka for "camp": *bala*. The film continues and we see different men giving the Baka names of different objects and tools: a pot, a plate, a spoon, a knife. As the video progresses, however, it becomes clear that there is also a narrative at work. We see the men light a fire, after which one straps into a harness woven from

reeds, climbs a tree, and hacks at the trunk with a machete. Then, he reaches into the opening he has created and pulls out an enormous honeycomb. In the audience at the *Conversations with the Earth* exhibition, there were audible gasps of wonder and scattered applause.

The example of the Baka video dictionary illustrates a number of interrelated phenomena that I will explore in this thesis: The way in which circulating videos can build “real world” solidarity and political connections, the way in which Baka communities participate in the international Indigenous “mediascape” (Appadurai 1996), and the affective quality of video and how this links to political action. Because it was conceptualized and filmed by members of the community that is depicted in the film, it raises fewer questions about the power dynamics inherent in representation. It would thus seem to avoid some of the thornier questions about the power dynamics inherent in outside representation. My case study of Baka videomaking, however, will reveal that the dynamics of mediamaking in marginalized Indigenous communities are much more complex than they might appear on the surface.

A few months later, I found myself sitting in the front seat of a battered grey pickup truck, next to Messe Venant,¹ the director of Okani. Messe had collected me from an internet café on the main drag of Bertoua, a town of about 90,000 in Cameroon’s East region, where the organization had its headquarters. Messe took me to his home, located in the neighbourhood of Tioro, a quiet, pleasant area away from the main part of the city that felt more like a small village than a bustling regional capital. In the Okani offices, located in a separate building next to Messe’s house, he introduced me to the other staff: Romial, Messe’s younger brother and the organization’s tech wizard, who edited all of the films they produced, and Noël, Messe longstanding friend and colleague on various development projects.

Later I was to meet the other members of Okani's "core team." André was dynamic, enthusiastic and almost constantly smiling. He had started work with Okani relatively recently and was a decade or two younger than the other Okani staff. Joachim was one of Okani's original participatory video facilitators. He no longer worked full time on the project, but would help out when the organization conducted work in his home village of Loussou. Charles was not Baka but Liberian, but had lived from many years in a Baka village, where he had run his own development organization. He had recently relocated to Bertoua for personal reasons and Messe had hired him on to help with Okani's work.

Over the next sixteen months, I conducted participant observation research by working alongside this team as a participatory video trainer and facilitator. Messe generously offered for me to live with him and his family in his house next to the Okani offices, which I did for the duration of my time in Cameroon (though I also occasionally benefitted from the generosity of a Canadian friend who had an apartment in the capital, Yaoundé, with hot water and internet access.)

Living at Messe's was supposed to be a temporary measure. My intent had been to use it as a jumping off point, but to eventually move to a Baka village. Messe is Baka, but his wife, Edwidge, is not. While Messe participates in some Baka practices, his family's lifestyle is much in line with that of the other residents of Tioro, none of whom (as far as I know) are "Pygmies." Indeed, in his neighbourhood, Messe and his family usually "passed" as "Bantu." People knew that Messe ran an organization devoted to "Pygmy" rights. They did not know he was a "Pygmy" himself. To study the Baka, I thought, I needed to live in a more "Baka" milieu. I needed to get to a "real" village with "real" Baka.

I had always planned to have a multi-sited dimension to my research, and I had outlined this in my proposal. We can find the groundwork for multi-sited approaches in the 1980s “crisis of representation.” Indeed, it is no accident that the theorists we associate with the birth of multi-sited ethnography, most notably George Marcus (e.g. 1995), were also some of the prime movers of the literary turn. The broader questioning of ethnographic authority in works such as *Writing Culture* involved a calling into question of the ontology of the traditional “fieldsite.” As with ethnographic description more generally, the fieldsite was revealed to be a construction of the ethnographer, who was then called upon to account for “the complex processes that go into constructing it” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 5).

The revelation that all fieldsites were, in a certain sense, constructions of the ethnographer, opened up possibilities for re-imagining how and where anthropological research was conducted. Rather than existing “out there” as bounded objects, anthropological fieldsites were conceptualized as “emergent object[s],” “existing across multiple scales and locations” (Marcus 1995, 102). The move to multi-sited ethnography also implied a more egalitarian, co-produced form of ethnographic knowledge. Instead of claiming status as an “objective” outsider, observing research subjects in their native “cultural milieu,” the ethnographer had to acknowledge the ways in which he and his subjects were “embedded within the same multi-sited field [and] conversant in similar discourses” (Sorge and Roddick 2012, 292).

I now realize, however, that my conception of my field research was, in many ways, informed by quite traditional notions of what constituted a proper “fieldsite.” In planning my research, I had assumed that, in spite of my intention to “follow” Baka mediamakers as they made films and exhibited their works, I would spend much of my time living in a Baka village;

that I would learn and communicate in the Baka language; and that I would accompany Baka community members as they undertook “traditional” hunting and gathering activities.

Gaining entry to Baka villages, however, proved more difficult than anticipated. Shortly after I arrived at Messe’s, Okani’s truck broke down. Planned work in Baka villages, which I was hoping would allow me to make local connections in order to transition to my “real” research site, was postponed. Citing safety concerns, Messe refused to allow me to travel on my own to the villages. (I also suspect that Messe had reservations about a foreign researcher associated with his organization “freelancing” in the villages, without his oversight. I would come to learn that the relationship between Okani and the communities where it worked was quite delicate.) Moreover, in the few visits that Messe and I had paid to the villages prior to the truck breaking down, community leaders had seemed reluctant when I broached the plan of living in the village full time. I thus found myself spending most of my days working in the Okani offices next to Messe’s house, where I helped Romial, Noël, André, Charles, and other staff plan videomaking activities and other development projects. Not all of the staff spoke Baka so we communicated in French.

I felt concerned that I was not accomplishing the research goals that I had set out for my dissertation committee and funders. But I also did not want to push Messe. I did not want to impose a research agenda on him, his organization, or the communities where Okani worked. So, rather than forcing the issue, I elected to wait. I am glad that I did. In retrospect I realize how damaging it could have been—to my research, to Okani’s reputation, and to Baka communities themselves—if I had insisted on conducting research on my own terms. Indeed, while I was in the field I witnessed several examples of researchers and development workers doing this, with terrible results.

Gradually, I began to reconceptualize my research site. Perhaps my research site was Okani itself, I thought. I began to look at the processes by which decisions were made within the organization. I studied the backgrounds and social roles of Okani's staff and collaborators and how these influenced their roles and positions in the organization. I looked at the discursive practices of staff members in relation to Baka rights and identity.

As I honed in on the relationship between Messe and the other Okani staff and the Baka communities they worked, new research questions emerged; or, rather, my questions were reframed. I was still interested in how the Baka were engaging in strategic self-representation to achieve goals such as counteracting stereotypes, claiming Indigenous rights, and attracting resources to their communities, but I realized that I needed to pay much more attention to the power dynamics and internal differences involved in this process of self-representation. When we say that "the Baka" or "Pygmies" or "Indigenous peoples" are representing themselves, what does this actually mean? Within all of these categories are myriad subgroups and individuals, all with different goals, perspectives, and, abilities.

The Baka videos that I had seen back in New York were presented as "Baka self-representation." Really, though, they were made by Okani, with the help of outside organizations and funders. The Baka Indigenous media that I had seen was being *shot* in the villages, but it was being *made* in Okani's offices in Bertoua. This was where the films were conceptualized, where the workshops were planned, where the raw footage was edited, where connections with the outside organizations that funded Okani's activities and facilitated the distribution of the films were formed and maintained. And the *people* making the films were not "traditional" Baka living in remote villages, but urban, cosmopolitan Baka—many with complicated backgrounds and identities.

Over the next sixteen months, I accompanied Messe and the other Okani video facilitators as they travelled to villages (the truck, thankfully, got fixed), met with funders and collaborators, and attended meetings and conferences of development NGOs and Indigenous rights organizations. I also travelled to events, both in Cameroon and internationally, where Okani's works were being exhibited. I saw how Okani's representation of the Baka—in both senses of the word—both worked with and pushed back on, outside discourses, including the “Pygmy Paradigm” and understandings of “indigeneity,” and I saw how Messe's cosmopolitanism allowed him to serve as an effective spokesperson, but also how it could create challenges and tensions when his identity was called into question.

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In undertaking this fieldwork, I sought to use a *collaborative ethnography* approach: “an approach to ethnography that *deliberately* and *explicitly* emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and...through the writing process” (Lassiter 2005, 16). According to this approach, it is no longer sufficient to do research *and* give something back to your research “subjects,” nor is it sufficient to design research projects such that they have disciplinary legitimacy *and* local public policy or political impacts. Rather, research subjects—now re-envisioned as co-authors and collaborators—must be intimately involved in shaping the research project.

This view is consistent with Francis Nyamnjoh's (2012) call in his article “Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa,” for a move from anthropology as “ventriloquy” to anthropology as co-production or *connaissance*, literally meaning co-birth:

Co-production calls for team work over and above professional collaboration, along with multi- and transdisciplinary endeavours, to include the very people we study in the conceptualisation and implementation of the research process.... The

era of the anthropologist as “lone ranger”, if ever it existed, is over—creative team effort beyond lip service is the way of the future. (84-5)

What Lassiter and Nyamnjoh are arguing for here closely resembles techniques such as participatory action research. These approaches have been used in the fields of international development and education, among others, since the 1970s. Indeed, this is actually the approach that Okani uses in Baka communities. Until relatively recently, however, there have been few examples of participatory action research in anthropology.

Part of the reason for this, I believe, is a reluctance to give up ethnographic authority. One of the hallmarks of participatory research is that it prioritizes *process* over product. Moreover, participatory approaches prioritize community buy-in and consensus over typical matrices used for judging success. Community dialogue is itself considered a positive outcome, rather than a means to an end. As Barbara Rose Johnston (2010) argues, doing participatory research means adopting a more “fluid and flexible vision of what constitutes “success”” for our research projects. This “may have less to do with a traditional scholarly product...and more with the process of communicating between project partners” (cited in Mullins 2011, 237).

There is a link here to what Hale (2006) calls “activist research,” “a method through which” the ethnographer “affirms a political alignment” with her subject group and “allow[s] dialogue with them to shape each phase of the [research] process” (97). Activist researchers “are generally aligned with the peoples they study and intend for their research to contribute to the “freedom” and empowerment of their research communities” (98).

Very early in my research, I realized that I would not be content to merely *study* Okani’s work; I would be committed to helping *advance* this work. Moreover, I conceptualized my writing not as an objective account, but as an effort at, as much as possible, allowing Messe, Romial, Noël, André, Charles, and the other Okani staff to tell their own stories. For a project

that is, fundamentally, about self-representation, this seemed only appropriate. Indeed, had I been bolder (and thought of the idea earlier in my research!) I might have made this entire dissertation a sort of oral history, with Okani staff and other Baka community members doing the bulk of the narration. As it stands, the reader will notice that I have elected to include rather extensive quotes from my informants, particularly in the later chapters.

Of course, the hand of the outside author is still very much present here, and I have sought to acknowledge this throughout the dissertation as well. Spivak (1988) warns us of the danger of the “the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent non representer who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (87). In most cases, I asked the questions that elicited the quotes; I translated them, chose them, truncated them, and placed them within the broader text. There is undeniably a power dynamic at play here. Somewhat cheekily, Messe once asked me, as we were concluding one of our early interviews: “So, you’re just going to write down everything I say, and you’re the one who will end up with a PhD?” As Mosse (2006) notes, “the notion that power inequalities between interpreter and the interpreted can be dialogued away, or ‘written out,’ is...obviously false; and...the analytical cost of this pretence is considerable” (937).

My efforts to give voice to my informants and to align myself with their political objectives, then, should not be conceived as an effort at eliminating the power dynamic inherent in representation. This dissertation, which is about local efforts to write back to, reshape, and repurpose outside narratives and tropes, cannot help but be informed by these very same discourses. Nevertheless, it was important to me that the voices of my informants—particularly Messe’s voice—were present in the text in a significant way. I hope this has created a richer, more evocative narrative. By reading an informant’s words (even if, in this case, they have been translated into a different language), one can get a sense of their personality. Indeed, I often

found my key informants jumping off the page as I re-read my transcriptions of their interviews. I wanted readers of this thesis to share the company of these remarkable people, whose take on Baka videomaking often more perceptive, and always more entertaining, than my own.

Before concluding, I must acknowledge an important gap here: The attentive reader will notice a relative lack of female informants in the pages that follow. I did interview a number of female community members, including a series of interviews with Baka and Bagyelí women working for community-based development organizations. I did not, however, achieve gender parity in my interviews, either in number of interviews, or in length of engagement. There were a number of reasons for this. Most importantly, during my time in Cameroon, only one of Okani's full-time staff members was a woman. She was a female administrator/secretary who was not Baka or Bagyelí. While I interviewed many community members who did not work for or with Okani, my longest, most frequent, and most in-depth interviews—both formal and informal—were with Messe and his colleagues. The Okani staff members with whom I worked everyday were more accessible and, more importantly, I was able to build a relationship of trust with them over the course of my research, which resulted in more candour in their answers. By contrast, when I interviewed Baka community members in the villages where Okani works, or staff members from other Baka and Bagyelí organizations, I was, in a sense, “going in cold.” Most of these informants knew me, but not well, and they were thus more guarded in their answers.

As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Six, the lack of women working for Okani is symptomatic of a broader inequality within many “Pygmy” development organizations. (As it is, indeed, in development organizations in Cameroon more broadly.) In part, this is due to unequal gender relations within Baka communities. While there has long been gender differentiation in Baka and other “Pygmy” communities, there is some evidence that gender inequality has

increased in recent decades, as Baka have increasingly sedentarized and entered the cash economy (Townsend 2015). When Okani was founded, for instance, the organization began by conducting an initial training for community members who wished to become participatory video facilitators. Of the ten participants in this training, only two were women. Messe explained to me that this was because many husbands did not want to let their wives participate. I faced similar challenges in trying to access female informants. Many women were hesitant to sit down alone with a male interviewer, even in full public view, for fear of sparking jealousy from their husbands or gossip from other community members.

At least since the insights for the “reflexive turn” in anthropology in the late twentieth century, we have been well-aware that all ethnographies are situated in a certain perspective. They reflect the preconceptions and biases of their authors and amplify some voices while omitting others. They are, at best, “partial truths” (Clifford 1986). This dissertation is no different. It is certain that a different researcher—a female one, for instance—even if working in the same way, at the same time, with the same organization, would have elicited different information and produced a very different account.

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The chapters that follow provide a detailed account of the narratives and tropes that inform Baka representation, how the Baka interact with and help shape these narratives and tropes, and the internal and external power dynamics of Baka “self-representation.” Chapter One offers a detailed genealogy of the “Pygmy Paradigm,” which is the foundational body of outside representations that shapes external and, to a certain extent, internal, understandings of Baka and identity. Like it or not, Baka representation is always in dialogue with this archive. Drawing on Foucault’s (e.g. [1971]2002) genealogical approach to history, I examine how Western

representations of “Pygmies,” beginning in Ancient Greece, have come to constitute a *discourse* that shapes the ways in which people think and speak about the groups that are today called “Pygmies”—with real political consequences for the groups in question. Among the most recent contributions to this archive are works from the “hunter-gatherer studies” school of anthropology, which portrayed “Pygmies” as “living ancestors” of “modern” human societies (Lee and Devore 1968; Lee 1974, 1992; Leacock and Lee 1982).

The genealogy of the “Pygmy Paradigm” is important to keep in mind for the subsequent chapters, in particular Chapter Two, which provides a history of how the Baka came to be known—and to know themselves—as a distinct group, and inhabit their current territory in southeast Cameroon. This chapter traces Baka history from the Bantu expansion (circa 4000 BCE) to the present day. While, where possible, I included accounts from Baka oral history, the majority of sources available on the history of the Baka come from the Western archive and thus are both informed by and contribute to the “Pygmy Paradigm.” Nevertheless, as this chapter will show, there is evidence that, even prior to the arrival of Europeans explorers and colonists in West Africa in the late nineteenth century, “Pygmies” constituted a “distinct social category” (Moïse 2011), even though some of the characteristics that would later come to be associated with this category were drawn from the Western “Pygmy Paradigm.” This chapter also shows how Baka history was shaped by interaction with other groups, first “Bantu” farmers and villagers, and later Western colonists, missionaries, development workers, etc.

The result of this historical trajectory is that Baka and other “Pygmy” groups today often exist in a subordinate, marginalized position, facing discrimination from “Bantu” and other non-“Pygmy” groups. This supposed “underdevelopment” has served to justify a host of outside interventions in Baka communities, first by missionaries, then through government

“sedentarization” programs, and more recently through Western development projects. Chapter Three examines how the logic of “development” has been applied to Baka and other “Pygmy” communities in Cameroon. Contemporary development interventions, I argue, have often been based on *degradation narratives*. Informed by the “noble savage” portrayals of hunter-gatherer studies in particular, and the “Pygmy Paradigm” more broadly, outsiders have sought to help the Baka either to “return” to traditional lifestyles, or to “catch up” to modernity. As I will show, these projects are based on a misunderstanding of Baka values and identity. Building on Robert Moïse’s (2011; 2014) “alternative model of pygmy history and identity,” I argue for an understanding of Baka identity rooted in widely held cultural *values* of “autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and creativity/play” (Moïse 2011, 5), rather than in specific livelihood practices. This approach can both serve to debunk degradation narratives, and bring about outside interactions with Baka communities based on respect, and self-representation. Such interactions do not seek a particular outcomes—be it a return to “tradition” or an embrace of “modernity”; rather, they focus on safeguarding the Baka’s *right* to determine their own pathways.

The final three chapters of the dissertation examine how Baka are engaging in self-representation, including for the purposes of claiming and exercising certain rights. Of course, it will quickly become clear that self-representation and rights advocacy is not a neat or simple process. Not only do efforts at self-representation continue to be informed by interactions with outsiders—with attendant power dynamics and misunderstandings—but such efforts can also lay bare *internal* differences and disagreements within Baka communities. Chapter Four examines self-representation through the lens of *Indigenous rights*, showing how, beginning in the early 1990s, some Baka, aided by sympathetic outsiders, sought to identify themselves as “Indigenous

peoples” and to use this identification to claim rights to land and other resources, pleading their case through international fora such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. As we will see, such efforts can, ironically, include making use of the tropes of the “Pygmy Paradigm,” but for local purposes. Chapter Five examines the internal power dynamics of self-representation. Building on my participant observation research, I explore the relationship between Okani and the communities where it works, showing how Messe and other Okani staff members draw on complex, hybrid identities to function as an elite group of *spokespeople*, representing Baka communities to the wider world. Finally, Chapter Six examines self-representation through the lens of *media*, using case studies of many of Okani’s participatory videos to show the different purposes and audiences of mediated self-representation, as well as some of the shortcomings of such an approach.

As I will make clear across all six chapters, there is no way to escape the “Pygmy Paradigm” or to create a “true” or unproblematic representation of a community. Successive representations are always informed by previous ones, even when explicitly envisioned as response or critique. And surely there will be subsequent views and approaches that will find fault with and/or seek to build on the participatory approach employed by Okani. There is no “there there.” It is, of course, turtles all the way down. The Conclusion completes the *ouroboros*, applying the same genealogical approach used in previous chapters to examine the notion of participatory self-representation, showing that this too functions as a discourse, masking internal and external inequalities and power relations, even as it helps advance the social, political, and cultural objectives of some Baka community members.

Chapter 1

“Pygmies” in the Western Imaginary

1. *“Une salle pleine de livres”*

In the late 2000s, Messe Venant, Director of Okani, the Baka human rights NGO with which I conducted my doctoral research, travelled to Japan to give a presentation at Kyoto University. His Japanese host offered to show him around, and Messe soon found himself in a research centre, in a room full of books about “Pygmies.” Messe describes the experience of standing in this room, in the midst of such a vast archive, as overwhelming. Here was a physical manifestation of centuries of outsiders writing and thinking about his people. These writings have had a huge impact on the lives of Baka and other “Pygmies”; they have helped to condition the ways in which these communities are perceived and treated by the government, by their neighbours, and by outsiders in general. And yet Messe, in his own estimation, was perhaps the first “Pygmy” to stand in this room.

Messe is highly literate. At the time of this writing, he was, to the best of his knowledge, the only Baka with a Master’s degree. Even for him, however, it would have been impossible to digest a fraction of this huge swath of material. It would have taken him a lifetime, he thought, to read all the books. Not to mention that many of the volumes were in Japanese. Messe imagined a less educated Baka from one of the communities where his organization worked standing in his place. If the person could not read, as is the case for the majority of Baka Messe’s age, all of the books would appear as the Japanese books did to Messe: As indecipherable symbols. Inaccessible. Obscure.

Messe told me this story in the course of one of our frequent conversations about the role of outside researchers, such as myself, in Baka communities. As the scope of the archive that Messe saw in Japan illustrates, “Pygmies” are one of the most researched groups in the world. Certainly this is true in anthropology where, owing to popular works such as Colin Turnbull’s *The Forest People* (1961), they have become ethnographic subjects *par excellence*. The continued outside fascination with “Pygmies” is readily apparent in southeastern Cameroon in the communities where Okani works. This is particularly the case in villages located close to the regional capital of Bertoua, where I lived with Messe and his family over the course of sixteen months in 2013 and 2014. During that time, it seemed that there always a graduate student or a development worker in town collecting information for a report, or trying to assess the feasibility of a planned development project. These researchers would stay for a week or two at the Catholic mission down the street for Messe’s house; or, if they had more generous research funding, across town at the Mansa Hotel, which had a pool and a decent restaurant. Owing to his international connections, Messe often served as a local contact for these visitors. While I was staying with him, I would accompany him when he toured them around. We would collect the visitor in the Okani pickup truck and drive to one of the Baka villages close to Bertoua.

These outsiders, many of whom had never been to a “Pygmy” community before, all came with pre-existing understandings of “Pygmy” culture. They had, to a certain extent, accessed the massive archive of thought and writing about “Pygmies” that was physically embodied by the books in that room in Kyoto. I was no different. When I first visited Cameroon in 2012 to begin planning my research, I too carried with me a preconceived “Idea of the Pygmy” (see Klieman 2003). One’s first experience of a foreign culture is usually mediated through books, films, and images. I do not remember my first exposure to “Pygmies.” I vaguely

remember a cartoon from my childhood in which a rotund, white explorer was attacked by ant-sized, spear-wielding Africans while he was sleeping.¹ Later there would have been various newspaper articles and Discovery Channel-type documentaries. These representations always showed “Pygmies” hunting deep in the forest, never in villages. They were portrayed as being a “part of nature” in a way that Western people like me, it seemed, were not.

Of course, by the time I began my research in Cameroon, I had studied anthropology for several years. I had read and watched a wide array of sources about “Pygmies,” including videos produced by “Pygmy” communities themselves. Consequently, I had disabused myself of many of the more simplistic stereotypes that continue to characterize popular understandings. As theorists like Edward Said (1995) and V.Y. Mudimbe (1988; 1994) correctly point out, though, even images and understandings that one has disavowed continue to inform perception, lingering on as palimpsests behind more progressive narratives (see below).

As for the academic and development researchers whom Messe and I accompanied to Baka villages, they too tended to be well-read, and to have a relatively critical understanding of popular representations of “Pygmies.” That being said, many outsiders (and, indeed, Cameroonians) whom I encountered during my research remained susceptible to stereotypes and misinformation.

I heard the following story, for instance, from André, a young staff member of Okani. André resides in Loussou, a Baka village about half an hour from Bertoua. According to André, a few years prior to my arrival in Cameroon, a group of European tourists or missionaries (he was not sure which) had arrived unannounced in Loussou. A Cameroonian guide had brought them to the village to “see the Pygmies.” When the Europeans found people socializing in the village, they asked if the Baka could go into the forest so that they could see “real” Baka culture.

Moreover, André told me, the Europeans, perhaps perceiving the villagers' t-shirts, pants, and plastic sandals to be "inauthentic," demanded that the Baka take these off. Because of his education and French language skills André found himself in the position of negotiating with the outsiders. He suggested, half jokingly, that if the Europeans wanted the Baka to strip naked and run around the forest, then the tourists should set an example and take off their clothes first. The Europeans were horrified. The Baka's natural state, they seemed to think, was to be naked and in the forest. It was quite another thing for "civilized" Europeans to strip naked in front of an entire "native" village! André protested that he did not understand the difference. The situation devolved into a yelling match and, eventually, the outsiders left the village, though not before one of the European women had asked to grope André's posterior to "see if he had a tail."

This is a particularly egregious example of stereotyping (to say nothing of entitlement and disrespect). Better informed researchers, however, also have their own preconceptions. What is consistent here is the revelation that all outsiders arrive in Baka and other "Pygmy" communities with preconceived notions.

There is a massive archive of writings about "Pygmies" in the West, beginning with the Ancient Greeks. For centuries, these narratives developed almost completely independently from the people who would come to bear their burden. For a long time, the Baka have been like Messe in that room in Japan, surrounded by representations made by others. This long history of external representation is no trivial matter. As we will see, outside representations of "Pygmies" have had—and continue to have—real political, social, and economic effects for the communities that have come to bear this moniker. These representations have conditioned the ways in which outsiders have interacted with "Pygmy" communities, how colonial and national administrations have sought to govern them, how anthropologists have studied them, and how

development agencies have tried to “help” them. More recently, Baka and other communities in the Congo Basin have begun to make use of outside narratives, turning these representations to their own political advantage. In so doing, these outside narratives have come to influence the ways in which they perceive their own identities and culture, and, for some, the category of “Pygmy” has become a source of identity and belonging.

Understanding the long history of Western representations of “Pygmies” is vitally important to any account of contemporary Baka representation. This chapter will trace the history of Western representations of “Pygmies,” beginning with the Ancient Greeks, examining the ways in which later representations built on previous ones. I draw here on John and Jean Comaroff’s (1992) “historical anthropology,” which is “dedicated to exploring the processes that make and transform particular worlds—processes that reciprocally shape subjects and contexts, that allow certain things to be said and done” (31).

2. “Pygmy-ism”

This chapter’s goal is not to provide a definitive history of the people who are today referred to as “Pygmies.” Rather, this chapter provides an account of “Pygmy” as a concept or category of thought. Certainly, the cultural practices, beliefs, and histories of groups such as the Baka, the Bagyeli, the Ba’aka, and other forest peoples of Central Africa are relevant to the way in which this category has and continues to operate. As we will see, however, the category “Pygmy” has historically had much more to do with the preoccupations and values of people in the West than with “Pygmies” themselves, even as these latter have taken up the category and turned it to their own purposes. Indeed, in spite of the diversity of historical accounts related to “Pygmies,” these exhibit one key commonality: From the time of the Ancient Greeks until the nineteenth century, accounts were not based on any in-depth or long-lasting interactions with the

people who are today referred to as “Pygmies.” Rather, “Pygmies” functioned as a conceptual or narrative device for Western discussions about human nature and diversity.

While some scholars have lately sought to recover Indigenous oral histories in order to provide an account of the traditions and values of various “Pygmy” groups (relatively) independent of Western projections and stereotypes (e.g. Moïse 2014), dominant understandings of Pygmies, both abroad and in Central Africa, continue to exhibit the traces of Western legends, assumptions, and preoccupations formed long before any actual encounter or exchange between Westerners and “Pygmies” occurred. For this reason the historian Jan Vansina (1990) argues that the existing literature on “Pygmies” is more useful as an account of Western thought than as an account of “Pygmy” history or culture.

Relevant here is Michel Foucault’s (e.g. [1971]2002) genealogical approach to history. Foucault rejects the idea that concepts increase in rationality or refinement as history progresses. Instead of teleological narratives and the search for the origins of concepts, he argues, one must undertake a close analysis of the multidirectional “*displacements* and *transformations*” in the ways in which concepts operate. This involves “various fields of constitutions and validity..., successive rules of use..., [and] many theoretical contexts” (Foucault [1972]2002, 5; emphasis in original; see also Canguilhem [1966]1991). History here is conceptualized not as a linear trajectory but as “a field of entangled and confused parchments...that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (Foucault [1971]1984, 79). As Foucault’s metaphor makes clear, history is only available as palimpsest. A hermeneutics of history always departs from the present and seeks to discover the confused, disjointed, and often unintentional ways in which concepts, categories, and ideas have come to inhabit their present meanings and functions.

While Foucault moves away from a structuralist approach, in which powerful groups and individuals are thought to shape history for their own purposes, domination is nevertheless central to his analysis. This domination, however, is not straightforward; it is exercised as much by concepts and discourses as by human agents. In his later work on governmentality (e.g. Foucault 2007), Foucault places greater emphasis on agency, examining not only discourses and “historical system[s] of thought,” but also “the interactions of various actors and systems of knowledge” (Mosse 2013, 229), even while acknowledging that these actors themselves are “constituted...by various regimes of governmentality” (Golub 2014, 115). As Alex Golub (2014) explains, categories of knowledge and actions interact. Categories commit actors “to one particular alternative or set of alternatives out of many, and these commitments...inform subsequent evaluations of practice, and...practical judgment...but do not determine practice” (Lambek 2010). It would be too simple to say that powerful groups shape history in a manner of their own choosing. It would be equally too simple, however, to view various discourses and modes of thought as “master practices” “overdetermining” individual and collective thought and action (Ferguson 1990, 276). Rather, history is conceptualized, as Gilles Deleuze (1988, 38; cited in Ferguson 1990, 276) puts it, as a “mushy mixture” of the intentional and discursive in which it is difficult to predict outcomes or to determine how these were engendered.

A genealogical approach can help us to understand the ways in which concepts related to identity and belonging operate. A number of authors, for instance, have found Foucault’s approach to history useful for analyzing the ways in which various figures of “the Other” have come to function in Western thought. Speaking specifically about Africa, V.Y. Mudimbe (1988; 1994) argues that the continent has long occupied a privileged position in Western thought. In Western representation, “Africa” serves as a foil for Western self-understanding, acting as “a

paradigm of difference,” “a uniform order of alterity,” the “representation of [the European’s] own negated double” (Mudimbe 1994, xi). Building on Edward Said’s ([1978]1995) theory of Orientalism, Mudimbe describes what he calls *Africanism* as a Foucauldian discourse, a “body of knowledge” enacted in Western art, literature, and scholarship that informs and constrains the ways in which Africa and Africans are represented and understood (Mudimbe 1994, ix).

As we will see, “Pygmies” have long occupied a privileged position within Africanist discourse, functioning as a sort of metonym for African difference. From the time of the Ancient Greeks, Western accounts have portrayed “Pygmies” as occupying a liminal space between the human and non-human worlds, both monstrous or animal-like and uncannily human-like. Such portrayals have made “Pygmies” “one of the most enduring root metaphors” for those seeking to answer “the most fundamental of human queries—*who am I, and from whence did I come?*” (Klieman 2003, 3). The historian Kairn Klieman (2003) refers to this “central role that legendary Pygmies have played in Westerners’ attempts to explain the origins and nature of humanity” as “the Pygmy Paradigm” (xvi).

As both Foucault and Mudimbe make clear, discourse plays an important role in determining practice. Certainly, discursive traditions have long had important effects in shaping non-African engagements on the continent. As Mudimbe shows, the effects of Africanist discourse have thus far been overwhelmingly negative, underwriting the slave trade, colonialism, and other Western interventions. This is not to say, however, that Africanist discourse cannot be re-appropriated. For Foucault (1984), history involves “the hazardous play of dominations” (83) in which some individuals and groups are disadvantaged, but where there is always the potential for “the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it,” even if it is difficult to predict how or

when such a change will occur (88). The way in which Africans, and Pygmies in particular, have sought to make use of outside discourses to advance their own socio-political objectives will be a central theme of later chapters in this thesis.

In proceeding with a genealogy of the category “Pygmy,” it is important to acknowledge that we will be doing so from a particular temporal perspective (see Foucault 1984, 90). It is thus important to avoid reading contemporary values and ideas back into the historical record. It would be tempting, for instance, to see in ancient accounts of “Pygmies” an early example of the noble/ignoble savage dichotomy that has come to characterize Africanist discourse. It is unlikely, however, that the writers of this era would have conceived of “Pygmies” in this way. Following Foucault, we must also be cognizant of what historical precedents become mobilized in later moments. At various points in history, writers on “Pygmies” have cited different precursors. Narratives of “Pygmies” have always drawn on material from the past, with subsequent theories and narratives adding new elements and ideas, such that the term “Pygmy” today has “come to signify a very complex and multilayered aggregate of meanings” (Klieman 2003, 3).

It is also important to acknowledge that this genealogy is grounded in a particular geographic and philosophical perspective. The figure of the “Pygmy” is present in many different traditions of knowledge. In addition to the so-called “Western” tradition, there exist, for instance, lengthy histories of engagement with the idea of the “Pygmy” among Japanese writers (see Ichikawa 2004). More importantly, “Bantu” and other local groups have their own, historically grounded narratives of “Pygmies.” This is to say nothing of the self-conceptions and representations of “Pygmies” themselves.

These traditions do not exist in isolation from one another. There is, for instance, evidence to suggest mutual influence between “Bantu” and European accounts dating back at

least to the mid-1600s. Beginning in the twentieth century there was also increasing dialogue and influence between different representational traditions. Foucault's "entangled and confused parchments" are, in other words, not only temporally, but also geographically diverse. In spite of increased communication between different traditions of representation, it is certain that a Japanese or "Bantu" genealogy of the category "Pygmy" would look quite different than what is provided here, which is firmly grounded in a twenty-first century, "Western" perspective.

3. Ancient Accounts

When analyzing Egyptian, Greek, and Roman accounts of "Pygmies," it is important to avoid describing ancient texts "as a sort of synchronic totality." As Mudimbe (1994) points out, these accounts "cover several centuries," "are...influenced by markedly different cultural sensitivities," and "depend upon...diverse and often contradictory norms" (21). In keeping with the genealogical approach described above, it is also important to acknowledge that what we know about ancient portrayals of "Pygmies" is strongly influenced by the way in which these descriptions were selectively taken up and resignified through history.

According to some contemporary accounts, for instance, the first record of "Pygmies" comes from Egyptian stone engravings dating from approximately 2500 BCE. These engravings describe "abnormally short people" from "the land of horizon dwellers" who came to serve in royal courts (Wæhle 1999, 5). The idea that the "abnormally short people" were "Pygmies," however, originates from the works of late nineteenth century archaeologists and anthropologists, who, in keeping with understandings of human origins and diversity prevalent at that time, were invested in proving the existence of an ancient, universal Pygmy race (Klieman 2003, 14). Indeed, as Serge Bahuchet (1993a, 166-7) points out, late nineteenth century citations of Ancient Egyptian accounts of "Pygmies" rest on a somewhat suspect interpretation of ancient hieroglyphs. Accounts of "Pygmies" in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, as well as in ancient

Greek and Roman texts, were selectively taken up and filtered through the dominant preoccupations and understandings of later eras.

The earliest known use of the term “Pygmy” itself comes from Homer’s *Iliad* (circa 750 BCE), in which the poet refers to nations of people “only one cubit (*pygmae*) tall, and who annually fight off the advances of migrating cranes” (Klieman 2003, 6).² This is the most famous example of a somewhat peculiar and enduring motif in which narratives about “Pygmies” include descriptions of their being menaced by large birds.

The *Iliad* placed “Pygmies” firmly in the realm of myth, classing them among a host of fanciful creatures inhabiting the boundaries of the known world, akin to the Cyclopes or sirens. Indeed, Ancient portrayals of “Pygmies” can be understood as attempts to reckon with the unknown. Descriptions of “Pygmies”’ cultural and morphological alterity represented an attempt to imagine the limits of human and natural difference. The Greek historian Ctesias (~400 BCE), for instance, wrote about “little black men” living in India. These men, he claimed, were “two cubits tall, wearing their hair and beards as their only clothing, with penises that descended to their ankles” (Bahuchet 1993a, 154; my translation). Similarly, the Roman historian Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE), described “Pygmies” as one of a number of fantastical and “monstrous” races living in the “rich and marvellous” countries bordering the known world (Bahuchet 1993a, 155). As Jahoda (1999) points out, the races described by Pliny (sometimes called “Plinian races”) have more in common with what one would find in modern science fiction than with any cultural or physiological taxonomy of human difference. Other “races” described by Pliny included “people without mouths who lived on smells, headless ones with eyes on their shoulders..., [and] a race with only one foot, so large that it was used as a sunshade” (1).

While, as we will see, the figure of the “Pygmy” remained quasi-mythological even into the 1900s, by the fourth century BCE Aristotle was arguing, explicitly using the term “Pygmies,” that Homer’s account was “not fabulous” and that there was “in reality a race of dwarfish men” living in “the marshlands south of Egypt, where the Nile has its source” (Aristotle 1907, 12). Drawing on Homer’s account, Aristotle cited Herodotus’ “studies of bird migration,” which showed that “cranes migrated to that region each winter” as evidence for this assertion (Klieman 2003, 6). Bahuchet (1993a) views Aristotle’s account as a pivotal moment Western understandings of “Pygmies.” “From this moment on,” he writes, “no one would ever again call into question the existence of “Pygmies,” but rather would strive to find them” (154; my translation). Aristotle’s account also seemed to provide evidence for locating Pygmies in Africa.

In addition to affirming the existence of “Pygmies,” Aristotle also introduced the notion of the *scala naturae*, a ranking and ordering of natural organisms along a linear scale, from simple to complex. In Aristotle’s system, organisms were “arranged like rungs on a ladder, with each lower form striving but not succeeding to get to a higher rung” (Schwartz 2005, 15).³ Aristotle’s system would come to inform subsequent, similar taxonomies. In the second and third centuries CE, for instance, the *scala naturae* “came to be conceptualized in religious terms.” The Christian “Great Chain of Being” drew on Aristotle, ranking all objects of creation “according to their resemblance to God” (Klieman 2003, 7). The Great Chain of Being made explicit reference to “Pygmies,” ranking them well below Western “humanity” in an interstitial space between humans and animals. “Pygmies” greater distance from God implied that they were morally underdeveloped. As we will see, tropes of Pygmies as animal-like and as morally suspect persist even today.⁴

“Pygmies” played a role in debates about human hierarchy and spiritual evolution throughout the Middle Ages. St. Augustine (354-430 CE), for instance, in *City of God* (426 CE) makes specific reference to the Pygmies described by the Ancient Greeks as part of a discussion as to whether “monstrous races” could be considered “sons of Adam” (Bahuchet 1993a, 156). Augustine would eventually settle on the criteria of rationality and morality for qualifying as human. Not surprisingly, subsequent debates centred on whether or not “Pygmies” could be considered rational, and thus, human, or whether they were more akin to animals.

Debates regarding the positioning of “Pygmies” in human and natural hierarchies came back to the fore in the thirteenth century through the work of the German philosopher and theologian Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great) (~1200-1280 CE). Albert was a scholar of Aristotle, and an important figure in a larger movement of scholasticism, which sought to “formalize the notions of the Ancients by grouping and ordering what had been dispersed in various books” (Bahuchet 1993a, 156-7; my translation). Much of what we know of Aristotle’s writings about “Pygmies” comes from the works of Albert and his contemporaries. The natural philosophers of the Scholastic Period drew on Aristotle’s *scala naturae* to classify natural phenomena into three categories: animal, plant, and mineral.⁵

In his *On Animals*, which drew extensively on Aristotle’s *History of Animals*, Albert conceptualized a category of “man-like beasts,” which included both “Pygmies” and apes (Jahoda 1999, 33). Albert ultimately argued that “Pygmies” should rightly be considered animals due to their lack of *ars*—“the ability to formulate syllogisms and argue from universals” (Klieman 2003, 9). “Many people have seen those animals that we call Pygmies,” wrote Albert, “they do not have the use of reason, and have neither modesty, nor honesty, they have no sense of justice, and have no traces of a government; they imitate humans in many ways, including

having language and speech, but their speech is...imperfect" (quoted in Bahuchet 1993a, 157; my translation).

Albert's portrayal, and those that preceded it, would set the stage for centuries of writing and theorizing about "Pygmies" as "a symbol of the subhuman," a link between humans and animals. What is incredible to note here is that Albert is "referring to an entirely legendary race" (Klieman 2003, 9). At this point in time there had been no documented encounters between Europeans and the people who would come to bear the burden of the narratives and tropes being created about them.

4. The "Age of Discovery" and the "Scientific Revolution"

The opening of trade routes during fifteenth century "Age of Discovery" brought European explorers into increasing contact with foreign peoples and cultures in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. Over the following century, tales of exploration and adventure, the circulation of which was facilitated by the new technology of the printing press, became widely popular. These accounts, which involved not a little exaggeration and poetic license, included vivid descriptions of foreign peoples, and often dwelled on cultural and morphological differences. In this regard, explorers' tales had much in common with the accounts of the Ancient Greeks.

Some explorers returned from Africa and elsewhere with stories of encountering "small men" who appeared to resemble the "Pygmies" of myth (Bahuchet 1993a, 162; see also Flowers 1889, 85-6). It was not long before philosophers and historians began to draw a connection between these populations and the tales of Homer and Aristotle, as well as the writings of Albert and the Scholastics. As Jahoda (1999) explains, "Faced with the exotic and incomprehensible, Europeans tended to interpret the Others in terms of familiar categories" (10). This linking of explorers' accounts and Ancient fables would persist for centuries. The historian Antoine Banier

(1673-1741), for instance, argued that the “dwarves” encountered in Africa by French explorers were indeed the “Pygmies” described by Homer, but that Homer, taking poetic license, had exaggerated the smallness of their stature (Bahuchet 1993a, 162).

As European explorers and missionaries increasingly had contact with “real” Africans, there also developed an interpenetration of European myths regarding “Pygmies,” and those of African “Bantu” populations. In 1686, for instance, the Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper, drawing on reports of Jesuit missionaries, wrote that “Bantu” populations in the Kingdom of Loango (in the present day Republic of Congo) traded with “certain small men called...*Bakke-Bakke*” and that the latter “know how to become invisible” (quoted in Bahuchet 1993a, 162). While it is possible that Dapper and/or the missionaries were simply drawing on their knowledge of ancient texts, what is interesting about this account is that it appears to be reporting back a local “Bantu” myth. We thus may be seeing here early evidence of the ways in which “Bantu” and European myths about “Pygmies” linked up in order to produce contemporary narratives.

The incredible array of natural and cultural diversity to which Europeans were exposed during the “Age of Discovery” played an important role in bringing about the “Scientific Revolution.” While fantastical accounts of foreign cultures were popular in Europe well into the twentieth century (and arguably remain so today), by the early 1700s, a number of writers and philosophers were seeking to apply a spirit of sober, objective inquiry to explorers’ tales. These scientists sought physiological evidence that would prove (or disprove) narratives of human diversity. This era thus saw the emergence of an enduring trend in European interaction with “Pygmies”—namely, the use of the latter as scientific specimens.

The work of the British anatomist Edward Tyson (1651-1708) represents an early example of a more scientific approach to human diversity. Tyson sought to provide evidence that

would falsify “fantastical” accounts of “Pygmies” passed down from Ancient and Scholastic philosophers. In addition to enabling increased contact with foreign peoples, the Age of Discovery had, for the first time, brought Europeans into contact with the “great apes” (chimpanzees, orangutan, gorillas) of Africa and Asia. Embracing a spirit of scientific skepticism, Tyson sought to prove that Ancient tales of “Pygmies” were fantastical. “Pygmies”, Tyson argued, did not exist; rather, ancient travellers had simply “mistaken apes for Pygmies when viewed from afar” (Klieman 2003, 11). In order to prove this hypothesis, Tyson, in 1698, dissected a “Pygmy” corpse, publishing his findings in a monograph entitled, *Orang-outang live Homo sylvestris, or the Anatomy of a Pygmie compared with that of a Monkey, an Ape and a Man; to which is added a Philological Essay concerning the Pygmies, the Cynocephali, the Satyrs and Sphinges of the Ancients. Wherein it will appear that they are all either Apes or Monkeys, and not Men, as formerly pretended* (cited in Bahuchet 1993a, 161). The problem with Tyson’s experiment, however, was that the specimen he dissected was not a human (or an orangutan), but a chimpanzee.⁶

Tyson’s dissection inaugurated a period characterized by a paucity of writings pertaining explicitly to “Pygmies.” Indeed, for much of the eighteenth century the category “Pygmy” nearly disappeared from discussions of human diversity. Instead, many of the characteristics once attributed to “Pygmies”—their status as a marker of the extreme end of human morphological diversity, for instance—became inscribed in a new category: the anthropoid ape. This transition owes in part to the confusion of Tyson and his contemporaries regarding the characteristics of apes and monkeys. If, for Tyson, apes were not considered “human,” they were nonetheless remarkably “human-like.” In one of Tyson’s lithographs, for instance, an “orangutan” “is depicted standing upright, with a staff” (Pieterse 1992, 39). This representation was in keeping

with a broader trend in European accounts of African and Asian apes, which (falsely) endowed them with certain human qualities (Schwartz 2005, 17).

The exaggeration of the human-like characteristics of apes, combined with a lack of in-depth contact between Europeans and the peoples who today are referred to as “Pygmies,” as well as an extensive legacy of writings portraying “Pygmies” as “animal-like,” allowed for the subsuming of forest peoples in Central Africa within the (false) category of “anthropoid apes.” As we will see, once explorers and missionaries began to travel more extensively in Africa, apes and “Pygmies” again split into different categories in European taxonomies. Prior to the “discovery” of this difference, however, an entire set of understandings built up in Europe around the category of “anthropoid apes.”

5. The Taxonomists

While there is a relative lack of explicit references to “Pygmies” in Enlightenment-era writings, this period saw a number of developments that would come to condition Western interactions with Central African forest peoples. Perhaps most importantly, the early 1700s witnessed the development of detailed taxonomies for ordering and ranking human and natural diversity. Writers such as the Swedish botanist and zoologist Carl von Linné (1707-1778) (usually referred to using the Latinized form of his name, Linnaeus) as well as the Comte de Buffon (1707-1788) and Johann Blumenbach (1752-1840) created “systematic and rigorous” systems for classifying “all forms of terrestrial life” (Wade 2000, 28).⁷ These systems continue to be influential in Western biology.

Linnaeus, Buffon, and Blumenbach were by no means the first taxonomists. As we have seen, Ancient and Scholastic philosophers—most notably Aristotle and Albertus Magnus—also produced ranked orderings of plants, animals, and other natural phenomena. Linnaeus, Buffon, and Blumenbach differed from these earlier writers, however, on two important grounds: First,

the Enlightenment taxonomists' systems were much more detailed and extensive, and relied on the collection and/or documentation of specimens of specific species and sub-species. Second, and most importantly, Linnaeus and his contemporaries did not see humans as existing above or outside of nature. Humans, they believed, were natural beings, and could thus be classified and subdivided according to the same principles as other animals.

Like the majority of Europeans of the early eighteenth century, Linnaeus, Buffon and Blumenbach were monogenists. They conceptualized humanity as consisting of different “types,”—European, Asian, African, etc. Following the biblical story of Adam and Eve, however, they regarded these types as descended from a common source. To be sure, they considered non-Europeans to be inferior, but narratives of inferiority referenced sociocultural, rather than biological, differences. To quote Maurice Wade (2000), non-Europeans’ “status as heathen, savages, barbarians, and uncivilized peoples resided in their non-European mode of living.” In other words, the European sense of superiority over other human types “was...more a matter of cultural chauvinism...than of racism” (28). Importantly, however, the taxonomists posited certain limits as to which peoples should properly be considered “humans.” Influenced in part by the figure of the anthropoid ape, their systems included various liminal figures, existing in the interstices between human and animal. It is here that we find the traces, or palimpsest, of the “Pygmy Paradigm.”

In the tenth edition of *Systema Naturae*, published in 1758,⁸ for instance, Linnaeus divided humankind, or *Homo sapiens*, into four principle kinds: the American, the Asiatic, the African, and the European (Hoquet 2014, 26). He distinguished these categories from one another based on physical characteristics such as eye colour and hair colour. He also argued that these physical differences were outward signs of differences in temperament (Wade 2000, 29).

While human kinds shared a common origin, differences in development, due most notably to climate, meant that they could be ranked along a linear “chain of civilizations.” The European was highest on this chain and the African lowest (Schwartz 2005, 18-19).

Linnaeus also, however, identified two other categories of *homo sapiens*: *homo ferus* and *homo monstrosus*. These categories did not even qualify as “civilizations.” They ranked below Africans and comprised creatures that, while possessing the core human characteristic of self-knowledge, were too strange or aberrant to be included in the other four categories. *Homo ferus* included the “wild man” who was “four footed, mute, and hairy,” as well as the southern African Hottentot (Schwartz 2005, 18-19). *Homo monstrosus* comprised “natural abnormalities such as giants or dwarfs, and...artificial ones like...those with compressed or elongated heads” (Jahoda 1999, 41). As Gustav Jahoda (1999) argues, Linnaeus’ taxonomy was thus “monstrously confused, the outcome of having tried to incorporate real and imaginary beings into a unitary scheme” (41). Below *Homo sapiens* in Linnaeus’ taxonomy was *Homo sylvestris*, or Orangutan, a separate species which Linnaeus, influenced by the aforementioned confusion regarding anthropoid apes, defined as the “man of the forest or of the trees.” *Homo sylvestris* “differed from monkeys in that it “lacked a tail and had emotions” (Schwartz 2005, 18).

Even if Linnaeus did not use the word “Pygmy,” the figures of *homo ferus* and *homo sylvestris*, like Tyson’s anthropoid apes, would play a role in informing European conceptions of and engagements with the peoples whom they would come to call by this name. Indeed, Pieterse (1992) argues that Linnaeus’ taxonomy set the stage for the transformation of “Pygmies” “from fables to scientific phenomena of nature” (40). When “Pygmies” re-entered European narratives in the late 1700s they did so in the interstitial slot that Linnaeus and his contemporaries had created and populated with figures such as *homo ferus* and *homo sylvestris*. As Klieman (2003)

argues, Enlightenment taxonomies had the effect of “scientizing” the category “Pygmy” while also maintaining stereotypes built up over centuries. The scientization of the “Pygmy paradigm” “help[ed] to establish a set of rules and constraints that would guide research for centuries to come” (12). European understandings were not only influenced by the *characteristics* that Linnaeus attributed to *homo ferus* and *homo sylvestris*, but also by the murky positioning of these species in his taxonomy: The “wild man” and the “man of the forest” were, for Linnaeus, interstitial figures, not quite man, not quite animal, *homo* but not human.

6. Scientific Travel

The taxonomic impulse of the mid to late eighteenth century provided an impetus for projects of “scientific travel,” in which Europeans sought to document and collect specimens in order to “replace an earlier...genre of mostly sentimental and aestheticizing tales” with concrete data (Fabian 1983, 8). Among the earliest such efforts were those of the British naturalist Joseph Banks who, in 1769 at the age of twenty-six, travelled to the South Pacific with Captain Cook aboard the HMS *Endeavour* (Holmes 2008, 1-59). On this and subsequent voyages, Banks returned to Europe with extensive collections plant and animal specimens to be named, catalogued, and fit into the Linnaean taxonomy. Indeed, upon Banks’ return to Europe, Linnaeus heartily praised him for making a remarkable contribution to “Natural History” (Holmes 2008, 43).

There was, of course, a rather violent and imperialist mindset underlying European taxonomic efforts. As Anne Fadiman (2008) points out, classifying specimens according the Linnaean system was, fundamentally, a political project: “Take a bird or a lizard or a flower from Patagonia or the South Seas, perhaps one that had a local name for centuries, rechristen it with a Latin binomial, and presto! It had become a tiny British colony” (19; quoted in Holmes 2008,

49). The taxonomic impulse was even more problematic when Europeans applied the same principles to human diversity.

In addition to discovering and classifying new plant and animal species, Europeans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were fascinated with encountering foreign, “exotic” peoples. The impulse to document and categorize these peoples brought about some of the earliest efforts in the emergent field of anthropology. Exemplary here is the work of the French philosopher Degérando (1772-1842). Dégerando founded the Société des Observateurs de l’Homme, and wrote an instructional manual entitled *The Observation of Savage Peoples*. As with Banks, Degérando’s efforts sought in part to furnish evidence to help expand and refine Linnaeus’ taxonomic system (Fabian 1983, 8).

Like the taxonomists, Degérando and his colleagues were (for the most part) monogenists. They viewed human diversity not as difference in *kind* but rather in degree of progress. Travelling to foreign societies represented, for Degérando, a sort of voyage back in time. “The *voyageur-philosophe* who sails toward the extremities of the earth,” he wrote, “traverses in effect the sequence of the ages; he travels in the past; each step he makes is a century over which he leaps” (quoted in Stocking 1968, 26-7; see also Fabian 1983). While in some ways progressive, this conception would also provide an impetus for the colonial “helping imperative,” wherein Europeans posited conquest and rule as an effort to “raise the mysteriously retarded savage to the level of his European brother” (Stocking 1968, 27).

7. The “Noble Savage”

Dégerando’s belief that foreign cultures represented an “earlier” phase of human development, referenced conceptions of the “state of nature” and the “Noble Savage.” While we can trace these conceptions back at least to the Middle Ages (they are present, for instance, in works such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516)), ideas of the “state of nature” and the “Noble

Savage” were especially prominent in Enlightenment debates regarding human nature and the ideal form of society (Trouillot 2003, 15-17). Understandings of the “Noble Savage” drew on the tales of European travellers and explorers, which were widely read by Enlightenment *philosophes* such as Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau. Like Linnaeus’ taxonomy and the Ancient accounts that came before, these tales often involved an amalgam of the factual and the fantastical (Trouillot 2003).

Indeed, Enlightenment writings about the “Noble Savage” and the “state of nature” reveal much more about European political debates than they do about the cultures and lives of foreign peoples. The “Noble Savage” living in an idealized “state of nature,” served as a rhetorical tool for critiques of the social inequality, discord, and disorder that characterized eighteenth century Europe (Trouillot 2003, 15-17). (This rhetorical strategy would later be repeated in relation to “Pygmies” specifically, most notably in the works of Colin Turnbull (e.g. 1961; see Frankland 1999).)

The figure of the noble savage is most famously associated with the writings of French *philosophes* such Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), though there is some debate as to whether the association of Rousseau with this concept is the result of a misinterpretation of his work (Kurasawa 2002). The figure of the Noble Savage is also present, however, in the works of Scottish and German counter-Enlightenment, or romantic, philosophers such as Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803).

For Ferguson, Africans and other so-called “savages” were living embodiments of Europeans’ forebears (Jahoda 1999, 49). Unlike the taxonomists, however, Ferguson also believed that, in some respects, “savages” were more successful or developed than Europeans: “The naked savage,” he wrote, may “have a penetration, a force of imagination and elocution, an

ardour of mind, and affection and courage, which the arts, the discipline, and the policy of few nations would be able to improve” (Adam Ferguson [1976]1995, 76). Ferguson did not explicitly reference “Pygmies” in his work. His writings, however, articulated an image of the “noble savage” living in harmony with nature. While the image of the noble savage would fall out of favour in academic circles at the beginning of the nineteenth century (see Stocking 1968, 37), it would prove remarkably enduring in informing popular (and sometimes anthropological) conceptions of “Pygmies” and other “primitive” cultures.

The counter-Enlightenment philosophy of Ferguson, Herder, and others would also set the stage for the Romantic rebellion against Enlightenment universalism. Herder’s work is particularly important here. Herder “believed that each people or *Volk* possessed their own culture,” and could not be ranked according to general taxonomies or narratives of progress (Barnard 2014, 47). The legacy of this idea is ambiguous. While it is, in a sense, “broadly humanistic,” valourizing so-called “primitive cultures,” it also has “important racial potential” (Stocking 1968, 36). Herder’s theories would thus form an important basis for nineteenth century theories of racial difference (Stocking 1968, 65).

8. From Polygenism to Evolutionism

Monogenist understandings of human diversity had always existed alongside and in tension with polygenist theories. David Hume for instance, writing in 1742, famously argued that “Negroes, and in general all the other species of men” were “naturally inferior to whites,” and that “such a universal and constant difference could not happen...if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men” (cited in Pieterse 1992). In spite of these precursors, however, it was in the early nineteenth century that polygenism became the dominant understanding human diversity in the West. Jan Pieterse (1992) attributes the rise of

polygenism in part to the growth of the abolition movement, arguing that “race emerged as a buffer between abolition and slavery” (57-59; see also Barker 1978; Stocking 1968, 36).

According to the polygenists, there were multiple human “races” each, as the French naturalist Bory St. Vincent (1778-1846) put it, with “its peculiar Adam, and its peculiar place of origin” (quoted in Schwartz 2005, 19). The rise of polygenism was informed by a fundamental shift in European understandings of natural diversity. While, as Michel Foucault (2005) has pointed out, Europeans in the early 1800s continued to subscribe to the “general principles of *taxonomia*” that Linnaeus developed, this era witnessed an important change, from a focus from “visible structures” to the internal principle of “organic structures,” which could not be visibly observed (245). Europeans thus began to speak less of distinct human civilizations, and more about biologically distinct human *races*. This shift would underwrite various “racial taxonomies,” which “allowed for the differentiation between human groups” according not to cultural, but rather “according to somatic characteristics” (Bancel, David, and Dominic Thomas 2014, 1). “Race,” explains Klieman (2003), “came to be seen as an indelible, inherited essence, one that determined intelligence, culture, even national character” (13).⁹ Polygenic theories of race would have an important impact on European understandings of “Pygmies” moving forward. As Klieman (2003) argues, in the late 1800s, the “Pygmy Paradigm” reemerged “in racialistic form” (14).

While, by the 1860s, monogenic theories of human diversity had again come to the fore, the influence of polygenism meant that monogenism reemerged in a “radically transformed” guise (Stocking 1968, 14). As Stocking (1968) points out, “the social forces that “impelled men to polygenism” in the first place had by no means “been dispelled” in the 1860s: “On the contrary, the external forces which nourished a broadly polygenist view were if anything

intensified: the gap between civilized white and savage black men, and the need to justify the white man's imperial dominion, were both becoming greater than ever before" (47). In part these forces found expression in the emergent theory of evolutionism.

While evolutionism is most famously associated with Charles Darwin it was, in fact, Herbert Spencer (who was himself drawing on the writings of Lamarck), and not Darwin, who first popularized the term "evolution" (Ingold 2004, 209; Ingold 1998, 79). Spencer sought to apply biological theories of "structural differentiation," which viewed development, at the level of an individual organism, as a move "from an incoherent homogeneity to a coherent heterogeneity" to human societies (Ingold 1998, 80), developing a theory of *superorganic evolution*, arguing that human societies tended to develop "from simplicity to complexity" (Birx 2010, 589).¹⁰

Spencer's theory of superorganic evolution dates from 1857, two years before Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and seems to have had little influence on Darwin's initial theory of biological development. In contrast to Spencer's work, *On the Origin of Species* did not explicitly theorize human development. Indeed, in this work Darwin viewed humans as existing outside of, or above, processes of biological "natural selection" and "descent with modification" wherein plant and animal species reproduced characteristics favourable to their survival (Ingold 2004). The book certainly influenced Spencer, however, who believed that Darwin's research provided "independent confirmation, from within the field of biology, of his [superorganic] evolutionary law" (Ingold 1998, 80). Darwin, for his part, became a great admirer of Spencer.¹¹ In subsequent editions of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin adopted Spencer's vocabulary, substituting, for instance, the phrase "survival of the fittest" for "natural selection" (Ingold 1998, 80) and the word "evolution" for "descent with modification" (Ingold 2004, 209).

The reciprocal influence between Darwin and Spencer helped to generate what Ingold (Ingold 2004) has termed a “colossal mistake” in evolutionary theory: the conflation of a Darwinian theory of biological (organic) evolution, based on the rigorous gathering and analysis of specimens, with a Spencerian theory of societal (superorganic) evolution, based on philosophical speculation (209; see also Ingold 1998, 79). As Ingold (2004) explains, prior to the 1860s, theorists continued to hold to the Enlightenment belief that “human beings differed in *degree* from other creatures with regard to their anatomical form, but nevertheless were distinguished in *kind* from the rest of the animal kingdom in so far as they had been endowed with minds—that is with capacities of reason, imagination and language” (211). With the publication of *The Descent of Man* (1871), however, Darwin subverted this distinction, embracing the idea that human beings were part of the evolutionary process and establishing “a single scale, running all the way from the most primitive of animals to the most advanced of humans, along which could be charted the rise of reason or intellect, and its gradual triumph over the shackles of instinct” (209-10). Not surprisingly, for Darwin, the apotheosis of this scale was “modern European civilisation” (211).

Moreover, in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin attributed the differential levels of evolution of different human “races” to different levels of cerebral development:

The scientist and the savage, Darwin insisted, are separated not by the differential development of intellectual capacities common to both, but by a difference of capacity comparable to that which separates the savage from the ape... And these difference were, in turn, a function of the gradual improvement of a bodily organ, the brain. Throughout human history, the advance of civilisation was supposed to march hand-in-hand with the evolution of the brain--and with it, the intellectual and moral faculties. (Ingold 2004, 211)

In other words, whereas the Enlightenment monogenists believed that “all humankind...carr[ied] the same capacities to rise above savagery” and that “primitive people” were simply “further behind in the process,” Darwinian theory, by arguing that “evolution out of instinct and into

reason was accompanied by a growth in the powers of the human brain” portrayed “primitive people” as “not only behind modern civilization, but also inferior in mental capacity as a result” (Kidd 2008, 68).

While the theory of human diversity that Darwin posited in *The Descent of Man* thus included a monogenist understanding of “the essential unity of mankind,” it contained a number of “polygenist survivals,” most importantly the rejection of the idea that “human nature was everywhere essentially the same” (Stocking 1968, 112). “Mankind was one not because it was everywhere the same, but because the differences represented stages in the same process” (Burrow 1966, 98). By ranking humans “in a chain that ran from ape to European,” Darwin was, in effect maintaining the “racial hierarchy of nineteenth-century polygenism” (Stocking 1968, 121). According to Darwin’s theory of evolution, “all men had in fact descended from a common root, but the moment of that single ancestry lay so far in the past that by the time man’s forebears had acquired the intellectual capacities which made them truly human, the various races had already been differentiated by natural selection” and thus “it might be fairly asserted that there were many originally distinct races of men” (Stocking 1968, 46). Moreover, Darwin seemed to predict the extinction of “savage races” and anthropoid apes: “At some future period,” Darwin argued, “the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes...will no doubt be exterminated” (Darwin 1871 quoted in Stocking 1968, 113).

9. Social Evolutionism and Colonialism

Darwin and Spencer were by no means alone in elaborating an understanding of human evolution that portrayed “primitive races” as lagging behind European “civilization.” The founders of Anglo-American anthropology—including Edward Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, and James Frazer—all developed evolutionary typologies quite similar to the one put forward by

Darwin. It would be too simple to say that these theorists were simply building on Darwin. Indeed, in many cases they began work on their evolutionary understandings before Darwin published *The Descent of Man*. There were, nevertheless, many commonalities between their approaches. By the 1870s, the theories of Spencer, Darwin, Tylor, Morgan, Frazer and others, had, in spite of some important differences between them, coalesced into a dominant understanding of *social evolution*. Social evolutionism was the dominant philosophy of the late nineteenth century, influencing a host of writers and thinkers, as well as public attitudes toward cultural difference.

Social evolutionism involved an important break with previous theories. For one, as we have seen, it dispensed with the belief of the eighteenth century monogenists that “all human races could ascend the evolutionary scale to the top.” The social evolutionists understood evolution as an overarching process whereby humankind *in general* “developed along lines which moved...toward the social and cultural forms of western Europe” (Stocking 1968, 119). They did not assume, however, that every individual group, culture, or race would progress in this manner. Rather, they believed that, “along the way different groups had diverged and regressed, [or] stood still...as they coped with various environmental situations *within the limits of particular racial capacities*, which their different environmental histories had in fact created” (Stocking 1968, 119; my emphasis).¹²

This belief in the maladaptation of certain “primitive” races led to the assumption that, rather than progressing, these peoples would inevitably die out. The American sociologist Franklin Giddings, for instance, wrote in 1896 regarding the Tasmanians (encountered by Captain Cook in the late 1700s but largely extinct by the time of Giddings’ writing) that there was “no evidence that [they] had the ability to rise. They were exterminated so easily that they

evidently had neither the power of resistance nor any adaptability” (Giddings 1896, 328; quoted in Stocking 1968, 119). Given that many ethnologists regarded “Pygmies” as “even more ‘primitive’” than Tasmanians (Barnard 2000, 51), such ideas had troubling implications for Central African forest dwellers as well. The evolutionists may have bemoaned such extinctions, but they nonetheless saw them as inevitable. Such understandings provided an impetus for a long tradition of salvage ethnography, as anthropologists sought to document cultural practices before they vanished, mostly for the purpose of increasing understanding of modern, European society’s origins.

The rise of social evolutionary theory also coincided with an expansion of the European colonial presence in Africa. The 1884 Berlin Conference, where European powers partitioned the continent between themselves and set the criteria of “effective occupation” for recognizing one another’s territorial claims, set off the famous “Scramble for Africa.” During this period, competing countries attempted to establish claims on the continent. Evolutionist discourses of African “primitiveness” helped to inform and build European public support for colonial conquest. As Mudimbe (1994) argues, evolutionism’s focus on “ranking” different cultures “on the linear chain of civilizations” “actualize[d], in the image of the colonized, all the negative metaphors worked out over five centuries of European explorations of the world” (29). Evolutionary discourse became implicated in a “power-knowledge political system” (1988, 16) that “justif[ied] the process of...conquering a continent and naming its “primitiveness” or “disorder,” as well as the subsequent means of its exploitation and methods for its “regeneration”” (20).

Colonial administrators drew “self-confidence and unshakeable paternal authority,” from the belief, espoused by Tylor, Morgan and other anthropologists, that Europeans occupied an

“awesomely responsible position at the top of the social evolutionary ladder” (Willis 1973, 245). As Dennis (1995) explains, social evolutionary theory “viewed European and especially English colonialism, imperialism, and other efforts to control the natural resources and people of distant continents as natural components of the... principles entailed in the struggle for existence, survival, and supremacy” (245; cited in Kidd 2008).

Despite the important impact that European portrayals had on Africans during the colonial era, it is important to point out here that Africans were not simply passive recipients of European representations and institutions. Instead, as we will see, many Africans, “Pygmies” included, sought to subvert and make use of outside stereotypes, either in order to articulate opposition to the colonial regime, or to gain domestic political advantage (Ranger 1983; Scott 1990; Mamdani 1996).

10. “Pygmies” in Evolutionism

It is around this time, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, that “Pygmies” re-enter European narratives. The Berlin Conference’s criteria of “effective occupation” motivated Europeans to move deeper inland, rather than confining themselves to ports and trading posts. This brought Europeans into contact with ethnic groups, including the Baka and other “Pygmies” which, prior to this, had experienced little direct interaction with colonizers (see Chapter Two). In other words, this expansion of European presence brought non-Africans face-to-face with the groups that they would come to call “Pygmies.” One of the earliest such encounters took place in 1868 in present day Gabon between the French Admiral Fleuriot de Langle and “Pygmy tribe he labelled Akoa” (Murray 2012). Encounters between Europeans and “Pygmies” multiplied rapidly over the following decades.

The coincidence of the ascent of social evolutionary theory and European encounters with short-statured forest dwellers in Africa would come to powerfully condition the discursive

“slot” through which Europeans made sense of “Pygmies” (cf. Trouillot 2003). Indeed, as we will see, the conceptualization of “Pygmies” as the paradigmatic “primitives,” existing at the lowest level of the social evolutionary scale continues to influence the way in which these groups are understood today. This conceptualization, in turn, drew on previous writings, including Ancient accounts of “Pygmies,” and Enlightenment understandings of anthropoid apes. We see, in Europeans’ first encounters with and writings about “Pygmies,” a palimpsestuous interplay of different narratives and tropes, originating from different philosophical traditions and points in history.

Groups such as the Baka would come to bear the burden of centuries of European myth-making, as well as the unique role that the figure of “Pygmy” had played in debates about human origins and diversity. As Klieman (2003) explains, by the nineteenth century, “the term “Pygmy” had come to signify a very complex and multilayered aggregate of meanings” (3). Centuries worth of myths and stereotypes were thus mapped onto the people who today are still referred to as “Pygmies.” Never mind the fact that these ideas had developed quite independent of any study of “Pygmies” themselves. Never mind too that the central African peoples lumped together under the category “Pygmies” in fact represented a number of different groups, which, in spite of some physical, cultural, and environmental similarities, spoke different languages and had many differing cultural practices.

In attempting to describe “Pygmies” and fit them into a taxonomy, many travellers explicitly evoked Ancient writers. The German anthropologist and explorer Georg Schweinfurth, for instance, writing in 1870 about his encounter with the Aka in the Northeastern Congo stated, “I finally have before my eyes a living incarnation of that myth that dates back thousands of years” (quoted in Bahuchet 1993a, 153; my translation). Schweinfurth drew an explicit

connection to the “Pygmies” described by Aristotle, leading “Western scholars to once again pore over the plethora of Ancient and Medieval references to Pygmies and dwarfs” (Klieman 2003, 14). Similarly, the French biologist and ethnologist Armand de Quartrefages (1881) cited a connection between groups such as the Aka and the “Pygmies” described by Homer, Aristotle, and Pliny the Elder (Bahuchet 1993a, 167).

One of the most famous early encounters between Europeans and “Pygmies” occurred in 1888 in the Ituri rainforest between the British explorer Henry Morton Stanley and a group who were likely Aka, Twa, Mbuti or Efé. In his *In Darkest Africa* (1890) Stanley offers a description of Ituri “Pygmies” that represents a strange amalgam of various, seemingly inconsistent writings and scientific theories. Some “Pygmies,” Stanley argued, were “fitly characteristic of the strong link long sought between the average modern humanity and its Darwinian progenitors, and certainly deserving of being classed as an extremely low, degraded, almost bestial type of human being” (Stanley 1890, 374-5). Stanley described some other “Pygmies,” however, in language that recalls the figure of the noble savage. In a chapter of *In Darkest Africa* titled “My Reverential Feelings for the Pigmy,” Stanley draws an explicit connection to Homer, describing a man that his party captured in the Ituri rainforest as follows:

That little body of his represented the oldest types of primeval man, descended from the outcasts of the earliest ages, the Ishmaels of the primitive race.... Even as long ago as forty centuries ago they were known as pigmies, and the famous battle between them and the storks was rendered into song...they reigned over Darkest Africa undisputed lords; they are there yet, while countless dynasties of Egypt and Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome, have flourished for comparatively brief periods, and expired. (Stanley 1890, 40-2; quoted in Murray 2012)

Stanley’s expedition was a sensation in Europe, and accounts of his travels, including his description of “Pygmies,” were widely read and disseminated. As Brian H. Murray (2012) explains, after Stanley’s expedition, “Pygmies...were re-mythologized and repackaged in all

manner of ways” including “Pygmy-related music hall and variety shows” with titles such as “Stanley and His African Dwarfs.” The narrative of the primitive “disappearing Pygmy” also came to be widely held in Europe, where their “anticipated extinction via natural selection became a favourite metaphor” of political commentators, particularly in Britain, who evoked the figure of the “Pygmy” when making points about the outmodedness of various political parties and ideologies (Murray 2012).

The tales of travellers, explorers and missionaries played an important role in influencing both public perceptions of “Pygmies,” and the role that “Pygmies” played in the emergent discipline of anthropology. Armchair anthropologists from Britain (W.H. Flowers), France (Armand de Quartrefages), and Germany (Wilhelm Schmidt) “received and compiled” these tales, interpreted them in accordance with social evolutionary theories, “and returned the material to circulation with the imprimatur of science” (Ballard 2006, 141).

In the writings of evolutionary anthropologists such as Tylor, Morgan and Frazer, “Pygmies” came to serve as paradigmatic vanishing “primitives.” Both Tylor and Morgan, for instance, wrote specifically of “Pygmies” as “primordial...surviving traces of early stages in human social and physical evolution” (Ballard 2006, 134). Narratives of “Pygmies” in evolutionary anthropology were characterized by a “signature theme of...absence “(Ballard 2006, 137). The defining characteristic of “Pygmies” was taken to be their short stature. This feature, in turn, became an signifier for a host of non-bodily absences—of morality, culture, material and behavioural development—that marked them as “hyper-other or even pre-cultural” and thus placing them “at the lowest rung of humanity” (Ballard 2006, 137). As the explorer Guy Burrows wrote in 1889, “they are, to my thinking, the closest link with the original Darwinian anthropoid ape extant” (quoted in Ballard 2006, 139). “Pygmies” supposedly low

level of development was posited in part to be an outgrowth of their native environment, the “dark gloom of the primeval forest.” Indeed, as late as 1936, Europeans were arguing that, having lived “for millenniums [sic] in the eternal gloom of [the] primeval forests” “Pygmies” had “sunk in character and physique almost as low as the wild animals” (Roome 1936, 266; quoted in Ballard 2006, 138). Anthropologists also cited a number of characteristics as proof of the extreme primitiveness of “Pygmies,” including their nomadism, and reliance on hunting and foraging (Wilmsen 1989, 14).

Chris Ballard (2006) identifies three “denigration tropes” used to describe “Pygmies” in the late eighteenth century: The primordial, the bestial, and the infantile (140-1). Each of these tropes can be linked to a social evolutionary understanding that viewed “Pygmies” as “less evolved” than Europeans. They thus appeared to exist at an earlier point in history (primordial), to be closer to apes (bestial), and to be less mentally and physically developed (infantile). The American explorer Paul de Chaillu, who is sometimes credited with being the first person to “confirm” the existence of “Pygmies” wrote in 1870, “they reminded me—I could not help it—of the chimpanzees...I had captured at times” (1870, 178; quoted in Ballard 2006, 140). Relatedly, in 1905 “six adult Pygmies were exhibited at the London Hippodrome...dressed in children’s sailor suits” (Green 1995; quoted in Ballard 2006, 141). We see here, then, the equation of a number of different types of “underdevelopment” or lack of evolution.

The exhibition of “Pygmies” for Western public remained common practice into the early twentieth century. The most famous such case is that of Ota Benga, and Mbuti Pygmy from the Congo, who, in 1906, was put on display in the Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo in New York (Newkirk 2015; Bradford and Blume 1992). The displaying of “Pygmies” alongside monkeys demonstrates the way in which the Darwinian theory of evolution had made possible an

interstitial category existing somewhere between human and animal. (The famous “missing link.”) The question of whether a particular being was human or not was no longer a binary. Pygmies were viewed as quasi-humans, and many believed that they did not need, and were not entitled to, the same respect, comfort, and consideration as other humans.¹³ This view was not, of course, universally held. Indeed, Ota Benga’s captivity sparked protests among African American civil rights activists, who viewed his treatment as an example of the denigration of the “Negro race” (Newkirk 2015).

11. Diffusionism & Culture Circles

The unilinear understanding of evolution that British and American anthropologists espoused in the late 1800s stood in contrast to *multilinear* evolutionary understandings which continued to hold sway in other parts of Europe—Austria and Germany in particular. Multilinear evolutionism was deeply influenced by the *historical particularism* of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), which insisted that “civilisations must be understood from within, in terms of their own stages of development, purposes, and outlooks” rather than according to a unitary, universal schema (Berlin [1976]1998, 390). The German ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1826-1905), a “staunch opponent of Darwinism,” drew on Herder to formulate his theory of the “psychic unity of mankind” (Barnard 2000, 49). Instead of exhibiting lower levels of cerebral development, and thus diminished mental capacities, Bastian argued, “primitive” cultures had developed different practices and institutions because they had been faced with different environmental and social imperatives. Human development, according to Bastian, was a result of “independent invention.” Humans had similar mental capacities and, faced with similar problems, would come up with similar solutions. Bastian’s theories of psychic unity and independent invention argued against the notion that primitive cultures were “lost in time,” doomed to extinction, and valuable only as examples of “civilized” humanity’s forebears.

Instead, Bastian proposed a theory of multilinear evolution, whereby peoples had the potential to develop and advance according to their own trajectories.

In the early twentieth century the social evolutionary theory espoused by Morgan, Tylor, and Frazer began to fall out of favour. While, as we will see, social evolutionism remained influential amongst many academics and members of the general public, a number of important ethnologists working at this time rejected evolutionary understandings of human difference in favour of theories of *diffusionism* (Erickson 2008, 56). Diffusionism, which is particularly associated with Austro-German ethnologists, argued, in contradistinction to Bastian's theory of independent invention, that key developments such as agriculture had been invented only once and then transmitted through migration and communication (Kenny 2013, 61).

The ethnologist Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), perhaps the most important figure in early diffusionism, argued that human cultures did not possess the capability for independent invention, but rather evolved through *contact* with one another, which had the effect of diffusing ideas and technologies (Barnard 2000, 50). As Barnard (2000) explains, "diffusionism stresses the transmission of things...from one culture to another.... An implicit presupposition of extreme diffusionism is that humankind is uninventive.... In contrast, classical evolutionism assumes that humankind is inventive" (47).

While Bastian himself was a critic of diffusionism, his work would nevertheless prove influential on later diffusionist writings. Beginning in the early 1900s, a group of Austro-German philosophers of what came to be known as the "culture historical" (*Kulturhistorische*) school developed "culture circles" or *Kulturkreise* theory. This theory incorporated elements of both Bastian and Ratzel, arguing that diffusion and "human creativity" acted "in concert" to bring about progress (Kenny 2013, 66). Leo Frobenius, one of the foremost scholars of the

Kulturhistorische school, conceptualized culture circles as “great culture areas spread across the globe and [in some cases] overlapp[ing] with those which had existed before” (Barnard 2000, 50). The Austrian priest Wilhelm Schmidt, another famous proponent of culture circles theory, similarly proposed that a small number of “original cultures” had “spread out” “in order to produce all world culture” (Garbarino 1983, 47). Culture circles theory thus posted multiple evolutionary trajectories, but also allowed for the possibility of borrowing between cultures.

“Pygmies” played an important role in culture circles theory. Schmidt’s conception of culture circles proposed four “strata of culture” that had been “spread across the globe by waves of migration and diffusion.” The first of these was the “Primitive or *Urkultur*” circle, which “contained four cultures” all of which were peoples who would come to be referred to as “hunter-gatherers.” These included “Pygmies of South-East Asia, South Asia, and Africa” (Barnard 2014, 48). For Schmidt, cultures in the *Urkultur* circle “had a special evolutionary position as *Naturvolk* (people in close relationships with nature)” (Hewlett 2014, xxviii; Hewlett and Fancher 2014). Schmidt also believed that “Pygmies” were among the most primitive cultures, characterized not by their cultural attributes, but by “what they did not do: no agriculture, no pastoralism, no striking weapons, no pottery, no iron, no bodily ornaments...no chiefs, no totems” (Bahuchet 1993a, 170; my translation).

Schmidt’s understanding of “Pygmies” as part of a globally distributed “culture circle” had much in common with the early twentieth century idea that there was a singular, globally-distributed “Pygmy race.” Influenced in part by the accounts of the Ancient Greeks, French ethnologists such as Quatrefages and his colleague Ernest Hamy, for instance, believed that the Pygmy, or “Negrito”, “race” encompassed “short statured” populations from areas as diverse as “Africa, the Philippines, Malaysia, and India” (Klieman 2003, 15). As Ballard (2006) explains,

the “endless repetition and casual plagiarism” of Central Africa travel accounts “generated material for a more or less standardized suite of Pygmy characteristics” which “were then re-disseminated to the other outposts of this presumed global race” (141). This race, anthropologists argued, represented “a primal form of human whose range had shrunk to isolated interior refuges under pressure from later, larger humans” (Quatrefages 1887, 48; cited in Ballard 2006, 141), or the “remains of a population which occupied the land before the incoming of the present dominant races” (Flowers 1889, 90).¹⁴

Austro-German culture circles theory would prove extremely influential on the ways in which “Pygmies” were depicted and understood in Europe in the early twentieth century. This influence owed in part to the fact that, at this time, a good portion of the Congo Basin Rainforest, where the majority of “Pygmies” resided, was a German colonial holding. German intellectuals, including Schmidt, travelled to Central Africa and gained privileged access to “Pygmies.” Indeed, in addition to his conception of “Pygmies” as the “most primitive” culture circle, Schmidt is famous for inventing “Schmidt’s bar,” which “proposed that the term “Pygmy” be reserved for groups where the average height was less than 1.5 meters (Bahuchet 1993a, 165). As Ballard (2006) observes, “the widespread acceptance of ‘Schmidt’s bar’ leads to some remarkably tortuous argument on the part of later anthropologists pleading for the inclusion of groups with an average stature just slightly in excess of 150cm” (138).

12. After Evolutionism

Culture circles theorists’ focus on (more) specific cultural practices and histories began a movement away from general theories of human nature and development toward a more specific engagement with particular cultural histories and practices. Schmidt’s idea that each people, or *Volk* “possessed their own culture or *Kultur*” which was adapted to local circumstances would become a “guiding principle” for the emergent discipline of anthropology, as seen in the

“successor traditions of culture-area theory and the writings of Franz Boas” (Barnard 2014, 47).

Boas and his students moved away from evolutionism altogether, embracing instead a doctrine of *historical particularism* wherein a “variety of local cultural traditions” developed according to idiosyncratic and accidental trajectories (Kuper 1996). Boas claimed that “the existence of a single, universal line of human development and of a genetically based hierarchy of races was untenable” (Barnard 2000, 55). Rather than serving as an example of an earlier stage of human evolution, for Boas “primitive” culture “came to stand...as a credible figure of...alterity and of human cultural diversity from which modernity could be interrogated” (Kurasawa 2002, 11).

Boas’ historical particularism set the stage for important changes in anthropological theory. With the rise of ethnographic fieldwork and theories such as structural functionalism, anthropologists moved away from studying “primitive” cultures for the purpose of elucidating general truths about human development, and toward an engagement with the specificities of local institutions, beliefs, and practices. “Pygmies,” however, are largely absent from the anthropological writings of this era. This was likely owing in part to ethnographers’ difficulty in accessing “Pygmy” communities, due to these communities’ remoteness and nomadism, as well as the difficulty of penetrating the equatorial rainforest. As Ballard (2006) explains, citing two early ethnographers, “detailed accounts of Pygmy life were not available until the first trained ethnographers began to work with Pygmy communities, including Patrick Putnam from 1928 and Paul Schebesta from 1929.” Ballard goes on to note, however, that “given the reluctance to publish of the former and the evident shortcomings in the field methods of the latter...there was little published by way of reliable detail on Pygmy lives” until the 1950s (137).

We also should not underplay the role of colonialism here. Indeed, part of the impetus for the anthropological shift from metanarratives of human development to interest in specific

cultural practices came from a concomitant shift from a period of colonial conquest to one of colonial governance. Anthropologists' studies of the beliefs and practices of African communities provided information that facilitated indirect rule and other strategies for managing colonial subjects (Mamdani 1996; James 1973). This symbiotic relationship between anthropology and colonialism also helps to explain anthropologists' relative lack of interest in "Pygmies," who, at this time, mostly resided deep in the equatorial rainforest, far from colonial metropolises. "Pygmies" were thought to pose little danger to colonial interests. (This belief was no doubt in part influenced by the aforementioned denigration narratives.) They thus represented a less urgent site for anthropological study and understanding.

If "Pygmies" were of limited interest to anthropologists in the first half of the twentieth century, however, they continued to occupy the popular imagination in Europe and North America. Popular understandings of "Pygmies" at this time continued to involve a strange amalgam of information derived from Ancient fables, evolutionism and other ethnological theories, as well as the quasi-fantastical accounts of explorers, missionaries, and colonial officials. The idea that "Pygmies" represented ape-like Darwinian "missing links," for instance, remained popular well into the 1900s. Ballard cites the following quote from the British author and explorer T.A. Barns, writing in 1922:

Both my wife and I look at these sturdy little men with undisguised interest. What need to look further from the Missing Link when he stood there before us! Short legs, long arms, heavy torso; short neck, rounded head, deep set, penetrating, see-in-the-dark kind of eyes; square long lips, protruding jaw. The ape was all there, up to the hair, which was discernible in some cases over the entire body of these dwarfs (Barns 1922, 149; quoted in Ballard 2006, 149).

Indeed, as Brantlinger (2003) points out, Social Darwinism did not fully fall out of favour until after the Second World War, when the popular "reaction against fascism and Nazism led to widespread questioning of race-based theories" (6).

13. Neo-Evolutionism and the Denial of Coevalness

Boas' historical particularism dominated anthropology, particularly in North America, in the opening decades of the twentieth century. By the 1940s, however, some younger anthropologists had begun to feel that the Boasian approach was overly cautious. These scholars took inspiration from the evolutionary anthropology of Lewis Henry Morgan and others, seeking once again to develop general typologies of global human development. As we will see, however, the narrative of human development proposed by these neo-evolutionists differed in important ways from that put forward by Darwin and the nineteenth century social evolutionists.

In order to understand this differences between nineteenth and twentieth century evolutionism, one must keep in mind historical context. The end of the Second World War, and the reaction against fascism and Nazism, had led to the inauguration of a global doctrine of universal human rights. The most prominent evidence of this new doctrine was the adoption, in 1948, of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The idea of universal human rights involved the underlying assumption that "all humans [were] equal in capacity and reasoning" (Kidd 2008, 70). This view could not be easily reconciled with a Darwinian understanding of evolution wherein different races displayed differing levels of cerebral development and thus had inherently different capacities for achieving "civilization." Furthermore, as Tim Ingold (2004) explains, the doctrine of human rights required a clear dividing line between human and non-human species: "If...all humans..., according to western juridical percepts, can exercise rights and responsibilities...then they must differ in kind from all other beings which cannot. And somewhere along the line our ancestors must have made a breakthrough from one condition to the other, from nature to humanity" (212).

The solution to this problem was to return to an understanding of nature and culture that very much resembled that of the eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophers. According to

this understanding, there were two, separate “axes of change” for human development: one biological, the other cultural. The biological axis was believed to be universal: all humans had progressed together through an evolutionary process “leading from our ape-like ancestors to human beings that are recognisably of the same kind as ourselves.” Progress along the historical axis “leading from humanity’s primitive past to modern science and civilisation,” however, was profoundly uneven. Different cultures displayed greatly varying levels of cultural/historical development (Ingold 2004, 212). Human cultural difference, in other words, resulted not from inferior or superior biological capacity, but from uneven levels of cultural/historical progress.

Neo-evolutionary theory also coincided with a shift in the nature of colonial governance in Africa and other parts of the Global South. The period of colonial conquest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had benefitted from a narrative in which Africans were inherently, biologically inferior. European imagery portrayed Africans as savage, warlike, and incapable of civilization. Such portrayals helped to build European public support for the often brutal conquest of African peoples. Once colonial rule had been more or less consolidated, however, European portrayals of Africans shifted. Instead of warlike savages, European narratives now portrayed them as stupid, naïve children in need of European tutelage and guidance (Pieterse 1992, 88-9).

The inauguration of the doctrine of universal human rights after the Second World War posed additional problems for the European colonial enterprise in Africa. On one hand, Europeans envisioned the colonial project as a way to spread civilization to fellow human beings; on the other, an acknowledgement of Africans’ equality to Europeans would have undermined the justification for European rule on the continent. Thus, “the European bourgeoisie fostered and embraced the idea of citizenship, but also a sense that citizenship was “a faculty to

be learned and a privilege to be earned”” (Stoler 1995, 3). A “grammar of difference” had to be “continuously and vigilantly crafted” (4). Neo-evolutionary theory was useful here. It allowed Europeans to acknowledge the humanity of colonial subjects while keeping a justification for colonial rule in place. Colonialism was no longer conceived as a natural outgrowth of Europeans’ biological superiority, but as “a kind of evolutionary assistance” wherein Europeans would help bring about the historical progress of the culturally backward Africans (Pieterse, 1992, 37).

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Trouillot 2003) points out, this reimagining of human difference did nothing to eliminate the Western practice of “ranking” different cultures: “As soon as one draws a single line that links past, present, and future, and yet insists on their distinctiveness, one must inevitably place actors along that line. Not everyone can be at the same point along that line; some become more advanced than others” (38). Johannes Fabian (1983) had famously termed this “tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” as the “denial of coevalness” (31). Fabian points out that this type of “temporal distancing” serves “as a way of creating...objects and referents [for]...anthropological discourse” and creating a false sense of objectivity (Fabian 1983, 30). Indeed, neo-evolutionism revitalized the figure of the Noble Savage, which was now reconceptualized as “standing on the threshold, at the point of origin when history diverges from evolution, and culture from biology” (Ingold 2004, 213).

As we will see, in mid-century anthropology, this liminal figure was often equated with an emergent category of “hunter-gatherers,” who were believed to exhibit the most “primitive” technologies and subsistence patterns. “Pygmies” were among those groups categorized as “hunter-gatherers.”

14. Hunter-Gatherer Studies

Leslie A. White and Julian Steward were perhaps the two most important neo-evolutionist anthropologists (Trigger 2006, 387). White (1949) developed a theory of *general evolution*, which examined the overarching trajectory of humankind *as a whole*. While he acknowledged the diversity of different human cultures, he nevertheless believed that one could discern a general increase in “scale and complexity” over time (Townsend 2009, 14). Steward’s (Steward 1955) theory of *specific* or *multilinear sociocultural evolution*, on the other hand, was more concerned with the way in which people adapted to specific environments (Graber 2010b, 571).

Steward’s approach, which came to be known as *cultural ecology*, posited “diverse trajectories of...evolution in different regions of the world” (Barnard 2000, 40). These trajectories, he argued, resulted from peoples’ using particular technologies “to exploit a particular environment” for the purposes of subsistence and reproduction. Steward termed the “features of social and economic life” that were “most closely related” to these subsistence activities the “*cultural core*” (Townsend 2009, 13). The cultural core could evolve through improvements in technology, but this evolution was limited by the natural environment. Peoples living in different environments thus evolved according to different trajectories, developing different *culture areas* characterized by different social and economic institutions. At the same time, Steward distinguished the cultural core from what he termed “total culture.” Unlike the cultural core, elements of a people’s “total culture” could be influenced through contact and communication with other groups. Steward’s culture areas theory thus encompassed elements for both evolutionism and diffusionism (Barnard 2000, 56; see Steward 1955, 78-97).

Steward’s theory of cultural ecology would prove influential in the emergence, in the 1960s, of the subfield of *hunter-gatherer studies*. Indeed, Steward is often regarded as the

“founder of modern hunter-gatherer studies” (Lee and DeVore 1968, 5). The founding of hunter-gatherer studies is usually dated to the 1966 *Man the hunter* conference in Chicago (Jordan and Cummings 2014, 8; Barnard 2014, 51). While there is no agreed upon definition of “hunter-gatherers,” and while definitions have shifted over time, Richard Lee’s (1992) definition provides a useful starting point.

Economically we are referring to those people who have historically lived by gathering, hunting, and fishing, with minimal or no agriculture and with no domesticated animals except for the dog. Politically gatherer-hunters are usually labeled as “band” or “egalitarian” societies in which social groups are small, mobile, and unstratified, and in which differences of wealth and power are minimally developed. Obviously there is a degree of fit between “forager” subsistence strategies and “band” social organization, but the fit is far from perfect. (31)

Groups meeting Lee’s definition exist throughout the world. Anthropologists studying “hunter-gatherers” work on six continents, with peoples as diverse as the Inuit of the North American arctic and the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. In Africa, scholars have identified three principle “supercategories” of “hunter-gatherers”: “the 200,000 Pygmies of central Africa, the 100,000 east African hunter-gatherers..., and the approximately 100,000 Bushmen/San of...Southern Africa” (Lee and Hitchcock 2001, 260).

Lee’s definition points to a number of key understandings and concerns in hunter-gatherer studies. Most importantly, following Steward, the anthropology of “hunter-gatherers” has posited a link between a group’s environment and mode of production on one hand, and its modes of political and social organization on the other. The practice of hunting and gathering, it is argued, led to “flexible and relatively egalitarian band organization” which “tended to be far less rigid and hierarchical than the norm of...agricultural and pastoral neighbours” (Lee and Hitchcock 2001, 258). As a number of authors have pointed out (e.g. Wilmsen 1989), this understanding assumes that hunter-gatherers are relatively isolated from, or at least uninfluenced by, diffusion of technologies and practices from neighbouring groups, and “regional historical

processes” more broadly (Moïse 2011, 2). As Kurtz (1994) demonstrates, until the late 1980s, anthropologists studying “hunter-gatherers” tended to view them as “autonomous peoples with cultural identities very different from and virtually unaffected by the agropastoral neighbours” (68).

Not only did anthropologists view “hunter-gatherers” as isolated, they also viewed them as static. The isolation of “hunter-gatherers,” anthropologists argued, meant that these groups had been living in the same manner for centuries. Jan Vansina (1990), for instance, in his excellent history of the peoples of the Congo Basin Rainforest, argues that many foreign scholars assume that, prior to European contact, “Pygmies” (as well as some neighbouring groups) were “so constrained by cultural tradition” or so “busy surviving in...a hostile environment” that they could not “evolve” (xi). These scholars view “Pygmies” as “endlessly...stuck in the same rut for time immemorial,” supposedly still living “today as they have done for centuries or millennia” (3). This view applies to anthropological views of “hunter-gatherers” more generally as well.

The supposed stasis and isolation of “hunter gatherers” is what, for many, made them an attractive object of study. Because they had supposedly been living the same way “for time immemorial,” “hunter-gatherer” groups could serve as “living fossils,” providing a window on the past of Western “civilization.” Lee, for instance, has stated that hunter-gatherer societies “represent the original condition of humankind” (Leacock and Lee 1982, 5). Writing about the !Kung San of the Kalahari, Lee argues that hunter-gatherers exist on the “threshold of the Neolithic [exhibiting] the basic human adaptation stripped of the accretions and complications brought about by all the ‘advances’ of the last thousand years” (Lee 1974, 169; quoted in Wilmsen 2003, 405). Robert Moïse (2014) identifies a similar tendency in studies of Central

African forest peoples, arguing, “the major interest in Pygmies expressed in anthropology has been by those wanting to elucidate the deep past” (86).

Anthropological writing about “hunter-gatherers” thus represents a paradigmatic example of Fabian’s “denial of coevalness,” with “hunter-gatherer” societies filling the slot previously occupied by the eighteenth century “Noble Savage.” As Ingold (2004) explains, “the division between nature and reason is still there, but is now shifted onto that between the exotic hunter-gatherer and the western scientist, the former epitomising a view of humanity in the state of nature, the latter the triumph of human reason *over* nature” (213). The figure of the hunter-gatherer is the lynchpin holding neo-evolutionary theory together, marking the point at which humans and nature diverge. Indeed, according to Ingold (1998), had “hunter-gatherers” “not existed they would almost certainly have had to have been invented. Evolutionary theory, it seems *requires* hunter-gatherers” (89). Indeed, a number of authors have argued that “hunter-gatherers” are, in fact, an anthropological invention. Bernard Arcand (1988), for instance, has claimed that the category “hunter-gatherers” is incoherent, identifying “no single, specific kind of society. Rather “the continued existence of the category is predicated on a need for it in Western discourse” (Barnard 2014, 52).

In addition to the denial of coevalness, early hunter-gatherer studies often trafficked in romanticism, with “hunter-gatherers” serving as a foil in explicit and implicit critiques of the malaise and anomie of Western industrial capitalism. Lee (1992, 43), for instance, has written,

When anthropologists look at hunter-gatherers they are seeking...a vision of human life and human possibilities without the pomp and glory, but also without the misery and inequity of state and class society.... Pockets of resistance persist and show us that even in this hard-bitten postmodern age other ways of being are possible.

“Hunter-gatherers,” some believed, represented a “purer” or “truer” model of human existence, freed from the corruption of modernity. They studied hunter gatherers because they thought that

the “human condition was likely to be more clearly drawn here than among other kinds of societies” (Lee and DeVore 1968, x). More specifically, they believed that the “remarkable” thing about “hunter-gatherers” was their “ability to reproduce themselves while limiting the accumulation of wealth and power” (Lee 1992, 39; Sahlins 1972). It is not difficult to see why this type of model would have been attractive to leftist academics.

As I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three, a major implication of the “traditionalist” view of “hunter-gatherers” as isolated and unchanging was the supposition that “hunter-gatherer” culture and ways of life were fragile, and would be unable to survive in the face of outside influence. Thus, many early studies of “hunter-gatherers” took the form of salvage ethnography. As Kathleen Sterling (2014) explains, “one of the key premises of *Man the hunter* was that since over 99 per cent of human history has been spent hunting and gathering, it was essential to document this way of life as fully as possible before the last of the cultures disappear” (153).

15. “Pygmies” in Hunter-Gatherer Studies

The rise of hunter-gatherer studies in the mid-twentieth century led to renewed public and academic interest in “Pygmies” (Rupp 2011, 38). “Pygmies” became hunter-gatherers *par excellence* and, along with the “San” of the Kalahari, were perhaps the group most studied by hunter-gatherer scholars. The image of “Pygmies” as hunters—and elephant hunters in particular—dates from at least the nineteenth century. William Henry Flowers, for instance, in his *The Pygmy Races of Men* (1889) wrote that “pygmy African tribes...live chiefly by the chase, being great hunters of the elephant, which they attack with bows and arrows” (87).¹⁵ The association of “Pygmies” with hunting, combined with their longstanding subordinate position in evolutionist and neo-evolutionist narratives, meant that they were well placed to play a key role in hunter-gatherer studies, which in turn reinforced these tropes. As Klieman (2003) notes,

In the post-World War II era, the Idea of the Pygmy reached a rather exalted status, one comparable to that of the ancient times. The new level of approbation was linked to the rise of the Man the Hunter evolutionary narrative, and its use of both San and Batwa peoples as analogical sources for understanding the origins of early humankind. (15)
Colin Turnbull's work with Mbuti "Pygmies" in the Ituri forest of the eastern Democratic

Republic of Congo (then Zaire) was particularly influential in carving out the privileged position that "Pygmies" came to occupy in the field of hunter-gatherer studies (Hewlett and Fancher 2014, 939). While Turnbull's work specifically concerned the Mbuti, as Hewlett (1996) argues, Turnbull's works "have been so popular that...most individuals, including anthropologists, view Mbuti culture as synonymous with African Pygmy culture" (215). Indeed, Turnbull's descriptions of the Mbuti have been important in the development of models of "hunter-gatherers" more generally. Marshall Sahlins, for instance, relied heavily on Turnbull's work in developing his theory of "hunter-gatherers" as "the original affluent society" (Klieman 2003, 16). This idea, in turn, "laid the foundations for the anthropological study of modern hunter-gatherers" (Bird-David 1992, 25).

Owing to his grounding in British structural-functionalism, Turnbull was particularly interested in Mbuti "social structure." While he disagreed with the rigidity of Steward's understanding of the link between environment and culture (some have characterized his Turnbull's work as "weak" cultural ecology (Altman and Chemers 1984, 8)), Turnbull broadly agreed with the cultural ecology's assertion that environment—in this case the rainforest—was "determinant as well as permissive of certain elements of social organization" (Turnbull 1965, 277). Other anthropologists have extended this argument to "Pygmies" in general, arguing that the association with a forest environment as generated "fundamentally different institutions, modes of the thought, and cultural forms" as compared to sedentary, agriculturalist populations (Hewlett and Fancher 2014, 947). Indeed, hunter-gatherer studies scholars argue that many of the

attributes that Turnbull associated with the Mbuti are shared by hunter-gatherers in general.

Hewlett and Fancher (2014), for instance, write,

Like mobile foragers in other parts of the world [Pygmies] lack strong leaders and food storage; gender and age egalitarianism, extensive sharing, and respect for autonomy are foundational cultural values; fertility and mortality are relatively high; camp sizes average 25-35 individuals; and seldom do they engage in warfare or raiding. (939)
Turnbull's work also paralleled that of the cultural ecologists in that he believed that

Mbuti forms of social and economic organization were somehow less "evolved." For Turnbull, the Mbuti were "still at the Stone Age level...in intimate sympathy with their forest world" (Turnbull 1976, 117; quoted in Frankland 1999, 63). Indeed, as this last sentence reveals, Turnbull's work involved not only an analysis of Mbuti social structure, but also quite a bit of romanticization of the Mbuti's supposedly more "pure," "authentic" lifestyle. Turnbull's most widely read book, *The Forest People* (1961) (which is more "subjective travelogue" than rigorous ethnography) sets the Mbuti up as a foil for the supposed ills of Western industrial capitalism (Klieman 2003, 17). As Rupp (2011) argues, Turnbull's "portrayal of "pygmies" reflected his own values of equality and liberty, his aspirations of social harmony, and his search for intimate relationships at least as much as it revealed the realities of the Mbuti" (39; see also Grinker 2001).

Throughout his career, Turnbull would continue to portray the Mbuti as "noble savages." Writing in 1993, for instance, he expressed his wish that "the Mbuti will bring with them, to this rather ugly modern world, something of the beauty that they have known for so long, and enrich us all" (Turnbull 1983, 9). As Klieman (2003), among others, has argued, Turnbull's romanticism contains the palimpsest of previous Western representations of African "primitives," including "ancient notions of the Pygmy...as remnant[] of a lost Golden Age, recalling an era when humans lived in harmony with community, economy, and nature" (17).

Stanley Frankland (1999) has coined the term “Turnbull’s syndrome” to describe a “romantic vision” of “Pygmy” life, which, he argues, has become central to later anthropological writings, particularly in the subfield of hunter-gatherer studies.

16. The “Pygmy”-“Bantu” Binary

In addition to the influence of his romanticism, Turnbull’s work also influenced another key trope that relates more to ethnographic studies of “Pygmies” specifically: Namely, a binary understanding of belonging and identity. Much of Turnbull’s work, including his most ethnographically rigorous book, *Wayward Servants* (1965), explores the relationship between Mbuti hunters and neighbouring Bantu farming communities. According to Turnbull “the relationship between the two neighbouring peoples is of the greatest importance” in understanding “Pygmy” social organization (1965, 146; quoted in Hewlett and Fancher 2014, 946-7). Turnbull proposed that Mbuti lives were conducted in two distinct socio-environmental spheres. Part of their time was spent living proximate to Bantu villages. The remainder was spent hunting and gathering in the forest. While, when they were in the “village world,” Mbuti practices were heavily determined by the Bantu, in the “forest world,” where the Mbuti spent the majority of their time, they displayed cultural, social, and political autonomy.

As we have seen, there are historical precedents for binary forms of representation. What separates Turnbull’s account, however, is that it is rooted in long-term ethnography. This differentiates Turnbull from scholars such as Paul Schebesta. Writing in the 1930s, Schebesta argued that “Pygmies” had become “totally dependent” on neighbouring Bantu villagers for food, metal and “even for their very culture” (Turner 1965, 874; see Schebesta 1933). Schebesta was a disciple of Schmidt and the *Kulturkreis* school, and was building on the Schmidt’s assertion that “Pygmies” were the “most primitive” culture circle. Schebesta’s study, however, was not grounded in long term fieldwork. Turnbull’s research in the Ituri forest proposed a quite

different relationship between Mbuti and Bantu. Nevertheless, it reinforced the idea of a clear division between the two groups, and between “forest” and “village.”

This binary understanding was carried forward to studies of other “Pygmy” groups. Indeed, general anthropological definitions of “Pygmies” tend to emphasize two principle characteristics: their hunting and gathering livelihoods and their relationship with “Bantu” neighbours. Hewlett (1996, 215), for instance, lists the following four general characteristics of “Pygmies”:

(1) they spend at least four months of the year in the tropical forest hunting and gathering; (2) they have a strong identity with and preference for forest life; (3) *they maintain many-stranded social and economic relations with neighbouring farming populations*; and (4) they practice important ritual activities associated with elephant hunting. (my emphasis)

The majority of ethnographies of “Pygmies” produced since the mid-twentieth century have adopted the strategy of dividing Congo Basin populations into “Pygmies” and “Bantu” with certain attributes are then applied to each group. Most commonly, each group is characterized by a particular livelihood strategy: “Pygmies” are said to be semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers. For this reason they are sometimes referred to simply as “hunters,” “hunter-gatherers,” or “foragers.” “Bantu” are said to be sedentary agriculturalists, and are thus sometimes referred to as “farmers,” “agriculturalists,” or “villagers.” Much of the anthropological literature on “Pygmies” concerns the nature of the relationship between “foragers” and “farmers,” with authors debating (in sometimes acrimonious terms) whether relations are symbiotic, exploitative, or something in between (Hewlett and Fancher 2014, 947).

As we will see, the “Pygmy”/“Bantu” binary of course involves a great deal of oversimplification. Both categories—“Pygmy” and “Bantu”—encompass a number of culturally and linguistically distinct groups (Abega and Bigombe Logo 2006a, 55). Moreover, the idea that

“Pygmies” are “pure” “hunter-gatherers” and the “Bantu” are “pure” agriculturalists, is today a misconception. (Though, as we will see in the next chapter, it is based on a real historical division between agriculturalist and nomadic groups.) Contemporary “Pygmy” and “Bantu” communities practice a diversity of livelihood strategies. The following sections will explore the category of “Pygmies” in more detail. It is important to note, however, that the term “Bantu” too is something of a misnomer. Not all groups that are categorized as “Bantu” speak Bantu languages. Groups such as the Bangando in southeast Cameroon, for instance, speak languages with Oubangian roots; yet, owing to their livelihood practices, sedentism, and relations with “Pygmies,” both outsiders and local people call them “Bantu.”¹⁶ Writing specifically about southeast Cameroon, Rupp (2011) notes:

Reflecting generalizations in academic literature on “hunter-gatherer” communities throughout equatorial Africa, the category “Bantu” emerged as a catch-all category to identify and classify all “non-Baka” communities whose subsistence techniques were classified as “farming” or “fishing.” “Bantu” communities were positioned over and against “Baka,” encapsulating all “non-hunter-gatherer” communities. (220)

Owing to the constructed nature of the term “Bantu,” I have adopted the same strategy with this term as with the term “Pygmy,” placing it in quotations marks to denote its literary quality.

17. Revisionism

Beginning in the 1980s, a number of scholars began to question the neo-evolutionist model of “Pygmies,” and of “hunter-gatherers” more generally. These critiques coalesced into a “revisionist” movement, which faced off against “traditionalist” hunter-gatherer studies. Richard Lee (1992), who was arguably the primary target of the revisionists, has identified two elements of the “revisionist critique”: First, an “argument from history,” which attempts to demonstrate that traditionalist ethnographies of “hunter-gatherers” ignored or misread evidence of historical contact between “hunter-gatherers” and other groups, thus treating “hunter-gatherer” societies as “more bounded, more isolated, and more pristine” than they really were. Second, a

“poststructuralist critique,” which, influenced by the rise of postmodernism and the mid-1980s “crisis of representation” in anthropology, points out the ways in which “all anthropology is powerfully shaped by the cultural constructions of the observer” (34).

Edwin N. Wilmsen is perhaps the most famous proponent of the revisionist critique of hunter-gatherer studies. Wilmsen’s 1989 book *Land Filled with Flies* incorporates elements of both the “argument from history” and the “poststructuralist critique.” Wilmsen undertakes a detailed analysis of the history of San “hunter-gatherers” of the Kalahari Desert.¹⁷ Rather than viewing the San as vestiges of earlier stages of cultural evolution, which have persisted due to the group’s isolation, Wilmsen argues that the San livelihood strategy of hunting and gathering, as well as their communal social relations and band form of political organization, are in fact the result of historical interactions with outside groups. According to Wilmsen, the San have not always been hunter-gatherers, but rather became hunter-gatherers because of their exploitation by “larger and more powerful societies” in the region (Lee 1992, 39). If true, Wilmsen’s argument would challenge the traditionalists’ neo-evolutionary system, and their assumption that “hunter-gatherers” can serve as a window to humanity’s earlier forms. Wilmsen (1989) sums his argument up as follows: “The isolation in which they are said to have been found is a creation of our view of them, not of their history as they lived it” (3).

A number of scholars have advanced similar critiques in relation to ethnographic models of “Pygmies.” Traditionalist hunter-gatherer studies posits a long period during which “Pygmies” lived isolated and independent deep in the rainforest. According to this view, “Pygmies”—who now inhabit a number of ethnic identities and speak a variety of languages—“can be considered as the remnant of an ancient and immense range covering the whole Congo Basin, the population of which was dispersed because of the “invasion” of non-Pygmy groups into the rainforest”

(Bahuchet 2014, 19). It was during this pre-contact period, the traditionalists argue, that “Pygmies” developed the livelihood strategies and culture that still characterize their societies today. The relatively “frozen” nature of “Pygmy” socio-cultural development means that studying contemporary “Pygmies” can reveal something about the ancestors of Western “civilization,” which, the argument implies, has advanced and changed rapidly over the past several thousand years, while “Pygmies” have remained relatively static.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, a number of authors presented evidence that would seem to challenge the idea that “Pygmies” had ever lived isolated and independent from “Bantu” and other communities (see Lee and Hitchcock 2001, 261). A famous debate of over so-called “wild yam question,” for instance, saw anthropologists considering whether “Pygmies” could, in fact, historically have derived sufficient carbohydrates from foraging, or whether they would have always been reliant on farmed produce, and hence on trading with non-Pygmy groups (Ichikawa 1983; Headland 1987; Bailey et al. 1989). Along similar lines, Ichikawa (1991) argued that, while elephant hunting was often viewed as a defining aspect of “Pygmy” culture, it was likely that this activity was in fact motivated at least in part by commoditization and trading relationships with “Bantu.” Elephant hunting thus, in fact, “illustrates the necessity of looking beyond...environment as the main frame of reference” for “Pygmy” cultural practices (Frankland 1999, 63). Some (e.g. Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza 1994) have gone so far as to engage in genetic testing of “Pygmies” and their neighbours in an effort to prove that the two communities are “genetically indistinguishable” (Klieman 2003, xviii).

In an argument that parallels Wilmsen, Robert Moïse (2011) draws on Bahuchet and Guillaume’s (1982) “myth of the forest cocoon” to argue that “the notion of isolation has directed attention away from the engagement of Pygmies with regional historical processes” (2).

Moïse (2014) challenges the idea that “Pygmy cultural practices have remained unchanged since ancient times” and that “contemporary Pygmy social and political culture is the result of “faithful adherence to a “way of life” based on a hunting-gathering mode of production” (86). As Frankland (1999) argues, a “theoretical focus on ecology...acts as a method of foreclosure,” with the anthropological emphasis on the “deep forest environment” eliminating the possibility of “influences beyond the confines of the canopy” (62).

The key question here, from a neo-evolutionist perspective, is whether “Pygmies” once existed independently, or whether they have always been in some way dependent on agriculturalists. The revelation that “Pygmies” had always engaged in trade would be significant in that it would debunk the model of the primitive, “Stone Age” hunter-gatherer. The “argument from history” attempts to demonstrate that the notion of “Pygmies” as “living ancestors” of Western “civilization” is false.

These revelations led some authors to go so far as to declare “Pygmies” to be an “ethnographic fiction.” According to Roger Blench (1999), “Pygmies” are in fact merely a “specialized caste” of their “Bantu” neighbours “who have developed a distinct ethnicity relatively recently” (42). Accepting the “wild yam hypothesis,” Blench argues,

The pygmies of south-central Africa simply are the same as their agricultural neighbours. If the rainforest could not support hunting-gathering all year round, then the early [“Bantu”] moving eastward from Cameroon would have settled on ecotones; the edge of the forest, the borderlands of swamps or the banks of rivers. A specialized group of hunters evolved who went into the forest to exploit it at certain times of the year. Like many specialized occupational groups in Africa, they became endogamous, and were eventually regarded as a “separate” ethnic group, as are blacksmiths in many other regions. (50)

“Pygmies” “short stature,” Blench argues, is not the result of genetic or ethnic difference, but is rather a biological adaptation resulting from several generations where a great deal of time was

spent deep in the forest, with a specialized diet and limited exposure to sunlight, as well as selective marriage between farmers and hunters where farmers tended to pick taller women (50).

There are a number of reasons to reject Blench's contention that "Pygmies" are an "ethnographic fiction." For one, recent archaeological evidence would also seem to call into question the theory of "Pygmies" as a specialized sub-caste of "Bantu" (see Hewlett and Fancher 2014, 938). For another, Blench commits the same error as the traditionalists, assuming that an identity category can only be ethnographically valid or useful if it is ancient and primordial. He thus ignores the ways in which, whatever its origins, the category of "Pygmy" (as well as specific categories such as "Baka") have become powerful sources of identity and belonging. We can thus accept the revelation that "Pygmies" have been less historically isolated than the traditionalists assumed without throwing away the category of "Pygmies" altogether.

18. Revisionism and the Poststructuralist Critique

In addition to attempting to provide historical and archaeological evidence to debunk notions of "hunter-gatherer" distinctiveness and isolation, the revisionist critique has also made a broader, more theoretical argument. Authors such as Wilmsen have sought to reveal the fact that categories such as "Pygmies" and "hunter-gatherers" are constructions of Western political imperatives and knowledge systems. Building on Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) notion of "invented traditions," Wilmsen (1989), for instance, shows how the category of "Bushmen" in Southern Africa was in fact a construction of the colonial administration, rather than a pre-existing group identity (xiii). Wilmsen then draws on writings from the anthropological "crisis of representation" (Asad 1986; Clifford 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986) to argue that traditionalist ethnographies of "hunter-gatherers" commit the error of believing that "the ethnographicized world and our knowledge of it are isomorphic" (Wilmsen 2003, 411).

Similarly, speaking specifically about “Pygmies,” Bahuchet (2014) has pointed out that the category “Pygmy” in fact unites about “twenty distinct ethnic groups” (19). “In reality,” Bahuchet (1993a) concludes, “Pygmies do not exist. The men who do exist have names: Baka, BaBongo, BaAka, BaSua, Èfè, Asua, BaTwa.... Who will ever know what they have in common, other than exciting the imagination of the Occident?” (175; my translation). Similarly, Frankland (1999) suggests that “Pygmies” have held together as a coherent object of study only through a process of “remaking the whole,” wherein anthropologists have made (and re-made) definitional lists of characteristics in order to bracket these populations off from neighbouring groups. To take one example, Hewlett, in his introduction to a recent collection of scholarship on *Hunter-Gatherers of the Congo Basin*, proposes what he terms the “80 percent criteria” for continuing to use the category of “Congo Basin foragers.” He writes: “Although precise measures do not exist, it is likely that more than 80 percent of Congo Basin foragers continue to hunt and gather at least several months of the year, view themselves as forest hunter-gatherer specialists, or have forager modes of thought” (Hewlett 2014, xxi). This more flexible definition, which requires only that a majority of a population hunt for some period of time, is a far cry from the more rigid definitions and understandings of the past.

According to the poststructuralist critique, the process of “remaking the whole” is necessary in order to preserve categories such as “Pygmy” and “hunter-gatherer” in the face of large scale social change in these communities. This desire is evident in the writings of traditionalist hunter-gatherer studies. Lee (1992), for instance, argues that, in spite of change, “foragers...have remained foragers,” seemingly eliding the fact that it is Western anthropologists and not “foragers” themselves who determine who properly belongs to this category. This

process of “remaking the whole” represents an attempt to preserve primordial identity categories in the face of undeniable social change.

19. The Political Stakes of Revisionism

The debate between traditionalists and revisionists in hunter-gatherer studies, and between Lee and Wilmsen in particular, raged for several decades, often descending into vitriol and personal attacks (e.g. Solway and Lee 1990; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990).¹⁸ What is striking about reading this literature, however, is the degree to which the two sides appear to be talking past one another. Lee (e.g. Lee and Guenther 1991) has produced stinging critiques of Wilmsen’s competence as a researcher, going so far as to assert that Wilmsen’s findings rest on incorrect translations and the falsification of evidence (see Wilmsen 2003, 327-8). Whatever the merits of these claims, however, they do nothing to undercut the (to me, patently obvious) assertion that identity categories such as “hunter-gatherers” are not ontological, but are rather Western heuristics and must be treated as such. As Klieman (2003; quoting Turbayne 1970) explains, traditionalist hunter-gatherer scholars “mistake the model for the thing modelled” (17). Crucially, this error also served to deprive “hunter-gatherers” of agency. “Hunter-gatherers” are “deemed primordial rather than recognized for the role that they played in producing Western definitions of primordality itself” (Klieman 2003, 17).

What is also remarkable in the debate between traditionalists and revisionists is the degree to which, in spite of the rather extreme rhetoric and accusations levelled by both sides, both parties’ work seems to be guided by a humanist impulse. Both sides view the undermining or challenging of their models and categories as somehow endangering the rights and well-being of “hunter-gatherers.”¹⁹ For instance, Lee has accused Wilmsen of “pandering to the need of the Government of Botswana to create a homogenous national identity” (quoted in Wilmsen 2003, 327-8) and has deplored the use of “tools of deconstruction, developed to debunk and call into

question the high and mighty” to instead debunk identities that may be useful to “the powerless” (Lee 1992, 36). He cites as an example James Clifford’s (1988) famous study in *The Predicament of Culture*, which explores the ways in which Mashpee Indians, in Lee’s words, “construct their identity *de novo* to see the exigencies of a court case” (Lee 1992, 36). Lee’s argument here supposes that if identity categories such as “hunter-gatherer” are revealed to be constructions, they will cease to function to support claims to Indigenous rights and other forms of special consideration.

I will explore this link between rights and identity categories in much more detail in subsequent chapters. For now, however, I will simply state that, as the ethnographic evidence in this thesis will show, an identity category need not be primordial or ontological in order to provide a useful container for rights claims. As Benedict Anderson (1983) has famously argued, all communities are, at the end of the day, “imagined.” The revelation that a community—be it “hunter-gatherers,” “Pygmies,” “Baka,” or “Canadians”—is a construction does not mean that this community cannot become a powerful source of identity and belonging, nor does it imply that members of the community are not entitled to certain rights.

As I have mentioned, Wilmsen’s work is also undergirded by a humanist impulse. Indeed, in the introduction of *Land Filled with Flies* he explains that his “motivations...for writing this book lie in [the] awareness that anthropological claims to knowledge...intervene in the public arena” (1989, xv). Wilmsen in fact praises the traditionalists for “illuminating in compelling ways the richness of “San” cultures and insisting rightly on the ancient heritage of “San” peoples.” He simply disagrees with the way in which traditionalist hunter-gatherer studies scholars have “made a virtue of what they perceive to be the isolation necessary to preserve the integrity of those cultures, an integrity they have inextricably tied to their supposed antiquity”

(8). Wilmsen is concerned that categories such as “hunter-gatherer” serve to obscure the Western power to represent, and the way in which they contain the palimpsest of the narratives, tropes, and other understandings that I have laid out in this chapter. Wilmsen is responding here to the postcolonial critique of Said, Mudimbe, and others, who point out the ways in which the Western will to representational truth was almost always tied up with a European “will to power” (see Mudimbe 1994, 212). His goal is not to debunk the distinctiveness of “San” and other hunter-gatherer groups, but to reconstitute it on a new basis.

20. “Pygmies” and the Poststructuralist Critique

Recently, some authors have sought to extend a version of the revisionists’ poststructuralist critique regarding “hunter-gatherers” to the category of “Pygmies.” Stephanie Rupp (2011), in a thought-provoking and carefully researched ethnography of identity and ethnicity in southeast Cameroon, argues that outsiders, particularly academics, tend to conflate local identities with outside categories, such that membership in “evident categories of self-identification,” such those based as a shared language, is taken to imply membership in other categories that may have little (or no) local resonance. For instance, a person’s being Baka is taken to imply that they are also a “Pygmy,” a “hunter-gatherer,” a “forest person,” and “Indigenous.” (I will discuss Indigenous identity in more detail in Chapter Four). Rupp compares these categories to “a toddler’s set of stacking cups” which “aligns similar, graduated, and functionally substitutable containers, so categories of identity are assumed to be interrelated and even interchangeable (2011, 5). This conflation of identity, Rupp argues, is both reductive, in that it “suggest[s] internal social, economic, and ecological homogeneity among members of [each] category,” and bifurcating, in that it implicitly opposes “Pygmy” “hunter-gatherers” to “Bantu” “farmers”/“villagers.” The two groups are portrayed as being “fundamentally *different*, masking important relationships, alliances, and mutual interests that unify rather the divide” (44).

While Rupp is careful to note that she does not concur with the revisionists' idea that "hunter-gatherer" is a "non category" "existing only in the imaginations of scholars and outside observers" (45), she nevertheless expresses her belief that,

By analytically slotting African equatorial forest communities into predetermined categories of "pygmy"/"villager" and "hunter-gatherer"/"farmer," the field of social relations is flattened into two dimensions based on contrasting subsistence strategies and polar relations of power. As a result of this narrow focus, other relationships and dynamics of belonging that are experienced by forest peoples are rendered analytically invisible and ideologically irrelevant to outside observers. (248)

Local people, Rupp argues, do not conceptualize belonging and identity in terms of oppositional identities of "Pygmy" and "Bantu." Binary narratives of identity serve to "de-emphasize socially affirming relations" between "Pygmies" and "Bantus" "in favour of analyses of domination and subordination" (41)

Rupp's intervention, and in particular her call for greater and more careful attention to the ways in which local people understand their own identities and relationships, is well-taken. It is certainly important to avoid falling into the trap of unproblematically conceptualizing identity and belonging in relation to outside categories, and binary understandings of identity. I believe, however, that Rupp draws too easy an equivalence between the categories of "Pygmy" and "hunter-gatherer." While "hunter-gatherer" is an outside construction that has little local resonance, "Pygmy," while it is certainly, as we have seen, also an outside construction, has been widely taken up by local populations to describe a form of difference that appears to have existed prior to European contact (see Chapter Two.) The category "Pygmy" is frequently deployed in local discourses of belonging and identity and both conditions and describes social and economic inequality. In my own experience, most Cameroonians have no conception of a broad, global category of "hunter-gatherers" that would encompass groups such as the "San," or as far flung as Aboriginal Australians. Every Cameroonian, on the other hand, knows exactly what a "Pygmy"

is, who “Pygmies” are, and where “Pygmies” can be found. I do not agree with Rupp, then, that the category “Pygmy” has “outlived its usefulness” (44).

It is true that “Pygmy” identity is constructed, rather than (as many of the earlier authors discussed in this chapter believed) genetic or biological. The same can be said of “Bantu” identity. “Pygmy” and “Bantu” are “symbolic categories” (Bourdieu 1991), “actively created and recreated by human beings rather than pre-given, needing only to be labeled” (Desmond and Emirbayer 2009, 336). As Desmond and Emirbayer note, however, “symbolic categories mark differences between grouped people or things. *In doing so, they actually bring those people or things into existence*” (my emphasis). Moreover, these categories condition intergroup relations and identities such that the categories are reinforced.

21. A Hermeneutic Approach to the “Pygmy Paradigm”

The challenge, then, is to adopt a perspective that acknowledges the impact of the “Pygmy Paradigm” on identity and belonging without perpetuating it; to accept that “being a “Pygmy”” has important effects on a person’s life and well-being while also being clear that the category “Pygmy” is heuristic, not ontological. A genealogical, hermeneutic approach can help here. As we will see in subsequent chapters, one can apply such an approach not only to the category of “Pygmies” but to other outside categories, notably “Indigenous peoples,” that have come to take on local resonance and have local political effects.

In adopting this approach, I take inspiration from the early twentieth century move from genetic/biological to socio-historical understandings of race. As W.E.B. Du Bois (1970) famously argued, racial difference is rooted not in “physical distinction” but in “spiritual, psychical differences” brought about through a common structural position and a common historical experience (77; Winant 2000, 173-5; Appiah 1992, 29). In the case of Africans, Du Bois argued, common experiences led to the formation of a collective “black consciousness” that

could be used in the service of emancipation (Rabaka 2009, 86). As Leone *et al.* (2005) argue, today “race is usually conceptualized as a social construct used to define an “other,” often through physical characteristics but also through knowledge of lineage and kinship” as well as “economic status.” Importantly, they note that “*defining race as a social construct is not meant to say that the ramifications of racialization do not exist*” (580).

In other words, while we can acknowledge that racial identities are historical constructs, this does not mean that we can ignore the very real effects of structural and interpersonal racism in people’s lives. As Desmond and Emirbayer (2009) argue,

Emphatically, this does not mean that refusing to recognize racial groups that were created through centuries of oppression, colonialism, political discourse, and scientific manipulation will somehow lead those races (and racial inequality) to magically disappear. The process of racial misrecognition is found both at the structural and individual levels and, most important, is a historical process. It follows, then, that the practice of refusing to recognize the misrecognition, as with France’s aversion to acknowledging racial categories or the prematurely celebratory declaration of a “color-blind” or “race free” America usually associated with neoconservative politics, is an ineffective and wrongheaded response to a world itself not color-blind. In many cases, the refusal to recognize race—a well-founded fiction—only exacerbates racial inequalities by rendering antiracist programs impossible. (336n2).

Rupp (2011) herself acknowledges both the fact that “Pygmy” identity may serve as a political resource, and the fact that it may lead to real social animosity and division. “Individuals,” she notes, “may align themselves strategically with [outside] paradigms in order to gain access to economic or social resources, which are often provided by external institutions” (16). Later in her book she acknowledges,

The political implications of shattering the stacking paradigms of “hunter-gatherer”—“forager”—“pygmy”—“indigenous peoples” are both enormous and potentially disempowering to communities for whom conformity with the stereotypes produces beneficial relationships, services, or economic outcomes. The communities represented—however accurately or inaccurately—by these stereotypes remain among the most politically and economically marginalized communities in the world. If maintaining images of “hunter-gatherer” and “pygmy” constitutes an important political tool for pulling on the heartstrings of Euroamerican donor agencies and on the head-strings of

scholars and researchers, perhaps these stereotypes serve an important, practical role that can be effectively utilized by some forest communities. (257)

This somewhat grudging acknowledgement, however, minimizes the structural impacts of “Pygmy” identity, as well as the ways in which “Pygmies” themselves strategically construct and embody this identity for their own local and external purposes. “Pygmy” identity is not just a tool for “pulling on the heartstrings” of Western donors, it is a source of real, pervasive, economic and political inequality. (I should note here, however, that while acknowledging the structural discrimination that “Pygmies” face, we must also avoid falling into the “pygmy-as-victim” trap (Moïse 2011, 4), neglecting other salient aspect of “Pygmy” identity that exist in addition to a shared history of discrimination and marginalization.)

To say that categories such as “Pygmy” are constructed is not to imply that they do not have real political, social, and economic consequences. As we will see in subsequent chapters, the idea of a (hierarchical) division between “Pygmies” and “Bantu” informs everyday interactions between individuals and groups, as well as a host of external interventions and political structures that differentially target, and affect, the two groups. The division of populations in southeast Cameroon into “Pygmies” and “Bantu” has conditioned outside interventions since the colonial era. Owing in large part to the influence of the Western “Pygmy Paradigm,” Baka, Bagyelí and other “Pygmies” have been treated differently and affected differently by various social changes. These differential effects have left them in a structurally disadvantaged position; a position that is exacerbated by the continued belief in various stereotypes and tropes by many Cameroonians and outsiders, as well as by the expansion of conservation, logging, and extractivism, which disproportionately harms “Pygmy” communities and reifies inequality between “Pygmies” and “Bantu.”

Whatever the origins of the “Pygmy” category, no one can doubt that such an identity exists today. Moreover, no one can question that *being* a “Pygmy” is a source of marginalization in the contemporary Cameroonian context. We must move past the vagaries of the debate between traditionalists and revisionists. “Pygmies” are not “Pygmies” because of genetics or historical isolation in the rainforest. They are “Pygmies” because of a common experience of structural marginalization and discrimination that is conditioned on the fact of their “Pygmy-ness.”

22. Conclusion

A philological, hermeneutic approach to categories such as “Pygmy” and “hunter-gatherer,” need not undermine the ways in which these categories have come to serve as genuine sources of identity and belonging, but rather can create a space for local agency. Looking at Blench’s contention that “Pygmies” are an “ethnographic fiction” for instance, I am struck by how arcane and beside the point the debate seems to be. Whatever the origin of “Pygmy” distinctiveness from “Bantu”, very few people would deny that “Pygmies” are today considered to be a distinct group. As we will see in the following chapters, the status on certain groups as “Pygmies” has marked them for discrimination, rights violations, and other disadvantages. The revelation that “Pygmies are an ethnographic fiction” is cold comfort to people who are marginalized because they are “Pygmies.” To return to Foucault, in order to understand the lived realities of the Baka and other “Pygmy” groups, we must not attempt to identify “objective” facts about these people’s history, but rather to understand the genealogy of the category “Pygmy” and the ways in which it encompasses an accumulation of different narratives and tropes, each of which is motivated by different political desires and imperatives. *Categories* such as “Pygmy” “hunter-gatherer,” and “Indigenous peoples” are both an important source of marginalization and, as we will see later in this thesis, a potential vehicle for emancipation.

It is possible to accept both the revisionist “argument from history” and the poststructuralist critique while maintaining “Pygmies” as a framework for understanding difference, identity, and belonging in southeast Cameroon. While it is true that the category is an outside construction, it has gained profound local resonance and helps both to describe and condition historical processes that have left a subset of the Cameroonian population—namely “Pygmies”—in a subordinate position.

What is essential about categories such as “Pygmy” or “hunter-gatherer” is not their origins—though these are important to understand. Rather, what is important is the utility as political tools today, for the people who inhabit them. The remainder of my dissertation explores the various categories inhabited by the people—sometimes called “Baka,” sometimes called “Pygmies,” sometimes called “Indigenous peoples,”—with whom I conducted my research. This thesis valorizes the agency of the local people who make up these groups, showing how they creatively make use of the history, tropes, and understandings described in this chapter—what Klieman calls the “Pygmy Paradigm.” They do this in order to advance individual and group political and social objectives. At the same time, I will explore how labels such as “Pygmy” can be oppressive, rather than emancipatory. This is the case when those who would seek to deny local rights and agendas wield these categories and associated understandings for their own purposes.

Chapter 2

Becoming Baka, Becoming “Pygmies”

1. “*Des hommes de petite taille*”

Today in Cameroon, “Pygmies” are considered a distinct group, with particular characteristics. In primary school, Cameroonian children are taught rote memorization of the following phrase: “*Les Pygmées sont des hommes de petite taille qui vivent de la chasse et de la cueillette*” (Pygmies are men of small stature who live from hunting and gathering) (V. Messe; personal communication). School curriculums and popular representations portray “Pygmies” as part of the natural flora and fauna of the country, rather than as fellow citizens.¹ There are also a host of stereotypes, both positive and negative applied to “Pygmies” by other groups.

Throughout my research, non-Cameroonian informants described “Pygmies” as backward, corrupted, smelly, and lazy; but also as pure, in touch with nature, and spiritually or mystically gifted. As we will see, these tropes are also common in popular representation.

While Cameroonians tend to think and speak about “Pygmies” in general, most know that this category comprises certain specific groups. There are four “Pygmy” groups within Cameroon. These are the so-called “*quatre B*”: Baka, Bagyelí, Bakola, and Bedzang. Some of these groups are closely related. Bagyelí and Bakola, for instance, speak the same language and are considered by many to be one group (cf. Nelson, Kenrick, and Jackson 2001, 8). My experience working on a project involving both Baka and Bagyelí participants, on the other hand, revealed that, in addition to speaking different languages, there was a great deal of division and misapprehension between the two groups. While the “*quatre B*” see important differences amongst themselves, then, and between their groups and other “Pygmy” groups outside of Cameroon, to most Cameroonians, any Baka, Bagyelí, Bakola, or Bedzang is, first and foremost,

a “Pygmy.” A person’s “Pygmy-ness” is used to extrapolate a host of assumed socio-cultural characteristics. Workers from international corporations, NGOs and development organizations, and other entities hold similar views. In discussions among Cameroonian non-“Pygmies” one notices a great deal of slippage between the category “Pygmy” and specific ethnonyms such as “Baka.” The terms are often used interchangeably.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the “Pygmy” label arrived from Europe during the colonial era. As Moïse (2011) notes, however, while the word “Pygmy,” as well as the some of the characteristics with which it has come to be associated, may be a European invention, the idea that the people who would come to be “identified by Westerners as ‘Pygmies’” constituted a “distinct social category” is not entirely an outside idea. In her detailed history of “Pygmy” identity, Klieman (2003) argues that “west-central Africans developed their own root metaphor centred on the image of the primordial *Batwa*” (3), and that this occurred “long before contact with Europeans and exposure to the ideas of the Western Pygmy Paradigm” (133). *Batwa* as used here by Klieman is, in fact, a Bantu² term that survives from the period of the expansion that was used to designate all autochthonous “bushpeople” or “hunters and gatherers” whom “Bantu” encountered during their migrations” (1990, 56).

As Moïse (2011) argues, “the Pygmy social category,” is thus, in a sense, is “a ‘native’ equatorial category” based on “forms of social difference” that “are of a qualitatively different nature than the kinds of ethnic distinctions other equatorial peoples make among themselves” (4). Moïse shows that “other equatorial peoples,” have long “attribute[d] a range of characteristics to Pygmies that they do not apply to themselves” (4). These include ascribing to them privileged knowledge of the forest, “access to the mystical realm” which allows them to act “as healers, diviners, [and] ritual specialists,” and, conversely, “low social status” as evidenced

by “the widespread inability of Pygmy males to be considered potential spouses by women of other social groups” (4). As we will see, once Europeans arrived in Central Africa, these distinctions would come to merge—or at least interact—with the Western “Pygmy Paradigm.”

This is not to say that the ancestors of the people who today call themselves Baka, Bagyeli, Mbuti, Ba’aka, etc. were considered, in the precolonial era, to constitute a single, cohesive group. As I made clear in the previous chapter, the notion of a single, large, geographically dispersed “ancient race” of “Pygmies,” is a result of the Western “Pygmy Paradigm.” It would be too simple, however, to say that “Pygmies” are therefore an “ethnographic fiction” (1999). Rather, in many locations across central Africa, there were various forms of distinction drawn between different communities, owing to differences of language, livelihood practices, etc. These forms of distinction evolved over time to create a situation onto which, once Europeans arrived in Africa, the binary understandings of the “Pygmy Paradigm” could be mapped.

When discussing Baka history, however, a binary distinction between “Pygmies” and “Bantu” is difficult to avoid. This is because much of what we know about Baka history—or at least, much of what a Western anthropologist such as myself can access—is based in accounts of local histories written by Western authors. As Leclerc (2012) notes, these authors, beginning in the colonial era, considered “Pygmies,” “to be an “ethnicity.” Historical accounts thus often used this general category. Moreover, owing to the Western idea that “Pygmies” represented a cohesive group “many [Western] observers, in order to describe the Baka, used knowledge acquired elsewhere” (2012, 84; my translation). Historical accounts of “the Baka” thus likely draw on observations of other “Pygmy” groups.³ There is a second consideration here too: If one subscribes to the dominant account of the emergence of Baka identity, this did not occur until the

seventeenth century. If one wants to learn about the history of the people who would *become* Baka before this time, then, one is stuck, in part, with generalized histories of “Pygmies.”

In order to understand the Baka’s contemporary position, then, we must understand how they *became* “Pygmies.” The title of this chapter refers to Dorothy Hodgson’s (2011) book *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous*, which explores the ways in which Maasai activists engage in a process of political “positioning” wherein they “intentionally manipulate, project, and homogenize their public images and identities...in order to seek recognition and demand rights,” in this case as “Indigenous peoples” (5). (I explore the concept of positioning and the process of Indigenous identity formation in Chapter Four.) The title of Hodgson’s book is itself referential to the edited volume *Being Maasai* (Spear and Waller 1993), which examines, among other topics, “how Maasai came to be ‘Maasai’” through a complex process where “what it meant to be Maasai...changed radically in response to both internal and external pressures” (19).

Obviously there are important differences between being Maasai and being “Pygmy.” There is a reason, for instance, why I am not placing the word Maasai in quotation marks. Though certainly inflected with outside tropes, it is a domestic category in a way that “Pygmy” is not. Maasai have a common language and identity. Maasai are proud to be Maasai; very few “Pygmies” enjoy being called “Pygmies.” I take inspiration, though, from Hodgson and Spear’s revelation that group identity is constantly in formation, involving a dialogical (or perhaps even dialectical) interaction between local understandings and outside narratives and tropes. Moreover, Hodgson’s work shows how, owing to outside forces and domestic political imperatives, new identities can be superimposed on older ones. This perspective enriches and complicates the genealogical approach I have adopted: It is not sufficient to conduct a genealogy of one identity. Rather, must examine the ways in which categories build on, and carry the traces

of, others. As we will see, the people that are today called “Baka” had to *become* Baka, then they became *Batwa*, then they became “Pygmies.” (And, as we will see in Chapter Four, like the Maasai, they are now “becoming Indigenous.”)

Of course, we must proceed carefully here. Historical accounts of the Baka and other groups that would come to be called “Pygmies” have always been refracted through a Western lens. There is no question of providing an “actual” precolonial history of the Baka or any other group. Western authors bring to their works a set of cultural positionalities and biases. In order to mitigate the biases inherent in Western accounts, I have tried where possible to include Baka accounts of their own history. These accounts too, however, have been mediated by Western authors (including myself). While we must thus read these sources with a critical eye, however, they can nevertheless help us gain a more complete understanding of Baka history.

This chapter traces Baka history from before the Bantu expansion (~4000 BCE) to the present day, seeking to highlight important events that have brought the Baka to where they are today. As we will see, far from occurring in isolation from other groups and “regional historical processes” (Moïse 2011, 2), Baka history—and indeed the existence of Baka group identity altogether—has been profoundly shaped by interaction with other groups. The ancestors of the people who are today called “Baka” interacted first with “Bantu,” and later colonists, government officials, missionaries, and development workers. Each of these groups carried its own outside traditions of representation, which came to influence how Baka are represented and understood today. To understand how the Baka are perceived and treated today, it is important to understanding the narratives of “Pygmy” history produced by these groups. This chapter thus not only summarizes narratives of Baka history; it also adopts a hermeneutic approach, examining

how historical narratives inflect and inform a “Pygmy Paradigm” that, still today, has important effects on Baka lives.

As this chapter will show, the Baka’s subordinate position in Cameroon today is due in large part to the fact that they are classified within the larger category of “Pygmies” and thus are subject to the discursive and political consequences of the “Pygmy Paradigm.” The stereotypes and tropes of the “Pygmy Paradigm” have served to justify (and have been exacerbated by) various “development” and “sedentarization” programs over the past half-century. These programs have seen the Baka and other “Pygmy” groups relocated from the forest to roadside settlements. Today, in a nation-state that comprises over 250 ethnocultural-linguistic groups, and which views its diversity as a point of pride, the Baka, the Bagyeli, and other “Pygmy” groups, remain on the outside. Their historical nomadism, perceived lack of “development,” and supposed lack of contribution to the advancement of the Cameroonian nation-state, combined with the absence of formal markers of citizenship, such as identification cards, consigns them to a liminal position, where they are excluded from many state benefits. “Pygmies” occupy a special place in national discourses of identity and belonging: they are regarded as a quintessential *part of* Cameroon, but not as fully *Cameroonian*.

2. The “Pygmy”-“Bantu” Binary, Revisited

The nature of relations between different “Pygmy” and “Bantu” groups has evolved over time owing to a variety of social, political, and economic forces. We must keep in mind that local “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations do always (or even often) neatly map onto a general, structural situation of marginalization. There are as many types of “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations as there are “Pygmy” and “Bantu” groups. Some relations are more symbiotic, or more unequal, than others. Moreover, as Daou Joiris (2003) argues, many “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations are deeply

ambivalent, characterized “both [by]...an “ideology of solidarity,” sustained by pseudo-kinship” between “Pygmy” and “Bantu” individuals, and an “ideology of domination,” characterized by “political-economic dominance over the Pygmy peoples by the [“Bantu”] “villagers”” (57).

Nevertheless, we can identify a broad historical trajectory experienced by many “Pygmies” in their relationships with “Bantu” communities. We can divide this trajectory into four broad historical periods, each characterized by a different type of relationship: An initial period of *complementarity*, in which “Pygmies” serve as guides for migrating “Bantu” during the Bantu expansion; a period of *differentiation*, in which “Pygmies” and “Bantu” develop a trading relationship based on specialized niches—“Pygmies” as forest specialists and “Bantu” as agriculturalists; a period of *increasing inequality* in which improved agricultural techniques, the rise of “Bantu” territorial chiefs, and the expansion of regional trading networks allow “Bantu” communities to gain political and economic power over “Pygmies”; and finally, a period of “Pygmy” *subordination* and *marginalization* in which the “upheavals of the Atlantic Age,” allow “Bantu” communities to consolidate their power (see Klieman, 2003, 95-96, 222).

Historians have attempted to date these periods. Klieman (2003) for instance, argues that “it was during the Late Stone to Metal Age (c. 1500 - 500 BCE)” that the “differentiating process” between “Pygmies” and “Bantu” began, “and during the Early Iron Age (c. 500 BCE - 1000 CE) that economic and ethnic distinctions between the two types of societies became complete” (95-96). She goes on to identify two further “periods of interrelational transformation...the first associated with the rise of territorial chiefs (c. 500 - 1000 CE) and the second with the upheavals of the Atlantic Age (c. 1500 - 1900 CE)” (222). This type of periodization is interesting as a general guide. Moreover, it is true that some broad historical phenomena—the introduction of banana cultivation, the rise of “Bantu” territorial chiefdoms, the

arrival of Europeans in Central Africa—undoubtedly had a wide and pervasive influence on “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations. Nevertheless, as we will see in the case of the Baka, it is also true that different “Pygmy” groups came into contact with “Bantu” at different times. While almost all “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations have followed the same general trajectory, from complementary, through differentiation and inequality, to subordination and marginalization, they have done so at different times in different places.

As I will discuss in more detail below, each different relationship between “Pygmies” and “Bantu” is characterized not only by different economic and political relations, but by different traditions of representation. As “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations transitioned from complementarity, through differentiation, to subordination, “Bantu” narratives of “Pygmies” shifted. As Bahuchet and Guillaume (1979) note, “Bantu” oral histories carry the traces of an initial tradition of representation, dating from the “Bantu” expansion, in which “Pygmies” were valued for the specialized and mystical connection to the forest, and were thought to play “a civilizing role (inventing fire, adopting cooked food, metallurgy and cultivation of plants),” and to serve, “a rescue function (leading migrations, accessing resources, initiating the forest environment).” This can be contrasted with later traditions of representation, in which “Pygmies” are depicted as, “semantically opposed to humans ... or to villagers ... and they are considered as ... taking an intermediary position; they are perceived somewhere between the world of humans and animals The status and capacities ascribed to them in the constructed representation of the [“Bantu”], are characterized by “ambivalence”” (113-14; cited in Joiris 2003, 70-71). Here again we see the aforementioned link between representation and power. As Klieman (2003) explains, both the rise of political/economic inequality, and the changes in “Bantu” representations of “Pygmies”

are “part and parcel of a single historical process, one in which immigrant populations have striven to establish new notions of precedence to legitimize their rule” (68).

3. Complementarity

Oral and written histories suggest that “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations have, generally speaking, become more unequal over time. Genetic evidence suggests that “the ancestors of Pygmy hunter-gatherers and farming populations” first diverged about 60,000 years ago. This divergence was “followed by a split of the Pygmies’ ancestors into Western and Eastern Pygmy groups [about] 20,000 years ago” (Patin et al. 2009). These populations settled in different areas, and developed different cultural practices, livelihood strategies, and even physiologies (see Blench 1999). The two groups re-encountered one another with the “entry of Bantu-speaking peoples” into the Congo Basin rainforest during the Bantu expansion, wherein Bantu migrated from “their homeland in the Nigeria/Cameroon borderlands across most of the continent south of the equator” (Moïse 2014, 90). Historians disagree about the dating of the Bantu expansion, situating the movement anywhere from 4500-4000 BCE (e.g. Klieman 2003) to 2000-1500 BCE (e.g. Vansina 1990). As Moïse (2014) points out, however, “whatever its precise timing, the expansion was clearly a slow movement of people across the landscape unfolding over millennia” (91).

Autochthonous “Pygmy” populations in the Congo Basin played an important role in enabling Bantu expansion into this region. Bantu histories of settlement portray “Pygmies” as “guides who taught the immigrants how to cope with various habitats within the rainforest” (Vansina 1990, 56). This pivotal role is remembered in Bantu oral histories, and is reflected in the title of one of the most important books about this time period, Klieman’s *The Pygmies Were Our Compass* (2003)⁴.

In nearly all of the oral traditions told by agriculturalists of the forest region, Batwa [“Pygmy”] peoples are represented as indigenous teachers and guides—individuals who led the new immigrants to favourable locations and taught them to survive in the unfamiliar rainforest environment. But their role as teachers does not end there; the Batwa are also considered to be the people who introduced civilization to agriculturalists, imparting the very skills and practices that separate humans from the animal world. The prohibition of incest, the use of fire, the cooking of food, the domestication of plants—even the techniques of weaving, potting, and metallurgy—have been attributed to Batwa populations among various agriculturalist societies.” (Klieman 2003, 67)

Klieman goes on to note that there is a widespread belief among Bantu that Batwa (i.e. “Pygmy”) “peoples introduced fire, iron, or iron tools” to their ancestors (138).

According to Robert Moïse (2014), the “first phase of Bantu settlement” in Central Africa was characterized by “relative complementarity between Bantu and “Pygmies” (101). It is important to note that this period of complementarity “comprises well over half of the period since the arrival of Bantu in the region”:

Although scholars have paid much less attention to this early era, from an autochthonous perspective, it is the most empowered phase of their history, comprising the long span of time before their marginalization by the immigrant political economy began. Indeed, it is this era which has been enshrined in their oral tradition as a “golden age.” (Moïse 2014, 95)

The relatively egalitarian relationship between “Pygmies” and “Bantu” was undergirded by “the first comer/late comer ideological complex, which guaranteed Pygmies a place in the social order as autochthonous masters of knowledge” (101). As Klieman (2003) argues, “Bantu” communities at this time adhered to the “principle of precedence,” “a political-cultural doctrine...that accords autochthonous peoples ritual and/or political authority as intercessors with spirits of the land” (68; see Kopytoff 1987, 52-54). Many “Bantu” communities held religious beliefs that venerated both ancestral spirits and spirits connected to the land and other geographic features. A core concept was “that a society’s land is its own because its ancestors are buried there.” This led to initial respect of “Pygmy” autochthons because “it was their

ancestors who were originally buried in the land,” and because “Pygmies” were believed to have privileged knowledge of, and access to, other, non-ancestral spirits (Klieman 2003, 74; see Schadeberg 1999).

“Pygmies”’ role as “intercessors to the spirits of the land” meant that they had important ritual and symbolic importance (Moïse 2014, 98). “Bantu” would thus have “sought to integrate autochthonous peoples into a common social formation in which autochthons could perform ritual functions” (Moïse 2014, 91; see Kopytoff 1987). “Pygmies” became an important component in “rituals of enthronement, annual rituals of renewal” and other ceremonies designed to legitimate “Bantu” rulers (Moïse 2014, 98; see Seitz 1993). As Moïse (Moïse 2014) explains, the ritual importance of “Pygmies” would have generated an initial system of equality between autochthons and “Bantu”:

Bantu notions of the mystical foundations of political authority, as well as various material needs, would likely have encouraged the development of regional networks of Pygmy village *nganga*, *tuma*, and possibly other cult masters, if these were not already in place. This, in turn, would have created a generalized landscape of respect for autochthons and, as the material and political conditions for the emergence of later inequalities were not yet in place, the atmosphere of respect in the ritual domain may well have extended to the political domain. If this was the case, the relations between autochthons and immigrants are likely to have been characterized by a relative parity—possibly even enough for intermarriage between the two groups. (92)

The idea of an era of complementarity is supported by linguistic and genetic evidence which suggests significant contact between newcomers and autochthons during the period of the Bantu expansion. As Klieman (2003) argues, “we must speak of a long period of close interactions between agriculturalists’ and forest specialists’...ancestors—one that led not only to the sharing of languages, but probably also to cultures, technologies, and genes” (110). While there is evidence that “Pygmy” groups at one point had distinct languages, as Takeuchi (2014) notes, today “no Pygmy group has its own language; rather they employ the one that is used by

the farmers with which the group has or has had relationships” (302-3). This “complete transfer of Bantu [and, in some instances, Oubangian] languages to Batwa societies had to have taken place under conditions of social contact that were much more intimate than those that prevail today” (Klieman 2003, 68-9; see Bahuchet 1993b). Indeed, there is evidence that the Bantu expansion led to a further split of “Pygmies” into smaller groups, who developed cultural and linguistic identities based in part on the characteristics of the farming populations that settled near them (Verdu 2014; Verdu et al. 2009).⁵ Moreover, a 1994 study found that “Pygmy” and “Bantu” populations in the Central African Republic, Cameroon, and Rwanda to be “indistinguishable, genetically, or hardly distinguishable, from some groups of farmers” (Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza 1994, 178; cited in Klieman 2003, 110-111). This points to a period in which there was a substantial degree of intermarriage between “Pygmy” and “Bantu” groups.

4. Differentiation

The genetic similarity between “Pygmies” and “Bantu” is remarkable, given the fact that, according to Vansina (1990), “by the nineteenth century, all surviving bands of pygmy hunters and gatherers were serfs for the villagers” who regarded them as “a despised, uncivilized subhuman race, unfit for sexual congress with any farming woman” (56). Vansina is somewhat overstating things here; I have already noted the diversity of “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relationships. Clearly, however, there has been a significant change in the nature of “Bantu”-“Pygmy” relations over time. As Klieman (2003) explains,

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Batwa have occupied the lowest socioeconomic strata of central African societies, and they are often described as semi-human and savage by their Bantu neighbours. Intermarriage between the two groups remains heavily proscribed, and in many cases the simple act of eating with Batwa individuals is considered taboo. Although the severity of such discrimination varies according to historical eras and locations, most Batwa suffer some form of social

stigmatization and economic exploitation at the hands of their agriculturalist neighbours today.” (67-8)

According to Moïse (2014), the initial phase of differentiation between “Pygmies” and “Bantu” was followed by a “second phase” characterized by “an escalation of force in the economic, political, and military domains of Bantu life, which eventually gave rise to a hierarchical social order and left Pygmies in the position of subordinate clients.” While noting that the rise of inequality “undoubtedly occurred at different times in different places,” Moïse proposed the “general time frame of 500-1500 CE” as “a period of transition in which the former regime of complementarity gradually gave way to a regime of inequality” (96; see Vansina 1990, 56-67).

Historians have proposed a number of explanations for the rise of inequality. As Joiris (2003) notes, these “interpretations are not mutually exclusive” and may refer to slightly “different periods in history.” The dominant explanations are economic and political. The Bantu expansion led to the creation of sedentary “Bantu” communities in the fertile agricultural lands of the Congo Basin. According to Klieman (2003), it was between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE that “Bantu” communities “began to develop a fully agricultural lifestyle.” In response to this, “both linguistic and oral data suggest that the ancestors of modern-day Batwa communities began to lessen their contacts with the Bantu communities they shared languages with at this time, thereby rejecting assimilation into the agriculturalist communities that increasingly gained hegemony over the land” (221). The livelihoods and environments of the two groups thus became differentiated, with “Pygmies” subsisting as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers deep in the forest, and “Bantu” as sedentary agriculturalists.

Two key developments further enabled the consolidation of sedentary “Bantu” communities: The introduction of banana (and plantain) cultivation, and iron production, both of which likely occurred sometime during the “last millennium BCE” (Klieman 2003, 220). These

two technologies “led to demographic growth and increased wealth among Bantu agriculturalists,” which, “in turn, allowed them to predominate over autochthons in new social, political, and religious ways” (Klieman 2003, 96). It is unclear how bananas and plantains diffused into the Congo Basin Rainforest, as these plants are not native to Africa (Klieman 2003, 96-99). Once they made their way to sedentarizing “Bantu” communities, however, they proved to be a boon. As Vansina (1990) explains, “the yield of bananas” exceeded that of domestic crops, such as wild yams, “by a factor of ten”; moreover, bananas were ideally suited to grow in a rainforest environment (61). This allowed “Bantu” communities to produce an agricultural surplus which lessened their need for mobility and enabled inter-community trade, including with “Pygmies” (Moïse 2014, 94).

The linguistic and archaeological evidence regarding the spread of iron production is less clear. Klieman (2003) identifies “two separate iron-trading networks in the western equatorial rainforest” through which this technology may have been diffused during the first millennium BCE (101). Klieman’s account, however, does not explain how, precisely “Bantu” communities would have learned iron working. As Klieman notes, however, “the oral traditions of a great many west-central African societies” encompass the idea that “Batwa first-comers” introduced iron to the region, and that the “Bantu” “late-comer appropriation of this material led to social division” (141). Moïse has collected Ba’aka “Pygmy” oral histories in the Central African Republic that provide support for this hypothesis in a specific area. According to these histories, Ba’aka were the original possessors of the village forge, but became distracted by the riches of the forest. In some tellings, Tolé, a trickster figure, discovers honey (considered a delicacy among “Pygmy” groups) and recruits the Ba’aka into the forest where they enjoy seeing all the animals, eating honey and yams, etcetera. When they get back to the village, however, they

discover that the Bantu have taken over the forge. Moïse has found similar stories among the Baka (personal communication; see Moïse 2014, 109n25).

“Bantu” control of banana cultivation and iron production led to an increase in the size and sedentism of “Bantu” communities, and also “allowed Bantu villagers to move into forested regions away from the original riverine routes of settlement” (Klieman 2003, 123). As the “Bantu” consolidated a sedentary agriculturalist lifestyle, “Pygmies” developed an economic niche as “forest specialists.” As Klieman (2003) notes, however, “the forest specialist lifestyle was a rejection of the increasingly sedentary economies developing in the region, not of contacts with agriculturalists themselves” (222). Rather, each group specialized in producing different types of products—“Pygmies” hunted wild game and collected honey and other forest products, “Bantu” produced agricultural goods—and traded these with one another.

5. Inequality

In many cases, however, an initial period of differentiated symbiosis gave way to circumstances of increasing inequality, characterized by “Bantu” domination over “Pygmies.” This was rooted in “the villagers’ technological superiority in metallurgy and agriculture” (Joiris 2003, 71; see Bahuchet and Guillaume 1979). As Moïse (2014) explains, “new forms of specialization...produced demographic growth, the emergence of new forms of wealth, an increase in regional trade, and an associated rise in political competition” among the “Bantu.” “Bantu groups became occupied with the spheres of trading wealth, political power, and warfare, while autochthonous groups remained focused on the material resources and mystical powers issuing for the forest” (95). This caused “Pygmies” to lose political power—or, rather, to fail to keep pace with the growth of “Bantu” political power. This divergence led, in turn, to changes in “Bantu” representations of “Pygmies.”

Because the political culture of the autochthons mitigated against the accumulation of political power, and they were unable—or unwilling—to respond in economic and military domains, they failed to keep pace with this escalation. As they came to lack those things that conferred value on Bantu—wealth, power, military force, etc.—they came to be regarded as social inferiors, dependents, “men of no worth.” As such, they became unfit as spouses and deserving only of a position of subordinate clientship. (Moïse 2014, 95)

Klieman (2003), for instance, argues that it was “the introduction of bananas and iron,” which was itself “engendered by the rise of [“Bantu”] territorial chiefs” that caused “Bantu” to “usurp[] the status” of “Pygmy” “first comers” (134).

This situation was exacerbated by changes in “Bantu” political organization. Beginning with the “rise of Bantu territorial chiefs” circa 500-1000 CE, Bantu began to “recast relations with first-comer populations” (Klieman 2003, xix). This process continued with the rise of larger, regional Bantu chiefdoms, which were later consolidated into kingdoms, beginning around 1200 CE:

They arose as chiefdoms, grew in power and were able to conquer or subordinate neighbouring chiefdoms.... The new princes or paramount chiefs were referred to as “masters of” or “owners of” the principality over which they ruled, and rituals of enthronement were designed to ensure their access to and control over the spirits of the land.... By the fourteenth century, a number of principalities had fused, allowing for the development of full fledged kingdoms...[encompassing] tens of thousands of inhabitants” (Klieman 2003, 172; see Vansina 1990, 149-155).⁶

The emergence of these larger political entities required a reframing of the relationship between land, territorial primacy, and political authority. Oftentimes, “Bantu” chiefs sought to appropriate the mythic and symbolic power of “Pygmies” in order to legitimate their authority, developing “a very elaborate set of methods for transferring first-comer status to members of their own clans” (Klieman 2003, 152). A “common set of Bantu myths, rituals, and political tactics,” emerged “designed to honor [“Pygmy”] first-comer status while simultaneously legitimizing the new system of chiefly rule” (Klieman 2003, 156). This allowed “Bantu” chiefs

to legitimate their power and ownership of land, while restricting “Pygmy” “participation in politico-religious institutions to a largely symbolic role” (Klieman 2003, 222). This combination of rising political and economic inequality, combined with continued relationships and ritual significance for “Pygmies” would eventually lead to the deep ambivalence and pervasive inequality that characterizes “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations in many parts of Central Africa today.

Two tactics for legitimating Bantu territorial authority stand out here. First, Bantu chiefs sometimes claimed “Pygmy” ancestry, placing “Batwa figures at the origin” of their lineages (Klieman 2003, 144). As Klieman explains,

Claiming Batwa ancestry was a particularly effective tactic. It legitimized the chief’s role as religious expert, honoured the ritual expertise of first-comers, and most important, released the new leader from the responsibility of paying homage to those Batwa who might live in his lands, because it focused attention on their ancestors, not on the contemporary Batwa. (157)

Second, Bantu chiefs put forth narratives of “Pygmies” as the original “guides, civilizers, or saviors” of their migrating ancestors:

The earliest eras of interaction could be thus be portrayed as the first step along an inevitable path to Bantu political and economic hegemony. By posting the Batwa as willing helpers, this historical trajectory is presented as one that had all along been approved of by the original owners of the land. (Klieman 2003, 158)

Indeed, we must treat early histories of Bantu-“Pygmy” relations during the Bantu expansion with some caution, as these accounts may be influenced by this later tactic of legitimating Bantu territorial authority.

It was not only “Bantu” chiefs who maintained highly regulated relationships with “Pygmies.” Seeking both to legitimate territorial claims and to gain access to forest products, many “Bantu” families developed quasi-formalized relationships with a specific “Pygmy” family. These relationships endure over multiple generations and are characterized by “fictive kinship,” with each “side” using kinship terms to refer to members of the other (Taloussock

2011, 39; Joiris 1998, 241-318). Economic imperatives were also important here. As Takeuchi (2014) notes: “Economic relationships (i.e., exchange of goods and services through the division of roles in resource use) and social relationships (i.e., fictive kinship bonds) form two sides of the same coin and each reinforces the other” (312).

Familial relations between “Pygmies” and “Bantu,” however, were—and often remain—highly unequal. In my experience, for instance, a “Bantu” man is more likely to refer to a Baka man of the same age with whom he enjoys fictive kinship as his “son” than as his “brother.” Indeed, writing about the “relationship between Efe Pygmies and Lese villagers in the Ituri region,” Grinker (e.g. 1994) argues that, “the inequality between the two groups” can be understood “with reference to the socio-political organisation of the villager’s [i.e. “Bantu”] household in which the hierarchical ideology reflects individual ideals as articulated between Pygmies and villagers in the same way as it is articulated between men and women and between the old and the young” (Joiris 2003, 67). At the same time, as we have seen, “Bantu” views of “Pygmies” are often deeply ambivalent, with “Pygmies” regarded at once as subordinate and inferior, and, at the same time, as powerful intercessors “in control of supernatural powers” (Takeuchi 2014, 302; see Bahuchet and Guillaume 1982).⁷

Trading and pseudo-kinship relationships had the effect of reifying “Pygmy” and “Bantu” ethnic identities:

Role differentiation in subsistence activities reinforces Pygmies’ connection with the forest...which results in clear cultural divisions between Pygmies and farmers. On the one hand, this differentiation creates cultural antagonism between Pygmies and farmers...while on the other, it helps to strengthen each group’s ethnic identity. Cultural antagonism is particularly important for Pygmies, who have highly fluid group membership and no centralized power, in maintaining a strong sense of ethnic identity. (Takeuchi 2014, 313)

In other words, contrary to traditionalist hunter-gatherer studies, which assumes that “Pygmy” group identity is a product of isolation in the forest, it was in fact relationships with “Bantu” that entrenched and reified “Pygmies” role as “forest specialists.”

Before moving on, it is important to note that, while they may have ended up in an inferior social position, “Pygmies” nevertheless asserted agency in their historical relations with the “Bantu”. As Espen Wæhle (1999) argues, citing Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), “Pygmies” have always used “indirect strategies in order to manifest a kind of self-assertion, to maximize flexibility in their way of life and to retain their autonomy” (8). The refuge space of the forest forms an integral part of “Pygmy” strategies for preserving autonomy. Moïse (2014), drawing on Turnbull (1965), argues that “Pygmies” exercised “contextual clientship” in relation to “Bantu,” appearing subordinate when “they operated in the spaces of other equatorial peoples,” but quickly shedding “this demeanour whenever they returned to their own milieu [i.e. the forest]” (97). “The strategy,” argues Moïse, “was to tolerate inferiority when necessary, but to escape it whenever possible” (98). “Pygmies” also minimized “the amount of time they operated in such contexts of deference and subordination...by putting what could be called “buffer zones” between their settlements and those of their alliance partners” (97). We should note here, however, that the idea of a dichotomy between a “Bantu” “village world” and a “Pygmy” “forest world” is, at best, an oversimplification. As Takeuchi (2014) writes, “it is important to recognize that the “forest world” and “village world” are historical constructs and this dichotomy is a conceptual framework applicable in limited cases.” He goes on to point out that some “Bantu” communities, such as the Nzime in eastern Cameroon, “have deep knowledge of forests and are highly adapted to the forest environment” (301-302).

Moïse (2014) identifies other ways in which “Pygmies” exercised agency during this period. These include exercising an “exit option” whereby they abandoned relations with one “Bantu” family or group in favour of another (98); forming strategic alliances with “Bantu” royalty (99); “acting as independent producers of forest products for regional trade” (101); and even “becoming Bantu” through intermarriage and/or cultural assimilation (102). Moïse goes on to note that, “contemporary ethnic communities identified today as Bantu may contain elements of early autochthonous populations” who chose to assimilate (102). We should also note that, owing to the variety of groups subsumed under the label “Pygmy,” it is likely that all of these tactics were employed somewhere in Central Africa, but that none was universal. Moreover, while there was a *general* trend towards rising inequality during this era, this does not mean that subordination characterized every specific relationships between a “Pygmy” and a “Bantu” group.

6. Migration and the “Atlantic Age”

Whatever inequality had built up between “Pygmy” and “Bantu” groups during the first millennium and a half CE it was greatly increased by the arrival of Europeans on the African continent. Of course it is important to keep in mind that, as Klieman (2003) notes, “there is no one history of Batwa people during the Atlantic Age.... One must take into account local political and economic systems to determine how forest specialists coped with the powerful new and often destructive factors at work in central Africa during this time” (210). Nevertheless, we can safely say that European influence is the single largest reason for the marginal position that most “Pygmies” find themselves in today.

The first documented contact between Central Africans and Europeans occurred in 1483, with arrival of Portuguese traders at the mouth of the Congo River (Klieman 2003, 173). While

contact with Europeans would prove devastating for many “Bantu” as well, the formation of trading relationships between some “Bantu” communities and the Portuguese, had the initial effect of deepening “Bantu”-“Pygmy” inequality. As Bahuchet and Guillaume (1979) explain, these “Bantu” were able to establish themselves as intermediaries between Europeans and “Pygmies.” This engendered an economic shift from a system in which “Pygmies” exchanged “game and gathered products for iron and agricultural products,” to one in which they exchanged “work for food, manufactured objects, European consumer goods and money” (124; cited in Joiris 2003, 71).

The spread of slave raiding, beginning shortly after the arrival of the Portuguese, and enduring—in one form or another—at least until the late nineteenth century, further exacerbated inequality (Klieman 2003, 174-175; Vansina 1990, 200-211). As Joseph Miller {*Miller, 2009wy} argues, “The violence attending slaving in central Africa forced political consolidation and sharpened identities...converting diffuse differentiated complementarities into cogently collective ‘ethnic’ defensiveness, even hostility” (45; cited in Klieman 2003, 211). This was true for many “Pygmy” and “Bantu” groups, as “Pygmies” “retreated further into the forest to escape the threat of slavers” thereby severing economic and social ties and deepening intercultural differences (Moïse 2011, 5-6).

7. Baka Identity and Migration

We now move from a general history of “Pygmies,” and of “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations, to a specific history of the Baka. According to most outside historians of the Baka, it is around the early seventeenth century, due in part to the pressures of the slave trade, that the Baka emerged as a distinct ethnocultural group, and made their way to southeast Cameroon.

There are, however, multiple versions of Baka history. Most importantly, we must distinguish between Baka history as constructed by Western academics, and Baka history as told by Baka and other local people. As Leclerc (2012) notes, “the Baka were not really observed [by Europeans], and their existence was not unanimously confirmed but relatively late, during the 1940s” (18; my translation). What Europeans know of Baka history specifically (as opposed to the history of Batwa or “Pygmies” in general) before this time comes from ethnolinguistic studies that attempt to retrace Baka migrations by examining linguistic commonalities between Baka and other ethnic groups. The work of Serge Bahuchet is particularly important here.

As I have already mentioned, today all “Pygmy” groups speak languages borrowed from “Bantu” and other agriculturalist groups. Interestingly, however, the language that is today known as “Baka” does not come from any of the agriculturalist groups located in the areas of southeast Cameroon where the Baka now reside. While today “the Baka have relations with sixteen [“Bantu”] societies..., they themselves speak an Oubangian language” (Leclerc 2012, 35; my translation; see Bahuchet 1992, 47-8). For this reason the Baka language is unintelligible to “Bantu” in southeast Cameroon (except, of course, for those “Bantu” who have learned it!) Indeed, as Bahuchet (1993b) notes, one of the most remarkable facts about the Baka is their “linguistic particularity,” as they speak a language that “has no kinship in the region” where they reside (74; my translation).

Baka is a “Gbanzili group Ubangian language” that “closely resembles the language of Ngbaka farmers” of the southern Central African Republic, hundreds of kilometres from present-day Baka territories (Bahuchet 2012, 24; Takeuchi 2014, 303). In addition to the Ngbaka, Baka also shares vocabulary with the Aka language, which is spoken by Ba’aka “Pygmies,” who are also located in the CAR. Aka has Bantu, rather than Oubangian roots. (Some anthropologists

also refer to the Ba'aka as Aka.) Nevertheless, the Baka and Aka languages share vocabulary related to plants and other natural features (Leclerc 2012, 57-8; see Bahuchet 1993b). This fact supports a “hypothesis of an earlier common life based on hunting and gathering with an annual cycle of activities punctuated by phases of dispersal and regroupment” (Leclerc 2012, 27; my translation). This common life likely occurred in the present-day southern CAR.

The ensemble of the common vocabulary of the two languages [Baka and Aka]...possesses a historical significance: The knowledge and practices to which this vocabulary refers existed before the Aka and the Baka adopted the languages that they respectively speak today. It was conserved by both groups because this common vocabulary transmits a specialized knowledge that could not be found in the borrowed [Bantu/Oubangian] language. The knowledge and these practices precede the fact of Aka and Baka respectively allying themselves to Bantu and Oubangian populations; they precede, in brief, their alliance with agriculturalists. (Leclerc 2012, 58; my translation)

Bahuchet (1992) takes this hypothesis one step further, arguing that the groups today known as “Baka” and “Ba'aka” (or Aka) were once one group. He proposes the term *Baakaa to refer to an “ancient group of Pygmies from which issued the two societies, Aka and Baka, that we know today” (Leclerc 2012, 59; my translation).

Bahuchet proposes that one portion of the *Baakaa adopted an Oubangian language (this group would eventually become the Baka), and another portion adopted a Bantu language (eventually becoming the Aka). Bahuchet (1987) dates the contact with Oubangian-speaking farmers, and adoption of their language, to around 1000 CE, when the Oubangian-speakers, because of pressure from incoming Nilotic groups, would have migrated from the savannah region of present-day CAR toward the forests further south, where the *Baakaa already resided (Weig 2013, 63). The *Baakaa would have continue living in close proximity, but speaking different languages, until the early seventeenth century, when economic incentives from emerging regional trade networks, as well as pressure from slave raiding, caused “geographic dispersion” between the two groups, with the Baka and Oubangian-speaking agriculturalists on

one side, and the Aka and Bantu-speaking agriculturalists on the other (Bahuchet 1993b, 122; see Joiris 1998, 21).

This split was followed by a second fracturing, this time between the Baka and their Oubangian-speaking agriculturalist counterparts. Bahuchet (2012) proposes the following hypothesis:

To summarize such a historical scenario, in the past the Baka used to live all together, associated with non-Pygmy populations speaking a Gbanzili-group Ubangian language that they finally borrowed. Thereafter they migrated...in various directions and moved far away, alone, establishing new partnerships with farmers speaking languages other than Ubangian varieties. (24)

Bahuchet (1993b) cites pressures from Portuguese-sponsored slave traders, who were penetrating into the interior via large rivers, including the Ubangi, as a major reason for the fracturing of the Baka from Oubangian-speaking agriculturalists. He dates this split to around 1765 (123-124).

Between 1765 and 1880, the Baka migrated progressively westward, arriving in present-day southeast Cameroon (Joiris 1998, 24). Historians believe that, during this migration, the Baka split into two subgroups, each of which followed a different bank of the Sanaga River, “giving rise to the hypothesis of ‘double populating’; one group travelling to [present-day] Moloundou, the other to Yokadouma” (Weig 2013, 63). This was “a bit before the arrival of the Germans, before the colonial abolition of slavery,” and, crucially, “*before villager societies established themselves in their current locations*” (Leclerc 2012). This last point bears repeating: From the evidence available, it appears that the Baka arrived in the forests of southeast Cameroon before the villager populations that live in these territories today, even if the Baka did arrive relatively late in historical time. It is not the Baka, in other words, “who spread among different villager societies, but different villager societies that occupied...the forest domain of the Baka” (Leclerc 2012, 53; my translation).

Among the first non-“Pygmy” groups to arrive in southeast Cameroon were the Badjué, the Nzime, and the Njem (Leclerc 2012, 41), as well as the Bangando and Mbomam (Joiris 1998, 22). When “Bantu” did arrive in the forests of present-day southeast Cameroon, they too were often being pushed by the pressures of the slave trade. These pressures came not only from the Portuguese, but from Muslim Hausa slave traders operating in the north (Joiris 1998, 22).

The oral histories of these “Bantu” groups often portray Pygmies as guides who led or accompanied them to their present territories. Bangando and Mbomam oral traditions, for instance, speak of ancestors’ encountering three groups of Pygmies during their migration from the north:

In these texts, the Baka are presented by the informants as having assumed the function of guides for the ancestors of the Bangando and Mbomam, certain Pygmy families having probably followed the ancient villagers during relatively long periods, crossing the same rivers in their company. This version concords with numerous other oral traditions from the West Congo Basin attesting to migrations accompanied or preceded by Pygmies. (Joiris, 1998 p.24; my translation; see Bahuchet 1993b, 71-73)

As Bahuchet (1993b) notes, however, there is a difference between portraying “Pygmies” as guides, and portraying them as first inhabitants. “It is curious to note,” he writes, “that...the country is always [said to be] empty when the migrants arrived. We always know by whom one has been chased, but one never confesses who was there before one” (69). We should keep in mind here, however, the aforementioned fact that “Bantu” oral histories may be framed at least in part by the desire to support political claims to territory.

The most likely scenario, according to the available historical evidence, is that the Baka (as well as another “Pygmy” group, the Bagyeli/Bakola)⁸ arrived in the forests of southeast Cameroon a bit before migrating “Bantu” groups. Sometimes, however, this was only by a few decades. Moreover, the Baka were semi-nomadic, and thus would not have established permanent settlements. There would also have been portions of the forest that they had not yet

penetrated, though their status as guides for the migrating “Bantu” would imply that they would have entered “virgin” parts of the forest at the same time as “Bantu,” if they had not already done so before. We must speak then, of an encounter between different populations whose territories were in flux.

8. Baka Oral History

The Baka, of course, have their own account of their history and migration. This account differs in some ways from the hypotheses put forward by historians and ethnolinguists. In other ways, however, it is concordant. It is important to distinguish here between the Baka’s origin story—that is to say, their account of how they *came to be*—and oral histories of Baka migration to present-day southeast Cameroon—that is to say, how they *came to be where they are*.

A detailed discussion of the Baka origin story falls outside the scope of this project. Here, however, is a very cursory summary:⁹ The Baka believe in a creator/God: Komba. Komba is not a creator in the same sense as a Christian God. Legends speak of Komba living in the forest with his family. Interestingly, in this legend, the forest is already inhabited by “numerous little Baka Pygmies” (Brisson 1999, 21; my translation). The forest comes before anything else. This is a quasi-mythical forest, however, that is not the same as the forest the Baka inhabit today. Komba used material from his surroundings, including the “little Pygmies” to form the world the Baka know today. He formed, or “carved” these beings into trees, men, and animals. (This is why animals have human characteristics). “The beginning [of the world] thus does not have a sense of eternity...but a beginning of Harmonization of Nature, by a “formation” of other living things, from the elephant to mosquitos, birds, beetles, snakes, fish, and even trees” (Brisson 1999, 24; my translation). This transformation by Komba creates a new, harmonious world.

In this new world, Komba is a distant being, spoken about much like a Christian God. Komba “is present everywhere. It is he who gives life through the intermediary of women. It is

he who gives all sorts of food, and the intelligence to find it. He gives everything necessary to live happily” (Brisson 1999, 24). Brisson (1999) quotes a Baka informant as saying the following: “You ask him, with all your heart, and thorough Komba’s goodness, he will give to you from the love that is in his heart. Even if now Komba has left the forest, you speak to him this way, because he sees and hears always” (24). A more immediate spiritual entity in Baka cosmology is Jengì, often described as the “spirit of the forest.” Jengì was created by Komba and is the “intermediary between Komba and man” (Brisson 1999, 87). It is Jengì who “introduces humans to knowledge of the world, and life in society (initiation). He protects men, presides over their lives, their deaths, and their reincarnation as spirits of the forest” (Brisson 1999, 21; my translation).

The Baka origin story does not specify a specific territory which the first Baka inhabited. Interestingly, Bahuchet (1992) cites similarities between Baka and Aka mythology as support for his hypothesis of an anterior, common existence as *Baakaa (290). This, though, is an outside interpretation. A Baka account of how they came to be *where they are* can be found in more recent oral histories that document their migration and role as guides for “Bantu” groups. Several different Baka communities, for instance, have a legend of Baka carving a hole through the trunk of a large tree, which is blocking the path they are following. By passing through the tree, the Baka gain access to the forest, and also provide this access for other groups who are following them. Baka call this “*deja mob ka*: the opening of the world.” According to this legend, it was the Baka who created a path into the forest for “all, including whites, blacks, and animals” (Baka village headman quoted in Weig 2013, 65). As Bahuchet (1993b) explains in relation to this story, as well as a similar one in which Baka help Bantu traverse a large river using a “providential vine-snake”: “One does not need much imagination to see this giant tree as a

symbol of the forest, and, in the intervention of the Pygmies, a transposition of their role as guides and initiators” (72).¹⁰

9. The Slave Trade in Southeast Cameroon

After the Baka arrived in southeast Cameroon in the late eighteenth century, they established relations with new groups of “Bantu” agriculturalists. As Leclerc (2012) explains, at this time slave raiding continued to be prevalent in southern Cameroon (42). While “historical slave-raiding for the Atlantic slave trade only ever reached the border regions of the present-day Baka area,” the Baka were nevertheless deeply affected. The pressures of slave trading led to large-scale migrations by “Bantu” groups, who sought to escape raiding by moving toward the Congo Basin forest where the Baka were located. This process also involved a great deal of conflict and “territorial warfare” between different “Bantu” groups (Köhler 2000, 66).¹¹

Slave raiding emptied out of large portions of the forest, concentrating populations in the far southeast, where they were less easily accessible. As Leclerc (2012) notes, the era from 1850 to 1890 is marked by “very low population density in the forest massif, the most part having fled to the far east” (44; my translation). “The majority of modern oral sources,” notes Alexandre (1965) “speak only of Pygmies” living in the majority of forestlands at this time due to the “demographic vacuum” created by the slave raiding (533-534; quoted in Leclerc 2012, my translation). Baka were able to persist in the forest due to their knowledge of the forest landscape, which allowed them to avoid and hide from slave raiding parties, as well as (possibly) through strategic alliance with “Bantu,” who were warring against one another both due to the effects of slave raiding, as well as for control of and access to trade networks.¹² As Köhler (2000) explains, “Baka witnessed these raids, became mediators between warring factions, and probably assisted Bantu parties and ‘war’-leaders as guides, scouts and possibly spies.” The

shape of “contemporary inter-ethnic links between Baka and Bantu” was in part determined by these pre-colonial “razzia alliances” (66; see Joiris 1998).

10. The Colonial Era (1884-1959)

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Portuguese had been joined by the Dutch, “who broke the Portuguese monopoly on trade” on the Cameroonian coast. With the expansion of the global slave trade in the following two centuries, “French, English, Swedish, Danish, and Brandenburger slavers visited the Cameroons coast in search of human booty” (LeVine 1964, 17). As LeVine (1964) notes, however, “despite the frequency of their visits” the Europeans, “made no effort to establish permanent footholds” preferring instead to allow “coast tribes” such as the Douala, Bakweri, and Bulu to “serve[] as middlemen” (17).

By the early 1800s, the British had superseded the Portuguese, and “become the dominant power along the Nigerian and Cameroons coast” (LeVine 1964, 18). The British declared slave trading illegal in 1807 and sought to establish a missionary presence on the Cameroonian mainland in part in order to advance the abolitionist cause. Instead of slave trading, the British encouraged trade in commodities, such as ivory and palm oil. While they established missions and trading outposts, however, “official British interest continued to be directed toward the suppression of the slave trade rather than toward the acquisition of new territory” (LeVine 1964, 18-9). In spite of the active efforts of the British to suppress the slave trade, however, slave raiding continued for several decades longer, with “Bantu” populations only giving up the practice when trading commodities, including rubber, ivory, and palm oil, became more lucrative (LeVine 1964, 17-19).

The beginning of the colonial era in Cameroon is generally dated to 1884. This is the year in which Germany, in a coup over the British, succeeded in claiming the important trading port of Douala, as well as five other coastal settlements (LeVine 1964, 23). The Germans were

relative latecomers to Cameroon. German merchant firms had begun to establish themselves along the Cameroonian coast beginning in 1868. They quickly proved themselves “very aggressive,” however, claiming new territory and seeking to foment local dissatisfaction with the British (Chiabi 1997, 1-2). At the same time, they launched a political lobbying campaign to convince Chancellor Otto von Bismarck “to extend imperial protection over the region” before it was annexed by another European power (LeVine 1964, 22). German annexation of Cameroon was also motivated by the 1884 Berlin Conference which set the criteria of “effective occupation” for the recognition of European territorial holdings, setting off the “Scramble for Africa,” wherein the various European powers sought to formalize their territorial claims in order to secure access to the continent’s natural resources (Pakenham 1991).

Over the following three decades, the Germans sought to extend and consolidate their control over the territory they called *Kamerun*. In order to do this, they set up and granted vast swaths of territory to two “private trading corporations,” including the *Gasellschaft Süd-Kamerun*. The *Gasellschaft Süd-Kamerun* was established in 1898 “specifically...to exploit the rich southeast forest region,” and “succeeded in establishing a German monopoly in the rubber and ivory with which the region abounded” and “effectively foreclosed the activities of the French, Belgian, and Dutch traders operating in the area” (LeVine 1964, 26).

The First World War marked the end of German dominion over Cameroon. During the war “a combined force for British, French, and Belgian troops...staged a three-pronged invasion of Cameroon” in 1914. The allied forces captured Douala and, over the next seventeen months, completely defeated the Germans, who eventually surrendered in February 1916 (Chiabi 1997, 9). In the negotiations that followed, the French and British agreed to split German Kamerun between themselves. The French received four fifths of the territory, including the southeast

forestlands where the Baka resided (Chiabi 1997, vii). After 1914, France “administered its portion” of “the Cameroons” (as the territory came to be known) as part of a broader territory known as “French Equatorial Africa,” which included parts of present-day Chad, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon (Vubo 2003, 596).

Cameroon’s two colonial periods—German and French/British—were marked by different economic strategies: The German period was characterized by “extractivism,” with government-sponsored trading companies focused on the collection of commodities such as rubber and ivory, often through forced labour (Bahuchet 1991, 14). This led to “the destruction of large ancient villages, armed conflicts with German soldiers and their local allies, relocation of villages, forced labour on roads...and for rubber collection, [and] the...flight of some inhabitants into the forest” (Joiris 1998, 25). When the French took over southeast Cameroon, extractivism continued, with the French putting into place a more formalized system of *corvée* labour, both for the collection of rubber, and, in addition, the cultivation of cash crops such as coffee, cocoa, and cotton (Joiris 1998, 25). These new crops entered “dangerously into competition” with subsistence agriculture, bringing about a “grave state of nutritional deficit” (Bahuchet 1991, 14; my translation). The French colonial period in southeast Cameroon was also characterized “by the interdiction of war [between tribes], of war rites, and of ancestor cults... [and] displacement from the hinterlands to present day villagers, located along roadsides” (Joiris 1998, 25).

11. Colonialism and the Baka

The first documented European encounter with the Baka took place in 1888 during the French explorer Paul Crampel’s expedition along the Ntem River, which runs along the southern border of present day Cameroon (Bahuchet 1993a, 163). Most Baka oral histories, however, cite the Germans as the first Europeans with whom they had contact (Joiris 1998, 25). Baka

interaction with Europeans was relatively limited as compared to the interaction between Europeans and “Bantu.” As Leclerc (2012) notes, “the Baka are rarely cited in studies on colonialism in Cameroon. Indeed, there is a paucity of sources directly addressing the impact of colonialism on “Pygmies” in Central Africa in general (Hewlett and Fancher 2014, 950). The limited nature of colonial interaction with the Baka was due to a number of factors. First, the forestlands where Baka spent the majority of their time were difficult for Europeans to access. Second, as Lueong (2016) notes, “the predominantly hunting and gathering-based livelihoods of ‘forest peoples’ did not rhyme with the needs of the colonial economy, which in the context of Cameroon was mainly plantation agriculture” (31). Third, owing to the influence of evolutionism and the Western “Pygmy Paradigm” (see Chapter One), colonists did not regard the Baka as fully human and thus saw them as neither needing nor as capable of meting out colonial control.

Colonial influence on the Baka was often mediated through “Bantu.” The demands of colonial extractivism and commercial agriculture, for instance, rendered relations between Baka and “Bantu” progressively more unequal. As discussed above, inequality between Baka and “Bantu” had been increasing since the dawn of the Atlantic Age, as “Bantu” consolidated trading relationships with Europeans, and thereby gained privileged access to manufactured goods such as sugar, salt, tobacco, and, importantly, guns and gunpowder. Whereas Baka-“Bantu” trade had once been based on a symbiotic, reciprocal exchange of forest products for agricultural goods, the introduction of European goods and weaponry turned “the terms of trade in favour of the Bantu” (Forest Peoples Programme 2013, 6). “Bantu” also became “gatekeepers to colonial power,” exercising more stringent control of Baka on behalf of colonial “masters” (Leonhardt 2006, 74-5).

In order to facilitate trade and gain access to European goods, Baka began establishing more permanent settlements closer to “Bantu” villages. While these settlements helped to facilitate trade, they also made the Baka more vulnerable to “pressures from their villager allies to help respond to the needs of colonists.” The early colonial period, for instance, led “Bantu” to pressure Baka to intensify elephant hunting to satisfy the colonial demand for ivory (Bahuchet 1991, 15). Similarly, the colonial imposition of quotas for rubber production on “Bantu” communities led them to “place pressure on...the Baka to...respond to the obligation to produce rubber and...assure Pygmy labour on their rubber plantations” (Joiris 1992, 132; my translation).

The French introduction of commercial agriculture further exacerbated this situation. As Bahuchet (1991) explains,

It was...from the moment when the villagers had to cultivate cash crops—which entered into competition with subsistence agriculture—that they began to use their Pygmy clients as servant labour...either in the fields of the plantations. This was vital for the [“Bantu”] to survive in the colonial system, and it marked a crucial step in their relations with the Pygmies. (15; my translation).

The fact that the colonists deprived “Bantu” communities of “a large portion of [their] means and men” through their demand for forced labour on rubber plantations and, later, for the war effort in Europe, further intensified the need for Baka labour in “Bantu” communities (Leclerc 2012, 83). Not only did this engender a situation in which Baka were forced to labour in “Bantu” fields, it also marks the point at which the Baka (who until this point had subsisted mostly by consuming and trading goods that they had hunted and gathered) began to adopt agriculture themselves, owing to a lack of agricultural surplus in “Bantu” communities (Althabe 1965). Gradually, “the ancient alliance [between Baka and “Bantu”] founded on reciprocal needs transformed...into a more authoritarian system. Colonial brutality provoked...a hardening of relations between [“Bantu”] patrons and *their* Pygmies” (Bahuchet 1991).¹³

A shift in the nature of political authority in French Cameroon after 1914 also enabled the continuation and deepening of this exploitation. In keeping with tactics used throughout European colonial holdings, the French sought to fix and formalize complex and “unstable” local political and ethnic identities in order to make these more amenable to colonial understanding and control (Leclerc 2012; see Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Li 2000). As part of this process, complex local systems of government were rationalized and formalized, with all authority often becoming concentrated in a local “Bantu” chief or headman, whom the colonists could use as an intermediary (see Ranger 1983).¹⁴

12. Political Authority and Autochthony

In southeast Cameroon, as in many of France’s colonial holdings in West and Central Africa, the legitimacy of local political authority was based on the principle of *autochthony* (see Geschiere 2009, 14-16). The Oxford English Dictionary defines an “autochthon” as “one sprung from the soil he inhabits; a ‘son of the soil’.” Autochthony, then might be defined as the principle of rooting political power in the soil. Autochthons are distinguished from *allogènes*—newcomers or strangers who lack the requisite connection to the territory where they reside to claim political power. In a modern context, the principle of autochthony was “first introduced by the French at the time of the colonial conquest of Sudan in the late nineteenth century” where it was used to “categorize” colonial subjects in order to facilitate their administration (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005, 388).

At its base, autochthony posited that every African had a core tribal identity. As Ilife (1979) famously summarized, the colonists believed that “every African belonged to a tribe, just as every European belonged to a nation” (323). Moreover, just like European nations, African tribes were posited to have roots in particular territories or, more metaphorically, “soils.” In

short, everyone had a unitary identity, and that identity was autochthonous to a specific place. The attraction of such an understanding for the colonial project is obvious: Autochthony functioned as a matrix for adjudicating competing claims to political authority and organizing these into a rationalized (and, crucially, limited) European-style system of territory-based authority. Informed by a narrative of autochthony, the French sought to divide colonial populations into “homogenous cantons” and to empower chiefs who were “of the land” over which they ruled (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005, 388).

In spite of the fact that the Baka had arrived in the forests of southeast Cameroon first, the principle of autochthony paradoxically served to justify “Bantu” political authority. As Vansina (1990) notes, European and “Bantu” essentially collaborated to put forth a narrative that “conveniently denied rights from first occupation to the hunters and gatherers by essentially claiming that they were not fully human” (57n40). According to this narrative, “Bantu” were the first to “wrest civilization from a socio-political wilderness” (Kopytoff 1987, 57). The “Bantu,” who, even prior to the Atlantic Age, had viewed Baka and other “Pygmies” as “quasi-bestial, quasi-mythological,” now “adopted Western notions of social evolution to justify policies of socioeconomic marginalization they imposed on their [“Pygmy”] “clients” (Klieman 2003, 225). While the Baka may have been hunting in the forests before the “Bantu” arrived, the “Bantu” were the first real “humans” to arrive there, as evidenced by their more “evolved” sedentary, agriculturalist lifestyle. They were thus the rightful owners of both the land, and the Baka.

These attitudes were informed by the Western “Pygmy Paradigm,” which posited that the Baka were not sufficiently “civilized” to exercise political authority and thus should be ruled over by the “Bantu.” The French also did not recognize Baka forms of landholding. As the Baka were semi-nomadic, there were no fixed settlements, farmlands, or other specific, bounded

territories that could be used to root Baka political authority “in the soil.” While “everybody agrees that the Baka were the first inhabitants of the forest,” their nomadic existence in the forest precluded their identification with any specific piece of territory (Geschiere 2009, 124). The Baka “do claim specific parts of the forest as their domain, but they tend to move through the forest in circles that overlap with the movements of other groups. The idea of being a “son” “of a specific piece of “soil”—encased in the very definition of autochthony—is thus less self-evident in their case” (Geschiere 2009, 125). As Leonhardt (2006) explains, “for...Baka their relationship is with the place, the environment, the forest, rather than with the soil” (71).

As Lueong (2016) explains, French attitudes towards the Baka generated a viscous cycle in which, because the Baka, “had very few or no encounters with the civilization and enlightenment projects of colonization, they were often considered by the colonial masters and the natives [i.e. “Bantu”] alike as ‘backward’, ‘primitive’ and ‘uncivilized’ compared to their ‘native’ counterparts” (31). Insofar as the Baka appeared in colonial discourse, they were, like other “Pygmy” groups, “enlisted...as a blank or ‘pre-cultural’ canvas against which the perceived failings” of the “Bantu” “could be portrayed” (Ballard 2006, 135).

Informed by an evolutionist “Pygmy Paradigm,” the French granted “Bantu” village chiefs authority over Baka living in their ambit. Groups of Baka became formally attached to specific “Bantu” villages, with the “Bantu” village chief, “taking authority over the Baka group such that, little by little, he designated them as “his Pygmies”” (Ministère des affaires social 1982, 27). The relationship between “Bantu” and Baka had thus transformed from one of symbiosis to one of quasi-feudalism. “Bantu” claimed “ownership” over specific Baka and used colonially-sanctioned chiefly authority to compel them to provide labour for little or no remuneration (Ministère des affaires social MINAS 1982, 27).

The narrative of “Bantu” autochthony also served to curtail the necessity of Baka ritual and symbolic function in legitimating “Bantu” political authority. Now, “Bantu” chiefs could bypass the ritual function of “Pygmies,” claiming by virtue of their autochthony to have a direct connection to local ancestral and environmental spirits with which they had once relied upon “Pygmies” to intercede. By taking control of spiritual practices and rituals, “late comers” (i.e. “Bantu”) were able both to marginalize “Pygmies” and “to assume the status of first-comers on the land” (Klieman 2003, 74; see Kopytoff 1987).

13. The Independence Era

Inequality between Baka and “Bantu” did not lessen when Cameroon gained its independence in 1960. Indeed, if anything, the policies enacted by the Cameroon’s government during this period served to exacerbate the problem. Cameroon’s independence government faced the daunting task of preventing fragmentation in a state that encompassed over 250 different ethnic groups (Mbaku and Takougang 2004, 373). The risk of division was compounded by the fact that the “colonial history had split the country into English-speaking and French-speaking groups” and because there was “a civil war going on at the time of independence...particularly in Bassa and Bamileke areas” located in the centre and west of the country (Konings 2011, 24). Government policy thus focused on building national unity. The government sought to centralize power while building patronage relationships with leaders from the dominant ethnic group in each region. This served to formally empower “Bantu” elites in the southeast to rule over the Baka.

The southeast region had been at the forefront of the fight for decolonization. Beginning in the early 1950s, the radical nationalist *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) had begun an armed struggle for independence under the leadership of Ruben Um Nyobé (Joseph 1977). The French, along with Cameroonian allies, waged a “bloody and destructive battle” against the

UPC, which resulted, among other things, in the assassination of Nyobé in 1958 near his home village of Boumnyebel (Konings 2011; Prévitali 1999). In 1960, Nyobé's successor as leader of the UPC, Félix-Roland Moumié was assassinated by a French security services official, who slipped thallium into his drink (Faligot and Krop 1989).

Concerned by the Marxist ideology of the UPC, and seeking to maintain control by proxy, the French installed Ahmadou Ahidjo, a Fulbé Muslim from the country's north. Ahidjo "took over power as Premier of the internal autonomy government in 1958," and, when French Cameroon gained its independence two years later, became the country's first President (Vubo 2003, 596). As Konings (2011) points out, Ahidjo "owed his ascendancy to power to a large extent to the French and he enjoyed hardly any support in the southern part of the country which had been more subject to colonial capitalism, education and Christianity than the north" (25). Ahidjo was "more the colonial regime's choice of an accommodating party than the outcome of the struggle for independence by...popular forces" (Vubo 2003, 596; Bayart 1979). Because of this, the UPC insurrection lasted for another decade, in spite of the movement's loss of its two most prominent leaders. As Vubo notes, "the task of pacification undertaken by the colonial state thus devolved on the new regime" (596).

In 1961, Cameroon was "reunified" when the British territory of Southern Cameroons, located along the present-day border with Nigeria, elected to join the newly independent Cameroonian state. The population in the Southern Cameroons had been faced with a choice, mandated by the United Nations: join Nigeria or join Francophone Cameroon. The U.N. had refused to include the preferred option of many Anglophone Cameroonians—independence—in the national plebiscite they organized to determine the territory's future, on the grounds that this would lead to the "Balkanization" of Africa.

In the end, the majority of Southern Cameroonians voted for what they considered the lesser of two evils. Their vote in favour of reunification appeared to be more a rejection of continuous ties with Nigeria, which had proved detrimental to Southern Cameroonian development, than a vote for union with Francophone Cameroon, a territory with a different cultural heritage and one that was then involved in a violent civil war. (Konings 2011, 106)

The mere fact of reunification, however, did not lead immediately to a national sense of identity. Indeed, as LeVine noted in 1964, the task of Cameroon's independence government essentially consisted of "finding a commonality for two countries separated by forty years of separate administration and by different languages, customs, and political traditions" (LeVine 1964, 220).¹⁵

In order to address the possibility of fragmentation, the Ahidjo government adopted a strategy of "centralization, nation-building, and repression," which resulted in the concentration of "political and economic power in his office and person" (Konings 2011, 25; DeLancey 1989). Fearing that opposition parties could become incubators for ethnic strife, Ahidjo established a one-party state under his *Union Nationale Camérounaise* (UNC) (Lueong 2016, 31; Jua 2005, 106). This process that was completed in 1966 "after a two-step process of forging a single party in the Francophone area and then merging this with the remaining parties of the Anglophone area" (Konings 2011, 25). Centralization also involved "the elimination of autonomous forms of organisation," with "previously independent organizations" becoming "subordinated to the political party through the party's women's, youth, and labour wings," for instance (Konings 2011, 25).

Having concentrated his power, Ahidjo established a canny system of clientelism designed to maintain national unity. He pursued "hegemonic alliances" with "different elite groups on the national and regional levels" comprising "not only...politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen, but equally the traditional elite, the chiefs" (Konings 2011, 25; Bayart 1979).

These alliances were formed on the basis of careful “ethnic arithmetic” and resulted in the formation of a new, multi-ethnic “dominant class” (Konings 1996, 25; Nkwi and Nyamnjoh 1997). This elite, in turn, “served as transmission belts between the President and the ethnic groups. Thus, every ethnic group felt represented within the regime and able to exercise some influence on government policy” (Konings 2011, 26). Every group, that is, save for “Pygmies.”

While, in most areas, the Ahidjo government formed alliances with chiefs of the dominant ethnic group and used these to mediate government control, for the Baka, control was mediated through “Bantu” chiefs. As Abega and Bigombe Logo (2006a) point out, there was “a fundamental contradiction between the official ideology, proclaimed many times by different political and governmental leaders, which makes of all Cameroonians equal citizens in terms of rights and responsibilities,” and a series of policies that made Baka subject to “Bantu” political authority (56). Indeed, in some cases, Baka were considered the “property” of “Bantu” chiefs. “The heir of a village chief,” notes a 1982 Cameroonian government report, “also inherits his Pygmies... He can make them work on his plantation, [or] make them hunt for him” (Ministère des affaires social 1982, 27).

While Ahidjo may have been engaged in “ethnic arithmetic” behind the scenes, discussions of ethnic identity and ethnic difference were verboten in public discourse during his rule. To “mention someone’s ethnic affiliation...was seen as a shocking transgression of the cornerstone of Ahidjo’s one-party state: the unity of the Cameroonian people, which was repeated *encore toujours* at any official meeting.” “In those days,” explains Peter Geschiere (2009) “the standard answer to prudent enquiries about someone’s ethnic or regional background was “*Il est Camerounais comme moi*”” (39).

14. Sedentarization, Authority, and Inequality

The Ahidjo government's exclusion of Baka and other "Pygmy" groups from their system of clientelism was informed in part by the "Pygmy Paradigm," which by this time involved a merging of Western and domestic narratives and tropes. Because of their supposed cultural alterity, Baka and other "Pygmies" are not considered "full" Cameroonians, equivalent to other ethnicities. Instead of including "Pygmies" in its efforts to distribute power among various groups, the independence government thus enacted programs designed to promote "Pygmy" development towards "civilization." Most significantly, the government embarked on a program of sedentarization for Baka and other "Pygmy" groups, which relocated them from the forest to the roadsides.

Supported by Catholic missionaries, the government used a "carrot and stick" method to encourage the Baka to become sedentary agriculturalists, integrated, or even assimilated, with roadside "Bantu" communities (Lueong 2016, 30-34).¹⁶ As we have seen, this process had already begun in the 1950s with the introduction of coffee and cocoa cultivation and the consequent need for labour (Pyhälä 2012, 15; Joiris 1998, 27). Indeed, there had been some missionary sedentarization efforts even before this. Beginning in the 1930s, for instance, missionaries near Moloundou had sought to encourage Baka "progress" by convincing local Baka to settle near a mission and take up agriculture. These efforts, however, "had little long term effect and the Baka progressively returned to live in the forest as they had in the past" (Joiris 1998, 26; my translation).

In spite of such precursors, however, we can date the beginning of "mass" Baka sedentarization to the early independence era (Leclerc 2012; Oyono 2010). During the 1960s, the Cameroonian government embarked on a formal program dubbed "*opération mille pieds*," which provided "elementary and sporadic" support for "Pygmy" agriculture, and sought to form

alliances with influential “Pygmy” community members who could convince their compatriots to sedentarize. Program administrators “sent Baka to search out groups in the forest and to convince them to establish themselves (and to stay) on the roadsides” (Leclerc 2012, 89; my translation). The “operation,” which ran from 1965 to 1970, also involved the distribution of identity cards and agricultural permits (Joiris 1998, 27). Around the same period, in 1968, a group of Catholic missionaries, with government support, “started the East Cameroon Pygmy Project to get Baka to move to large sedentary villages...where missionaries could provide health, education, agricultural, and evangelical services” (Hewlett 2000, 382).

Sedentarization served as a means of furthering administrative control over both “Pygmies” and the forestlands they inhabited. The government feared that the forests could become an incubator for political opposition, owing to the difficulty of projecting state control in these difficult-to-access areas. As Leclerc (2012) explains, “the establishment of the Baka on the roadside had military stakes.” Faced with the UPC’s armed rebellion beginning in the 1950s, the colonial (and later, independence) administration “wanted to avoid having the Baka guide the rebels in the forest” (89; my translation; see Joiris 1998, 27). While the fear that “Pygmies” would act guides for rebels was partly based on instances where this had indeed occurred, it also reflected a more abstract fear: that the rebels, and thus the force of political disorder that the rebels represented, would master the difficult, not-yet-rationalized terrain of the forest, and that with this mastery would come political power.

In 1975, the newly-formed Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) took over responsibility for Baka development and sedentarization from the Ministry of Health and Public Assistance (MSAP) (Joiris 1998, 27). Officially, MINAS was charged with “improving the living conditions of [all] marginal groups,” but “the Baka were the only marginal group identified and targeted for

intervention.” Most of the Ministry’s funding, however, “was utilized by Cameroonian anthropologists in the early 1980s to conduct preliminary studies of Bakola and Baka foragers...and to support field agents in towns with high concentrations of Baka” rather than on direct programs (Hewlett 2000, 382-3).

Sedentarization programs greatly exacerbated Baka-“Bantu” inequality.¹⁷ As we saw earlier, it was longstanding practice for many Baka families to have a Bantu “patron” with whom they exchanged forest goods for agricultural products. Historically, these interethnic relationships ranged in nature from symbiotic to exploitative (Geschiere 2009). Prior to sedentarization, however, Baka were able to use the forest as a refuge to escape exploitative relations. As access to the forest was curtailed, however, “Baka...bec[ame] more and more economically dependent on farmers” such that the latter became “exceedingly dominant both socially and politically” (Hattori 2012; quoted in Takeuchi 2014).

Inequality was further entrenched by the fact that sedentarization efforts often resettled Baka onto lands that “belonged” to “Bantu.” In spite of the fact that “Bantu” had arrived in southeast later than the Baka, the former could cite particular parcels of land that they had settled and cultivated. “Bantu” were thus able to claim themselves as “autochthons” of particular villages and territories, thereby ensuring their political control (Geschiere 2009, 125). Baka were viewed as “forest peoples” who are autochthonous to the forest *in general* but *allogène* to the specific village lands where they now resided. This dynamic continues today. As one Baka informant explained to me: “Historically we say that Baka are *autochthone* because they are the first people. They can walk in the forest because they have knowledge from ancestors. [...] But once they relocate to the side of the road they are no longer *autochthone*” (personal communication; my translation).

Roadside Baka communities were often located directly next to “Bantu” communities. Indeed, the name of many Baka villages is simply the name of a “Bantu” village with a “Baka” qualifier (so next to the village of Akonetsé, for instance, is the village of Akonetsé Baka.) As Lueong (2016) notes, “most Baka camps were given the names of the Bantu villages closest to them, and were considered to be subquarters of the Bantu village with the Bantu chief being the overall village chief” (36). Indeed, as seen in this quote, many “Bantu” still refer to longstanding roadside Baka communities as “*campements*” (camps) rather than villages. This terminology conveys the idea that the Baka are temporary interlopers, rather than established residents.

15. Motivations for Sedentarization

In discussing Baka sedentarization, it is important to keep in mind the varying motivations of the different actors involved: the Cameroonian government, NGOs, missionaries, and, of course, the Baka themselves. Indeed, even within these different groups, there were different beliefs, objectives, and imperatives. Sapignoli’s (2015) point about Botswana applies equally to Cameroon. Writing about sedentarization/eviction of the San, she explains, “It is important to stress that the Botswana state is not a coherent and monolithic entity and that there were different positions on the relocation and treatment of the San and Bakgalagadi in the country” (9). Indeed, some motivations for promoting sedentarization were rather idiosyncratic. For example, in 1961 the new mayor of Moloundou tried to convince the Baka to leave the forest and take up agriculture in the hopes that this would make it easier for them to vote, and that they would serve as a new bloc of supporters for him in an upcoming election (Joiris 1998, 27). The varying motivations of government, missionaries, development workers, and, indeed, Baka themselves—which pertain to different logics and narratives of “development”—are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

It is also important to note here, however, that, in spite of the coercive efforts of the government, many Baka *chose* to leave the forest and settle in permanent roadside villages (Hewlett 2000, 383). As Hewlett (2000) notes, the Baka were not “forced to sedentarize” (383). While military operations aimed at forcibly evicting the Baka from the forest—for instance by burning down villages—have become more common in recent years, in the early years of sedentarization, the Baka mostly “moved to the road on their own” (383). Similarly, Leclerc (2012) notes, “the establishment of the Baka on the roadsides is enigmatic. There is not a convincing external force that can be observed, leaving us to suppose that [sedentarization] was the result of an internal motivation in Baka society” (90; my translation).

There have been a number of hypotheses put forward as to why the Baka would have elected to do this. According to Althabe (1965), Baka sedentarized in order facilitate trade with Bantu for European manufactured goods. Leclerc (2012), however, rejects this hypothesis, arguing instead that it was the influence of missionary theology, which drew a link between the Christian God and Komba, the Baka creator, which served to motivate resettlement in proximity to Christian missions. Taloussock (2011), for his part, notes that, while in some areas the Baka may have moved to the roadsides on their own, in other areas they were faced with the incursion of logging operations that would have made forestlands less hospitable (48). Moïse (2011), citing Dodd (1986), argues that sedentarization was a mutually-reinforcing process: “As the Baka presences on the road reached a critical mass over time, the road became the place “where the people were” and thus came to be seen as the “proper place to live” by Baka within the region” (8).

While all of the above-cited factors likely played a role, it is also important not to overstate the degree to which Baka actually sedentarized, particularly in the early years of

sedentarization projects. While it is true that, during the 1960s and 70s, the Baka could increasingly be found living in roadside settlements, most did not permanently reside there. Rather, they continued to engage in hunting and gathering, often spending weeks, or even months, in the forest. Thus, Baka “sedentarization” can also be viewed as part of a historical strategy of entrepreneurialism (see 2011), wherein Baka form relations with “Bantu” and other outsiders to further their social and political objectives.

16. Agriculture-Citizenship-Development

The sedentarization efforts undertaken by Cameroon’s independence government were motivated in part by an ambitious program of national development centred on agriculture (Pelican 2006). This program was informed by Rostow’s (1960) ‘five stages of growth’ development model, which posited “agriculture as one of the stages in moving up the development ladder” (Lueong 2016, 32). All Cameroonians, it was argued, “needed to work towards national development” through agriculture (Lueong 2016, 31; Takougang and Krieger 1998). The physical work of cultivation became a means for the metaphorical cultivation of a national identity, with the state framed as a collective project towards which all Cameroonians were working.¹⁸

In keeping with Ahidjo’s view of cultivation as an essential part of national identity formation, sedentarized “Pygmy” communities were required to take up agriculture. As Lueong (2016) explains, “at independence, not all inhabitants could immediately become citizens.”

Residents of the country were ascribed different statuses, some of which required that they become assimilated into sedentary agriculture in order to be considered as citizens of the new nation state.... To this end, the citizenship status and belonging of non-sedentary inhabitants of the country [i.e. Baka and other “Pygmies”] were called into question and a series of assimilatory preconditions attached to their path to becoming citizens. (30)

Lueong calls this the “agriculture-citizenship-development” process. “Citizenship,” she explains, “was something that non-agricultural inhabitants of the country needed to work for” and “the

Baka...were presented as lagging behind, in a fashion not dissimilar from the colonial construct of ‘the uncivilized.’” “Other sectors like forest conservation/exploitation and the development of medicinal plants, which Pygmies specialized in, were left to lie beneath the development dust” (32). This helped to justify “Bantu” political authority over Baka communities.

The government’s attitude here is eerily reminiscent of the one taken by European colonists toward their African subjects. As discussed in Chapter One, in the mid-twentieth century, Europeans argued that citizenship was “a faculty to be learned and a privilege to be earned” by Africans (Stoler 1995, 3), and framed colonial governance as “a kind of evolutionary assistance,” that would allow Africans to gain the capacity for self-governance (Pieterse 1992, 37). Now, the independent government of Cameroon was treating the Baka and other “Pygmies” in much the same way.

Baka took up agriculture at different times in different places. Althabe (1965), for instance, observed adoption of agriculture by Baka near Moloundou around 1960. Dodd (1979), on the other hand, found a group near Lomié that was not raising animals or practicing agriculture at the end of the 1970s (see Leclerc 2012, 20). While Baka continued to hunt after sedentarization, the nature of hunting changed. Whereas, in a previous era, Baka communities “were constantly moving in the interior of the forest, from one camp to another without any possibility of return to the point of departure” (Taloussock 2011, 56), after sedentarization, Baka were more likely to be “based” in a “home” village, to which they would return after spending time in the forest. Forest life took the form of seasonal *molongo* expeditions, during which ten to twenty households traveled nomadically through the forest for several weeks, before settling in a temporary forest camp, “located around 40 km” from their home villages, where they “stay[ed] for several weeks or a few months” (Yasuoka 2012, 100).

In spite of these changes, however, Baka adoption of agriculture should not be regarded as “a stage in the historical process of the transition from gathering to cultivation” (Yasuoka 2012; Althabe 1965, 86). Such a view reaffirms old evolutionist notions of progress and development. Rather, Baka cultivation represents a diversification strategy that does not necessarily presage a transition to full-scale agriculture, or a move away from forest-based livelihood strategies (109). Baka preserved, and continue to preserve, distinct cultural practices and beliefs rooted in the forest landscape and the practice of hunting and gathering.

17. Sedentarization and Land Dispossession¹⁹

While, in the first decades of sedentarization, Baka continued to have some ability to move strategically between the forest and the village, by the 1980s Baka access to the forest had become significantly curtailed. This was the result of legal changes, enacted over the previous decades that formalized property regimes for Cameroon’s forestlands. In many cases, these changes had the effect of permanently excluding local populations. New laws rationalized the forest, making it more amenable to government oversight and control, dispossessing Baka and other forest populations, while freeing up valuable timber and mineral resources for exploitation. This would have significant, negative impacts on Baka well-being and on the continuity of various cultural practices.

Land tenure legislation in Cameroon involves the consolidation of a conception of land ownership that is fundamentally at odds with Baka understandings. The Baka have historically not had any fixed conception of private property. While certain portions of the forest were sometimes temporarily designated as the hunting territory of a particular clan or family, boundaries were porous and ever changing, allowing for flexibility in the pursuit of game and other resources. Owing to their nomadism, the Baka did not believe that the occupation of a

particular territory entailed any sort of permanent ownership (Abega 1998). Indeed, as Leclerc (2012) notes, the Baka language does not even have separate concepts of space and time:

The term *tīe* designates both a location and a time, *ndāndā*, a place and a moment. The term *bēlēbēlē*, which represents a doubling of the term for “forest” (*bēlē*), signifies indistinctly “everywhere” and “always.” Everything presents itself as if spatial mobility, in terms of a relation to a space that can be divided into categories, and, at the same time—independently—divided into units, cannot be conceptualized or understood by the Baka! (68; my translation)

In other words, thinking in the Baka language does not allow for the idea of a piece of land, existing separate and apart from a particular moment. Land can be occupied by particular people at a particular time, but it cannot be abstractly “owned” by a person, group, or other entity permanently and without their actually occupying it.

“Bantu” groups, on the other hand, have traditionally had a more fixed concept of land. The areas in and immediately surrounding “Bantu” villages were believed to be the property of that community, with houses and agricultural plots often belonging permanently to particular families. A similar regime prevailed in the “*grand forêt*” outside of the village. While this area was open to any community member who wished to hunt, fish, or collect other forest resources (Nguiffo 1998), and while many “Bantu” believed, informally speaking, that the more remote areas of the forest constituted the Baka’s “domain,” “Bantu” still believed that specific “Bantu” families or clans owned particular parts of “the forest *and its inhabitants*” (Ichikawa 2014, 329; my emphasis). Baka thus did not have formal ownership or property rights. Rather, as we have discussed, they were considered part of the flora and fauna of the forest. Just like the trees or the animals, they were the property of, and were subject to exploitation by, specific “Bantu” “owners.”

Cameroon’s colonial rulers enacted a number of legal changes, particularly in relation to land-holding, that continue to influence Baka property rights today. The first of these laws was

an 1896 German imperial decree that proclaimed all lands that were not clearly “occupied” to be “vacant and ownerless” and thus property of the German crown. The decree defined “occupation” very narrowly: only clearly inhabited or cultivated territory was considered to be “occupied.” This was at odds with both Baka and “Bantu” conceptions of land-holding, as it excluded vast expanses of forest used by local populations for hunting, gathering and other activities (Nguiffo, Kenfack, and Mballa 2009, 3-4).

The colonial state’s claim of ownership over uncultivated lands would underwrite massive land expropriations over the course of the twentieth century, as the colonial, and later Cameroonian, governments transferred control of the “uncultivated,” “uninhabited” forest commons to private companies (Nguiffo 1998, 108). At the same time, the sheer expansiveness of the Congo Basin Rainforest rendered it difficult for the state to project its authority in remote, difficult-to-access areas. In many such locations local populations were able to maintain customary, open-access regimes involving fundamentally different conceptualizations of ownership and territory as compared to state laws (Karsenty 1999).

When Cameroon gained its independence in 1960, far from abandoning the destructive land policies of the colonial government, the post-colonial state maintained the concept of state ownership of forest lands. Indeed, owing to severe economic problems “there was a considerable rise in forest resource exports, exploitation and destruction” after independence (Nguiffo 1998, 108).

In 1974, the government of Cameroon enacted a national Property Law, which formalized the notion of state ownership of “uncultivated lands.” This law mandated the registration and titling of all privately held lands, with active “occupation” or cultivation a prerequisite for proving land ownership. Only those citizens who were able to prove

longstanding occupation or cultivation of land were allowed to apply for land titles. Given the cost and complexity of obtaining land titles in Cameroon, only a very few local elites have been able to obtain titles and the concomitant rights to commercialize resources extracted from their lands. Thus, the 1974 law “enabled the state to reclaim the bulk of communities’ land as it forbade registration of unexploited land which was under customary ownership” (Nguiffo, Kenfack, and Mballa 2009, 10). Today, the vast majority of Cameroonians still do not have a formal title for their land (Ashley and Mbile 2005, 8).

In 1982, Ahidjo resigned the presidency and handed power over to a hand-picked successor, Paul Biya, who remains in power today. Biya “promised a more tolerant democracy, albeit still with a one-party system” (Lueong 2016, 33). Shortly after Biya took control, however, Cameroon faced a “severe economic crisis” as “a sharp downfall in commodity prices and the slide of the American dollar against the CFA franc resulted in a 70 percent deterioration in the country’s terms of trade during the period 1986-1993” (Konings 2011, 31). In order to address the economic crisis, the government took loans from the IMF and World Bank, which required structural adjustments, including “important cuts in public expenditures, increased state revenues and the compression of consumption, coupled with the promotion of selective investments to foster long-term growth” (Konings 2011, 32).

Structural adjustment also entailed a number of legal reforms, most notably new laws regarding property rights in Cameroon’s forests. These reforms barred the Baka from traditional lands and paved the way for a massive increase in industrial timber exploitation, which made life in the forest more dangerous and difficult (Nguiffo et al. 2012). This had the effect of drastically increasing sedentarization. As of 2001, more than 25,000 Baka (out of a total population of

around 40,000) had resettled along roadsides (Leclerc 2001). This number is surely much higher today.

Government rhetoric from this time framed the despoilment of the forest as inevitable. Rather than a deliberate strategy to free the forest up for exploitation, sedentarization programs were portrayed as a benevolent way to help the Baka cope with the “inevitable” incursion of modernity. According to government officials interviewed by Tallousock (2011), for instance, “the territorial administration realized that various technological, demographic, socio-political and ecological changes underway in the Baka environment” meant that the Baka, “could not live in the forest for much longer.” Thus, “preventative measures were undertaken to avoid the disappearance of the Baka”—namely, their relocations to villages near the road (54; my translation).

A 1982 report by the Ministry of Social Affairs makes the government perspective clear. Forces such as logging, the expansion of roads into the forest, the increasing scarcity of game due to the introduction of guns, and increasing population density in the forest massif are taken as inevitable and irreversible (25). The Baka are portrayed as a people “caught between two worlds” and the report stresses the importance of “not staying halfway down the path to sedentarization” (28). “Sedentarization is an ongoing movement and is irreversible,” the report states. “The really, and maybe the only, question to ask is how to allow this ongoing movement to unfold in the most harmonious way possible so that it contributes to national development” (31; my translation). The report proposes a number of measures to entice the Baka to resettle on the roadsides, including the establishment of “socio-educational villages” (39). Baka nomadism and hunter-gatherer livelihoods are seen as anti-modern, and thus as failing to contribute to a collective goal of “developing a modern nation” (9). The report summarizes as follows:

The Baka group, like all the other groups living in Cameroon, must be able, better than in the past, by complete citizenship, to accede and benefit concretely from the fundamental concepts of national socio-economic development, and participate actively in the affirmation and blossoming of its cultural identity. (6; my translation)

The report stresses that the Baka should be allowed to keep their “cultural roots” but these are viewed as consisting of traditional beliefs, religious practices, and the like. Nomadism, hunting, and other activities that are a core part of Baka culture and identity are not accounted for. The report concludes:

These exterior interventions can be justified by the fact of national coherence about development, which, like any other national development, provokes a rupture for everybody. But this rupture in one’s way of life, and mentality, does not break one’s cultural roots and is definitely a positive operation for human progress. (34; my translation)

There are certainly strong echoes here of the old evolutionist “Pygmy Paradigm.”

18. Ethnicity-Belonging-Participation

Inequality between Baka and “Bantu” was further aggravated by national-level ethnic fragmentation due to Cameroon’s transition from single to multi-party rule. On December 5th, 1990 the government of Cameroon passed a new law “formally allowing creation of several [political] parties” (Konings 2011, 37). Biya allegedly took this step due to “intense pressure from French President François Mitterand” (Geschiere 2009, 40). While multipartyism failed to place a genuine check on the power of Biya’s party (which, in 1985, he had renamed the *Rassemblement démocratique du peuple camerounais* (RPDC)) it had important effects on the ways in which political belonging was negotiated and conceptualized in Cameroon (Konings 2011, 39-40).

Seeking to mitigate the democratizing effects of multipartyism, the Biya regime “promoted the creation of ethnic and regional elite associations” (Pelican 2013, 239). These associations were aligned with the RPDC and were designed to channel local political ambitions

away from opposition parties. While elite associations sometimes “ostensibly” had “cultural aims,” in practice they had “firm orders to...campaign for the President’s party” (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005, 391; Jua 2005, 311). As Nyamnjoh and Rowlands (1998) explain, the “ruling party [sought] to maintain local support at all costs, principally through appropriating the support of elite associations and their representatives.” Instead of forming opposition parties that would seek to take over the levers of power, elite associations competed for status within the structure of the RPDC in order to access state resources (321). Membership in elite associations was determined by ethnicity, with only those who were “really” from the area where the association was based being permitted membership.

At the same time, some opposition parties did spring up. Here too, membership was ethnically inflected, with “citizens who belonged to particular ethnic groups associated with particular opposition parties or with the ruling regime (Lueong 2016, 35). Ethnic difference in Cameroon “became more pronounced, even in official discourse” (Geschiere 2009, 40). Biya’s approach here stood in contrast to Ahidjo’s emphasis on a discourse of national unity. The “post-independence vision for the cultivation of a single national identity of unity and integration” gave way to “power rivalries, which were based on ethnic cleavages” (Lueong 2016, 34).

As Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005) note, “the reintroduction of multipartyism inevitably turned into red buttons such questions as “who can vote where?” or, more important, “who can stand candidate where?”—that is, questions of where one belongs” (389). The ruling regime mobilized the discourse of *autochthony*, to address these questions, informally fragmenting the country into various ethnic homelands, each “rightfully” belonging to a particular ethnic group. As Clifford (2013) notes, “assertions of priority and ownership, in a world of movement and exchange, are always claims to power” (14). While it appears to imply a celebration of the

“local,” autochthony is thus, in fact, “directly linked to processes of globalization” (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005, 387; see Mbembe 2001; 2002). Autochthony in Cameroon is an example of what Li (2000) calls “a global conjuncture of belonging” wherein “apparently unrelated global trends—political and economic liberalization, decentralization, global concerns over “disappearing cultures,” and decreasing biodiversity—seem to converge in a deepening concern about belonging” (Geschiere and Jackson 2006, 3).

In Cameroon in the 1990s, autochthony became “the basis to access rights as citizens within [the] state” (Leonhardt 2006, 70). According to government discourse, each Cameroonian had an ancestral village or homeland where they had “roots.” Only when they were on this home soil could they properly claim political rights. Everywhere else in the country one was *allogène*, and thus not entitled to land rights or rights to political participation. The government manipulated voter lists so that people had to go “home” to an ancestral village to vote, for instance (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005).²⁰ The exclusion of *allogènes* applied even to those who had lived on ‘non-ancestral’ soil (in a large city, for instance) for years, decades, or even their entire lives.

Government narratives of autochthony invoked the tradition of village burial in order to explain the notion of a homeland where one was rooted in the soil. As Samuel Eboua, an “*éminence grise* of Cameroonian politics” wrote in 1995: “Every Cameroonian is an *allogène* anywhere else in the country. . . apart from where his ancestors lived and. . . where his mortal remains will be buried. Everybody knows that only under exceptional circumstances will a Cameroonian be buried. . . elsewhere” (cited in Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005, 391).

The rise of a discourse of autochthony represented a fundamental shift from Ahidjo’s vision of national unity. Under Ahidjo, “the very idea of national citizenship” rested on the

principle that any Cameroonian could settle, and belong, anywhere in the country, provided they were willing to work toward national development (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005, 402). Now, people who were *allogène* to the region where they lived “might claim to be Cameroonian citizens, yet they [did] not really belong” (Geschiere and Stephen Jackson 2006, 3). In Lueong’s (2016) terms, the old “agriculture-citizenship-development” process gave way to an “ethnicity-belonging-participation” process, wherein one’s status in the Cameroonian nation-state was determined not by one’s ability to work toward national development, but rather by one’s ethnicity and political utility (34).

The political advantages of a discourse of autochthony are not hard to see. Sorting the country into ethnic homelands strengthened patronage networks through which the government consolidated its control. The government meted out advantages through elite associations, in return for which association leaders ensured loyalty to the government. At the same time, autochthony served to block “political participation by *allogènes* who mostly supported the opposition parties” in key areas, such as the major city of Douala (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005, 391). As Jua (2005) argues, “use of *allogeny/autochtony* binary led to the introduction of differential entry costs in politics. *Allogènes*, seen as “invaders” predisposed to vote the Opposition, were consistently disenfranchised and thereby denied visibility in public space” (115).

Politics was not the only domain in which negotiations over autochthony became salient in the 1990s. This era also witnessed the decentralization of development programs, as donors moved from a “statist approach” to one that focused on partnerships with civil society and non-governmental organizations (see Chapter Three). As Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005) note, “this switch in policy almost inevitably triggered fierce debates about belonging, i.e., over who could

participate or could not participate in a project” (398). Moreover, autochthony, which began as a way of claiming political power, quickly became linked to claims to land rights, with autochthons demanding that “strangers” who had migrated to “their” territories not be granted legal titles to land or resources (Socpa 2006). Spurred on by legal changes related to land titling, autochthony came to function as part of a broader process of rationalizing land and land-holding, itself motivated by a desire by the central state, as well as various outside powers, to incorporate Cameroon’s forests and their resources into global flows of trade and capital.

19. Baka-“Bantu” Inequality Today

The transition from an “agriculture-citizenship-development” mentality to an “ethnicity-belonging-participation” mentality, has served to further entrench Baka-“Bantu” inequality. Whereas under the former system, Baka at least had a theoretical path to equal citizenship (through participating in national development via agriculture), under the latter, this option was foreclosed. Baka forest territories having been either destroyed or subsumed to a legal regime that denies the possibility of Baka land rights, Baka are stuck living as *allogènes* on lands that “belong” to “Bantu” *autochthons*.

Baka existence on these lands is tenuous, as “Bantu” can reassert their autochthony at any time when it is politically or economically advantageous, or when they see a potential challenge to their power. I encountered numerous such instances while conducting my fieldwork: When speaking with a Bantu chief about a project that would improve Baka political representation in his area, the chief protested that the Baka were not from that area and thus were not entitled to representation. “It was my grand-father that went and took them from somewhere over there [in the forest] and brought them here,” he explained. When observing a focus group conducted by a French researcher about Baka knowledge of traditional medicines, a Baka community member explained that they were reluctant to share their knowledge with outsiders because, if the

knowledge ever became profitable, the “Bantu” would claim that the forest bordering the villages, and the medicines that it contained, belonged to them. When speaking with Messe about his desire to run for political office in Andom, the village where he was born and had lived his entire life, he explained, “even now [...] there are always people who say ‘*tu n’es pas d’ici*’ [you are not from here], and that angers me a lot, when they say to you ‘*tu n’es pas d’ici*’ (personal communication; my translation).

In addition to notions of “Bantu” autochthony, the Pygmy Paradigm continues to play a helping, or reinforcing, role, denying Baka and other “Pygmy” claims to political authority through the promulgation of primitivist tropes and stereotypes. Not only are Baka and other “Pygmies” not “of the soil” of the particular village territories where they now reside, they are often still viewed as “somehow prehuman” (Leonhardt 2006, 70). As Geschiere (2009) notes, “there are still a long series of standard jokes about Pygmies and apes” (126-7). Baka thus are not deemed to possess the capabilities necessary to reclaim rights as full citizens of the Cameroonian nation-state. The Baka’s supposed lack of the faculties considered essential for citizenship renders them unable to claim substantive autochthony—even if they were somehow to be able to “prove” that they were “rooted” in a particular piece of soil. More recently, these narratives have been joined by notions of “Pygmy” degradation, which seek to deny political claims by portraying Baka and other communities as “corrupted” or “fallen” from a noble savage ideal. I discuss degradation narratives in detail in the following chapter.

The remnants of the “Pygmy Paradigm” are not the only thing excluding the Baka from the benefits of citizenship. There are also practical obstacles, such as the difficulty of obtaining a national identity card. “Cameroonian citizenship can be claimed only if at least one parent can prove to be born in Cameroon” and most Baka do not have birth certificates (Geschiere 2009,

124). The Baka thus are “outside the field of the state, and “substantive” autochthony—the kind that counts in the struggle over political rights—is reserved for those who are considered to be citizen of this state” (Geschiere 2009, 124).

I should note here, however, that the lack of Baka citizenship (and, thus, of substantive autochthony) is, in many cases, not only due to stereotypes and structural obstacles, but also due to ambivalence on the part of the Baka themselves. Indeed, many contemporary development projects—and some of the old sedentarization initiatives—had as an explicit goal the development of Baka “*citoyenneté*.” The problem with such initiatives, however, is that they require social and political changes that many Baka view as antithetical to their identity. These include not only sedentarization, but also hierarchical forms of political authority that are at odds with Baka acephalous and egalitarian traditions (Leonhardt 2006, 91). As Leonhardt explains, “for many Baka, citizenship and being Baka can be mutually exclusive. From this perspective the educational and economic requirements of citizenship cannot be added to a Baka way of life; they can only replace it” (90). There are also more pragmatic reasons why Baka might not wish to take on the mantle of citizenship. Being a citizen requires, for instance, that one pay taxes.

There are also reasons related to identity. Simply put, many Baka do not feel “Cameroonian.” While all Cameroonians possess both a national and a tribal identity (among others) there is no doubt that most Cameroonians (at least in the francophone part of the country) feel a sense of national pride and belonging. For many Baka this is not the case. National identity requires belonging to a fixed piece of territory, which is antithetical to Baka understandings of space. Moreover, various appendages of the Cameroonian nation-state have systematically discriminated against them, making membership in the state rather unattractive. For some Baka,

a disinterest in citizenship is a conscious choice. For others, it simply does not enter their purview.

20. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the real, on-the-ground impacts of the “Pygmy Paradigm” elaborated in Chapter One. When Western and local understandings of “Pygmy” alterity became linked up in, beginning in the Atlantic Age, they conspired to entrench and reinforce “Pygmy” subordination. General narratives of “Pygmies,” largely (though not entirely) created in the West, were applied to specific “Pygmy” groups, such as the Baka. Evolutionist notions of “Pygmy” inferiority meant that Baka communities were overlooked or disregarded in discussions about Cameroonian economic, social, and political development. At the same time, “Bantu” communities used such narratives to justify Baka exploitation. This is apparent, for instance, in the discourse of autochthony, which simultaneously reinforces “noble savage” tropes of the Baka as “people of the forest” while mobilizing Occidental understandings of territory and progress—as well as old evolutionist stereotypes—to underwrite Baka disenfranchisement.

This discourse has served to engender a number of harmful developments for Baka in southeast Cameroon; most importantly land dispossession. At the same time, the Pygmy Paradigm continues to condition outside perceptions of Baka lives and livelihoods, both within Cameroon and abroad. Baka who fail to embody noble savage stereotypes (with the exception of a very few individuals who successfully follow a Western-style development pathway conditioned by education and upward social and economic mobility) are degraded and devalued, which serves to exacerbate social and political exclusion.

Chapter 3

Degradation and Development

1. *“It was tragic”*

In June 2013, a few months into my fieldwork, I attended the 10th Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS) in England. I had been meant to accompany Messe Venant, the Director of Okani, the Baka organization with which I was working. Messe was invited to present Okani’s work during a session on “indigenous voices.” Unfortunately, however, he encountered visa issues and was unable to make the trip. He asked me to present on his behalf.

And so I packed a bag and made my way from the 35-plus degree heat of Bertoua to a surprisingly sunny and crisp Liverpool. After months working with “Pygmies” themselves, I found myself surrounded by those devoted to studying them. They were mostly European, almost entirely white, and there was nary a “Pygmy” in sight.

During the question and answer period following a panel on social change and cultural rituals amongst “Pygmies,” an older anthropologist, who was seated in the audience, related the following anecdote: He was in an African “hunter-gatherer” village and was watching a group of youth from the community perform a traditional dance. My recollection is that he had requested this performance for his own edification. At a certain point, while the youth were performing for the anthropologist, a truck pulled into the village. The truck carried crates of beer and was blasting what the anthropologist described as “Western hip hop” music. Seeing the vehicle, the youth abandoned the traditional dance and went instead to drink and dance next to the truck.

“It was tragic!” bemoaned the anthropologist, with a fair amount of emotion. He did not make it clear if he felt the situation was tragic for the community members, or merely for himself.

By that time, this type of narrative had become familiar. I had heard similar accounts pertaining specifically to the Baka, not only from anthropologists, but also from development workers, government officials, and non-Baka Cameroonians. These accounts portrayed the Baka as being degraded from a previous, ideal-type state of purity. They had been corrupted by “modern” influences; they had lost, or were in the process of losing, their culture; they had forgotten how to hunt; they no longer went into the forest; they had become beggars; they had become alcoholics.

Early one morning, for instance, after returning to Bertoua from Liverpool, I was sitting in the dusty Bertoua bus station waiting to travel to Yokadouma, the “gateway” to Cameroon’s difficult-to-access southeast region, where many Baka communities are located. I struck up a conversation with a fellow passenger, a Cameroonian woman, around my age. I told her about my work with Okani, and she responded by bemoaning the underdeveloped state of the Baka, contrasting this with an imagined, previous ideal state: ‘It’s as if you took a lion out of the forest,’ she said, going on to compare the Baka to wild animals that had been placed in a zoo. Yet she also viewed the Baka as responsible for their own situation. ‘It’s a choice that they made,’ she explained, seemingly unaware of the often coercive government efforts (discussed in the previous chapter) to get Baka to sedentarize.

While both the anthropologist and the women I met waiting for the bus generally regarded the supposed “degradation” of Baka and other “hunter-gatherers” with pity, the woman’s second point hints at another common attitude: disdain. Many people whom I encountered during my fieldwork regarded the Baka as being somehow responsible for their current, supposedly “degraded” state. “With the Baka, it’s difficult,” a missionary, who had been

working with the Baka for over four decades, explained to me. “They have a tendency to drink now. They have developed bad habits” (personal communication; my translation).

In contemporary Cameroon, degradation narratives strongly inform the interaction between outsiders and Baka communities. These narratives motivate development interventions by outside individuals and organizations, as well as by the Cameroonian government. These interventions seek to “rescue” the Baka from poverty and vice. At the same time, these narratives reinforce and inform a power imbalance between development practitioners and the Baka with whom they work. More than once I witnessed a development worker or government official dismiss the opinions of Baka individuals, and even entire villages, based on their supposed “degradation” from ideal-type models.

Degradation narratives entail the idea that present-day Baka are not the “real” Baka. The Baka with whom development practitioners work have supposedly been corrupted by alcohol, drugs, and “modernity” writ large. This perspective allows non-Baka outsiders to hold the seemingly contradictory position of venerating ideal-type constructions of Baka “culture,” “wisdom,” etc., while simultaneously dismissing and ignoring the views and desires of those Baka with whom they actually work. When Baka voice opposition to a project, for instance, the project can be pushed ahead on the basis that “corrupted” Baka have become unable to see the benefits the project seeks to achieve. The Baka are in need of help, but not sufficiently competent to determine the nature of the help they are given.

Not surprisingly, Baka themselves—particularly Baka youth—rarely agreed with the construction of contemporary Baka culture as “corrupted” or “degraded.” Certainly, many Baka with whom I spoke acknowledged serious problems in their communities. When they spoke about problems, however, they most often mentioned discrimination, poverty, or a lack of access

to land, to water, and to social services such as education. Rarely did a Baka informant express concerns about culture loss, or about corrupting external influences.

In the lead up to Liverpool, the conference organizers had asked Messe to prepare a short video to be screened for attendees. They sent him the following instructions, which they suggested he share with Baka community members who would appear in the video:

Everywhere in the world, there are people like you, people who live in the forest of honey, of meat, of yams, of nuts and of fruits. These people have faced many problems—like governments which do not like them to move freely in the forest, or their neighbours who often say that they are sub-human and sometimes steal their lands, or loggers or palm oil companies who take their forests. Many problems...

But some continue to live as their grand-parents did. They travel across vast territories, they like to move from one place to another, they like to be free from the rules imposed on them by other people. They keep the ancient practices of their grand-parents at the same time as they are interested in changes—in visiting health centres, or sending their children to school. Many are changing, but they still like to follow the path of the grand-parents.

We the researchers from around the world who work with hunter-gatherer peoples spend our time trying to better understand how you see the world of today. Your world, but also that of your neighbours, and also the world that you have not yet seen!

We would like to ask you questions on these topics so that we can hear you directly when we are together with Messe at the big meeting in England. Here are our questions:

1. Does the path of the grand-parents remain a good path today?
2. Why is the way of the grand-parents important?
3. Is this way of life still strong? Why? How?
4. What has weakened the ways of the grand parents?
5. Why don't they work anymore?
6. What would you like to say to all the researchers who will watch you when you are talking on screen?
7. What would you like to say to other peoples who share your way of life?
8. What would you like to say to the people who say that you should live more like your non-Baka neighbours?

9. Thanks very much!

Certainly, the idea of allowing Baka community members to address the conference directly through a video is commendable (thought it would have been more commendable to invite a larger number of representatives of hunter-gatherer communities to attend in person!) It should also be pointed out that the questions sent by the conference organizers acknowledge that some types of social change, such as “visiting health centres” and “sending children to school,” may be desirable. Nevertheless, there is a clear normative undercurrent to this invitation regarding the perceived value of the “ways of the grand-parents.” There is an overall sense here, as there was at the conference itself, not of social *change* but of social *degradation*.

A few days after receiving these questions, Messe and I tried putting them to a group of young men after a village meeting in the Baka community of Loussou. While acknowledging that there were some older members of the community who believed that Baka culture should not change, the young men expressed that, by and large, they felt as though the changes their community had experienced in recent years had been positive. One man explained that he now lived in a concrete house and thus no longer had to worry about snake bites and falling trees as his parents had when living in temporary dwellings in the forest. Another man stated that, by residing in a village, rather than being nomadic, he had been able to gain title to a piece of land and send his children to school. The men also stated that they were able to preserve certain traditions that were of value to them, while also adapting to and benefitting from modern technology, social services, and other “outside” influences. While they saw some changes as negative, these men did not view their lives or their community to be “in decline,” nor did they believe that outside influences were inherently corrupting.

This chapter explores how the Baka have found themselves the subject of degradation narratives. These narratives view the Baka as fallen from a “pure” “authentic” or “traditional”

idealized way of life. They thus cannot account for certain aspirations to social and cultural change. I explore how degradation narratives work in tandem with Western development discourse to justify different types of external intervention in Baka communities. As with previous chapters, I am interested here in the link between discourse and action—in this case, the ways in which discourses of degradation and development (which themselves are informed by and contribute to the “Pygmy Paradigm” discussed in Chapter One) serve to bring about certain types of outside engagement with Baka communities.

Some entities, the Cameroonian government in particular, have referenced degradation to continue to enact development interventions and legal changes designed to foster “progress” as envisioned by traditional neoliberal economic models. The idea here is that the Baka have “fallen” so far from a “traditional” ideal, that it will be easier for them simply to join “modern” society than to “go back” to previous traditions. Others, such as activists and Indigenous rights organizations, have attempted to create space for Baka to “return” to lifestyles resembling those of the traditional “hunter-gatherers” of anthropological discourse.

Neither of these approaches accurately captures the ways in which many Baka understand their own, contemporary situation. I end the chapter by attempting to identify a way forward. This involves rooting notions of Baka identity and authenticity not in outside narratives, but in the values and desires of the Baka themselves.

2. Degradation Narratives in Anthropology

Degradation narratives are informed by the longstanding tropes and understandings of the “Pygmy Paradigm,” which I described in detail in Chapter One. In that chapter, I discussed what Johannes Fabian (2002[1983]) has called the *denial of coevalness*, “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (31). As we saw, the “denial of coevalness” is perhaps nowhere

more obvious than in the subfield of hunter-gatherer studies. In many studies of hunter-gatherers, from the 1960s until at least the mid-1990s, the denial of coevalness is explicit. Writers such as Richard Lee, for instance, have stated that hunter-gatherer societies “represent the original condition of humankind” (Leacock and Lee 1982, 5). A particularly egregious example of this tendency, which I found in an archive in Yaoundé, described “Pygmies” as “living fossils” (Hallet and Pelle 1973).

More recent anthropological writings about “Pygmies” and “hunter-gatherers,” however, tend to focus not on similarities between contemporary communities and early humans, but on social change. On the surface, accounts of contemporary social change would seem to avoid the denial of coevalness. In actuality, however, this is often not the case. Rather than accounting for the ways in which, throughout history, “Pygmies” and other “hunter-gatherers” have constantly evolved in response to various internal and external forces and imperatives, many works portray social change as a recent development affecting a previously unchanging ideal-type model. These studies examine social change with the objective of stripping it away so as to use contemporary groups and individuals as a sort of “window” into the past. Thus, in current writings on hunter-gatherers one finds statements such as the following:

Contemporary hunter-gatherers do not live in an identical situation to Paleo-lithic humans. Although some aspects of their lifestyle can provide clues to understanding past human societies, the foraging peoples of the Congo Basin are modern humans facing modern human problems. (Ichikawa 2014, 321)

Such views do away with the notion that “Pygmies”/“hunter-gatherers” exist *in* the past, but nevertheless imply that they are somehow *closer to* the past than other societies.¹

The bracketing off of social change so that contemporary “Pygmy” communities might serve as a “window” into the past can very easily, and often does, engender narratives of degradation. In order to redeem ideal-type constructions of “Pygmy” and “hunter-gatherer”

cultures and livelihoods, some anthropologists and other outsiders come to characterize any form of change-producing external influence as a sort of “pollution.” This perspective allows the anthropologist to claim that the “natural” cultural trajectory of a group has somehow been thrown off course. The anthropologist’s analytical category, it follows, is not incorrect because it reduces a complex and ever-changing culture to a narrow and static set of characteristics, but rather because it has been ruined by unnatural external influences.

In reference to Central African forest peoples specifically, Stanley Frankland (1999) has called this narrative strategy “Turnbull’s Syndrome,” referencing noble savage stereotypes and unwarranted assumptions about the isolation of Central African hunter-gatherers in the works of Colin Turnbull (e.g. 1961; 1965). In Turnbull’s Syndrome, communities and community members that have allegedly experienced “too much” contact with external cultural influences lose their status as objects of anthropological interest. Speaking specifically of “Pygmies” in the Ituri rainforest, where Turnbull conducted his research, Frankland argues that a “notion of essence in contrast to degradation has been mapped onto the Ituri, so that the more remote, the deeper into the forest, the purer the ‘pygmy’” (1996, 5).

The denial of coevalness is slightly more complicated here. Rather than simply being “behind” in universal, evolutionary time, the communities under analysis are at once behind and ahead. In terms of universal notions of progress or development, they are unequivocally *behind*. While they are no longer conceptualized as living *in* the past, they are thought to be living *closer to* the past—they have deviated *less* from Neolithic humans—and thus to occupy a privileged status as “windows” into humanity’s origins. At the same time, in relation to their specific cultural attainment or realization, they are *ahead*; they have attained their cultural zenith and are now in the process of degrading. (Note that degradation and acculturation are almost

synonymous here). No longer credible as “living ancestors” of the anthropologist, contemporary “Pygmies” come to function in anthropological discourse as degraded versions of their own ancestors.

There are historical precursors to this type of narrative. Almost since the dawn of the colonial era, Europeans have been worrying about their influence on the “primitive” cultures they encountered. “The effect of this inroad [of Europeans] upon the unsophisticated native population...may easily be imagined,” wrote William Henry Flowers in 1889, in an article entitled “The Pygmy Races of Men.” “It is simply deterioration of character, moral and physical decay, and finally extinction. The newly-introduced habits of life, vices, and diseases, are spreading at a fearful rate, and with deadly effect.”

Indeed, early anthropological writings about “Pygmies” introduced a second category, “pygmoids,” to describe peoples who possessed some “Pygmy” characteristics, but whose “bodies and economic lifestyles [did] not conform to the ideal type” (Klieman 2003, 18). Unlike “Pygmies,” “pygmoids” were not “considered suitable objects of biological and anthropological studies” (19). While some of the supposed differences between “Pygmies” and “pygmoids” were morphological, the cultural components of the “pygmoid” category also served a strong normative function, bracketing off “pure” “Pygmies,” still living an “authentic” lifestyle, from “fallen” or “degraded” “pygmoids” who had moved too close to “civilization” and thus “lost their *naturvolk* status” (R. Moïse; personal communication).

Frankland (1999) cites a number of sources that show how the “pygmoid” archetype persisted in mid-twentieth century accounts of “border Pygmies”—that is, communities living sedentary or semi-sedentary lifestyles in proximity to other, non-“Pygmy” communities, rather than a nomadic existence in the forest:

For Berger (1960, 111), “the border type of “pygmy” has long since lost most of his originality”, contaminated by the wider world.... The list goes on; “destroyed,” “corrupted”, giving a false impression of the typical (Hallet and Pelle 1973, 408); “not true “pygmies”, but half-castes at various stages of degeneration” (Bodo 1977, 161). (69)

Some of these views persist in contemporary accounts of Baka, “Pygmies,” and “hunter-gatherers.” Indeed, at the same Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies that I cited in the introduction, at the same panel at which the anthropologist told the story of the young men who had abandoned their traditional dance to listen to hip hop, one of the panelists presented a paper on “ritual degradation” in a Baka community in southeast Cameroon (Townsend 2013). This paper argued that external influences such as alcohol, technology, and “highly-acquisitive values” had changed the “character and performance” of traditional events and performances, and that *boîte*, or nightclub, culture, had “infused” Baka community events, leading these to produce social stratification, rather than community solidarity.

Even more “progressive” schools of anthropological thought sometimes traffic in the trope of degradation. Beginning in the mid-90s, responding in part to Fabian’s postcolonial critique of approaches that viewed non-Western cultures as “behind” in universal, evolutionary time, many anthropologists embraced a “multiple modernities” approach that sought to “develop a more pluralized understanding of modernity” that accounted for “different ways of being modern” (Appadurai 1996, 30-1). Instead of simplistic models of hunter-gatherers and other Indigenous communities as “living ancestors,” a multiple modernities approach views supposedly “traditional” practices, such as witchcraft, as adaptations to contemporary circumstances that should be considered on equal footing with “modern” practices originating in the West.

A multiple modernities approach had important implications for the field of development, which, in the mid-90s, was going through its own shift, from top-down projects aimed to help

communities “catch up” with the West toward a more participatory approach that would allow local communities more input in planning, enable different trajectories of “progress,” and better account for local circumstance and desires (e.g. Chambers 1994; Braden and Mayo 1999). In its best iterations, a multiple modernities approach helped inform projects that enabled local communities to exercise agency and autonomy to preserve or reimagine certain “traditional practices” while selectively embracing outside technologies and other influences. Indeed, this is the approach that Okani takes in its work with the Baka.

In other cases, however, as James Ferguson (2006) points out, a “multiple modernities” approach risks allowing local “aspirations to modernity to drop out of the picture” (34). In its worst forms, a multiple modernities approach attributes a false consciousness to local people who seek to recast or abandon certain “traditions” in favour of outside practices and opportunities. After all, if local traditions are equally “modern,” why abandon them unless you have been “sucked in” by the destructive logic of neoliberal capitalist progress?

This seemed to be the attitude of some of the anthropologists at the hunter-gatherer conference cited previously. Informed, no doubt, by the tropes of the romantic aspects of the “Pygmy Paradigm,” these anthropologists idealized the “traditional” aspects of “Pygmy” cultures (which they perhaps saw as a counterweight to their own dissatisfied view of Western modernity.) This led them to dismiss and denigrate “Pygmies” who sought to change that culture. This attitude reinscribes a power imbalance between the enlightened outsider who understands the “true” value of “traditional” cultural practices, and the degraded “Pygmy” who has been seduced by outside influences such as alcohol and material wealth, such that he can no longer understand the value of what he is (supposedly) losing.

As can be seen in the above examples, the principal villain in degradation narratives is usually “Western” influence. “Pygmies” are seen as the victims of outside forces, which have damaged “traditional” livelihoods and lifeways. Degradation narratives often focus specifically on the “corrupting” external influences of money, alcohol, and drugs.² Since the colonial era, alcohol use by Indigenous communities throughout the world has been portrayed as a marker of corruption and degradation. Indeed, as Oishi and Hayashi (2014) note, “most...studies...of alcohol and tobacco use in Indigenous societies” “emphasize...negative effects,” focusing on “alcoholism and alcohol-related violence” as “a major health risk threatening indigenous people” (143-44; see Ohenjo et al. 2006). In such accounts, as they relate to “Pygmies” specifically, alcohol, drugs, and tobacco are viewed as part of a “village world” that is contrasted with a purer, more authentic, “forest world” (Oishi and Hayashi 2014, 157). The problem with such accounts, as Frankland (1999) points out, is that use of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco has long been a part of many “Pygmy” cultures, often dating to the precolonial era. The use of these substances “as a marker of deviance,” he argues, “tells us more about Western preconceptions of drugs based on notions of abuse and addiction than it does about acculturation” (Frankland 1999, 70).

None of this is to deny that alcohol and drug abuse can be a serious problem. It is true, moreover, that alcohol and drug use has increased in many “Pygmy” communities since sedentarization. It is also true that, in Baka communities specifically, as trade of foodstuffs between Baka and “Bantu” has declined in recent decades, owing both to the increased scarcity of game and non-timber forest products and increasing participation by Baka in agriculture, “recreational substances,” such as tobacco and alcohol, have “increased in importance as...objects of exchange” (Oishi and Hayashi 2014), often on terms that are unfavourable to the Baka (157). This situation can lead some Baka to become dependent on alcohol, which in turn

leads them to accept inferior terms of trade with “Bantu,” or to become indebted by accepting advance payments from “Bantu” in the form of liquor. This can lead to conflict and reinforce poverty as, “if the amount of debt accumulates or a Baka who received advance payment abandons farm work, the farmer will claim...the debt in cash” (Oishi and Hayashi 2014, 155). Indeed, Baka community members themselves—Messe in particular, who himself never drank—often spoke to me about the negative effects of alcohol.

What is troubling about the way alcohol functions in degradation narratives, however, is that there is often a slippage from a concern about *alcoholism*—a genuine social problem with genuine negative impacts for many people—to a critique of *alcohol use* and, more broadly, other forms of social change for which it is much less tenable to take a normative stand. Take, for instance, the story of the young men who abandoned their traditional dance to drink beer and dance to Western music cited in the introduction. The “tragedy” in this story, according to the anthropologist who recounted it, was not only that the villagers had abandoned their dance in order to go drink beer, but also that they had abandoned it in order to dance to “modern” music. Furthermore, there was no indication that the villagers in the anthropologist’s anecdote wound up drinking to excess, in a manner that would cause harm to themselves or their community.

3. Degradation Narratives in Popular Culture

It is not only within anthropology and hunter-gatherer studies (with its need to “purify” ideal-type models from external “pollution”) that one finds degradation narratives applied to the Baka and other “Pygmies.” Such narratives are also prevalent in popular culture, both within Cameroon and in Western representations.

Many Cameroonians regard “Pygmies” with a mix of awe and distaste. On one hand, they evince respect for “Pygmies” supposed “mystical knowledge,” and connection to the forest; on the other, they denigrate “Pygmies” for a variety of reasons, many having to do with their

supposed “degradation” from a previous ideal-type, noble savage model of the forest hunter-gatherer. As a colleague who has spent decades working with various “Pygmy” communities in the Congo Basin explained to me, “In general, “Bantu,” especially local ones, value Pygmies for their forest skills and mystical knowledge, but when they cease to possess such skills and knowledge, they tend to become *persona non grata* for “Bantu”—hangers-on, parasites, etc.” (R. Moïse; personal communication).

I witnessed these attitudes first hand during my research. I recall, for instance, a conversation with a Bantu notary who had come to my apartment in Yaoundé to authorize a letter for my Cameroonian roommate’s Canadian visa application. When I told the notary that I was conducting research with the Baka, his first reaction was to express dismay at their lack of development. ‘They are not organized,’ he told me. ‘They are starting to get a little organized now, but only because people are helping them.’

The notary’s views were not entirely negative, however. He also expressed admiration and awe for the Baka’s supposed mystical abilities. They could, he told me, enter an ‘invisible world’ where there was ‘no space and no time.’ They could contact dead ancestors and heal incurable illnesses, such as cancer. He spoke dismissively of most Baka healers, whom he characterized as charlatans with no real access to the supernatural, but insisted that there were also “real” “strong” healers with genuine powers. These individuals, he told me, were extremely rare, but did exist. There were people with serious illnesses who were desperate to meet a “real” “Pygmy” healer so they could be cured. The implication here was that Baka traditional knowledge of the supernatural was dying out, giving way to the “disorganized,” “underdeveloped” state he had described earlier.

Portrayals of the Baka in the Cameroonian press tended to be less mixed and more decidedly negative. One day in Mayos, for instance, I followed a Cameroonian journalist and cameraman from a television production company, who had come to film a news story about “Pygmy” development. The production crew was most interested in filming examples of poverty and underdevelopment, spending a great deal of time, for instance, shooting footage of a young pregnant woman who was caring for her younger siblings in home that looked poorly kept. When it was released, the news story began with a sensationalist narrative that emphasized the poverty and supposed hopelessness that the journalist had found in Mayos:

In this *campement* of Mayos, near Dimako, about 700 kilometres from Douala, the Pygmy population is dying. Children without underwear, malnourished, their feet naked, and full of lice, play on a swing—the only way to give themselves joy. During this time, a baby grows tired of suckling the dry, flaccid breast of its mother. A little pot boils on a fire. Visibly, it is this little pot for which more than a dozen people are waiting. Not far away, rickety houses and old fashioned Pygmy huts. Here, one sits and even sleeps on the ground. Chairs and beds are unknown. (my translation)

Aside from containing patent falsehoods (I personally sat *in a chair* in Mayos, next to several Mayos community members, and the journalist who wrote this introduction, who was also *sitting in a chair*) this narrative is an, admittedly extreme, example of the type of degradation narrative that one often encounters in Cameroon with regard to Baka and other “Pygmies.” (I discuss this film in more detail in Chapter Six.)

4. Sedentarization and Degradation

We can trace the origins of degradation narratives to the government-run “Pygmy” sedentarization programs, which, in Cameroon, began at large scale in the 1960s. As discussed in the previous chapter, these programs (which occurred not only in Cameroon, but throughout Central Africa) sought to encourage and coerce Baka and other “Pygmies” to “come out” from the forest, and resettle along roadsides. The goal was to transform “Pygmies” “into ‘productive

citizens' that contributed to the national economy" by encouraging them to give up hunting, establish permanent villages, and take up agriculture (Moïse 2011, 6).

According to Wæhle (1999), sedentarization programs may have been motivated in part by early anthropological understandings of cultural evolution:

In a sense we may have fallen victim here to the most successful communication of an anthropological message to the public, which is the more than a century old idea about social Darwinism. This implies that hunting belongs to an earlier stage in human evolution. Although the idea is outdated among researchers, it lingers on among many people, and certainly so among authorities in many countries. It is believed that hunting and gathering as a way of life or as an adaptation should not have a place in a state opting to become modern and developed. (13)

Influenced by the "Pygmy Paradigm," the newly independent Cameroonian government (and many Cameroonians in general) believed Baka and other "Pygmies" lagged behind in terms of cultural and civilizational "development." While anthropologists and some others, who were also influenced by the "Pygmy Paradigm," celebrated and sought to preserve so-called "primitive" "Pygmy" culture(s), the government viewed practices such as semi-nomadic hunting and gathering as obstacles to national economic development. As Hewlett (2000) explains, "Cameroonian government officials consistently mentioned the "evolution" of the Baka. Baka, while a nice people, were at an earlier and primitive stage of cultural evolution and needed assistance to move into the modern world" (385).

Sedentarization was important for consolidating Cameroon's image of itself as a modern, developing state. It was vital for this image that all citizens, especially those "on the margins," "acquire the appropriate political subjectivity" (2009). As Das and Poole (2004) note, the "spatial and social margins" of the state "are seen as sites of disorder." These areas serve as an internal, geographic manifestation of a metaphorical "state of nature" and the state is "always seen as in danger of losing its hold over the rational organization of governance by the force of the natural

from within” (6). “Pygmies” are marginal figures *par excellence*. Consigned by the “Pygmy Paradigm” to the role of noble or ignoble “savages” living in a “pre-civilizational” state of nature, deep in a “primeval,” mostly unmapped forest, they represented a threat to the image of a “modern” Cameroonian nation-state.

The solution, the government believed, was assimilation. “The Baka, then considered as ‘savages’, were made...to be assimilated as sedentary agriculturalists like the majority of the Cameroonian population, and thus become integrated citizens” (Lueong 2016, 2). As we saw in the previous chapter, to encourage this integration, “Pygmies” were often resettled close to “Bantu” communities with which they already had (often exploitative) relations (Abega and Bigombe Logo 2006b). These communities “were considered to be the host society into which the Pygmies were to become assimilated” (Lueong 2016, 33).

While the government maintained overall responsibility for sedentarization, “the implementation of the programme [was], in practice, left in the hands of international and local non-governmental organizations... as well as foreign aid agencies” (Pyhälä 2012, 15). In the early years of sedentarization, the most important non-governmental actor was the Catholic Church. Organizations such as Dutch Cooperation (SNV) and the French Association of Volunteers for Progress were also involved (Hewlett 2000, 383). Indeed, missionary organizations played a major role in Baka development until the 1990s, often partnering with the government and various foreign development organizations. While the prevalence of missionary-led projects has declined in recent years, many missionaries continue to operate in Baka and other “Pygmy” communities in Cameroon today. Major missionary projects included FONDAF (Foyer Notre-Dame de la Forêt) in Bipindi, AAPPEC (Association pour l’auto-promotion des populations de l’Est Cameroun) in the East of Cameroon, and those run by INADES (*Institut*

africain pour le développement économique et social - African Institute for Economic and Social Development), a Jesuit NGO.

In part, the motivations of these missionary organizations and NGOs overlapped with those of the Cameroonian government. Like the government, they believed that “pygmies [were] at a primitive state of evolution, and intervention [was] needed to bring them into the modern economy... to become productive members of society” (Bailey et al. 1989, 264). NGOs and missionary organizations thus sought to provide the Baka and other “Pygmies” some trappings of “civilization,” including access to agriculture, improved living conditions, health, and education (Ministère des affaires social MINAS 1982, 30).

Unlike the government, however, NGO officials and missionaries also believed that, “the Baka needed to be protected from the assertive and exploitative farmers as well as from the national government” (Hewlett 2000, 385-6). Whereas government projects sought to assimilate the Baka with the “Bantu,” many “NGO staff and missionaries were interested in teaching Baka to farm and become sedentary” precisely so that they could become economically independent and thus free themselves of trading relationships with villagers that, as we saw in Chapter Two, had, by this time, become increasingly exploitative (Hewlett 2000, 386). In contrast to the government, NGOs and missionaries thus sought to encourage Baka and other “Pygmies” to settle “away from Bantu villages...avoiding the exploitation that had become characteristic in situation of Baka/Bantu co-habitation” (Hewlett 2000, 382).

NGOs and missionaries also tended to place more value on Baka traditional abilities and knowledge, particularly their knowledge of the forest. As Hewlett (2000) notes, while, “government documents seldom indicate an interest in maintaining or sustaining Baka culture. Missionaries’ and NGOs’ documents, on the other hand, list the importance of incorporating and

maintaining Baka language, rituals, and traditional medicines” (388). More broadly speaking, international workers and officials often believed that, “the Baka were at a higher rather than lower level of existence. Hunting-gathering Baka life was valued because it was close to nature, relatively egalitarian...and peaceful. The Baka had knowledge of the forest, were exceptionally good parents, and had emotionally and socially satisfying lives” (Hewlett 2000, 385).

Accordingly, the goal of NGOs and missionaries was not to help Baka develop or modernize to the point that they would be assimilated *per se*, but rather to provide limited assistance and protection to allow them to maintain a modified version of a “traditional” lifestyle in the face of the encroachment of modernity. These organizations often framed their work using the term *accompagnement* (accompaniment): They viewed their role as working alongside and protecting the Baka and other “Pygmies” as they dealt with forces of modernization that they would be supposedly incapable of addressing these on their own. This was, of course, an incredibly paternalistic approach. As Messe explained to me: “In that era we are really still in [a system of] paternalism. That is to say that the missionaries, they really considered the Baka like an egg that one cannot let fall in any old way. One has to baby them. [*Il faut les cajoler*]. [...] If not they will break” (personal communication; my translation).

Unlike government sedentarization projects, which had a clear objective of bringing about assimilation, missionary projects usually had no clear end goal. As Samuel Nguiffo, Director of the Yaoundé-based Centre for Environment and Development (CED), explains, “their objective [was...] giving medication, giving clothing, sometimes giving food. It was very useful, but [...] these were activities that would have no end. It would be like that forever” (personal communication; my translation).

In spite of the supposed value they placed on “Pygmy” culture, however, missionary and NGO projects were selective about what elements of that culture should be retained. These elements were not selected by Baka or other “Pygmies” themselves, but rather by the outsiders running the projects. Thus, “what is maintained is what is perceived as culture (language, ritual, and medicines)” by outsiders, while other elements such as “egalitarian social relations, interactive styles, conflict resolution, [and] sharing” were forced to give way to “agriculture, hierarchy, and formal education” (Hewlett 2000, 388). As Hewlett sums up, at the end of the day, missionaries, NGOs, and government officials shared the same goal. They “want[ed] the Baka to be more like them: sedentary, responsive to hierarchy, healthy, wealthy, and wise” (388).³

Of course, sedentarization was destined to fail. Instead of becoming fully assimilated, “modern” citizens, as the government wanted, or healthy, independent communities with some aspects of “traditional” culture intact, as missionaries and NGOs wanted, Baka and other “Pygmies” followed a different path. In part this was a path they chose themselves. “Pygmy” communities had little interest in hewing to the templates set out for them by outsiders. Instead, they strategically sought to take advantage of the opportunities offered by sedentarization programs to further their own desires for certain forms of change and certain forms of continuity. In larger part, however, the path of Baka and other “Pygmy” communities was, indeed, determined by outsiders. More specifically, the incoherence, under-resourcing, prejudice, and lack of local buy-in that characterized most sedentarization projects meant that, even if sedentarizing “Pygmy” communities *had* wanted to embrace the visions of development and modernity proffered by the government, missionaries, or NGOs, it was next to impossible for them to fully do so.

5. Sedentarization and Baka-“Bantu” Inequality

As we saw in the previous chapter, sedentarization also exacerbated Baka-“Bantu” inequality. As Baka have become increasingly subjected to “modern systems, such as the judicial system, tax system, and the monetary economy,” with which “Bantu” have longer experience, Bantu have “generally have become increasingly dominant over Pygmies” (Takeuchi 2014). Owing to a historic lack of literacy and education, accessing and using these systems is more difficult for “Pygmies.” This allows “Bantu” to serve as privileged interlocutors with outsiders, gaining privileged access to resources and channelling decision-making in their favour. Today, while there is a great deal of regional and community-level variation in the nature of Baka-“Bantu” relations, in the majority of cases, Baka find themselves subordinate to “Bantu” (Abega and Bigombe Logo 2006a). Owing to the fact that they often reside on land that is “owned” by “Bantu,” as well as the increasing difficulty in accessing the forest, Baka increasingly subsist by working as labourers on “Bantu” plantations. As Takeuchi (Takeuchi 2014) explains, this has undermined the specialized trading relationship that previously existed: “[As] Baka have started crop farming and cacao cultivation...fictive kinships and reciprocal exchanges between the Baka and neighbouring farmers...have disappeared.” The result of this is that “the regional symbiotic system has become an empty framework, and economic disparities have been generated through competition with farmers and merchants” (314). For their work on “Bantu” plantations, Baka are often paid a pittance, or not at all. Sakanashi (2010) for instance, found that “farmers use various objects for exchange and did not pay the full wage in cash. They offered meals, alcohol, and other recreational substances to “motivate” Baka labourers during working hours on farms” (cited in Oishi and Hayashi 2014, 144-5).

A short ethnographic sketch will help to illustrate the nature of contemporary Baka-“Bantu” relations. In late 2013, I travelled with Messe and other staff from Okani to the far south

of Cameroon, along the border with the Republic of Congo. The goal of the trip was to conduct initial consultations with Baka communities about a new EU-funded project that Okani would be leading. Because the Baka communities where Okani proposed to work were located on “Bantu” territory, they fell under the jurisdiction of a “Bantu” chief. We thus required the chief’s permission to undertake the project. I accompanied Messe to meet with the chief at his home, located in a Bantu village abutting the Baka village of Akonetsé. The chief was accompanied by another Bantu village elder. We sat in the living room of the chief’s large concrete house. The room was decorated with posters produced by various NGOs; one was a WWF poster illustrating which animals could and could not be hunted in the nearby forest. It quickly became clear that the relations between Baka and Bantu in the area were very fraught, and that this would present a major challenge in gaining chiefly sanction for the project to proceed.

The chief began by complaining about Baka theft. The Bantu provide Baka with food and other goods in exchange for their agricultural labour, the chief explained, but often the Baka do not show up. Moreover, when the Baka did show up, they sometimes took produce from Bantu fields for their own consumption. The Bantu chief explained that he paid each Baka about 500 CFA (about one dollar) per day to work. The other Bantu man jumped in. The Baka eat only out of the charity of the Bantu, he complained.

The chief also expressed wariness about the Okani project. Earlier in the day, while waiting to meet with community members in the Baka village, Messe had played videos of Baka musicians on his computer to entertain those who were waiting. One of the videos included a lyrics such as “I’m not going to work in the Bantu’s fields anymore” and “we’re tired of working without eating.” “I understood the song you were playing down there in the *campement*,” the chief explained to Messe. He would support the project, he explained, if it would teach the Baka

to stay in place and work, rather than going off into the forest to hunt, which the chief saw as a waste of labour. Messe was able to explain the project in a way that seemed to appease the chief, explaining that the entire community would benefit if the Baka developed.

The chief did wind up expressing some support for the Okani project's focus on Baka rights as they related to human rights abuses committed by the "ecoguards" charged with patrolling nearby national parks. In expressing his support, however, the chief also unintentionally revealed the deep inequality that persists between Baka and Bantu, particularly in remote areas such as the villages surrounding Ntam. Speaking about two Baka men who had recently been killed in the forest (it was unclear to me if the chief was blaming the ecoguards or a mining company that had recently set up shop in the area for the deaths) the chief said, "*I lost two Pygmies like that.*" He went on to explain that he had raised the issue with the local authorities, asking them, "What happened with *my* Pygmy?" "I lost that *element* like that for nothing," he explained to us (my translation). Clearly the chief thought of "Pygmies" as his possessions, and seemed more upset at the uncompensated loss of labour than the fact that a human being had been killed.

More succinct examples are also available. When I asked a Bantu friend, for instance, if he knew any words in Baka, he replied that he only knew how to say "come here." A non-Baka man working with Okani, when away from his Baka colleagues, would often refer to Baka as "*les enfants.*" On another occasion, while visiting Mayos, a community member complained to me that, the day before, four men from the village had agreed to accompany a Bantu man to help harvest cacao on his plantation. He dropped them at the plantation and promised to return to collect them and pay them at the end of the day. He never returned and the men were forced to walk back to the Mayos, without being paid.

Of course, there are important regional differences and inter-group differences in the nature of Baka-“Bantu” relations, and “Pygmy”-“Bantu” relations more generally. Indeed, in my own experience, there was a marked difference between the different regions where Okani worked. It would be too simplistic to characterize these differences along a fixed scale from symbiosis to exploitation/inequality. For instance, in remote communities in southeast Cameroon, near the town of Moloundou, relations appeared highly unequal but also relatively free of conflict. “Bantu” openly referred to adult Baka as “*enfants*”, and I witnessed a number of occasions in which a younger “Bantu” ordered an older Baka to do something and the Baka immediately complied. At the same time, Baka did not openly discuss this inequality or complain about it during discussions.

In the villages of Mayos and Loussou, which were located much closer to the regional capital of Bertoua and close to a major highway, the situation was much different. Relations were, in some sense, more economically equal (though still not at all egalitarian). In these communities, however, Baka often complained openly about exploitation by “Bantu,” sometimes resulting in heated debates and conversations.

There are a number of possible reasons for these differences. Hewlett and Fancher (2014), for instance, argue that “relative interdependence and symbiosis in forager-farmer relations is more likely to occur in rural, low-population density settings with minimal impacts from a cash economy. As market economies (coffee, gold, diamonds, bushmeat trade) expand, farmers are more likely to exploit forest forager labour” (947). This tracks with my experience, though it must be noted that “symbiotic” relations do not entail egalitarian relations. There may be less conflict in communities such as those around Moloundou, with a relatively low penetration of the cash economy, but Bantu still treat Baka as their inferiors.

Another possible reason for the difference in relations is that, in the area surrounding Moloundou, the same “Bantu” and “Baka” families have lived in proximity for several generations (though Baka have only recently moved to permanent settlements), whereas populations in Mayos and Loussou are relatively more transient. Many of the Bantu with whom Baka in Mayos and Loussou interact are not longstanding residents of the communities, but rather traders and other outsiders who do not reside in the community. These outsiders come to Baka villages that are relatively easy to access in order to benefit from cheap Baka labour.

Baka-“Bantu” inequality is exacerbated by the degradation narratives discussed in the previous section. As Hewlett and Fancher (2014) note, “political-economic inequality in forager-farmer relations is a crucial issue in the Congo Basin today.” Specifically, they note that “Pygmies” often have difficult accessing “health and education services” due to discrimination by “Bantu” (947). Often this discrimination references not only the idea that “Pygmies” are primitive, but also that they are degraded. Tallousock (2011), for instance, notes that Baka parents often hesitate to send their children to school due to discrimination and teasing by “Bantu” students. In my experience, this teasing often focuses not only on the trope of Baka “primitivity” but also degradation. I have heard Bantu claim, for instance, that Baka children cause disruption at school because they do not have good morals and do not wash properly, or because their parents are alcoholics. Similarly, a fellow anthropologist explained to me that, in his experience, government and development officials considered the opinions of more “traditional” “Pygmy” groups as more valid when it came to issues such as land management. For groups living less “traditional” lifestyles, my colleague explained, the attitude of government and development workers was sometimes, “these guys have fallen, so their opinion isn’t valid” (R. Moïse; personal communication).

Sedentarization programs have, in many ways, done precisely the opposite of what they claimed to have intended. Instead of bringing Baka and other “Pygmies” into mainstream, national society, they have pushed them to the margins. Baka may live in closer proximity to “Bantu” than they one did, but, in terms of their capabilities and ability to achieve their own understanding of a “good life,” they have grown further apart from these groups. In short, they have become marginalized.

6. Development, Traditionalism, and Modernization

The challenge, then, becomes finding a way to speak about and address the challenges faced by Baka communities, without reinforcing degradation narratives. One way to do this is to begin speaking not of degradation but of *marginalization*. As Abega (2006) explains:

Marginalization mean being confined to the margins.... Pygmies are not separate from the rest of society, they are *separated*. Their inaccessibility thus does not come so much from a lack of willingness, or an inability to integrate themselves into the majority groups in the national society of which they now form a part, but from the erection of barriers by dominant neighbouring groups belonging to “Bantu”...groups, the official administration, regional governments, development organizations, employers, educators, etc. Everything is done to keep them on the far side of the barrier where they are alone, pointed at, frustrated, deprived. (26)

Marginalization describes a contemporary reality based on peoples’ own ability to attain their self-determined goals and aspirations. Degradation uses an external, ideal type model (in this case a ‘noble savage’ construction of “traditional” “Pygmy” culture informed by the Western “Pygmy Paradigm”) as a reference point for evaluating the situation of a community, without taking into account the views of community members themselves.⁴

Both marginalization and degradation can serve as starting points for further outside interventions in local communities. These interventions are usually done in the name of “development.” As Blaser, Feit, and McRae (2004) argue in their seminal book on development and Indigenous peoples, development “embodies the European Enlightenment’s implicit project

of making specific...world views and values, those broadly described as modern and Western European, into universals” (28; quoted in Moïse 2011). As Moïse (2011) notes, “inevitably, such an approach produces a discourse of deficit, one based on negative definitions of local peoples and situations. One sees them in terms of what they are not as we as what they lack—lacking in rights, lacking in development, etc.” (1). As Wæhle (1999) explains, “development not only stands for integration into the overall economic and political life of the nation, but also for ridding the nation of a relict, a relict which is seen as an antithesis to the idea of development” (13).

In Baka communities, the problems created by sedentarization have served to justify new “development” projects. While, as we will see, some of these projects aim to address marginalization, providing Baka with the abilities and opportunities to pursue their own goals, many take “degradation” as their starting point. The connection between sedentarization (itself a sort of development project) and subsequent efforts at development is a prime example of the logic of development itself. As James Ferguson (1990) points out in his seminal *The Anti-Politics Machine*, ‘development’ must be understood as a *discourse*. Development perpetuates itself through “a distinctive style of reasoning backward from the necessary conclusions—more “development” projects are needed—to the premises required to generate those conclusions” (259). In short, development begets more development.

According to Ferguson, the discourse of development also serves to de-politicize both poverty and state action. It “repos[es] political questions of land, resources, jobs, or wages as technical “problems” responsive to the technical “development” intervention.” Thus, “a “development” project can end up performing extremely sensitive political operations involving the entrenchment and expansion of institutional state power almost invisibly, under cover of a

neutral, technical mission to which no one can object” (256). While the goal of entrenching state power was fairly explicit in mid-twentieth century sedentarization projects, by the 1990s this goal had become camouflaged within a discourse of development. Government and other interventions in Baka communities were reframed as technical interventions, rather than explicitly as efforts to assimilate a “relict” culture.

Many development projects in Baka communities, beginning in the 1990s, sought either explicitly or implicitly to address degradation. They took as their starting point the thesis that roadside Baka communities were miserable and impoverished. Depending of the view point of those executing the project, problems in Baka communities were caused either by the fact that sedentarization had gone “too far,” destroying traditional culture, values, and institutions; or, on the other hand, that it had not gone “far enough,” leaving the Baka “caught between two worlds”—unable to cope politically, economically, or culturally with the new influences that sedentarization had brought to their communities. No matter which view an individual or organization took, however, the solution was the same: The Baka needed more development. Projects thus sought either to “help” Baka return to an ideal type construction of an imagined past (to which many Baka had no desire to return), or, like previous government projects, to help Baka achieve “modernity” because a return to traditional lifestyle was deemed undesirable, impossible, or both. We can term the former school of thought “traditionalism,” and the latter “modernization.”

In many ways, these two schools of thought parallel those of the government and missionaries/NGOs in the early years of development. Some individuals and organizations, including some devoted to Indigenous rights, frame their work in Baka communities as an effort to help preserve traditions in the face of encroaching modernity. Others, particularly

Cameroonian government projects, speak of development as a means of fostering Baka “citizenship” and assimilating Baka to the national “mainstream.”

One of the most explicit examples of traditionalism that I encountered in my fieldwork came in my interactions with a Cameroonian social activist and musician who has styled himself as an activist for the Baka. The activist frequently gives performances in Yaoundé to raise awareness of Baka rights, and has presented to high-ranking government officials. While not Baka himself, he has lived for several years in a Baka community and has adopted the stage name “Baka Baka” for his performances.

Baka Baka feels a deep connection to Baka culture, which he sees as a more authentic expression of his own African identity than the cultural practices that one finds in cities such as Yaoundé and Douala, which he views as overly influenced by the West. Baka Baka sees Baka culture as rooted in the forest. Much of his activism is focused on fighting against exploitative logging. In order for the Baka to maintain their “traditional” culture, he argues, they must be able to live in the forest, free from outside influences. Indeed, there is much in common between Baka Baka’s views and the old, Turnbullian “forest as refuge” or “forest world/village world” understanding of “Pygmy” culture. When I asked him about development, Baka Baka was dismissive:

They say they are doing development. What is development? Me, I don’t know! And they come for their own self interest while saying they are developing the Pygmies. No, I don’t like that. We need to leave the Pygmies over there where they are. In one of my songs, you will see, there is a title that says “leave the Pygmies over there where they are.” (personal communication; my translation)

Baka Baka is far from the only person to oppose development projects in Baka communities. For a certain cadre of activists (and still some anthropologists!), Baka and other “Pygmy” cultures continue to stand as a rhetorical counterpoint to the supposedly corrupting

influence of modernity, such that any sort of outside change is viewed negatively. Messe told me, for example, of an instance in which he travelled to Europe to give a presentation at an anthropology conference (a different conference from the one described in the introduction). A Western academic helping to organize the conference, upon seeing him dressed in a shirt and slacks, told him that he “didn’t look Baka.” For this anthropologist, Messe speculated, to be authentically Baka you had to wear ripped clothes and have dirt in your hair: “You have to not brush your teeth. You have to stay covered in monkey blood.” Messe then spoke specifically of what he felt to be a conflict between outside understandings of Baka culture and Baka agency. Some people, he told me, would prefer, for instance, that Baka not have access to radios so that they would be obliged to continue to play only traditional music. “But that’s not the aspiration of the Baka!” he exclaimed (personal communication; my translation).

Indeed, those holding traditionalist views can be quite critical of Baka who refuse to live “traditional” lifestyles, viewing them either as degraded or as possessing a false consciousness that does not allow them to see the value of the practices they are supposedly giving up. “The rhetoric of development has been adopted by the Baka,” bemoaned one recent article. “They now perceive their former lifestyle as deficient” (Townsend 2013, 1). In their own way, however, the traditionalists are “doing development” as well. Efforts to preserve “traditional” culture are nevertheless interventions that seek to change the trajectory of a community towards some externally-determined ideal.

Traditionalism disguises its adherence to development discourse by framing interventions as a return to the past. The rhetoric of modernization, by contrast, is explicit about its desire to engender development. In 2003, for instance, the Cameroonian Ministry of Economic Affairs, Programming, and Regional Development (MINEPAT), with funding for the World Bank,

launched the Pygmy Development Plan as part of a broader National Plan for Participatory Development. The preamble of the Pygmy Development Plan makes clear its rootedness in the failure of sedentarization and underlying goal; namely, to make “Pygmies” into “equal” Cameroonian citizens.

Has the increased dependence on farming, sedentary life for much of the year, and the desire to access social services turned “pygmy” communities into simple citizens of Cameroon like others—a few ethnic groups among others? Decidedly not. Not a single Baka, Kola or Aka is working as a civil servant, no “pygmy” is a member of any of the 339 councils, only one of Cameroon’s 13,000 villages had a pygmy leader prior to the implementation of an IPDP in the Campo Ma’an region.... Few have identity cards that enable them to participate as citizens, because almost none can afford the US\$25 or so that it takes to acquire one. Nor do they have birth certificates, needed to register as voters. Rough estimates of cash income indicate that pygmy households may earn about one third of average and rural incomes in the country.... In general, the pygmies are simply seen to be dependent, virtual non-members of the villages with whom they interact. (Schmidt-Soltau 2003, 4)

The prescription for this state of affairs, according to the project documents, is development. More specifically, fostering “Pygmy” “citizenship” by establishing “legal,” “financial,” “organizational,” and “cultural” opportunities. For instance, the Development Plant sought to provide national ID cards (which would theoretically facilitate voting), fund job creation programs, and increase “Pygmy” representation on various local government committees. Of course, it should be noted that the Pygmy Development Plan also included provisions to fund “capacity building to preserve the loss of traditional knowledge, culture, and livelihood patterns,” though this involved a tightly circumscribed view of culture as involving practices such as dance, hunting techniques, etc. that did not challenge the overall trajectory of development (Schmidt-Soltau 2003, 5).

While the Pygmy Development Plan thus nods in the direction of both a “Pygmy” role in decision-making, and the value of “traditional” “Pygmy” culture, the ultimate goal is to integrate Baka and other “Pygmy” groups within the national mainstream. Pygmy political participation is

limited to (what would turn out to be tokenistic) representation on small local committees. Culture loss is perceived as inevitable. Traditional knowledge is something to be documented and preserved, rather than something that should inform, and shift, decisions about how Baka communities live and interact with outsiders. The objective is either to bring “Pygmies” into the mainstream trajectory of development or, failing this, to manage their underdevelopment such that they do not disrupt that stream. Remarkably absent from these narratives are the views of “Pygmies” themselves. Nowhere does the Pygmy Development Plan account for the possibility that, in order to be truly inclusive of “Pygmy” perspectives, the trajectory of “development” itself may need to shift.

7. Towards Self-Representation

While one cannot escape the discourse of development. It is possible, however, to reshape, shade, or morph it in a new directions. As noted in Chapter One, discourses are not “master practices” that determine all actions. Rather, the “machine” of development is a combination of both discourse and individual actions. Citing the work of Deleuze, Ferguson (1990) describes the enterprise of development as a “mushy mixture” of “the discursive and the non-discursive, of the intentional plans and the unacknowledged social world with which they are engaged” (275-6). According to this formulation, while it is probably impossible for a “development” project to elide the discourse of development entirely, it may still be possible to do development “better,” though it may be difficult to pick apart which actions and results are challenging or reshaping the discourse of development, and which are simply reinforcing it.

One fundamental insight of Ferguson’s work—and of the anthropology of development more generally—is that development projects often have unintended effects. In Ferguson’s telling, these effects are often insidious. As the case of Baka development shows, however, these effects can also be (at least in part) salutary. Accounts of development as discourse often

underestimate the role of local agency. Projects for which the initial design may have paid little heed of local values or objectives can nevertheless “introduce into the lives of local [people] a number of new possibilities, which they [make] use of to fashion their own vision of the future” (Moïse 2011, 7).

While the rhetorics of traditionalism and modernization are still very much present in many development projects in Baka communities, beginning in the 1990s, political changes, both within Cameroon and in the field of development, opened the door for projects that moved beyond this dichotomy. These projects seek to address *marginalization*—that is, to address structural obstacles that prevent Baka and other “Pygmies” from achieving their own understandings of the “good life”—rather than *degradation*. They thus avoid the premise that the Baka have “fallen” from some primordial, noble savage ideal. Projects aimed to address marginalization give increased attention to the beliefs and desires of the Baka themselves, which involve much more nuanced and complex understandings of modernity and tradition as compared to the understandings of government officials, NGO workers, or missionaries.

The 1990s in Cameroon and other developing countries witnessed what Fisher (1997, 440) terms the “associational revolution,” wherein NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) multiplied rapidly and began to take on a number of functions, such as delivery of social services, that had previously been the domain of national governments and religious organizations. A number of factors conspired to bring about this “revolution.” At the global level, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a “spread of the institutions and ideologies of free markets, liberal democracy, and civil society.” This in turn led to a process of national-level democratization, characterized by “economic deregulation, multi-party elections, and the creation of a vibrant NGO sector” (Igoe 2003, 864).

This was also the period of structural adjustment programs in many developing countries. Responding to concerns about state graft and corruption, organizations such as the World Bank and IMF required the liberalization of laws governing freedom of association as a condition of the loans they provided to help address national debt crises. Structural adjustment also required drastically scaling back public and social services. These changes both enabled the creation of NGOs, and engendered a greater need for NGO programming. Foreign governments and large development donors began to contribute to NGOs, instead of state coffers, using these organizations to bypass the state and deliver services directly to communities (Geschiere 2009, 67). As Igoe (2003) notes, Western governments and organizations also assumed “that NGOs could be equated with civil society,” and thus concluded that “funding NGOs meant building civil society” (866; Chabal and Daloz 1999, 22).

In Cameroon, specifically, this dynamic played out through the passing of law 90-053 on the Freedom of Association in December 1990. The law proclaimed that every citizen was “free to set up an association and has the right to belong to any association” (Nyambo 2008, 49). (We have already seen, in the previous chapter, how this law helped to further land dispossession by igniting debates about ethnicity, belonging, and autochthony.) In addition to allowing for the creation of opposition political parties and organizations such as trade unions, this law enabled the establishment of domestic development NGOs, and also made it easier for outside NGOs to operate. In many parts of Cameroon, national and international development NGOs began to undertake large scale projects in domains such as health and education, working alongside, and in some cases taking over from, the religious organizations that, until liberalization, had been the main providers of these services in many parts of the country, and especially in the southeast, where the majority of Baka live.

The most significant “Pygmy” development organization to emerge after the liberalization of Cameroon’s law on associations was the RACOPY network (*Réseau Recherche Actions Concertées Pygmées* - Research Network for Planned Pygmy Actions). RACOPY formed in 1996 as a national network for religious and non-religious NGOs working “for the needs and interests” of “Pygmy” communities. According to an undated promotional brochure, the network’s “mission is to support the self-development of the Baka, Bakola, Bagyelí, [and] Bedzang and their insertion in national citizenship: political, economic, social, and cultural life.”⁵

In the early years of the RACOPY network, there was little involvement of Baka and other “Pygmy” communities themselves, although some Baka and Bagyelí were invited to observe the network’s meetings. As Messe explains,

[Establishing the RACOPY network] really wasn’t a decision of the Baka organizations, who at that time did not even exist yet. It was the missionaries; it was the NGOs, who really wanted to do something for the Baka and who decided to have meetings like that one. And that’s how RACOPY began. [...] It was more the missionaries at the start...who looked for funding to make the network work and all that. (personal communication; my translation)

RACOPY’s early work consisted of advocacy on “Pygmies” behalf. For example, the network engaged in consultation with government officials to encourage that “Pygmies” be taken into account when Cameroon reformed its Forest Law in 1994.

In spite of the continued presence of missionaries and other outsiders in networks such as RACOPY, however, these networks also provided resources for new NGOs that had greater involvement from local communities. By the mid-1990s, large development donors, informed by the “participatory turn” in development practice (Chambers 1994), had started to move from a diffusion model, whereby development policies and projects were applied to communities, to an exchange model, which stressed “the importance of cultural identity of local communities and of democratization and participation at all levels” (Servaes 1996, 15-6). As a result, funding

organizations required national and international development NGOs to partner with a local community-based organization (CBO) as a precondition for receiving financial support. As David Mosse (2011) explains, “an emphasis on partnership, consultation and local ownership set the ideological conditions for aid such that aid agencies claim they no longer make interventions at all, but rather support the conditions within which development can happen” (3). International and national NGOs thus began encouraging “Pygmy” communities to found their own community-based organizations (CBOs).

Today, in many parts of southeast Cameroon nearly every grouping of four or five Baka villages has its own development organization (or “association,” to use the local nomenclature), each with its own acronym (ASBAK, ADEBAKA, ABAGUENI, etc.), headquarters, and staff members (President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer). Rather than being an organic project of local communities, however, these organizations must be viewed as a creation of local, national, and international elites. As Chabal and Daloz (1999) argue, the growth of local CBOs beginning in the late 1990s is in part “a successful adaptation to the conditions laid down by foreign donors on the part of local political actors who seek in this way to gain access to new resources” (22). In Cameroon, encouraging the founding of Baka CBOs became a way for national and international development organizations to continue their work in Baka communities while responding to the international imperative for local “grassroots” development.

8. A Values-Based Approach

While the process may have been imperfect, however, bringing Baka into development projects did change the way that development projects played out in Baka communities for the better. As more and more Baka began to work in development—first as workers, then as managers, and finally as executives in their own organizations—they began to exert greater

influence over the logic of development itself. This led to a shift from projects grounded in outside narratives of degradation to projects that sought to address local needs and desires.

The problem with degradation narratives is that they privilege the coherence and duration of Western understandings of progress over the understandings of local people (in this case, the Baka) themselves. An alternative approach, however is possible. This approach requires reimagining Baka identity. Rather than taking the ideal type constructions of the Western “Pygmy Paradigm” as a starting point, this approach is rooted in the Baka’s self-professed *values*. Values, by their nature, are slippery and self-defined. They are thus less amenable to narratives of degradation. This is in keeping with a broader trend in the study of Indigenous groups. The Canadian First Nations scholar George Sioui (1992), for instance, has argued that “studying the persistence of essential Amerindian values, rather than the investigation of cultural transformations, in what is of primary interest to Native people and of greatest importance for understanding their role in world history” (Trigger 1992, x). Sioui goes on to argue that Indigenous people have a fundamentally different understanding of their histories than those typically found in dominant narratives, and that one must understand these in order to study ethnohistory.

As Robert Moïse (2011; 2014), who has conducted extensive ethnographic research among various Indigenous groups in Central Africa, has pointed out, members of these groups are much more likely to describe their cultural identities in terms of values, than in terms of specific livelihood or ritual practices. Moïse’s “alternative model of pygmy history and identity” seeks to understand these local values, focusing on “life projects embedded in local histories” that encompass unique and grounded “visions of the world and the future” (Blaser 2004; cited in Moïse 2011, 3). The focus is thus on how values are articulated in the present, rather than on how

contemporary societies resemble or differ from their ancestors. In developing this model, Moïse draws on Jan Vansina's (1990) understanding of tradition, as articulated in *Paths in the*

Rainforest:

Vansina employs the notion of historical "tradition" in a particular way. He considers it to involve elements of both continuity and change: continuity is manifested in the long-term reproduction of certain fundamental cultural principles, "basic choices, which, once made, are never again put into question," while change is manifested in the continual transformation of elements of the tradition as it moves through time. (Moïse 2014, 88)

Moïse's model takes as a starting point the rejection of the myth of "Pygmy" isolation. "Pygmies," he writes, "have always been engaged with historical transformations unfolding in wider regional environments":

When these transformations have offered opportunities, Pygmies have sought to take advantage of them and, when they have imposed constraints, they have attempted to avoid them through a strategy of social and physical distance. In addition, rather than being disempowered victims or timeless hunter-gatherers lacking agency, Pygmies have always been resilient and creative entrepreneurs who are perfectly willing to pursue their goals in wider regional environments, whenever opportunities for this arise. (Moïse 2011, 3)

Rather than conceiving of "Pygmies" as isolated communities whose traditions—and very existence—is threatened by outside influences, Moïse's model allows us to reconceptualize "Pygmies" as capable, creative, dynamic actors who have always interacted with outside individuals and forces with the aim of preserving and furthering certain core values. According to Moïse (2014), it is adherence to these core values that helps resolve what Bahuchet (1993b) has called the "Pygmy paradox," showing "how Pygmies have produced fundamental continuity in their cultural forms despite millennia of intimate interaction with outsiders that resulted in the sharing of languages and genes...without resorting to the notion of social isolation," which, he notes, "has proven untenable" (104).

Through detailed ethnographic and archival research Moïse (2014) goes on to seek to identify the “fundamental structures of principles that could be considered as cornerstones of an autochthonous tradition” in “Pygmy” communities, in counterpoint to those practices and characteristics (livelihood practices, for instance) that tend to be emphasized by outsiders (88). While acknowledging that there are important differences between different “Pygmy” groups, Moïse (2011) posits three principal values that make up the core of “Pygmy” identity: “autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and creativity/play” (5).

Of these characteristics, autonomy is perhaps the most important. Drawing on a wide variety of ethnographic sources, Moïse (2011) argues that, within “Pygmy” communities “the autonomy of the individual is regarded as inviolable” (5). The importance of this principle has “fundamental implications for Pygmy political life”: “Because the autonomy of the individual is regarded as inviolable, almost sacred, it cannot be transgressed; this, in turn, prevents forms of hierarchy (based on age, political authority, etc.) from ever becoming institutionalized as relations of coercive power.” While “those with authority have the right to give advice...the decision whether to follow it always rests with the individual; in the face of directives from those with authority, individuals maintain a universal right of refusal” (Moïse 2014, 89). This priority on autonomy engendered a key difference between “Pygmy” communities, which tend to have relatively flat, egalitarian social structures, and Bantu, where political culture is often based on competition between rival “big men” seeking to consolidate power (Vansina 1990).

While, today, most Baka communities have a designated “chief” who is recognized by the government (and who is usually under the authority of a higher ranked, “Bantu” chief) traditionally Baka communities have not had a permanent leader. Instead, as Messe explained to me, Baka practiced what he calls “circumstantial leadership.” The system was in part

gerontocratic: It was the elders who decided, for instance, when to go hunt. Leadership was also, however, determined on a case-by-case basis. If you were hunting, a skilled hunter would often assume a leadership role. In the evenings, it was often the musicians who had the most power. Even then, following the directions or advice of a circumstantial leader was optional. An individual always had the right to refuse, though this could sometimes mean that he or she would leave the group temporarily (personal communication). Indeed, in my experience, the power of Baka village chiefs is greatly circumscribed, often limited to exercising formal functions and interacting with government officials. Other members of the community, who usually do not have a formal role or title, also take on leadership as circumstances warrant.

The second characteristic enumerated by Moïse is entrepreneurialism. For Moïse, entrepreneurialism is at the core of “Pygmy” interaction with outside groups and forces, and has been since the precolonial era. For centuries, argues Moïse, “Pygmy” “responses to pluralistic environments” have been characterized by “a marked openness to creating alliance relationships to gain access to resources controlled by others,” and they have deployed a variety of “strategies...to take advantage of historical opportunities.” These include, “migrating to locations where they can access [resources]” (Moïse 2014, 90). This interpretation stands in stark contrast to narratives of “Pygmy” isolation.

Moïse (2011) uses what he call the “society of the road” as an example of “Pygmy” entrepreneurialism. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, in response to government sedentarization programs that relocated them from the forest to the roadsides, “Pygmies” developed new practices to preserve and enact cornerstone values. While we should not underplay the use of force and coercion in these efforts, Moïse points out that some “Pygmies” moved to roadsides willingly, as these locations “provided...opportunities for entrepreneurial

activity” such as the possibility of selling goods at higher prices through access to a greater, more diverse group of consumers (8).

This ties into Moïse’s final core “Pygmy” value: creativity/play. Not only did sedentarization enable entrepreneurialism, it also enabled the creation of new cultural forms. “The presence of so many...groups on a single road,” argues Moïse (2011), “occasioned the development, especially among the youth, of certain regional cultural forms—in the realms of dance, music, dress, sports, etc.” (8). These forms can be viewed as a continuation, and means of expression, of a long tradition of “story-telling, comedic performances” and, most importantly, “polyphonic ensemble singing, music, [and] dance” (6; see Oishi and Hayashi 2014; Tsuru 1998). Seen from this perspective, recent changes in Baka and other Indigenous forest communities, such as the expansion of consumerism or “nightclub” culture, can be recast not as degradation, but as an expression of common values.

In an article about Baka youth culture, Oishi and Hayashi (2014) make just such an argument, stating that the decisions of Baka youth who choose “to drink and dance in bars” or open informal discos in their villages rather than partaking in “traditional dance rituals” are in fact perpetuating cultural values of creativity and entrepreneurialism, replacing “traditional ritual performances with these new types of recreation as an occasion to demonstrate their economic adaptabilities to the others and to strengthen solidarity among them” (156-7):

Whereas such situations can easily be interpreted as threatening the continuity of their “traditional culture,” the change in the use of social spaces among the contemporary Baka demonstrates their adaptabilities to changing socioeconomic situations beyond the “essentialist conceptualization” of Baka culture. (158)⁶

The fact that the embrace of these “modern” practices by Baka youth is done to strengthen solidarity is an important point. There is a risk that, in celebrating values such as autonomy and entrepreneurialism, we make Baka and other “Pygmies” out to be quintessential neoliberal

subjects, divorced from community. It is important to note that autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and creativity/play are also valued insofar as they contribute to the larger whole.

Unlike the anthropologist whom I cited in the introduction, who bemoaned the decision of a group of “hunter-gatherer” youth to dance to modern music and drink beer as “tragic,” Oishi and Hayashi provide a description of changes in Baka culture without normative judgement. Baka youth are characterized as contemporary actors making decisions about how to behave in accordance with their own understandings of their culture and identity, as well as the opportunities available to them. In spite of anthropological accounts of isolation and stasis, there is a great deal of evidence, in fact, that this is precisely what the Baka, and other forest peoples, have always done.

A note of caution is necessary here, however. There is, first of all, a major flaw in Moïse’s theory—namely, his attempt to generalize about all “Pygmies.” As discussed in detail in Chapter One, “Pygmy” is a catch-all term developed and applied by Europeans to a diversity of groups which, even though they have some physical and cultural similarities, also have important differences, including of language. While my own ethnographic research provides some support for the applicability of Moïse’s posited core values of autonomy, entrepreneurialism and creativity/play to the Baka, more detailed research is needed to determine if and how these values are shared by diverse “Pygmy” groups.

Moreover, it is important to note that not all Baka have the same understanding of their own culture and values, or how these should be enacted. While some Baka youth, such as those studied by Oishi and Hayashi, may wish to spend their time in nightclubs, and see this as compatible with the preservation of Baka culture, there are other Baka community members who bemoan the loss of tradition and long for a return to nomadic hunting and gathering. More

commonly, in my experience, Baka themselves are ambivalent about which outside impositions and opportunities to embrace, and which to fight.

9. A Baka NGO

Okani, the organization with which I conducted my field research, provides an example of putting a values-based approach to development into action. Messe Venant founded Okani with a group of former colleagues from the AAPPEC missionary project in the mid-2000s, making it the first independently established Baka NGO. Owing to internal governance issues and financial struggles, AAPPEC collapsed in the mid 2000s. Messe had worked with AAPPEC for five years, beginning in 1992. He was one of the aforementioned Baka hired by a development organization to meet the dictates of “participatory development.” Okani sought to continue AAPPEC’s work, building on connections Messe had made with international and national development donors during his time with that organization.

With the closing of AAPPEC, we gathered together [...] and said to ourselves, “Well, we still have to continue to keep the wheel turning, even if it’s at a different speed, so that we try to fill the little space that we [are going to] make. The hole that AAPPEC is going to leave. So when that NGO closed, we sat down together—that is to say the young Baka from Dimako and Mayos and Loussou—and we started to think about what had to be done. (personal communication; my translation)

Okani emerged around the same time, and in response to a number of the same trends, as the aforementioned Baka community associations, yet the organization was quite exceptional as compared to these organizations. As previously noted, Baka associations were often created and sustained directly by external development NGOs, often in order to meet funders’ dictates that projects be carried out “in partnership” with a local organization. Baka community organizations also had a limited scope, often working on one specific project in a specific community. Okani, on the other hand, was more ambitious. The founders of Okani sought to fill the gap that would be left with the closing of AAPPEC, coordinating a host of activities across Baka villages in a

number of locations, although they were pragmatic about the fact that they would not be able to take on a large role right away.

The UK-based NGO Forest Peoples' Programme (FPP) was a vital source of support for the formation of Okani. FPP began working in Cameroon in the early 2000s, examining the effect of conservation on Baka and Bagyelí Indigenous communities. At the time, FPP was working with the Yaoundé-based Centre for Environment and Development (CED) on a project aimed to help local communities to map their traditional territories in order to advocate for community access to protected areas. In the interim, between the end of AAPPEC and the founding of Okani, Messe, as well as other Baka who had worked with AAPPEC, had been employed on this project as community facilitators.

Unlike other Baka CBOs, however, the impetus to form Okani did not come from FPP, but from Baka themselves, who then approached FPP from support. John Nelson, former Africa Regional Coordinator for FPP, describes the moment when Messe first told him about Okani:

I'll never forget [...] sitting at this crossroads in Mambélé way back [from a trip to the southeast] when Venant first came up with the idea [for Okani]. [...] Venant started explaining, "Well, I have this idea" [laughing]. And then he sort of explained the idea. [...] We started by thinking through the fact that it's ridiculous for outsiders always to have to come in to make anything happen. And that was the problem. [Baka communities] would only ever have a meeting if some external actor came out and organized them and gathered them into the room. That was it. It was just crazy, because what you need is sustained [...] information going to communities. And so that was where we started struggling to create those pathways. (personal communication)

Messe and his colleagues named the organization Okani, which is Baka for "let's go," (sometimes translated less directly as "rise up") and explicitly presented it as Baka-run. The use of a Baka name helped to build local support for the project. As Messe explains, this allowed "people [to] see themselves in the organization. Instead of having a French acronym where people wouldn't even really know what it means" (personal communication; my translation).

Okani's status as a Baka-run organization, with a Baka name, also provided a tactical advantage. The burgeoning international focus on Indigenous rights (see Chapter Four) and participatory development helped Okani to secure the money necessary to begin its activities.

FPP viewed Okani as having closer connections to Baka communities than other, non-Indigenous Cameroonian organizations with which they had partnered previously. Partnering with Okani was in line with FPP's goals, informed in part by the ethos of participatory community development, to empower communities to advocate on their own behalf. As John Nelson puts it, "my feeling is that we are supposed to work ourselves out of these jobs."

Venant was there. So I thought, this is a guy who has ideas about an organization, he's motivated. So that's the kind of person I wanted to work with. [...] If you're doing an Indigenous peoples' project, why would you do it with [a non-Indigenous NGO]? In fact, one of the reasons we wanted to do an Indigenous peoples' project is because the way... the traditional model of working with these gatekeeping non-Indigenous people organizations was they never invested properly in the communities in the way that the Indigenous people wanted and need to take control for themselves. So I just wanted them out. And Venant, by that time, really wanted them out, because we'd tried all kinds of stuff and it kept going wrong. (personal communication)

Okani's early years were challenging. Messe—who, by the time, I worked with him lived in a large concrete house with electricity and internet, travelled from village to village in a pickup truck, and favoured staying in hotels—often spoke with nostalgia about the times when Okani staff had to reach villages by mototaxi or on foot, and slept on the floor of peoples' homes on reed mats. Originally, Messe and his colleagues had hoped to use Okani to continue AAPPEC's work on education. They quickly realized, however, that working on this topic would be prohibitively expensive and logistically difficult for a small, grassroots organization. Instead, Okani carved out a niche for itself working in participatory video and rights advocacy (see Chapter Four).

Okani took a different approach to its activities than NGOs and missionaries. While inspired by the success and positive reception for some of AAPPEC's programs, Okani took greater heed of the desires of communities themselves. In part, this was because the vast majority of Okani's staff *were* Baka. They thus had their own understandings of Baka culture and development and were less susceptible the ideal-type constructions of "traditional" Baka culture that so many other development organizations took as a starting point. It was the constructions that informed external organizations' efforts to either then seek to transcend traditional culture through modernization, or to return to it through traditionalism. Instead, Okani's starting point was the views of the Baka themselves.

Okani's approach is "really to start advocacy at the local level," explains Messe. "My issue with the whole system [of development]," he notes, "is that it is not always intelligent to go attack the problem at the highest level. You have to start by looking for local solutions." This involves taking into account the views and desires of local people. "Well the trick is, I think, as I've said, there's a Cameroonian singer who says "in order to know me better come towards me and you will know who I am,"" Messe says, explaining that people with strong views as to how development should occur in Baka communities have not "yet really discussed this question with the Baka" (personal communication; my translation). Often, heeding the wishes of Baka themselves means addressing marginalization, not degradation. The majority of people in the communities where I worked with Okani did not want a simplistic return to tradition, nor did they want a wholesale transition that would see them adopt the cultural and livelihood practices of their "Bantu" neighbours. Rather, they wanted power to make decisions for themselves.

Of course, as we will see, Okani's activities are in part also determined by the availability of funding. The organization first began working with participatory video, for instance, because

there was grant funding available for this activity, not necessarily because there was a request from the communities where Okani works for a video project. Nevertheless, the end goal of all of Okani's projects is not the attainment of some external ideal type, but the fulfillment, as much as possible, of the desires of Baka themselves.

10. New Directions

Okani provides one example as to how a values-based approach can be used to design better development interventions in Baka and other marginalized communities. Such an approach is very much needed. As Wæhle (1999) notes, "I cannot remember having encountered any development agency that entirely acquired a complete understanding of pygmy communities' holistic inter-connections between different aspects of their world view," although he goes on to note that some NGOs are making serious efforts to do so (11). This is the approach that Okani, supported by FPP, is attempting to take. "It's mistaken to set up an opposition between 'Inevitable Modern' (by roadside and impoverished) and 'Unrealistic Traditional' (living in the forest)," explained Justin Kenrick, a Senior Policy Advisor at FPP, "FPP seeks to help them have the space to secure rights to their forest lands and to develop ways of organizing and making a living that allow them to be full members of Cameroonian society as well as being able to develop their way of life/society/culture as they wish" (personal communication).

My experience working with Okani suggests that many Baka want some types of development, such as education and health care, but also want to retain access to traditional territories. Baka want to maintain their identity as Baka, rooted in core values of autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and creativity, even as they selectively take up outside technologies and practices. This was the point that the young men were attempting to make in the anecdote I recounted in the introduction to this chapter. They saw some changes in their communities as

positive, even as they sought to preserve some traditions. They resented, however, being told by outsiders which traditions and innovations they should value.

There is an important role for research, and perhaps even for applied anthropology, here. In order to help a community achieve its objectives, one has to understand its values and desires. Messe and I spoke frequently of this, and Messe was frequently critical of the aforementioned musician Baka Baka, as well as many anthropologists, who he saw as advocating for a “traditional” vision of Baka culture, while not making an effort to understand the needs and desires of contemporary Baka, which included selective participation in “non-traditional” cultural practices and institutions.

Even Baka Baka, although he pretends to be promoting Baka rights—that is to say that he hasn’t yet really discussed this question with the Baka. People say, “Oh, we have to leave the Baka like that.” [...] Before we were talking about the question of choices. Baka Baka, he says we have to leave the Baka in the forest, but the Baka today, it’s not really anymore the... It’s true that there are some that want to stay in the forest, but there are... There is a balance. There’s a balance between adding to the knowledge of the forest and what I see on the other side. [...] You will arrive [in a Baka community], there are people who have radios in the villages. There are some who really want to stay [sitting] in front of the participatory video, watching films. And [to] have a house made of sheet metal, like everywhere, [...] which has nothing to do with the forest habitat. (personal communication; my translation)

For Messe, the fundamental issue is choice. Baka should be free to choose their own path, whether this involves maintaining a traditional lifestyle, or embracing certain outside influences. Indeed, while he was critical of traditionalists such as Baka Baka, he was also critical of forced modernization. “I insist on question of choice,” he explained to me, “everyone should be free to choose which lane to follow.” “If we go with force, or with brutality to say everybody has to adapt, it’s certain that there will be an accident somewhere—cultural or, I don’t know what—that will make it so they won’t even attain the results that we are counting on” (personal communication; my translation). He went on to explain that, for him personally, it was important

to maintain a balance between the “traditional” and the “modern.” While he valued his education, and the amenities of the house in Bertoua, he noted that, several times a year, “I have to have a few weeks in the forest. [...] I have to have a few moments of... in the forest in order to recharge, and to do something that I will be able to leave to the generation that will follow” (personal communication; my translation)

Moreover, Messe acknowledged that within Baka communities there would be different views of modernity and tradition, and he attempted to account for this in Okani’s work:

We can’t say anymore that 100% of people have the intention of staying in the forest. If we did statistics, we would surely find a 50/50 split. I am, in fact, completely thrilled about that. That is to say that, there will always be the guardians of tradition. Not everyone. But, really, we also can’t say that everyone will come out of the forest to get educated and stabilize themselves somewhere. There are always [those] who have kept... Who will stay guarding the temple. (personal communication; my translation).

Messe’s vision here is in line with a values-based approach, particularly the value of autonomy. Each Baka should be free to choose for him or herself what path to follow. While this is, I think, a salutary ambition, it should be noted that there is a risk that a values-based approach to development can underplay the coercive colonial and neo-colonial conditions under which changes in Baka society have come about. Roger Bastide (1971) distinguishes “forced acculturation” and “planned acculturation.” In *forced* acculturation:

Cultures judged inferior to occidental civilization are pressed to abandon their institutions, their idols, and the collection of their bad habits in order to give themselves the means to share in the well-being of the occident. This acculturation is forced because it benefits only one group. The collectives that are affected by this process see the traits that are foundational to their identity at risk of disappearing.... But the collectives that are faced with this situation have a potential to resist that we must not ignore. These resistances are testament to the strength of their social bonds. They express themselves by mixing indigenous traits and imported elements. (quoted in Abega 2006, 28)

In forced acculturation, people exercise agency, but within the constraints imposed by an outside power. *Planned* acculturation, on the other hand, can occur only “once the process of

decolonization is complete.” In planned acculturation, people willingly embrace and seek to engender cultural change, which can include taking on elements of an outside culture (Abega 2006, 29).

As Séverin Cécile Abega (2006) notes, there is a risk—and a temptation—to portray the desire of “Pygmy” groups such as the Baka for access to outside, “modern” services and institutions—education, health care, sanitation—as an example of planned acculturation. This perspective can help to conceal the ongoing domination and discrimination that the Baka face:

We might be tempted to believe that this definition of planned acculturation applies to the situation in which Pygmy societies in Central Africa find themselves, quite simply because everyday they put forth requests for assistance to governmental, international, and civil society development agencies...and that they welcome numerous development projects which have as an objective to improve their living conditions on the material level, as well as the recognition of their rights. The situation, however, is much more complex. The need for assistance has been formulated in terms that conform to the interests of dominant groups, and we cannot immediately predict that this demand conforms to those of a dominated group having a lifestyle as particular as that of the Pygmies. Planned acculturation thus becomes another form of forced acculturation because minority groups do not have the opportunity or the means to formulate their needs in their own terms, and, because of this, the assistance that is proposed to them does not really correspond to their actual expectations. (29)

This can, in turn, serve to legitimate actions that are harmful to the ability of “Pygmy” groups to enact and preserve their cultures as they see fit. Most importantly, noting the desire of some “Pygmies” to live near roadsides and engage in the cash economy, rather than hunting and gathering, can be used to diminish the validity of “Pygmy” land rights claims to traditional hunting grounds. As Justin Kenrick points out “the reason [most Baka] live by the road in extreme poverty is not really about modernization, but about no longer being able to rely on their forest resource” (personal communication).

Messe and I spoke frequently about this as well. Indeed, while Messe viewed hybridity and selective modernization as legitimate choices for many Baka to make, he often viewed these

choices as an imperative, created by outside forces that were destroying the forest and, with it, the option for the Baka to lead a more “traditional” way of life.

The forest is still where? [...] Where is the forest now? In a few years there won't be any more forest as it is now. It will be towns. It will no longer be forest. And so [...] we have to adapt. The Baka has to adapt to everything that is happening to his environment, which will be gone soon. [...] The people who say, “They should stay in the forest,” like Baka Baka and others. [...] No! If the forest was intact, no problem! But today we don't really have the luck to have an intact forest. The forest, as you have seen on the maps that we have on our computers there, that show the situation with forestry and mining in Cameroon, it's really disadvantageous for the Baka. The Baka have to adapt. And I insist on the word “adaptation.” [...] Whether we like it or not, the places where the Baka are found, modernity will find them there. [...] And if the Baka don't do anything it will be a catastrophe.

Messe's view here is actually not so different from Baka Baka's, which he was quite fond of criticizing. Both fear the effects of the destruction of the forest on traditional Baka livelihoods. Baka Baka hopes to prevent the destruction of the forest, Messe sees it as inevitable. The key difference, though, is that Messe bemoans the loss of the forest because it eliminates the Baka's ability to *choose* traditional livelihoods, whereas Baka Baka does not account for an option in which Baka might nevertheless opt for a more “modern” or “hybrid” existence.

Moreover, while Baka Baka viewed resettlement strictly in negative terms, Messe saw the increasing presence of outsiders in Baka communities as a potential opportunity to enact a value of entrepreneurialism:

In what way should we prepare ourselves? There are a lot of people who are going to arrive. They will need to be fed. And we'll have to feed ourselves, and then sell the surplus to the others who will come. And if I want to sell I need to be informed about the price. And to be informed you need to have at least a basic education. That way I can organize my market, I can look for the price elsewhere. How much are they selling for elsewhere and how much can I sell it for at my level? And that way I can also get something from the work that I do.

Many traditionalists—the anthropologist who told the story about the young men abandoning their traditional dance, Baka Baka—have bleak visions of the future. Such visions, I would argue, downplay the agency, resilience, and creativity of local people.

While Messe is not naive about the problems facing the Baka, particularly when it comes to land rights, his vision is more optimistic. He embraces a vision of hybridity, in which Baka will be free to combine the aspects of tradition and modernity that they choose, in order to enact their core values. He explained this vision to me by using the metaphor of a Baka/Bantu couple who were participating both in “traditional” gathering of forest products, and “modern” agricultural practices:

In Nomedjo [...] there is a guy there, he is not Baka but he married a Baka woman, but he has been trained, for example, to collect everything that grows in the forest. He has a whole nursery, big like this yard, with all the essences of the forest. And he does terracing, he does grafting. He can graft a wild mango to an avocado tree. And he has really impressive results. [...] I think that we could develop an initiative like that one. And have people who have traditional techniques for multiplying non-timber forest products, which will soon be gone with the mining exploitation, to domesticate and plant them.

Indeed, Messe views his own life as an example of this hybridity. While he has long worked for the rights of Baka communities, and embraces many aspects of his Baka heritage, Messe is also an entrepreneur. He has started his own NGO, lives in a concrete house with electricity in a large town, and frequently travels internationally. While some see Messe’s material success as evidence that he has lost his cultural roots, for him it is an expression of a core value of entrepreneurialism. (I explore Messe’s story and identity in more detail in Chapter Five).

To develop you need capital. And through entrepreneurialism the Baka can take charge of themselves. Because the whole problem is related to income. When people have no income it’s a problem. I can speak loudly today because I have an income! I can go into a lot of environments today because I have an income. If I go into the Mansa [the most expensive hotel in Bertoua] I will pay for my beer without looking at you, Nick, to see if you can pay for me! [laughing] [...].

If we give the means to those young [Baka] people, like André [a young employee of Okani], I think that he could already launch himself into an [income generating] activity. We can follow him, give him advice, and orient him. And André, through that initiative, in five years becomes autonomous. And he himself will understand the necessity of going in that direction. Because the forest is leaving. People will continue to need to take care of themselves, but all those trees will be devastated.

11. Conclusion

As Moïse notes, almost since the first contact between European explorers and native peoples, Europeans have expressed concern about the “disappearing Indian.” And yet, he notes, “there are still a lot of Indians walking around” today (personal communication). What is really “disappearing” in such conceptions is not the people, but rather certain aspects of local cultures that outsiders see as worth preserving—often because they see these cultures as a counterbalance to their own dissatisfaction with modern industrial capitalism. To put it differently, perhaps what is actually “degrading” in the degradation narratives discussed in this chapter is not “Pygmy” or “hunter-gatherer” cultures or societies, but rather the analytical *models* traditionally used to classify and understand them.

Stereotyped narratives such as the Western “Pygmy Paradigm” entail the view that contemporary local people are “fallen” versions of their ancestors. As we have seen, these narratives continue to inform outside interactions with Baka and other “Pygmy” communities today. Some anthropologists, development workers, and others perceive these communities as a sort of “ruin”—a degraded form of an ideal type construction that only ever existed in Western popular culture and anthropological theory. Narratives of degradation purify and redeem an ideal-type construction of pre-contact life, which is simultaneously located in the recent past of contemporary “Pygmies”/hunter-gatherers and the distant past of the Western anthropologist. As

Frankland (1999) puts it, “in this arch conceit, change is equated solely with loss. Ways of life can only be transformed detrimentally, people’s responses can only be passive” (69).

While they may be useful in preserving the analytical coherence of anthropological models, degradation narratives have extremely detrimental effects for the communities that are subject to them. First, these narratives engender discrimination: The views and desires of local people are ignored due to their supposed corruption and “fallen” status. Second, degradation narratives serve to justify various forms of outside intervention in the name of “development,” which seek either to “save” local cultures by helping them “return” to a supposedly more authentic, traditional way of life (“traditionalism”), or to enable them to modernize and assimilate to national mainstream populations (“modernization.”)

The problem with degradation narratives is not that they reference problems such as poverty and alcoholism. These are real problems that cause real harm. Degradation narratives however, talk about these problems in a way that presupposes certain solutions. The challenge, then, is to find a way debunk degradation narratives without dismissing the very real problems that Baka, and other “Pygmies” and “hunter-gatherers” face. One way to do this is to begin speaking not of degradation but of *marginalization*. While it would be difficult to deny that Baka political power and social prestige has declined since the precolonial era, there is a difference between saying that the Baka are “marginalized” and more insidious narratives of Baka “degradation” or “underdevelopment.”

Underdevelopment narratives imply the acceptance of a Western understanding of progress. The Baka themselves, however, speak of “marginalization” and this type of narrative serves as a political tool in demands for economic benefits, political power, etc. It is outsiders who speak of “underdevelopment.” The idea that Baka are “underdeveloped” underwrites

development and sedentarization initiatives. These initiatives seek to “help” Baka develop, but along a certain path that is not in keeping with Baka aspirations. Development initiatives do not often address the real issue of political marginalization. Indeed, as we will see in the following chapter, they often serve as “cover” for political and legal changes that exacerbate marginalization.

At the same time, programs for Baka development exist in tension with narratives of Baka degradation. These narratives, which one finds among some anthropologists and well-meaning Indigenous rights organizations, view the changes that that Baka have experienced due to sedentarization and development projects as harmful to Baka “traditional” culture. Degradation narratives draw on the idea of the “noble savage,” as embodied in the Western “Pygmy Paradigm,” engendering traditionalist projects aimed at preserving certain understandings of culture and returning Baka to their traditions. This approach does not reflect the aspirations of the Baka either. As we saw, many Baka want to selectively modernize. They want to live in a world where it is possible to both send their kids to school, or access health services, or have a radio, and also be able to hunt in the forest. They also seek to preserve aspects of their cultures, and may view certain aspects of their cultures as under threat. The aspects of culture that local people see as valuable and worth preserving, however, do not always—or even often—line up with the priorities of outsiders. (Of course, as noted earlier, there are differences of opinion among the Baka themselves, often along generational lines.) In general, local people have much more complex and nuanced understanding of their own identities and cultures, as well as of “tradition” and “modernity,” than do outsiders.

All of this raises an important question: How can outsiders engage respectfully and productively in Baka and other “Pygmy” communities? If Baka are marginalized, some

assistance in combatting marginalization could be useful. The solution, I would argue, is to focus first on consultation and communication. Outsiders should play the role of facilitators seeking to create space and pathways for Baka voices, rather than prescribing specific solutions.

As Baka have taken on greater responsibility in development projects—first as workers, then as managers, and finally as founders of their own development organizations—many projects have shifted from addressing degradation, a notion based on the persistence of the Western “Pygmy Paradigm,” to addressing marginalization, a notion based on local peoples’ own perceptions of what is needed to achieve their goals and objectives. Baka-led development projects embrace a values-based approach, seeking to further core commitments to autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and creativity/play. Organizations such as Okani have identified new paths that draw on aspects of both “traditional” and “modern” influences.

It is uncertain, as of yet, where these new paths will lead. As Abega (Abega 2006) notes, however, the first step toward reducing the marginalization of “Pygmies” is to “extract the Pygmy from the golden sarcophagus that myth has built for him” (26; my translation). The most important way to do this is to change who describes and interprets Baka aspirations and realities—from Western outsiders influenced by the “Pygmy Paradigm,” to Baka themselves, who have their own, non-mythologized view of what aspects of their culture are worth preserving.

In order for Baka to make their own path, and address marginalization; however, they require a voice in decision-making. This requires fighting for certain political and social rights in the face of discrimination. It is the question of rights that will be taken up in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Becoming “*Peuples Autochtones*”

1. “*Je suis P.A.!*”

One of the first things Axel,¹ the Baka chief of one of the communities where Okani works, told me about himself was his shoe size. Size 42. The next time I came to his village, he informed me, I would bring him a pair of sneakers in that size similar to the ones I was wearing.

Technically, according to Messe, Axel had been installed as chief by government officials. As we have seen previously, Baka communities do not traditionally have chiefs; rather, this position is an outside imposition designed to facilitate government control in sedentarized Baka communities. The officials, however, had not picked at random. Axel possessed a number of qualities that made him a good fit for his position: He was one of the few members of his community who could read and write. Perhaps more importantly, he was charismatic and gregarious. He spoke good French and clearly relished the opportunity to converse with visitors to the village; even if these conversations were usually focused on obtaining favours to benefit him personally.

Really, who could blame him? Axel’s village was poor, as was Axel, and few thousand francs from a relatively well-to-do outsider would go a long way. I was not the only one whom Axel asked for assistance. Messe, who usually accompanied me when I went to Axel’s village, was also a frequent target. I never brought the sneakers, but Axel and I did strike up a sort of friendship, and I saw him frequently during my time in Cameroon.

One day I was standing with Messe next to the Okani pickup truck, beside the dirt road that ran through Axel’s village, chatting with some of the other residents. We had just arrived and would be spending the day conducting consultations about a new participatory video that Okani

was planning to shoot with the community. In front of us, over the crest of a hill, Axel emerged, and began shambling down towards the road. With a big smile on his face, Axel began shouting:

“Je suis P.A! Je suis P.A! Je suis P.A! Nicholas, je suis P.A, tu sais? Peuples autochthones!”

Regrettably, I never had the chance to discuss this seemingly spontaneous utterance with Axel. He was a severe alcoholic and this made him difficult to pin down for a formal interview. (While, in the previous chapter, I have made clear the problems with the generalized trope of Baka as alcoholics, there is no doubt that some Baka have problems with alcohol. And Axel was certainly one of them.) As my research progressed, Axel’s mental health also seemed to deteriorate. He became more sporadic and unpredictable. I heard from a fellow villager that he had run into the forest one night, swiping at the ground with his machete, convinced that soldiers were emerging from the dirt to attack him. And so, I was left to interpret Axel’s proclamation—*“je suis P.A”*—for myself.

Axel’s statement evokes the key questions that I will seek to answer in this chapter: What is Indigenous identity in Cameroonian context? How do international and local categories of belonging act in concert both to constrain the Baka, but also to provide opportunities for action? And does Baka invocation of identities such as “Indigenous peoples,” *“peuples autochthones,”* or “P.A.” involve a shift in identity and self-understanding, or are these simply convenient tools used to obtain personal and community objectives?

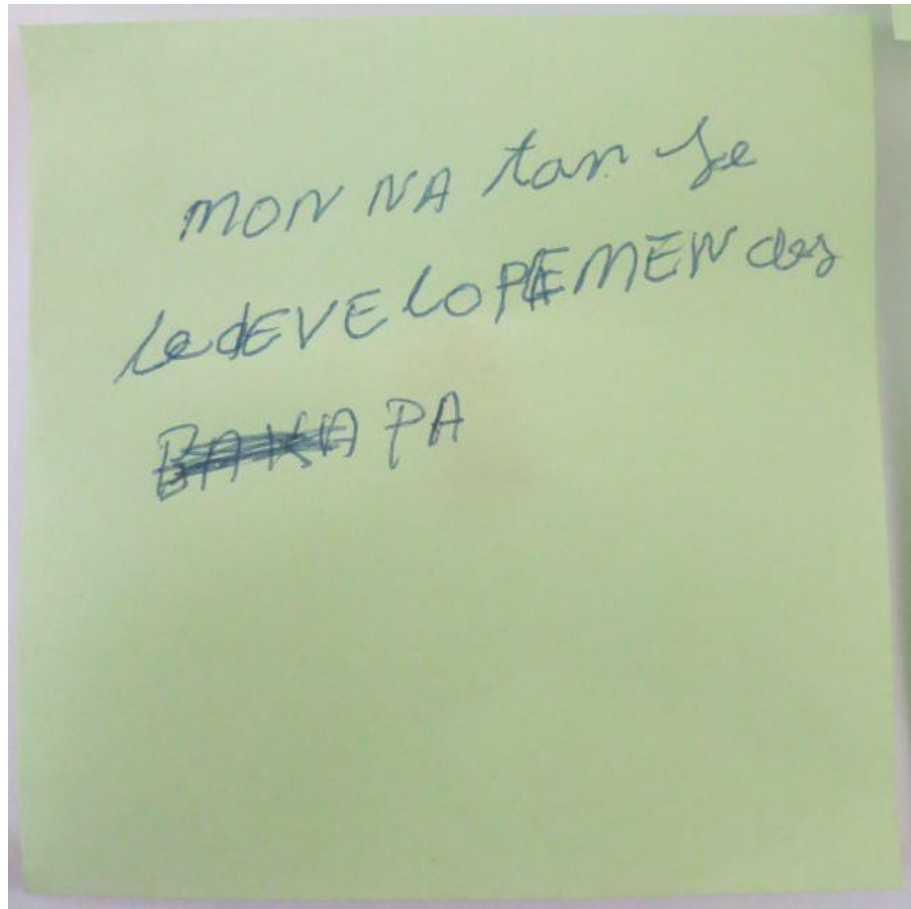


Figure 4.1. An image taken by the author from a training session with Baka and Bagyelí community members. Participants were asked to write their expectations for the project on post-it notes. On this note, the participant has written: "Mon attente le developement des ~~Baka~~ PA."

There is an extensive academic literature on the emergence of global, Indigenous identity, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. Ronald Niezen (2003) identifies an emergent phenomena of global “indigenism” during this era, comprising the inauguration of an international movement for Indigenous rights based on notions of a common, global, differential identity. Indigenous communities from around the world began to “draw upon universal ideas for the promotion of social distinctiveness,” referencing certain emergent international human and Indigenous rights instruments (Niezen 2004, 3). Indigenous activism was rooted in other, local group identities (Cree, Yanomami, Maori, Baka, etc.). These local identities served as a reference

(or entry) point to the translocal identity of indigeneity, which references a particular worldview and certain characteristics that these local groups share. In Niezen's (2004) terms, indigeneity is *ismatic*—"a social movement with a coherent network, a common world-view, and widely shared objectives" (66).

As we will see, indigenism and Indigenous identity emerged relatively later in Africa and Asia than in the Americas and Oceania. Gradually, however, international Indigenous rights forums, such as the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations and, later, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, became more open to groups such as the Baka that did not have "priority in time" in a particular territory, but who nevertheless had experienced marginalization due, in part, to a desire to practice traditional livelihoods. This openness enabled Africans to access international Indigenous rights instruments, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and International Labour Organization Convention 169, which they used to advocate for recognition of their territorial and other rights.

Around the same time, in the 1990s, as we saw in the previous chapter, a political opening in Cameroon led to an increased presence by national and international NGOs in Baka communities. Eventually, this opening also enabled the emergence of a vibrant network of Baka and other "Pygmy" community-based organizations (CBOs). Baka CBOs partner with outside NGOs on a variety of projects, including, notably, rights advocacy. We saw in the previous chapter how, in order to be respectful of local views and values, outside interventions in Baka communities should focus on addressing *marginalization* rather than *underdevelopment* or *degradation*. A key way of combatting marginalization is to advocate for greater respect for Baka *rights*. A rights-based approach does not prescribe or envision a specific outcome, rather it seeks

to create space and opportunity for local people to express their views, needs, and to have these recognized.

Indigenous rights advocacy has been an important subset of a rights-based approach to addressing marginalization. NGOs work with Baka communities to enable their engagement in international Indigenous activism through transnational advocacy networks. These networks enable what Keck and Sikkink (1998) call the “boomerang effect.” Unable to take their rights claims directly to the Cameroonian government (due to political marginalization), Baka and other Indigenous communities call upon powerful, sympathetic outsiders—U.N. bodies, international advocacy organizations, and members of the general public, particularly in Western countries—to exert pressure on the government, as well as powerful corporations and organizations that are engaged in rights violations against the Baka.

Much has been written about the “strategies of extraversion” (Igoe 2006; Bayart and Ellis 2000) used by Indigenous communities such as the Baka to enable this transnational advocacy. As we will see, Baka communities and their allies make use of a host of narratives and tropes—including some drawn from the “Pygmy Paradigm”—to gain international recognition as “Indigenous peoples” and build support for rights claims. There is some debate in the anthropological literature as to the meaning and consequences of strategic self-representation. Some (e.g. Kuper 2003) use the insight that Indigenous identity is, in a sense, strategically constructed, to dismiss the salience of this identity and associated rights claims. Others, such as Li (2000; 2002) and Barnard (2004) have countered with a more nuanced view that envisions indigeneity as a product of the intersection of global forces and local circumstances that may nevertheless become a valid and genuine source of local identity and belonging (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).

This chapter explores the intersection of rights and identity in Baka communities, through the lens of Indigenous activism. As we will see, Baka communities, with the assistance of Okani and other outside organizations, are engaged in strategic self-representation, which includes making use of the tropes of the “Pygmy Paradigm,” but for local purposes. This chapter examines the complex relationship between local communities, development organizations, government officials, and (yes) anthropologists, that result in the framing of the Baka as “Indigenous peoples” entitled to specific rights. It will show the local impacts of these framings, examining the ways in which they serve to empower and benefit some community members while disempowering and marginalizing others. The chapter also explores what resonance—if any—Indigenous rights claims and Indigenous identity have for local people.

2. The Rise of International Indigenous Rights and Identity

We find references to Indigenous peoples in international law as far back as 1936, when the International Labour Organization (ILO) introduced Convention 50, which was designed to place certain parameters on the recruitment of “indigenous workers” (Lueong 2016, 9).² We can, however, trace more comprehensive international recognition of Indigenous rights and identity “primarily to the post-World War II elaboration of universal human rights” (Niezen 2003, 30).

The establishment of the United Nations in 1945, and the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948 heralded “a new era in the understanding and management of world affairs” (Escobar 1995, 3). Over the second half of the twentieth century, Indigenous activism and conceptions of universal human rights grew in tandem, with the former feeding off the latter. As Sally Engle Merry (2006) notes,

Since the 1980s, human rights concepts have gained increasing international credibility and support at the same time as a growing body of treaties and resolutions have strengthened their international legal basis. The global human rights system is now deeply transnational, no longer rooted exclusively in the West. It takes place in global settings with representatives from nations and NGOs around the world (2).

International human rights instruments provided a point of focus for substate actors and transnational alliances who sought to claim rights *vis-à-vis* particular national governments and corporate interests. Among these actors were Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous rights activism is an example of what Charles Taylor (1992) calls “the politics of recognition,” “a desire evident in individual groups of people to be recognized as different from other groups, but at the same time equal to other groups” (McGillis 2013, xxv). As Niezen and Sapignoli (2017) note, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, there was an increasing effort by NGOs, activists, and other international actors to connect local “categories of belonging” with international human rights instruments and norms: “Connections are made between rights and identities, in which specific categorizations of people are given legal recognition and then naturalized through participatory, collaborative forms of justice lobbying” (27). As Indigenous rights became enshrined in international law, recognition as Indigenous became “an avenue for entitlement, enfranchisement and empowerment” for groups that could not gain redress from national governments. International Indigenous rights activism “provided formerly [sic] oppressed peoples a proverbial ‘seat at the table’ in negotiations over land rights, compensation packages and acknowledgment of past wrongs” (Lee 2006, 458). Similarly, Dorothy Hodgson (2002) argues that indigeneity “is one of the only politically viable strategies currently available in a time of radical dislocation. By reframing their long-standing grievances and demands against their states in the terms of the indigenous rights movement, [communities] have gained greater visibility, increased legitimacy, and enormous resources” (1095).

While, in North America, one finds examples of Indigenous representatives addressing global bodies as early as 1923, when Chief Levi General Deskaheh travelled to Geneva to address the League of Nations on behalf of the Six Nations of Grand River (Niezen 2003, 31-36),

it was not until the 1970s that the *international* Indigenous rights movement began in earnest. Writers on Indigenous rights in Latin America, for instance, often cite the 1970s as the seminal decade in which domestic political opening and emergent international forums and human rights norms led to a burgeoning Indigenous rights movement, through which Indigenous peoples sought to represent demands and grievances (Warren and Jackson 2010). The 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the formation of a number of regional Indigenous organizations in North and South America, including the Inuit Circumpolar Conference in 1973, the Organization of Central American Indigenous Peoples in 1977, and the Indian Council of South America in 1981 (Saugestad 2001, 47). Drawing on international norms of human rights, and the nascent recognition of Indigenous groups by organizations such as the ILO, Indigenous communities—particularly in North and Latin America—began to join together to engage in regional and global activism.

The rise of international Indigenous activism led to the establishment of a number of dedicated international “Indigenous organizations and networks of communication,” most importantly the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982 (Niezen 2003, 30). The Working Group would later be transformed into the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2000, which would, in turn, agree to the 2007 U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The ILO, for its part, updated its Convention 107, “Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semitribal Populations,” which it had passed in 1957, but which many came to view as encouraging assimilation.³ A new instrument, ILO Convention 169, passed in 1989, created a permanent, “internationally recognized category of “indigenous and tribal people” (Li 2002, 149). The Convention “establishes a permanent relationship between indigenous “peoples” as permanent sociopolitical

units and “their” states.” The Convention cites the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and “promotes the rights to land as a decisive condition to ensure identity” (Zips-Mairitsch 2013, 44). While only 22 countries have ratified the convention (and none since 2008), ILO 169 continues to be a major point of reference for Indigenous activism.

3. Africans in the International Indigenous Rights Movement

While Indigenous activism began to gain global momentum beginning in the 1970s, it was not until the late 1980s that African communities began participating in the international Indigenous rights movement. Until this time, most of the African communities that would come to be identified, and identify themselves, as “Indigenous peoples” did not consider themselves Indigenous in a global sense and were not generally seen as Indigenous by others (Niezen 2003, 26).

Historically, understandings of Indigenous identity have followed an “essentialist,” “substantialist,” or “positivist” approach based on “priority in time”: Indigenous peoples were those who occupied certain territories before the arrival of the (almost always European) groups now dominating those territories (Hodgson 2009, 8). Essentialist definitions of indigeneity, however, are much more applicable to settler colonies in the Americas and Oceania than they are to Africa. If “Indigenous peoples” are those that were present before Europeans arrived, then almost all Africans are “Indigenous peoples.” In the mid-1980s, however, understandings of indigeneity began to shift. This opened the door for Africans to participate in the international Indigenous rights movement.

The inauguration of an international architecture for Indigenous rights—beginning with the establishment, in 1982, of the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations—necessitated the development of definitions as to which groups could be considered Indigenous. In setting the criteria for membership, the U.N. eschewed essentialist understandings based on “priority in

time,” and instead adopted a “working definition” that listed a number of characteristics that Indigenous communities generally share. These include “strong links to territories and surrounding resources,” “distinct language, culture, and beliefs,” and “non- dominant” status in society (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2006; see also Daes 1996; Cobo 1987). While the U.N. working definition retained a reference to continuity with pre-colonial societies, this definition was not meant to be applied rigidly. Indeed, the U.N. has never adopted a coercive, universal definition of indigeneity, and no such definition was included in the 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Hodgson 2009, 10). Instead, the 1986 working definition continues to be used as a rough guide. In addition to the enumerated characteristics, the U.N. relies on the principle of *self-identification* (Hodgson 2009, 9). If a community lacks one or two characteristics, the group may still be recognized because it embodies several others and self-identifies as Indigenous.

Through this new definition, certain African groups have been able to successfully claim Indigenous identity in the global arena based not on territorial “priority in time” but on “cultural distinctiveness,” “tied to the putative dichotomy between African indigenous minorities and national mainstream populations” (Igoe 2006, 404). As Dorothy Hodgson (2009) explains,

The term [“Indigenous”] was adopted by distinct cultural minorities in Africa who argued that they had been historically repressed by majority populations in control of the state apparatus. Few claimed to be “first people” as such. Instead, they argued that they shared a similar structural position vis-à-vis their nation states as indigenous peoples in the Americas, Australia, and other settler colonies. Because of their cultural distinctiveness, they had experienced a long history of political subjugation, economic marginalization, territorial dispossession, and cultural and linguistic discrimination by colonial and then postcolonial states. (8)

The first African delegate to address the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, was Moringe ole Parkipuny, a Maasai activist from Tanzania. Parkipuny spoke on August 3, 1989 (Hodgson 2009, 1) and addressed discrimination and rights violations against

“peoples with culture that are distinctly different from those of the mainstream national populations” (quoted in Wachira and Karjala 2016, 395).⁴ This was the first time an African had “ever made a statement to the United Nations as a representative of indigenous people” (Bojosi 2010, 98). As Wachira and Karjala note (2016), African Indigenous communities had certainly engaged in activism before this moment. Some, however, have cited Parkipuny’s presentation, as the moment when “the world began to take serious note” of African Indigenous issues (395).

Participating in international Indigenous activism provided African Indigenous communities with a means of “reframing” and gaining support for “longstanding claims to land rights and cultural self-determination” vis-à-vis African states (Hodgson 2009, 4). Participation in Indigenous rights fora also provided access to donor funds targeted for Indigenous, “grassroots” organizations. While these were undoubtedly motivating factors for some African groups, however, we should not look at these groups’ pursuit of recognition as merely a political strategy based on material interests. As we will see in the case of the Baka, taking on Indigenous identity is also often rooted in a genuine sense of shared difference, and a feeling of commonality with Indigenous groups from other parts of the world. Indeed, Parkipuny’s speech to the United Nations was inspired in part by a visit to a Navaho community in the southwest United States, during which he noted the similar issues faced by the Maasai and the Navaho (Hodgson 2011, 28).

Since Parkipuny’s address in 1989, the participation of African groups and communities in international Indigenous activism has continued to grow, with “African indigenous peoples’ representatives, civil society actors, and activists working on indigenous peoples’ issues, spurred on by support from international and national non-governmental organizations, argu[ing] for the applicability of the concept of indigenous peoples in Africa” (Wähle 1991; cited in Wachira and

Karjala 2016, 395). There initially remained trepidation, however, among some Indigenous activists from the Americas and Oceania that the inclusion of Africans in organizations such as the U.N. Permanent Forum weakened claims to self-determination by groups that *do* have “priority in time” in a particular location.⁵ Even though the only *official* criteria for membership in many international Indigenous organizations is self-identification, more informal norms may determine which groups are *recognized* and *acknowledged* by other Indigenous members or delegates.⁶

In spite of this, however, over the following decade, a number of African communities consolidated their hold on Indigenous identity. In 1993, the International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) held “a seminal conference on indigenous peoples in Africa, which marked the starting point of a coherent continental movement of indigenous peoples” (Crawhall 2004, 41). Around the same time, a number of Indigenous peoples’ umbrella organizations, including the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordination Committee (IPACC), formed in Africa, just as they had in the Americas several decades earlier. Activism and advocacy continued to gain momentum over the following years. Twelve years after Parkipuny’s address, when the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was inaugurated in 2001, two of sixteen “expert” leadership positions were designated specifically for African Indigenous representatives (Hodgson 2009, 10).

2003 witnessed “a massive leap” in African Indigenous activism, as the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights Working Group on Indigenous Populations/Communities released a groundbreaking report regarding the applicability of the concept of “Indigenous peoples” in the African context. As Wachira and Karjala (2016) note, “the establishment of the Working Group” in 2000 “is today seen as the culmination of [African]

indigenous peoples' struggle for recognition and protection of their fundamental human and peoples' rights despite continued constraints and challenges, especially at the national level" (396). The Working Group definition of Indigenous peoples echoes the U.N. working definition, referencing characteristics such as attachment to land and marginalization, as well as the principle of self-identification:

Self-identification as indigenous and distinctly different from other groups within a state; ...a special attachment to and use of their traditional land whereby their ancestral land and territory has a fundamental importance for their collective physical and cultural survival as peoples; ... an experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination because these peoples have different cultures, ways of life or modes of production than the national hegemonic and dominant model. (ACHPR and IWGIA 2005, 93)

Wachira and Karjala (2016) explain the intention of the Commission's definition as follows:

A possible rationale for the Commission's approach is the fact that, in Africa, the decolonization process transferred state powers to groups dominant in the territory. Certain groups remain vulnerable primarily because of their close attachment to their traditional cultures and their reluctance to assimilate and embrace Western developmental paradigms adopted by the post-colonial state. (397)

As this quote notes, often "traditional cultures" are equated with, or flow from, livelihood practices. Thus, the majority of African communities that have come to self-identify as Indigenous "fall within two categories...namely, the pastoralists and hunter-gatherers" (398). Indeed, Barume (2014) and others have argued that Indigenous rights is the only international framework appropriate for addressing livelihood-based exclusion in Africa.

4. Indigeneity and Autochthony

Despite a growing acceptance of certain African communities by the international Indigenous peoples movement, however, African Indigenous groups continue to struggle for recognition by national governments (Hodgson 2009, 3). This was evidenced in 2006 when a large group of African states, led by Namibia, held up the ratification of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, claiming that it conflicted with constitutional provisions for

ethnic equality (a compromise was reached in 2007 and the Declaration was passed) (21-2).

Certainly, this opposition is present in Cameroon, where the government has been reluctant to recognize Indigenous rights.

The Cameroonian government's position is informed in part by a countervailing discourse of *autochthony*. As we saw in previous chapters, autochthony involves an identity rooted in a particular territory and is linked particular traditional rights, most importantly over land. *Autochthons*—native to a particularly village or area for generations—are distinguished from *allogènes*—newcomers to a territory who lack this historical connection and are thus excluded from claiming territorial and other rights. As Pelican (2009) notes, the ways in which the concept of “autochthony” is understood by most Cameroonians “differs significantly from...Euro-American/international conceptualization[s]” of indigeneity (Lueong 2016, 9).

Samuel Nguiffo, Director of the Yaoundé-based NGO Centre for Environment and Development (CED), links the increased prevalence of a discourse of autochthony in Cameroon to the rise of multipartyism in the 1990s:

In 1990s here there was a big... It was a political battle: multiparty-ism. There were many parties that were created and wanted to overthrow the president. And here in Yaoundé—but also in other areas, in Douala, for instance [...]—there is that question. Between the “autochthones” and the others. But that has nothing to do with Indigenous [in the international sense]. (personal communication; my translation)

For most Cameroonians, autochthony was a way for certain ethnic groups to maintain political power in their “home” territories in the face of representative democracy. Particularly in large cities, where migrants from other parts of the country tended to outnumber the ethnic groups “native” to that territory, there was a concern that local populations would lose political power.

That was a debate, and because of that the word “*autochtone*” became very known by everyone. I am *autochtone* of Yaoundé because I was born here and it's my village. All the others are strangers. So it's I who must be in charge here. [...] Because those who are from Yaoundé are not very numerous vis-à-vis the whole population. And so if

[everyone] vote[s], it's someone else who will be mayor. So there is this whole debate that says, "No, no, no. We want to preserve our rights. The rights of the *autochtones*. I am *autochtone* of Yaoundé and I have rights. My right is a political right to be represented." (S. Nguiffo, personal communication; my translation)

The rise of the discourse of autochthony in Central Africa, however, also coincided with the aforementioned increased presence of Africans in the international Indigenous rights movement. This created a great deal of confusion, particularly in Francophone countries. The French language lacks an exact counterpart for the English term "Indigenous." In the international context, the word "*autochtone*" is usually used in French translations. For instance, the French name for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is given as *Déclaration des Nations Unies sur les droits des peuples autochtones*. Messe explains the resulting situation as follows, referencing not only Baka, but also the Mbororo pastoralists, another group in Cameroon who have identified themselves as "Indigenous" in the international sense:

So now, all of that is also related to the problem of translation, for "Indigenous peoples" in English. The francophones translated it as *les peuples autochtones*. They meant, *les peuples indigènes* but they said that *indigène* was a term that they applied to everyone during colonization and it's better to look... to take another. [...]

Well, I think that that's really where, in Cameroon, everything gets ruined. Because the question of autochthony, in Cameroon, is perceived in another way. That is to say that, before the United Nations applied that term, *autochtone*, to specific communities, that word already existed in Cameroon. And to make a bit of distinction, one said, "so and so is *autochtone* of such and such a locality, and so and so is *allogène*." That is to say, he has come and found the others [already] there. So now, when they came to apply that term, *autochtone*, to a specific group, of Baka or Mbororo, it starts to become very complicated, because in the confusion of autochthony in Cameroon, we don't know anymore exactly who is *autochtone*. And everyone who is born somewhere claims to be *autochtone* of that place, and now the United Nations are saying, "No, you're not the autochthones, it's rather the people that have such and such a characteristic." And then there is a terrible confusion.

And moreover, in Africa in general—I've seen this in the big seminars at the United Nations and even in the African Union—African governments say, "All Africans are *autochtone*. They have not come from anywhere. All of us are born in Africa, and so we

are *autochtone* of Africa.” And that causes a second problem, at the level of Africa, because everyone is claiming the identity of autochthony. (personal communication; my translation)

As Messe alludes to here, the use of the term “*autochtone*” in the context of international Indigenous rights has enabled a convenient sort of double speak whereby Cameroon and other francophone African governments can portray themselves as supporting Indigenous rights—that is, the rights of Baka and other marginalized communities—on the international stage, while in fact, when it comes to domestic laws and policies, they support *autochthonous* rights—that is, the rights of longstanding local communities *vis-à-vis* newcomers or outsiders. The preamble of Cameroon’s 1996 national constitution, for instance, notes “*L’Etat assure la protection des minorités et préserve les droits des populations autochtones conformément à la loi*” (“The state assures the protection of minorities and the rights of autochthonous populations in accordance with the law.”) This provision, however, is intended to protect *autochthonous* rights, not Indigenous rights in an international sense. As Samuel Nguiffo explains:

The 1996 constitution protects “*les autochtones*,” but it’s not [referring to] “*les autochtones*” Mbororo, Baka, Bagyelí. It’s not that. It’s the “*autochtones*” of Yaoundé, the “*autochtones*” of Douala, the “*autochtones*” of Bafoussam. Those who are born in big cities, who have their village in the big cities, and there are many people who have come, and they have become minorities in their village. The constitution protects them. But [it] does not protect [those who are] “*autochtone*” according to international law.

This provision, however, risks creating the impression that Cameroon protects *Indigenous* rights.

An impression that the government has not made great effort to correct.

But it doesn’t specify either. So when one reads “the constitution protects ‘*les autochtones*’” someone who knows what an “*autochtone*” is according to international law says, “Ah, okay, the Baka are protected by the constitution.” But it’s not this that the parliament, the members of parliament, wanted to say. They were thinking about something else.

And it creates a misunderstanding because among the [civil society] associations, they say, “Ah, good: The Constitution protects “*les autochtones*.”” But the government says,

“No, no, no, it wasn’t... We don’t protect Pygmies in a particular way. We were talking about someone else.” And I think that created a big problem. [...]

And for the state, they say quite often, “No the Baka are not Indigenous, because there are no Indigenous peoples in Cameroon.” In their understanding there are “*autochtones*” in Yaoundé, because they have their village in Yaoundé, but one cannot speak about “*autochtones du Cameroun*”. [...] No, there are no “*autochtones*” here. These are the terms of the debate. (personal communication; my translation)

As Nguiffo alludes to here, for many Cameroonians, the concept of “*peuples autochtones du Cameroon*” is nonsensical. One is *autochtone* to a particular village; one cannot be *autochtone* to an entire country.

Indeed, the discourse of autochthony has actually served to disenfranchise Indigenous groups such as the Baka. As discussed in Chapter Two, owing to government sedentarization programs, Baka and other “Pygmies” often reside on land to which they do not have a longstanding connection. This has created a strange situation in which the Baka and other groups are *Indigenous* in the international sense, but not *autochtone* in the sense of having roots in the soil of the particularly territory where they reside. As Noël, the Okani staff member from Mayos, explained it to me,

So today they [the “Bantu”] say that they are *autochtone* because they’re born there, they have grown up there, and they have the “*droit de l’âche*” [right of the axe]. They arrived, they cultivated fields and everything, and the Baka man who survived only in the forest, who lived from hunting and gathering, now he finds himself on the roadsides and he no longer has a parcel [of land]. And he is no longer *autochtone*. That’s what they say. Because he has nothing that shows that he *autochtone*. (personal communication; my translation)

Some Baka activists have tried to split the difference, arguing that they are *autochtone* not only in a general, international sense, but also to particular territories within Cameroon, even if these territories are larger and less delimited than “Bantu” villages and towns. More specifically, Baka claim that they are autochthonous to the “the forest” (i.e. the Congo Basin Rainforest) as a whole. As Noël explained:

Here in Cameroon we are still asking ourselves the question: “Who is *autochtone*?” Who is really *autochtone*? But historically we say *autochtone* because the Baka man is the first inhabitant of this country, and it is he who knows best the forests of this country, and who has the rights. Because the Baka in Cameroon can walk in all the forests without having a compass, without having a GPS. Why? Because he has the mastery. And it’s a science that he has acquired from the ancestors. [...] The word *autochtone*, as I’ve said... There are doubts. But the Baka man himself knows that he is the first inhabitant and that he’s been the master and the guardian of that forest for centuries. But through that it appears that he doesn’t have a term that proves that really it is he who is the master and the guardian of that forest. (personal communication; my translation).

While a discourse that notes the status of Baka and other “Pygmy” groups as the original residents of the Congo Basin Rainforest helps link rights claims to local concerns about territory and soil, however, this has not proven to be an effective means of securing land and other rights. Leonhardt (2006) explains this by distinguishing between what he calls “symbolic autochthony” and “substantive autochthony.” “Substantive” autochthony, is linked to the aforementioned “right of the axe,” and is possessed by families and communities (usually “Bantu”) that can prove a long history of living on and cultivating particular land. In local parlance, these groups have “roots in the soil” in a particular place. In the national context, substantive autochthony “has unambiguous exchange value,” conferring specific rights to territory, political representation, and social benefits. For instance, a successful claim to substantive autochthony could allow a community to acquire a small portion of an adjoining forest from the government to use as a “community forest” (see below). Symbolic autochthony, on the other hand, is linked not to specific pieces of territory, but to general narratives and tropes—of the Baka as “first peoples” or “peoples of the forest,” for instance. Symbolic autochthony carries no concomitant rights or privileges in the Cameroonian national context.

In an effort to untangle the complications of the term *autochtone*, some organizations and individuals working to advance Indigenous rights in the Congo Basin use “P.A.,” as referenced in the introduction of this chapter, to refer to the international category of “Indigenous peoples.”

This term, however, has not yet been widely adopted. In Cameroon, one also encounters other monikers, such as “*peuples autochtones de la forêt*” or “*quatre B*” (referring to the four “Pygmy” groups in Cameroon: Baka, Bagyelí, Bakola, and Bedzang). These terms, however, while useful in some contexts, are not as universal as “*peuples autochtones*.”

Indeed, while some Cameroonians now refer to Baka and other “Pygmies” as “*peuples autochtones*” or “P.A.”, there remains substantial opposition to the notion that these communities should qualify for special rights. Opposition comes from both the Cameroonian government and from the general public. There is a belief that granting special rights to Baka and other “Indigenous peoples” will unfairly disadvantage “Bantu” communities, which often rely on the local notion of “autochthonous rights” to maintain political power vis-à-vis outsiders. As discussed earlier, these outsiders sometimes include Baka and other “Pygmies” who have resettled on traditional “Bantu” territory due to government sedentarization efforts. As Nguiffo explains:

The worry of the public authorities is that if we recognize all the rights that international law gives to the Baka, he will rise above the “Bantu.” And we worry about a second situation of marginalization with a group that is more powerful. How many Baka are there? 50,000, 60,000? We can manage it. But there are 3 million Bantu in the forest. Do we want to have 3 million people that are not happy because we gave rights to the Baka? That, for a government is more difficult to manage.

So the claiming... That’s why I think that claiming [Indigenous rights] was misguided. To say, “We want rights. All the rights that are guaranteed to Indigenous peoples.” It won’t work. The government won’t do it, because it is scared to create... to reverse the marginalization. So we have one group at this level, very low, [and] one group above. Recognizing the Indigenous status of the group that is lower doesn’t bring it to the same level as the group that is above, but puts it above that group. (personal communication; my translation)

The solution often proposed to avoid this supposed risk of reverse marginalization is simply to grant land rights to everyone, “Pygmies” and “Bantu” alike. Indeed, it is true that most rural “Bantu” lack formal titles to their property as well. As Nguiffo argues, “Many of the

questions that the Baka are concerned with, that Indigenous peoples in general are concerned with, are also the demands of the Bantu. So nothing is impeding that they secure the land rights of everybody in the rural areas. That way we avoid creating a new form of discrimination” (personal communication; my translation). Proposals to simply grant “everyone” land rights, however, often involve the explicit or implicit proposition that the Baka and other “Pygmies” will have to “go back” to their “proper” place deep in the forest. While there may be some who are in favour of granting Baka title to the lands currently occupied by Baka roadside villages established as a result of government sedentarization programs, as I have noted, the majority of these lands are claimed by “Bantu” groups. As Lueong (2016) explains, “While the Baka continue to reside on the roadsides...the forest is being staged as their homeland, where they belong” (2-3).

There are, of course, many problems, both ethical and practical with this approach. Many Baka do not wish to return to lands deep in the forest. These areas lack access to infrastructure, services, and opportunities that Baka have come to value. Moreover, much of the traditional territory of the Baka simply no longer exists in a form that could support Baka livelihoods. It has been given over to logging, mining and conservation. Nguiffo acknowledged this reality and proposed a mix of solutions. In some cases, such as Bagyelí “Pygmy” communities in the south, “Pygmies” could share land rights with Bantu; in others, it may be possible to restore access to the forest:

The Baka do have land rights somewhere. They have their rights somewhere. But we made him come out of that area to put them where other people have rights to the land. And today we must demonstrate creativity find solutions. In certain areas where the Bagyelí are, there are discussions between the Bagyelí and the Bantu to share the space. And the Bantu met and gave a part of the space to the Bagyelí. And maps were made and the administration signed off. That’s an option. Where it’s possible we must negotiate, and try to find a solution for rights to the lands bordering the roads.

But moreover we have to come back to the places where Indigenous peoples have their land rights. Sometimes it is deep in the forest. And we have to see how to recognize their usage of these places. Some of these places are protected areas. We have to find how to give them the right to hunt in a protected area. Because if we prohibit this it limits their access to resources.

In other areas it will be more difficult to find agreements between the “Bantu” and the Bagyelí or the Baka. There we have to think; we have to find creative solutions once more that will, in all the required manners, recognize the rights there where the Indigenous peoples have settled. At first we have to recognize the rights in those areas. (personal communication; my translation)

While there is something to be said for this approach, however, there needs to be greater space for the views and desire of Baka and other “Pygmies” themselves. Moreover, any action on land rights needs to account for the ongoing marginalization of Baka and other “Pygmy” groups vis-à-vis “Bantu.”

5. The 1994 Forestry Law⁷

The legal context for debates about autochthony and land rights in Cameroon is determined, in large part, by Cameroon’s national Forestry Law, passed in 1994. Largely drafted by officials from the World Bank under the terms of a Structural Adjustment Program, the Forestry Law served to restrict access to the forest by enacting a regime of formal titling of forest lands, which effectively “stripped [Baka] of their claims of belonging to the forest (Lueong 2016, 36). Whereas the forest had previously been available as a refuge, where Baka could escape unequal power relations with, and exploitation by, “Bantu” (Moïse 2014), many Baka now found themselves trapped in a situation where they were considered *allogène*, had no recognized territorial or political rights, and no longer had access to the forest resources that would allow them to trade on equal terms with “Bantu.” This is to say nothing of the ways in which restricting Baka access to the forest enabled a narrative of Baka deterioration and degradation that serves to further entrench marginalization and inequality (see Chapter Three).

The Forestry Law ostensibly encompassed three principle considerations: 1. Fuelling economic growth through the industrial exploitation of timber, 2. Protecting biodiversity, and, 3. Recognizing and guaranteeing popular participation in forest management and ensuring the distribution of benefits from logging and other activities to local communities (Nguiffo et al. 2012, 12). In reality, however, a number of researchers and civil society organizations have argued that the specifics of the law, as well as the fashion of its implementation, have privileged the first of these goals at the expense of the third (Nguiffo et al. 2012, 14).

The 1994 Forestry Law divided the entire expanse of Cameroon's forests into two broad categories: permanent forest estate (PFE)—areas which are to be maintained as forest areas (although some “sustainable” logging is permitted)—and non-permanent forest estate (NPFE)—areas designated for eventual transformation into agricultural lands (Nguiffo et al. 2012, 23). Each of these categories is further subdivided. The PFE consists of state and commune forest areas (“*forêts dominales*,” and “*forêts communales*”). The national government directly manages state forests, which encompass national parks and other protected areas, as well as major logging concessions (“*unités forestières d'aménagement*” or “UFAs”), while local, sub-regional governments manage commune forests. The NPFE consists of community forests (see below), privately-held lands, and “national forest domain” (“*forêt du domain national*”). “National forest domain” areas officially belong to the state, but are “largely made up of secondary forest that lacks titles but clearly belongs to individuals, families, and clans” (Ashley and Mbile 2005, 5). In addition to granting long-term logging UFAs in the PFE, the state often sells short-term “*ventes de coupe*” logging rights in the national domain forest area.

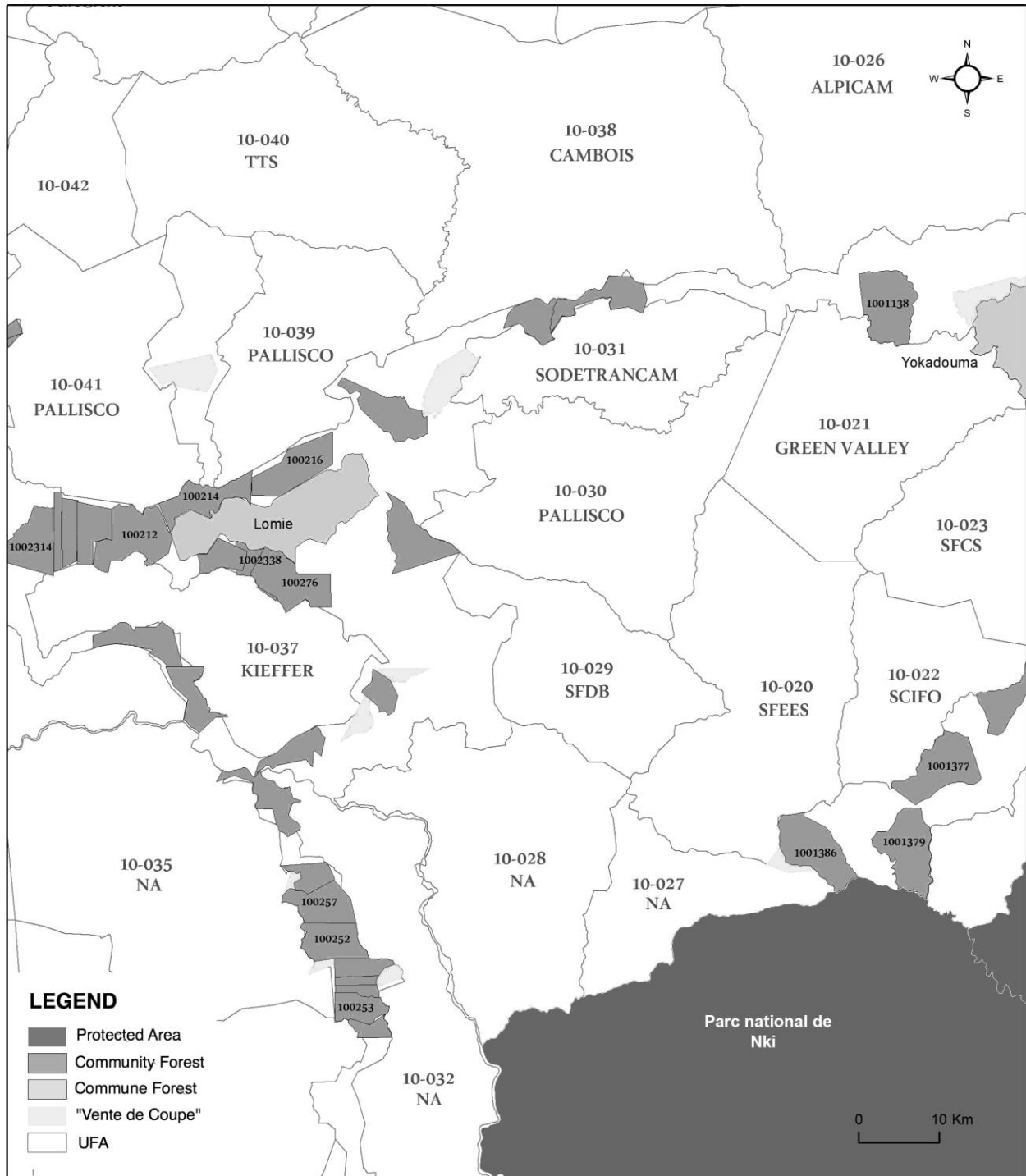


Figure 4.2. Land demarcations near Lomié, Eastern Cameroon. The acronyms in the white zones refer to logging companies. (Source: World Resources Institute Atlas Forestier du Cameroun 2012; Projection: WGS 1984 Zone 33 Nord)

Some have viewed this formal categorization of forest lands, and in particular the provision for local management of forest resources through commune and community

forests, as empowering local actors vis-à-vis the national government. While the Forestry Law does grant communities the right to *manage* some forest resources, however, it does not give them formal title to forest lands. Indeed, one of the key aspects of the 1994 Forestry Law is the divorcing of *land rights* from *usage rights*. While the law recognizes communities' rights to use resources in certain segments of the forest, the lands on which these resources lie can be expropriated by the state at any time for "vaguely defined reasons of "public interest"" (OKANI, Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement, Forest Peoples Programme 2013). Overall, while it appears to involve a devolution of responsibility to local governments and communities, the 1994 Forestry Law maintains the key characteristic of colonial and independence-era policies: the ownership of forests by the state, rather than local people or communities (Nguiffo et al. 2012, 13).

	PERMANENT FOREST ESTATE (PFE)			NON-PERMANENT FOREST ESTATE (NPFE)		
	state forest		commune forests	community forests	national domain forest	private lands
	protected areas	logging concessions (UFAs)				
Title holder (land rights)	<i>State</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>State (via sub-regional gov't)</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Individual/corporation</i>
Usage rights for local populations?	<i>No (with some exceptions)</i>	<i>Unclear/ varies</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Timber and forest product commercial'n rights for local populations?	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes, with proper permits</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>

Table 4.1 - Land classification and rights according to 1994 Forestry Law

Where the law does permit access to the forest, this is subject to new government rules and strictures. The recognition of local usage rights applies to subsistence activities only. According to Section 8 of the law, forest communities are entitled "to collect all forest,

wildlife, and fisheries products freely *for their personal use*, except protected species” (emphasis added). Any commercialization of forest resources “can only be done in delimited territories and requires special permits” (Nguiffo et al. 2012, 27). Permits are now required, for instance, to legally sell non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as honey, fruit, and seeds (Ingram 2014). Obtaining such a permit requires a government inspection of the portion of the forest where the resource will be collected, in order to set a quota that will determine how much of a given resource can be sold. The reality, however is that the government lacks the human resources to do such assessments, and thus local communities must often bribe an official in order to get a quota (Anonymous; personal communication). This advantages wealthy communities and large-scale producers over local collectors. Moreover, local people are often unaware of permit requirements (Ingram 2014, 117). They are thus forced to sell their products for reduced prices to middlemen (see Belobo Belibi, van Eijnatten, and Barber 2015).

The Forestry Law also placed new restrictions on hunting. While according to Article 87.1 of the law, local populations have the right to engage in “traditional hunting” without obtaining a permit, Article 85 states that “traditional hunting” must be done with tools made from plants or other vegetable materials. “Tools such as flashlights, vehicles, dogs, steel-tipped arrows, guns, [and] steel cables are prohibited” (Taloussock 2011, 14; my translation). This in spite of the fact that many Baka had been using tools not made from plants, such as steel tipped arrows, since before the colonial era! Those caught “using unauthorized tools are subject to fines between 5000 and 50,000 CFA and 10 days in prison” (Taloussock 2011, 17). Furthermore, “the product of traditional hunting must be used for consumption and game must be consumed within the forest and not transported back to a village or town”

(Taloussock 2011, 15). This provision eliminates the Baka's ability to trade game with "Bantu" villagers, which is the basis of reciprocal, symbiotic relationships between the two communities.

Finally, the Forestry Law divides game into different classes. Class A animals include "small elephants, lions, panthers, chimpanzees, gorillas, [and] crocodiles. Class B animals include "buffalo, large elephants, [and] royal pythons." Class C animals include "rabbits, porcupines, [and] rats" (Taloussock 2011, 15). "Traditional hunting" is only permitted for Class C animals. Hunting Class A and Class B animals requires a special permit. These permits are prohibitively expensive, such that they are only accessible to wealthy foreign big game hunters and other well-resourced individuals. Local hunters caught hunting Class A or B animals without a permit "are subject to the seizure of their kill, fines between 50,000 and 200,000 CFA and, if the game is sold,...may be subject to between 20 days and 2 months in prison" (Taloussock 2011, 17).⁸

6. Baka "Becoming Indigenous"

Due to their lack of substantive autochthony, Baka have been unable to gain rights to land and other resources through national laws and institutions. While, in the Cameroonian context, the status of Baka and other "Pygmy" groups as "first inhabitants" or "guardians of the forest"—that is, their *symbolic* autochthony—does not provide any significant benefit, however, this status has proven much more useful internationally. As the discourse of international Indigenous rights spread into African hunter-gatherer and pastoralist communities beginning in the late 1980s, Baka and other "Pygmy" groups were presented with a potential alternate route to advance rights claims. By mobilizing and projecting their symbolic autochthony to achieve recognition as "Indigenous peoples," they could gain powerful allies and access to international institutions and legal instruments. These connections could then help secure concessions from the Cameroonian

government, as well as international financial institutions, multinational corporations, conservation organizations, and other entities operating on “Pygmy” traditional territories.

Sapignoli (2016) identifies five factors that enabled African Indigenous communities to begin representing themselves on the world stage. These include:

1) the sense on the part of indigenous peoples in African states that they were making little progress in their attempts to negotiate with or confront the state; 2) the rising awareness of the global indigenous movement and its aims, which they learned about through the media as well as through conferences and meetings; 3) the availability of funds from donors for the support of the activities of non-governmental organizations; 4) the presence of visionary individuals who were willing and able to take advantage of the discourses on indigenous rights; and 5) what Hodgson (2011, 27) describes as “chance encounters and connections in meetings hosted by the United Nations and other international organizations.” (268)

All of these conditions were present in Baka and “Pygmy” communities in the early 1990s. As discussed previously, this was a period of structural adjustment and liberalization in many African countries, and witnessed the launching of many large-scale commercial projects. In Cameroon, there were two particularly significant developments in this regard: First, the Chad-Cameroon pipeline, a major infrastructure project designed to carry oil from southern Chad to the Cameroonian coast near Kribi, which would traverse Bagyelí “Pygmy” lands, requiring the relocation of several communities (Nelson, Kenrick, and Jackson 2001). Second, Cameroon’s 1994 Forest Law, which, as we have just seen, was designed to provide a legal framework for commercial logging and resource extraction, and often resulted in Baka and other “Pygmy” communities’ losing access to hunting grounds and other traditional territories. Both the pipeline and the Forest Law thus threatened to have devastating effects on local lives and livelihoods.

Like Indigenous communities around the world, however, Baka and other “Pygmy” communities lacked effective direct channels of communication to the government and corporate officials executing these projects, through which they could make their opposition known.

Decision-making in Cameroon, especially at the local level, tends to be personalized and ethnically inflected. Non-“Pygmy” elites dominate local government institutions. “Pygmy” communities usually fall under the jurisdiction of a “Bantu” chief, and “Pygmies” have a difficult time accessing government services and having their voices heard in the halls of power (Joiris 2003). Baka and other “Pygmy” communities thus began to partner with national and international NGOs in order to bypass local and national-level decision-makers and take complaints regarding the impact of resource extraction and other projects directly to powerful international actors and organizations.

Ironically, this activism was enabled by the same political opening that brought about the projects that Baka would fight against. As discussed earlier, the period of structural adjustment and liberalization saw the lifting of restrictions on the formation of political parties and other organizations. This enabled a greater presence of NGOs in Baka and other “Pygmy” communities, and created greater space for these organizations to engage in rights-based advocacy, rather than focusing on a humanitarian approach focused on basic needs—food, health care, education, etc.—as they had previously.

Aided by NGO partners, Baka and other “Pygmy” communities began to participate in what Keck and Sikkink (1998) call “transnational advocacy networks” (TANs) devoted to environmental and, notably, Indigenous rights issues. TANs consist of “relevant actors working internationally on an issue” and are “bound together by shared values” as well as “exchanges of information” (2). As Keck and Sikkink note, “advocacy networks are not new.... But their number, size, and professionalism, and the speed, density, and complexity of international linkages among them has grown dramatically in the last three decades” (10). TANs’ activities revolve around *campaigns*. Campaigns address a particular local issue, pull in relevant allies, and

target a specific objective or opponent (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 7-8). Often, the goal is to access sympathetic outsiders—be these international organizations such as the United Nations, or members of the public—in order to exert pressure on governments or organizations that have not responded to community complaints, or where effective channels of communication do not exist.

As Messe explains:

We've started to identify how, if we've exhausted all our options at the local level, what are the higher levels that we can approach to put forward our complaint and make it understood. [...] We've understood that, when we've used all the options at the national level, there are mechanisms [...] that have been put in place and that allow people to make their problems known [internationally] and to get them solved. (personal communication; my translation)

Keck and Sikkink (1998) refer to this phenomenon, wherein “a domestic group...reach[es] out to international allies” through a TAN in order to “bring pressure on its government,” or “target actors” as the “boomerang effect” (36).

A boomerang effect can be more or less direct. In some cases, a local community, with help from a well-connected mediator (often an NGO), can raise a rights complaint directly with an international institution, such as the United Nations. This institution can then question and demand answers from a national government. For instance, just prior to the beginning of my fieldwork, Okani, assisted by international partners, had lodged a complaint about government land dispossession and lack of consultation in the implementation of Cameroon's national Forestry Law with the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), a United Nations body that monitors the implementation of the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, to which Cameroon is a party. The goal of this complaint was to produce a “boomerang effect” whereby this respected international institution would exert pressure on the Cameroonian government.

In other cases, the boomerang effect operates indirectly. Rights complaints are not raised with an international institution; rather, they are conveyed through awareness campaigns targeting members of the general public, usually in the West (Niezen 2009, 7). TANs often seek to stoke indignation—“wrath excited by a sense of wrong to oneself or, especially, to others” (OED quoted in Niezen 2009, 7)—in the audiences they address, which can serve as a powerful motivation for action on behalf of marginalized groups. As Niezen (2009) explains,

Injustice should be understood not just as a formal contravention of law but also as the source of a powerful sympathetic emotion, sometimes expressed through a sense of personal moral outrage, even toward distant injustices involving unknown actors. And, like compassion, it is cultivable, stimulated into growth by strategic representation. (7)

Once public awareness and outcry reaches requisite levels, NGOs can incorporate this in the campaign, using it to demand action by international institutions, who can in turn pressure national governments or other supposed rights violators, or to pressure rights violators directly. We will see an example of an indirect boomerang effect, brought about by Okani’s use of video to raise awareness of human rights abuses in Cameroon’s national parks, later in this chapter.

Indigenous rights TANs have proven a useful avenue for many African hunter-gatherer and pastoralist communities, including the Baka, to engage in rights advocacy. While the Baka’s *symbolic autochthony* does not have much value in securing substantive rights in the national context, it has great value in attracting recognition, resources and support internationally. As international understandings of indigeneity became more expansive, groups such as the Baka were able to project characteristics such as continued adherence to “traditional” beliefs and practices, “environmental wisdom,” “spiritual attachment to the landscape,” and capacity “for environmental management” (Li 2000, 165) to gain admission to Indigenous rights TANs. Outside NGOs played an important role in drawing this connection between local identities and international understandings of indigeneity. As Sapignoli (2016) writes, it was through their

interactions with NGOs that African hunter-gatherer and pastoralist groups “learned to be indigenous and to use indigeneity” (277).

The projection of pre-existing characteristics such as attachment to local ecosystems, desire to practice traditional livelihoods, and marginalization vis-à-vis national majority populations plays an important role in gaining recognition as “Indigenous peoples.” This is particularly true for communities such as the Baka who cannot render their claims to indigeneity definitive by citing their “priority in time” in a particular location. Additionally, however, international recognition as Indigenous occurs through a self-perpetuating, positive feedback loop: The more a community is present in Indigenous rights TANs, the more that community is recognized as Indigenous, the more the community is provided with additional opportunities to participate in international Indigenous activism, institutions, and networks. Membership in Indigenous rights TANs fosters connections with activists, outside NGOs, and other Indigenous communities who share experiences and best practices, provide opportunities for participating in development projects and meetings, and who can serve as allies for future rights advocacy and other projects.

Baka activism in opposition to the Chad-Cameroon pipeline and 1994 Forest Law made specific reference to the emerging body of international laws and conventions addressing Indigenous rights. The Chad-Cameroon pipeline, for instance, was partially funded by the International Finance Corporation, an arm of the World Bank. Because of this, the project was required to respect emergent Bank policy regarding the consultation and involvement of Indigenous communities. Working in collaboration with, and on behalf of, Baka and other local communities, Indigenous rights organizations such as Centre for Environment and Development (CED) and Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) demanded that the project respect Bank Operational

Directive 4.20, which required “the preparation of an indigenous peoples plan for any project affecting them based on the informed participation of the indigenous peoples themselves as well as borrowing country capacity to implement such a plan” (Horta 2012, 223). While World Bank policy on Indigenous peoples has frequently been criticized for failing to go far enough in protecting Indigenous rights (e.g. Griffiths 2005), it nonetheless provided a useful port of entry in this case, bringing the concept of Indigenous rights into discussions at the national level in Cameroon. As Nguiffo explains,

We saw that the World Bank had a policy on Indigenous peoples. It said, the policy, that if [a project] crossed the territories of Indigenous peoples the policy would apply. We saw, more or less, what a policy that took into account Indigenous peoples’ rights looked like. They were standards that were much higher than what we have in Cameroon. We didn’t... We don’t have standards in Cameroon. So people looked at these elements, [...] these international elements. The World Bank... The policy of the Bank that applied to Cameroon. People compared and said, “Ah, if this is what they [i.e. The World Bank] do, while here there is nothing, maybe we need to bring this [policy] to the national level. (personal communication; my translation).

This activism led to the Cameroonian government’s putting in place “Pygmy/Indigenous People’s Development Plans” for the project (Lueong 2016, 11).

At the same time as they framed Baka and other “Pygmy” communities as “Indigenous peoples” in order to gain concessions from organizations such as the World Bank, Indigenous rights NGOs were also helping to form and empower community-based organizations (CBOs) run by local people. The 1990s “participatory turn” in development practice (Servaes 1996, 15-6; see Chapter Three), had led to calls for an increased voice for local people in projects undertaken in their communities, as well as increased demand for, and facilitation of, self-representation by local communities in the international sphere. Global forums and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations increasingly emphasized a “bottom up” approach, encouraging local groups to represent themselves at international meetings and conferences, rather than being

represented by benevolent missionaries, development workers, academics, etc. as they often had been previously (Niezen and Sapignoli 2017, 2).⁹ Indeed, many large international funders began to require that NGOs have a local partner organization in the communities where they worked. A symbiotic relationship developed between NGOs and CBOs. Local people participating in CBOs gained access to transnational network that could provide advantageous connections and funding, as well as support for local objectives and grievances, while, for international organizations, the inclusion of the voices of a local organization in their transnational advocacy made “credible the assertion that they are struggling with, and not only for, their southern partners” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 13).

Among groups such as the Baka, support for CBOs was framed as enhancing *Indigenous* self-representation. This helped build support for NGO activities among Western donors. In addition to attracting contributions from individuals interested in Indigenous rights, partnering with Indigenous CBOs provided outside organizations such as FPP access to funding from large development donors that was specifically earmarked for supporting Indigenous communities. Baka working for CBOs and benefitting from their programs were well aware that the benefits flowing to their communities were due to their status as “Indigenous peoples.” The spread of CBOs in Central Africa in the 1990s, and the framing of these organizations as “Indigenous-run,” thus helped to further spread and enmesh understandings of Indigenous rights and identity in Baka and other “Pygmy” communities.

Indeed, with support from outside NGOs and donors, Indigenous CBOs in Cameroon and surrounding countries began to come together in a formalized, regional Indigenous rights network. REPALEAC (*Réseau des populations locale et autochtone pour la gestion des écosystèmes de l’Afrique Centrale*) was founded in 2003 to coordinate between Indigenous

communities throughout Central Africa. (Messe was serving as head of REPALEAC during my field research.) The idea for REPALEAC came from an Indigenous rights activist from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who was inspired by the model of Indigenous organizations in Latin America:

REPALEAC is really an endogenous emanation from Indigenous peoples. We have someone who spent time in Geneva around... He saw a bit the movements from Latin America and everything, and he replicated the same thing [...] at the level of the Congo Basin. He did a bit of a tour of the countries to diagnose what organizations already existed. (V. Messe; personal communication, my translation).

Unlike other networks of development organizations working in “Pygmy” communities, such as RACOPY (see Chapter Three), REPALEAC is made up exclusively of Indigenous organizations. REPALEAC is focused on a rights-based, rather than a humanitarian approach, engaging in political lobbying to change discriminatory laws.

REPALEAC is really an Indigenous peoples’ organization. Inside it, until today, there is no non-Indigenous organization that is in it. And the mission that is proving a bit more difficult, because there we are in the framework of the sub-region, several countries at the same time, is really to do political lobbying. We have to lobby the administrations to change their vision of the Baka a bit. And even to develop laws specific to the Baka, and to Indigenous peoples. (V. Messe; personal communication, my translation).

Membership in this network helped to further reinforce CBOs’ status as Indigenous, and to frame the activities carried out by these organizations as example of “Indigenous self-representation.”

7. Okani and Indigeneity

The increased emphasis on Indigenous self-representation on the part of some development NGOs and donors provided a comparative advantage for local organizations that could successfully present themselves as being “Indigenous.” This was certainly the case for Okani, the Baka organization with which I conducted my fieldwork. While not a CBO *per se*, as it works across multiple communities in different regions, Okani has greatly benefitted from the

requirement that outside NGOs receiving funding for Indigenous rights and development have a local, Indigenous partner organization.

Through support from organizations such as FPP, Okani has carved out a specialization in Indigenous—and specifically Baka—rights advocacy. Okani benefits from the fact that it is not only an organization working on Indigenous rights, it is an *Indigenous-run* organization. Okani’s website describes it as “a young association of *Indigenous* Baka Pygmies of Cameroon. It has as its ambition to promote development *of the Baka, by the Baka, and for the Baka*” (my emphasis). When the organization was beginning its activities, this framing of Okani as an *Indigenous-run* organization, allowed it to pull power and resources from non-Indigenous organizations. Samuel Nguiffo, the Director of CED, and Messe’s former employer before he left to start Okani, summarizes a shift in attitude that benefitted organizations such as Okani, sometimes at the expense of organizations such as CED:

It’s all these international meetings that you’re talking about, where NGOs... We [organizations like CED] cannot participate in meetings like that, because we are not Indigenous. There have to be Indigenous peoples that are capable of speaking in the name of Indigenous peoples. Our role as NGOs is to facilitate the possibility for Indigenous peoples to speak for themselves. This is the work that pushed people to create [Indigenous] associations; to be able to speak in the name of Indigenous peoples themselves. You are Indigenous; you have a problem; we are not Indigenous; you must speak. We can help you, but we cannot speak in your name. (personal communication; my translation)

Okani’s status as an Indigenous organization also led to the organization’s first funding from an international donor. Through John Nelson, Africa Regional Coordinator for FPP, Messe was invited to attend the Fourth International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Conservation Congress in Barcelona in October 2008. While attending the conference, Messe was able to begin the process of securing funding from the United Nations Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Program to train a group of Baka community

members in video production, and to produce short videos on the effects of climate change in Baka communities, which would form part of an exhibition entitled *Conversations with the Earth: Indigenous Voices on Climate Change* (CWE). This training would be carried out by a British NGO, InsightShare.

Messe's description of his meeting with John Nelson, Nick Lunch from InsightShare, and Terrence Hay-Eddie from GEF at the IUCN Congress shows the importance of "chance encounters and connections" (Hodgson 2011, 27), as well as the importance of "visionary individuals" (in this case, Messe) in enabling certain African communities to begin participating in international Indigenous right networks, as referenced in the previous section (2016, 268).

I met Nick Lunch during the conference... the Fourth Global Summit of the IUCN in Barcelona. Because I was at that workshop at the same time. [...] During that meeting it was John Nelson from FPP who facilitated our meeting because he had heard about Terence who, at that time, was one of the people responsible for the GEF Small Grants Program. [...] They had small grants so that people could develop activities around conservation and climate change. And Terence at that time was working for the UNDP, the United Nations Development Program. So we had that meeting, as in all the big international meetings, where people who have interests in common can sit together and have a beer or a tea, and discuss a bit about the work that they want to do. [...] InsightShare had started projects a bit all over the world with Indigenous communities on participatory video, but they were looking for a way into Cameroon, notably, in Central Africa. And at that exact moment the forces of nature wanted me to be the one who was there! [laughing]. (personal communication; my translation)

Participating in projects such as CWE helped to further reinforce Okani's legitimacy and status as Indigenous. Okani—and the Baka—were now visible alongside other Indigenous peoples on the global stage. In a 2011 brochure, CWE describes itself as a "collaboration between 17 Indigenous communities in 15 countries...living in critical ecosystems around the world." CWE's goal was to bring "marginalized indigenous voices" into the climate change debate by funding the production of videos to be shown at global meetings and exhibitions devoted to Indigenous rights and environmental issues. These include the World People's

Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia; the 10th International Indigenous Film and Video Festival in Quito, Ecuador; and the COP15 and COP16 meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Copenhagen in 2009 and Cancun in 2010.

In 2011 the videos were part of a major exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of American Indian (NMAI) in New York and Washington. (As noted earlier, it was through my work as a Program Assistant in the NMAI film and video centre that I first became aware of Okani's work.) The project thus helped to draw an equivalency between the Baka and communities in the Amazon, the Andes, the Canadian Arctic, and other parts of the world, which were also participating in CWE. This helped open the door to Okani's participating in other Indigenous peoples' project and initiatives, thereby helping grow the organization.

Through Okani's participation in the CWE project, Messe, his wife Edwidge, and Noël Okani's most senior staff member, were invited to Copenhagen to attend Klimaforum2009, an open, public "people's climate summit" organized alongside the COP15 meetings of the UNFCCC in December 2009. Here, they screened *Facing Change in Africa's Forests*, a film Okani had made in collaboration with InsightShare. They also met representatives from other Indigenous video "hubs" participating in CWE. A brochure produced by CWE about their activities at the COP15 meetings is entitled "An International Indigenous Family." It features descriptions of the exchange of various "Indigenous" practices between attendees, including a "sacred dance" that Messe shared with the others.



Figure 4.3. An image of indigenous CWE participants at COP15 from the 'An International Indigenous Family' brochure. Messe is third from left in the back row, wearing the blue hat and scarf.

The Copenhagen conference helped to further enmesh Okani in transnational Indigenous rights networks, providing opportunities to exchange with representatives from other Indigenous video projects, and to plan further activities. As Messe explains:

When we were in Denmark and Copenhagen [...] we had a retreat in the north of Denmark with all... It was the first time we had met with the other Indigenous communities who were participating in the participatory video project. And there we had to make an action plan for what we planned to do upon our return, when we returned to Cameroon and the others elsewhere. (personal communication; my translation).

At the Copenhagen conference Messe was also able to secure a further funding commitment from InsightShare to conduct a second participatory video training in Baka communities (see below).

Participating in events such as the Copenhagen conference may have also helped shape Messe and Noel's identities as "Indigenous peoples," though the way it did so is complex. (Edwidge is Bantu, not Baka, and thus does not identify as an "Indigenous person" in the global sense). Messe, like Moringe ole Parkipuny, for instance, noted that Baka communities faced a

number of similar problems to the other Indigenous communities represented at the conference, and found some cultural similarities. At the same time, Messe felt quite different from the other Indigenous representatives, and viewed some of their customs and practices as strange, or incommensurable with Baka ways of life. (I explore the complexities of Messe's identity in much more detail in the next chapter.)

Okani continues to benefit from its status as an Indigenous organization. During my fieldwork, for instance, Okani had recently been selected as a partner on a multi-million dollar project that aimed to improve Baka political representation. This was by far the largest project with which Okani had been involved to date. The project was funded by the European Union and managed by FPP. Messe explained to me that Okani had been selected by FPP to partner on the project over another, non-Indigenous Cameroonian NGO after he had made the case for the organization in an FPP meeting. Essentially, Messe's argument was that, for a project that aimed to empower Indigenous peoples, the local partner should be an Indigenous organization.

8. Land Rights, Conservation, and Ecoguard Abuse¹⁰

In recent years, Okani has continued to engage in transnational Indigenous activism. A major component of this work has been a campaign against exclusion of Baka from traditional territories that have been designated as national parks. Aided by international NGOs, Okani and other Baka communities and organizations have engaged in both direct and indirect advocacy to create a boomerang effect whereby multilateral organizations and the general public in the West will exert pressure on the Cameroonian government and large conservation organizations to respect Baka rights. This activism specifically references the Baka's status as "Indigenous peoples" and makes use of Indigenous rights TANs. The work of Okani and other organizations on this issue has helped Baka gain increased attention from global

Indigenous rights activists, and further enmeshed Okani, and the Baka, in transnational Indigenous rights activism.

In conjunction with the Forestry Law, also in the mid-1990s, Cameroon rendered Baka access to the forest even more difficult by establishing a network of national parks and other protected areas in the country's southeast. In part this commitment was a response to pressure from international conservation organizations. The Congo Basin Rainforest, an important portion of which is located in southeast Cameroon, is a vital store of global biodiversity, as well as an important "carbon sink" regulating global temperatures (FAO 2011). The CBRF is threatened, however, by deforestation, having lost nearly five percent of its total area between 1990 and 2010 (FAO 2011, 15). The forest's role as a store of biodiversity is further threatened by poaching, particularly of large animals such as forest elephants (Maisels et al. 2013). Pressured to respond to these threats, Cameroon undertook a commitment at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to set aside 30 percent of the country's territory for conservation (Njounan Tegomo, Defo, and Usongo 2012).¹¹

Over the following decade, enabled by the 1994 Forestry Law's re-zoning of territory, Cameroon established numerous national parks and other protected areas. The largest of the new parks were located in the department of Boumba et Ngoko, in the country's southeast, and were made up of lands traditionally used by Baka communities for hunting, fishing, and collecting non-timber forest products, as well as for cultural and spiritual activities. In 2001, Lobéké National Park was officially established by prime ministerial decree, and in 2005 Boumba Bek and Nki National Parks were created through the same mechanism (Njounan Tegomo, Defo, and Usongo 2012, 48). Together, these three parks cover more than 750,000 hectares, flanking either side of the road between the towns

of Yokadouma and Moloundou (WWF 2015a). As of the late 2000s, Cameroon had advanced almost halfway to its stated goal of setting aside 30 percent of its territory for conservation, with protected areas accounting for more than seven million hectares, and 15 percent of the country's territory (Topa et al. 2009).

Cameroon adopted a “fortress conservation” model for its protected areas, with laws and policies forbidding “access and use of resources inside of national parks” (Messe 2009, 4). More specifically, the decrees establishing Lobéké, Boumba Bek, and Nki National Parks prohibit “any intervention that can alter the appearance, composition, and evolution” of these protected areas, “including, hunting, farming, and logging” (Njounan Tegomo, Defo, and Usongo 2012, 50). In practice, however, many Baka ignore these regulations. According to a recent study (Njounan Tegomo, Defo, and Usongo 2012), for instance, ten years after Boumba Bek was designated as a national park, forty percent of its territory remains a “high penetration area” for Baka communities, used regularly for activities such as hunting and trapping.

A key difference between protected areas and logging concessions is that the forest in protected areas remains unspoiled. It is thus tempting for Baka to defy bans on entering national parks. Baka defy entry bans for a variety of reasons. These include a desire to escape exploitative relations with “Bantu,” a deep cultural and spiritual attachment to forest lands and traditional livelihoods, and a lack of alternative economic opportunities. Under the land-zoning plan prescribed by the 1994 Forest Law, farming and hunting is limited to areas bordering major roads. Some sections of these same areas are also designated for logging under a “community forests” program (see above). The overuse of these lands has depleted the game available in “legal” hunting areas to such an extent that, as one Baka man

put it, respecting the law as written would require “eating beans instead of meat” (Schmidt 1998).

The Baka’s continued use of national parks is also in part the result of a defiant attitude originating from the failure to properly consult Baka communities before the parks were established, and to obtain their consent for the parks’ creation. The attitude seems to be one of “since you reached these decisions without us, we will go about our business without paying any attention to them, or to you” (Ndameu 2003, 233). For instance, in the case of Boumba Bek National Park, local Baka claim that they were not consulted “until after the boundaries had been put in place” (Ndameu 2003, 230). Interactions between government officials, conservation organizations, and local communities during the national parks’ establishment were largely limited to public information campaigns regarding the coming restrictions on hunting and other activities. Local people were never given a genuine opportunity to influence boundaries and management policies (Ndameu 2003, 230). The consultations that did take place occurred principally between government and conservation officials and local Bantu and Bangando chiefs, who purported to speak in the name of the community (Njounan Tegomo, Defo, and Usongo 2012, 49-50).

Because of this failure to adequately consult Baka communities, the demarcation of park boundaries did not consider the unique ways in which Baka use forest lands. For instance, the demarcation process sought to account for “human occupation of territory” in order to avoid displacing local populations. This was done, however, by using “aerial photographs and satellite images,” which showed only large “settlements, farming fields, and fallows.” Baka hunting grounds, as well as tombs, semi-permanent settlements, and

other important areas that could not be seen from high above the forest canopy, were rendered invisible (Njounan Tegomo, Defo, and Usongo 2012, 48; see Côté 1993).

The fact that local communities rarely share in the benefits generated by tourism and other activities conducted in protected areas also stokes Baka defiance. While Baka and other local communities are excluded from the forest, some safari companies have been allowed to operate in the area. In the words of Richards Ndongo, a Baka man from the village of Lopango, “They prohibit hunting for the Baka, but they allow Whites to come kill animals for pleasure.... The safaris let meat rot in the forest; while there are entire families who are hungry” (Kouétcha 2011).

The Baka’s continued use of the forest has brought community members into conflict with the “ecoguards” charged with enforcing restrictions on access. While the purpose of the ecoguards is ostensibly to prevent large-scale commercial poaching, in reality these officers often target Baka who are engaged in small-scale, subsistence hunting. Indeed, a 2011 report by the Cameroonian Ministry of Forests and Wildlife acknowledged that ecoguards often confused subsistence hunting with poaching (MINIFOF 2011, 22).

While ecoguards have also targeted other ethnic groups, such as the Bangando (S. Rupp, personal communication), the Baka have been most affected by militarized conservation in Cameroon. Not only are Baka more likely to be caught hunting in protected areas, they are more likely to be abused when they are caught. The ethnically inflected character of Cameroon’s public service means that ecoguards are almost exclusively “Bantu” (to the best of my knowledge there are no Baka ecoguards). Many “Bantu” and Baka alike believe that the Baka are “*des sous-hommes*,” compelled to submit themselves to the “Bantu” “superiors” (Bahuchet 1993c). Abuse of Baka by “Bantu” is common in

southeast Cameroon. When a Baka hunter is caught by a “Bantu” ecoguard, then, the ecoguard is likely to engage in abusive behaviour.

Since the inauguration of Cameroon’s protected areas, the government has partnered with a number of international organizations in order to implement and manage conservation activities. The WWF has been primary among these partners. Boumba Bek, Nki, and Lobéké National Parks, as well as surrounding areas, are part of the WWF’s “Jengi” project (Hattori 2005). The Jengi project website cites the “training and recruitment of 43 game guards to support anti-poaching and surveillance operations” as a key achievement (WWF 2015b). In the mid-2000s, however, responding to allegations that WWF-sponsored ecoguards and project staff had engaged in torture, racism, and corruption, the organization handed control of the program to the Cameroonian government (Newsome 2015). Enforcement of regulations related to national parks is now often handled by a combination of ecoguards and soldiers from government Rapid Intervention Brigades (BIR). The duty of these teams is to “track down local poachers and discourage any other person who dares carry out unauthorized activities in the protected areas,” through the use of “strong reprisal measures” (Mawoung 2015, 151).

It is particularly galling that WWF fundraising and other literature regarding the Jengi project often portrays the Baka as part of the biodiversity that the organization hopes to preserve. Indeed, the name “Jengi” itself comes from a Baka word meaning “spirit of the forest.” A WWF publication about conservation efforts in Lobéké Forest, for example, explains that this area is “the traditional home of the Baka pygmies, and it is hoped that by preserving their forest, it will help to preserve their threatened culture and way of life”

(quoted in Rupp 2011, 32-3). This in spite of the fact that Baka are now excluded, often violently, from a large portion of this forest.

Whether out of neglect or ignorance, the WWF and the government of Cameroon have fostered a situation that is ripe for abuse. In addition to barring Baka and other communities from their traditional territories, while providing no alternative means of subsistence, there is deep confusion among both community members, and the ecoguards themselves, as to what activities are permissible in what areas. During my research, different informants and sources provided widely differing information as to what, if any, access Baka were permitted to protected areas. A WWF consultant told me that no access was permitted under any circumstances (M. Diel, personal communication); another NGO director who had worked in the area for several decades told me that Baka were permitted to hunt in a “traditional manner” in the parks, provided they stayed within two kilometers of the park boundary (S. Nguiffo, personal communication); Stephanie Rupp’s (2011) ethnography of the area indicates that Baka are permitted entrance to Lobéké National Park during the dry season only (33). These differing accounts are further complicated by the uneven enforcement of rules. As Messe (2009) explains, “in reality, civil servants in charge of forests often allow Indigenous peoples to access forests even when this contradicts the letter of the law, because they realize the need for communities to access forests to survive” (5).

This ambiguity creates a situation in which “might makes right.” Because neither Baka nor ecoguards are sure of the rules, conflicts become an exercise in power, where the armed ecoguards can enforce their will upon the Baka regardless of who is technically in the wrong. The fact that, as the WWF has acknowledged, some ecoguards are themselves

involved in illegal hunting, and thus may have an incentive to keep others out of the forest in order to conduct this activity in secret, further aggravates the situation (WWF 2014, 17).

During my field research, I heard dozens of stories from or about Baka who had been harassed and abused by ecoguards. Testimonies collected by NGOs such as Survival International bear out these accounts. In a November 2014 letter to Cameroon's National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms, Survival enumerated over a dozen incidents in which ecoguards had engaged in property destruction, torture (with one case resulting in death), forcible expulsion from forest camps, beatings (sometimes conducted with "burning hot machetes"), death threats, and theft (see also Kouétcha 2011).

In spite of the fact that, as discussed above, some Baka do continue to access national parks, there is no doubt that the threat of abuse by ecoguards has made many people frightened to enter their former hunting territories. Indeed, my research would suggest that some Baka even avoid entering forest areas where hunting and other activities are permitted, due to fears that they will either accidentally enter a restricted area, or that ecoguards will seek to punish them in spite of the fact that they are hunting legally. In conflicts between ecoguards and Baka hunters, it is always the Baka who suffer, and many feel it is best to avoid the risk altogether.

None of this is to say, of course, that Baka are never involved in more serious illegal activities, such as commercial poaching, in national parks; however when Baka are caught poaching—particularly of large, financially lucrative animals such as elephants—they are often acting as guides for outsiders (Ndameu 2003). These Baka guides usually receive little remuneration for their efforts, often only a small share of meat, while the outsiders take the more valuable skins, tusks, etc. My conversations with Baka community members reveal

that they participate as guides in illegal hunting for a variety of reasons, including financial hardship, power relations with a local “Bantu” “patron,” or, indeed, a desire to use tracking and other skills that they view as central to their self-worth and identity. Even if a Baka hunter or guide is caught engaging in commercial poaching, however, this cannot serve to justify extra judicial torture and killing.

9. *Baka: Face to Face with Society*

Responding to the issue of Baka exclusion from protected areas and abuse by ecoguards, Messe and other Okani staff members, in consultation with Baka leaders, decided that the second participatory video training with InsightShare arranged during the Copenhagen conference (see above) should take place in communities near the town of Yenga, located between two large national parks, Boumba Bek and Lobéké, in southeast Cameroon. While Messe and his colleagues were familiar with, and in some cases had worked in, these communities before Okani was founded, the distance from Bertoua (about 500km over very difficult roads) meant that Okani had not yet been active there.

Community members in this area had been complaining to Messe and other Okani staff for years about the issue of ecoguard abuse. Until he attended the conference in Copenhagen, however, Messe had been unsure how Okani could help address it. After having been exposed to the way in which other Indigenous communities were using video to confront human rights violations, however, he thought that a video similar to *Facing Change in Africa's Forests* might be useful in raising international awareness and seeking redress. Messe consulted with leaders from the villages around Yenga to obtain their consent for the project. They agreed, and, in late 2010, InsightShare sent a trainer, Jean-Luc Blakey, to work with these communities.

Romial and André, two of Okani's video facilitators, traveled to the Yenga area with Jean-Luc. The team spent about four weeks conducting a participatory video workshop,

exploring ecoguard abuse and other issues. Romial, who is Messe's brother, describes this experience as follows:

I've participated in making many videos, but the one that affected me the most was the video from Yenga. Yes. There, at a certain time, they [the ecoguards] were burning all the Baka cabins in the forest. They were destroying all the traps. And everybody... Nobody is unaware that the Baka live only from the forest. They jailed a Baka because he had killed an elephant in Yenga. He killed an elephant and they locked him up. And really, when we were over there, they [the community members] told us that they no longer have access to meat. They were now eating what we call *okok* [boiled wild spinach leaves] only. That video really touched me. And also, when we screened it all over the place, it had a bit of an impact. (personal communication; my translation)

The end product of the Yenga workshop was a video entitled, *Baka: Face to Face with Society* (BFSS). The video was filmed through a participatory process, meaning community members were responsible for conceptualizing and shooting the video themselves. The use of a participatory video (PV) methodology also allowed community members to engage in detailed discussions about issues such as land rights and ecoguard abuse, and to build consensus about how they wanted to address these issues. (See Chapter Six for a more detailed discussion of participatory video methodology.) Jean-Luc, Romial, and André facilitated discussions, provided technical assistance, and edited the final product.

BFFS shows community members discussing and undertaking subsistence activities, such as trapping and fishing, which they have traditionally conducted on lands that now fall within national parks. Community members speak of the hardship caused by their expulsion from protected areas, and describe incidents in which ecoguards beat and burned down the homes of Baka hunters. The video climaxes with participants' acting out a scene in which ecoguards catch and beat two Baka hunters. As the ecoguards strike them, the hunters scream: "They have killed us because of our forest. This forest is ours!" Not only does the video show the way in which

Baka use the forest and address the immediate problem of torture and abuse, then, it also puts forward a claim of ownership.¹²

The video was originally slated to be added to the Conversations with the Earth Project. For a time, in mid-2011, it was among the videos posted on the CWE website. The video was also posted to InsightShare's YouTube channel. Okani, InsightShare, and CWE organizers had planned to include the video in future CWE exhibits in prominent forums, such as the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. This would raise public awareness, particularly in Western countries, of the abuses committed by the ecoguards and help bring about a boomerang effect.

BFFS also helped to influence and provided evidence for a major international pressure campaign. Survival International's "Parks Need Peoples" campaign seeks to "expose the dark side of the conservation industry," highlighting abuses committed in evicting and barring "tribal peoples" from protected areas throughout the world (Survival International 2014, 3).¹³ The campaign includes a specific component devoted to the issue of ecoguard abuse in Cameroon. The Parks Need Peoples campaign has made prominent use of video. The campaign website features filmed testimonies in which Baka community members describe beatings committed by the ecoguards. Other organizations working near Yenga also joined in the fight. For instance, One Heart Global Music Exchange, an NGO that works with Baka musicians and other community members in a village not far from where BFFS was filmed, made their own videos about the issue of ecoguard abuse and distributed these online (see Newsome, 2015).

The Yenga campaign is an example of *indirect advocacy*. Rather than approaching international institutions directly, the organizations and communities involved in this project sought to use video and other forms of publicity generate public outcry that would put diffuse

political pressure on the WWF.¹⁴ In spite of the fact that the WWF is no longer directly involved in the day-to-day management of Cameroon's national parks, it continues to fund the ecoguards through the intermediary of the Cameroonian Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF) and provides the government with "technical assistance" to help manage the national parks. Okani and its partners posited that, through video and other forms of advocacy, they could pressure the WWF, which would then use its financial leverage to demand change and enact stricter oversight on the government of Cameroon's respect of human rights. Survival's emails and press releases, sent as part of the "Parks Need Peoples" campaign, for instance, encouraged members of the public in Europe, North America, and other parts of the world to write to the WWF to urge it to demand that Cameroon uphold its rights commitments. This resulted in the WWF's receiving over 9000 letters (Survival International, 2015).

Survival targeted the WWF in part because it seemed to be more vulnerable to a public pressure campaign than the Cameroonian government. As the WWF is reliant on individual charitable donations for a large part of its budget, a publicity campaign that threatened damage to the organization's reputation could, they believed, be a powerful motivator for action and change. As Freddy Weyman of Survival International explained to me:

I think that WWF is more receptive to the kind of pressure that we can bring to bear. We've tried discussing these problems with the government and have not got very far. [...] There's more evidence of WWF being made aware of this problem than the government and also WWF has adopted and reaffirmed its commitments to higher standards on human rights. [...] But that's not to say we've given up on trying to influence the government; we might try a different complaint against them in future, for example. (personal communication)

The Yenga campaign thus rested on what Robert F. Drinan (2002) calls the "mobilization of shame." It sought to create negative publicity that would demonstrate that the WWF's

provision of funding, through the Cameroonian government, was supporting people who were committing torture. Torture of Indigenous peoples is, of course, fundamentally at odds with the WWF's espoused values, as well as those of the members of the public who fund the organization through their individual donations. Indeed, as discussed earlier, the WWF has actually made use of the symbol of the traditional "Pygmy," living in harmony with nature to "promote its activities and raise funds" (Rupp 2011, 32). The revelation that the WWF was funding the torture and killing of the "Pygmies," then, should embarrass and chasten the organization, and motivate it to take action in order to preserve its reputation and be true to its values.

The videos that Baka communities around Yenga have produced, both as part of the initial workshop run by Okani and InsightShare, and in collaboration with other organizations such as Survival, employ three different, but related, narratives. The first narrative emphasizes the brutality of the ecoguards' actions. The idea here is that, even if the Baka who the ecoguards abuse are trespassing illegally in protected areas, the punishment is excessive and in violation of national and international law. In one of the videos posted by Survival, for instance, a community member provides a graphic description of a practice by which Baka are stripped naked, put on their knees, and beaten with machetes. "They want to kill you. Kill you as an animal. It's as if they see you as an animal," another community member explains.

Here we see a key advantage of videos over written reports: Videos reach a much broader audience. Images also have a more visceral impact on audiences than written accounts, particularly when it comes to issues such as torture. Filmed descriptions and reenactments of torture have an affective dimension, speaking not only from "mind to mind" but from "body to body" (Nichols 1991, 39). Accounts of bodily harm and suffering are particularly effective in

international advocacy, as they evoke a universal experience. Distant audiences come to sympathize and identify with those who they see on screen. This creates a powerful incentive for activism.

The second narrative focuses on the economic and social hardships experienced by Baka communities deprived of their traditional livelihoods due to access restrictions. In a video produced by One Heart Global Music Exchange, for instance, a Baka community member attributes the rise of alcoholism and violence in his community to the loss of access to the forest:

Before, the Baka didn't drink because they were continuing to hunt in the forest. [...] Since they have left the forest [...] there's nothing to do but to drink [...], to kill and stab one another, to steal the Bantu's things [...]. After that they say, "the Baka do bad things," when it is the orders of the government that create that [...]. What are the Baka to do?

The third narrative emphasizes the Baka's long history serving as "guardians of the forest," living in an ecologically sustainable manner in forest areas. According to this narrative, the Baka's deep knowledge and respect of the forest means that allowing them to sustainably use and help manage protected areas would, in fact, further conservationist objectives. In the aforementioned Survival video, for instance, Baka community members describe traditional livelihood strategies, such as gathering wild yams and honey. The video ends with the following statement displayed on screen: "tribal peoples are better at looking after their environment than anyone else."

Not only are these three narratives effective in capturing public attention and support, all three of these narratives both draw on and help to reinforce the Baka's status as "Indigenous peoples." Indeed, if we recall the U.N. working definition of indigeneity, we will note that the Baka videos emphasize all of the key characteristics that this definition enumerates: "Strong links to territories and surrounding resources," "distinct language, culture, and beliefs," and

“non- dominant” status in society (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2006; see also Daes 1996; Cobo 1987). The framing of the Baka as “Indigenous peoples” also occurs through the context in which the videos were screened and distributed. As mentioned earlier, for instance, the BFFS video was intended to be part of the Conversations with the Earth project, which was subtitled “Indigenous Voices on Climate Change,” and which held screenings at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

The WWF’s reaction to the Yenga campaign provides proof of its potency. Rather than enacting changes to address Baka communities’ concerns, however, the WWF initially undertook “damage control,” seeking to minimize and discredit the claims made in the videos and other campaign materials. The WWF also demanded that CWE remove BFFS from its website. In an email to the CWE coordinator, a WWF official claimed that the term “*dobi dobi*” as used by Baka community members, which in the video subtitles had been translated as “WWF” was in fact a generic term that referred to all officials and organizations involved in anti-poaching and conservation activities, and did not refer specifically to the WWF.¹⁵ The WWF also claimed that it was in possession of a report that alleged that the Baka community members in the Yenga area had been tricked and persuaded by a foreigner (presumably Jean-Luc, the InsightShare trainer) into making false statements about WWF in the video. Based on my review of the email correspondence between InsightShare and the WWF, my discussions with Jean-Luc and the Okani staff members involved in making the video, and my discussions with community members around Yenga about the video-making process, the problem of ecoguard abuse, and the role of the WWF, I am confident in saying that this allegation is completely baseless.¹⁶

In spite of this, however, CWE and InsightShare eventually made the decision to pull the BFFS video from the CWE website and exhibition in response to the WWF’s demands.

InsightShare was overwhelmed with their preparations for the exhibit and did not have sufficient capacity to respond to the WWF's complaints. InsightShare made efforts to contact Messe to see if he could shed light on the WWF's complaints and confirm the accuracy of the translation, but were unable to get in touch with him quickly. When they did, Messe explained that the situation in the villages surrounding Yenga had improved and so InsightShare and Okani decided not to put the video back online.

While the BFSS video was taken offline after only a few months, however, it had a major impact. Word of Okani's advocacy activities filtered back to the local WWF office in Moloundou, who sought to address the problem. Romial explains:

The people from the WWF were really mad! Because they were not sure, maybe, that a little association like Okani could make this type of denunciation. I remember, at that time, the WWF could no longer hold a meeting without calling Venant [Messe]. [...] Everywhere. After that they always called Venant to come to their meetings, because they felt that there were people denouncing those bad things that they were doing. That maybe they had gone a bit outside of the law. Because we knew that the park... Even when they had put the park there, they had left a space for the Baka to go to a certain point and take their resources. But they [the WWF], even for a rabbit, would pick you up. (personal communication; my translation)

BFFS thus helped to create immediate change on the ground, as the WWF was forced to involve Messe and Okani in their conversations with Baka villages. This allowed Okani to provide advice and technical assistance to ensure that community members were not swindled or exploited.

Moreover, the removal of the BFFS video from the CWE website was not the end of advocacy efforts. Indeed, as noted above, by the time the video was removed, there were a number of other videos being made by other organizations, and the "Parks Need Peoples" campaign was about to get underway. This illustrates the diffuse nature and power of Transnational Advocacy Networks. While the original intended pathway of the video was

stymied, others organizations and individuals who were members of Indigenous rights TANS were able to build on Okani's efforts and take up the fight.

There is some evidence that advocacy on behalf of the communities around Yenga was successful in yielding results. There remain serious questions, however, as to whether subsequent efforts by the WWF and Government of Cameroon represent a genuine attempt to uncover evidence and ameliorate the situation, or are aimed merely at appeasing international outcry. In addition to the WWF's move to involve Okani in its conversations with local communities, in 2014, the government of Cameroon announced a national inquiry into the issue of ecoguard abuse. The WWF, for its part, undertook at least two studies of the issue (Njounan Tegomo et. al. 2012, and another never published). Officials from the organization also claimed to be negotiating with the Cameroonian government to give Baka some access to Boumba Bek and Nki National Parks as part of a reformed management plan (Chintom 2012).¹⁷

While Okani has not worked much on the issue of ecoguard abuse since the production of BFFS, preferring to concentrate on other projects, Survival and other organizations continue their pressure campaign against the WWF. In 2016, Survival filed a formal, legal complaint in Switzerland, where the WWF is headquartered, alleging the organization had violated its human rights obligations under the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as its own policy on Indigenous peoples. The complaint, which was 228 pages long, provided extensive documentation of the complicity of WWF-funded staff in torture, abuse, and other human rights violations against Baka and other hunters in Cameroon's protected areas. This complaint resulted in mediation talks between Survival and the WWF, but ultimately these talks broke down when the WWF refused to agree to obtain the consent of Indigenous communities for decisions about the management of protected areas on their territory, even

though the requirement for Indigenous consent is stipulated in the WWF's own Indigenous peoples policy. As Survival Director Stephen Corry wrote in an article announcing that Survival was abandoning its complaint, it had become clear that the "WWF has no intention of seeking, leave alone securing, the proper consent of those who lands it colludes with governments in stealing. It has no intention of facing the fact that its own Indigenous peoples policy isn't worth the paper it's printed on. It's just public relations fluff used to rebuff criticism."

This complaint shows how direct and indirect advocacy can work together, with the latter paving the way for the former. Once indirect advocacy through video, letter-writing, and publicity campaigns, had generated sufficient public support, Survival was better positioned (and resourced) to pursue a complaint through formal channels. Notably, these channels were available due to the status of Baka and other "Pymgy" communities as "Indigenous peoples." While the OECD complaint did not yield concessions from the WWF, it succeeded in another way: The complaint was covered in mainstream news outlets in the UK, where Survival is based, such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, and also received extensive attention on environmental and Indigenous rights websites, blogs, and social media. This generated increased public attention to the issue of ecoguard abuse in Cameroon and ramped up pressure on the WWF. Media coverage also framed the question of access to Cameroon's national parks as an Indigenous rights issue, and the Baka and other "Pygmy" communities as "Indigenous peoples."

The most notable media coverage of the issue of ecoguard abuse occurred in a six-part *Buzzfeed News* exposé entitled "WWF's Secret War." "The WWF has provided high-tech enforcement equipment, cash, and weapons to forces implicated in atrocities against indigenous communities" read the introduction to the first story in the series. While the series covered abuses committed by WWF-funded ecoguards in a variety of contexts, including in Nepal and

the Central African Republic, the situation in Cameroon was featured prominently. Abuses against the Baka were framed as Indigenous rights abuses. The Baka's status as Indigenous was reaffirmed by "guardians of the forest" narratives, highlighting the Baka's role as ecologically-responsible stewards of forest lands. Charles, the Okani staff member, is quoted in the article: "The Baka are the eyes and ears of the forest and could really help conservation," he states, "But they are treated as the enemy instead" (quoted in Warren and Baker 2019).

The *Buzzfeed* investigation prompted significant public outcry, as well as responses from celebrities and lawmakers. The Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, for instance, called for a "full and transparent" accounting of the allegations (Leonardo DiCaprio sits on the WWF's U.S. Board of Directors), while the celebrity explorer Ben Fogle announced that he was suspending his role as WWF ambassador. UK Parliament members also called for an investigation, potentially putting in jeopardy millions of pounds in funding from the Department for International Development (DFID). "We must make sure that no UK aid funding has been used to support programmes that may have gone very wrong in this way," explained Stephen Twigg, a Labour MP who chairs the committee overseeing DFID. In a rare show of bi-partisanship, he was joined by Conservative members as well. Priti Patel, a Conservative MP and former secretary of international development was quoted as follows: "U.K. taxpayers have provided generous financial support to WWF to fund programmes across Africa, Asia, and Latin America so they can protect wildlife in challenging parts of the world. Taxpayers and donors to WWF need to know that their money is not being misspent and supporting appalling human rights abuses (quoted in Baker, Warren, and Whitman, 2019). In April 2019, the U.K. Charity Commission also opened a formal investigation.

There was also action in the U.S., where, in May 2019 a House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources launched an investigation. This resulted, in December 2019, in proposed legislation that would “prohibit the government from awarding money to international conservation groups that fund or support human rights violations” (Baker and Warren, 2019).

As public outcry and media coverage of the WWF’s complicity in abuse has started to threaten the organization’s funding, both from individual contributions and government grants, it appears that transnational advocates have finally secured the necessary leverage to compel the organization to make changes to its practices. In late 2019, in response to public scrutiny, the WWF agreed to conduct additional community consultations before establishing another new national park, called Messok Dja, on Baka territory in the Republic of Congo. (This was in part also due to the results of a separate investigation by the UN Development Programme Social and Environmental Compliance Unit.) The organization also announced it was halting its support for ecoguards in the Salonga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, after an investigation revealed similar abuses to those occurring in Cameroon. The WWF has appointed Navi Pillay, the former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, to oversee an internal review, though, as of this writing, it is unclear when the results will be released.

10. Critiques of Indigenous (Self-)Representation¹⁸

There has been much written in anthropology and related disciplines about the “complex cultural politics of identity, images, and representation involved when indigenous groups intentionally manipulate, project, and homogenize their public images and identities to accord with Western stereotypes in order to seek recognition and demand rights” (Hodgson 2002, 1040). Much of this writing has been critical.

Academic critiques use a number of interrelated insights to call into question the validity of Indigenous rights claims by groups such as the Baka. Broadly speaking, critiques usually make some, or all, of the following arguments:

1. Indigeneity is a constructed identity category. It is therefore somehow “artificial” and thus not a valid container for rights claims.
2. Casting certain groups as “Indigenous peoples” unfairly advantages them over other marginalized groups that lack the requisite characteristics to claim indigeneity.
3. Framing certain groups as Indigenous involves referencing primitivist narratives and tropes—of Indigenous peoples as “guardians of nature,” for instance—that, at best, oversimplify and, at worst, completely miscast, local identities.
4. The category of “Indigenous peoples” was imposed on local communities by outside NGOs and activists. It is these actors, and not local communities, who benefit from Indigenous activism
5. Indigeneity has little resonance for local people, and thus Indigenous “self-representation” is not *self* representation at all. The framing of certain communities as Indigenous is done by outside actors, often without these communities’ knowledge or consent.

Let us discuss each of these arguments.

Critique 1: Indigeneity is a constructed identity category

This is perhaps the easiest critique to debunk. There is no question that “Indigenous peoples,” as a transnational identity category, is a relatively recent construction. Indeed, this chapter has already traced the genealogy of this category, including its expansion to encompass African pastoralist and hunter-gatherer communities, such as the Baka, beginning in the mid-

1980s. This insight, however, by no means entails that indigeneity is not a valid source of rights claims.

As Li (2000) correctly notes, drawing on Stuart Hall, *all* identities are “articulations” that originate from particular circumstances. Identities “come from somewhere, have histories. But far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall 1990, 225). Indeed, we have already seen detailed genealogies of both “Pygmy” and “Baka” identities, and how they emerged, shifted, and coalesced over decades and centuries. Arguments that “indigeneity” is not a worthy reference point for rights claims, owing to its constructed, strategic nature, rest on an implicit assumption that there are other, more valid, more deeply rooted cultural identities that *would* be worthy reference points for rights claims. Hall’s revelation that *all* identities are articulations puts the lie to this line of reasoning. If all identities are constructed, all identities are potentially valid reference points for rights claims. The salient question is which identities have resonance and utility for local people.

Critique 2: Indigeneity unfairly advantages some groups over others

Stephanie Rupp (2011), in her detailed ethnography of interethnic relations in the Lobéké forest region, which encompasses Yenga, where the original Okani ecoguards video was filmed, argues that “identifying certain people as “pygmies” and “hunter-gatherers,” and by extension as indigenous peoples, while relegating all other groups to the unmarked category of “villager”...risks overlooking the shared realities of poverty and marginalization that these communities share” (11-12). She goes on to question the notion that “one community in southeastern Cameroon—the “pygmies”—can be privileged as uniquely “indigenous” by virtue

of their aboriginal relations to place and nature, cultural purity and social distinctiveness, political subjugation and marginalization within the nation” (18).¹⁹

Rupp does not argue against the notion of Indigenous rights *per se*, but rather points out that non-“Pygmy” communities in southeast Cameroon share many characteristics—such as an attachment to nature, a reliance on traditional livelihoods, and political marginalization—with their Baka neighbours. Moreover, she complicates notions of ethnic identity, pointing out the long history of intermarriage, for instance, in the region where she worked.

Rupp’s ethnography provides useful insights, and can help explain some of the concern among poor, rural “Bantu,” about granting special rights to “Indigenous peoples,” as discussed earlier in this chapter. It is certainly true that there are many “Bantu” communities that are impoverished and disadvantaged. My own experience working in southeast Cameroon, however, would suggest that Rupp’s argument somewhat understates ongoing inequality between Baka and “Bantu” in this area.

“Pygmies” are structurally marginalized in a way that “Bantu” are not. I have never, for instance, heard a Cameroonian informant talk about rural “Bantu” as being dirty, or animal-like. I have never heard a Cameroonian informant express doubt that a rural Bantu are intelligent enough to go to school or work in the government. Rural “Bantu” are not being killed and tortured by ecoguards in national parks, because, unlike “Pygmies,” ecoguards do not think of “Bantu” as scarcely human. Rural “Bantu” are not often entrapped into quasi-feudal labour arrangements. Adult rural “Bantu” are not commonly referred to as “children.” They are not laughed at and made fun of. They are not give tokenistic (if any) representation in local politics and in the management of local resources and then exploited due to their lack of education, or

paid off with patronizing “gifts” of food and alcohol while neighbouring communities gain financially.

In short, “Pygmies” are historically and structurally marginalized, and because of this they have many fewer opportunities to achieve their goals and live what they consider to be a “good life.” It is this situation of structural marginalization that outside organizations are attempting to address when they work in “Pygmy” communities, and it is this marginalization that forms to basis of “Pygmy” claims to Indigenous rights. (As discussed previously, a shared experience of “non-dominance” as compared to national majority populations is, according to the United Nations, a common characteristic of Indigenous peoples (Cobo 1987).)

It is true that rural “Bantu” are also poor. It is true that rural “Bantu” also lose out when forests are given over to logging, resource extraction, and conservation. But with all due acknowledgement of the hardships that rural “Bantu” face, they are not of the same character or quality. A rural “Bantu” has political and social advantages, simply by virtue of being “Bantu,” that a Baka does not.

Critique 3: Indigeneity references primitivist tropes

When they engage in strategic self-representation to attract attention from outside audiences and generate a “boomerang effect,” communities such as the Baka must *frame* issues in a way that resonates with their target audiences (see Snow and Benford 1992). This involves calling upon narratives and tropes that appeal to “the tastes and inclinations of overseas publics” that may have little knowledge of the local situation (Niezen 2010, 103). When done successfully, framing can help influence distant publics (often in the West) to take action on behalf of a marginalized community.

Advocacy campaigns undertake framing in a variety of ways. Depictions of bodily harm, for instance, such as the accounts of torture included in the videos described in the previous section, are particularly effective in international advocacy, as they evoke a universal experience. While not everyone has experienced land dispossession, everyone has experienced some form of pain and suffering (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 27). Activist campaigns also employ “abstract values,” such as “freedom, democracy, and human rights,” which are strongly held by international audiences, though these values may not always have the same resonance or meaning for local peoples (Englund 2006, 9).

As we have seen, portrayals of rights violations can also seek to demonstrate a community’s indigeneity, emphasizing characteristics such as traditional livelihoods, connection to nature, and marginalization. This casts rights abuses as violations of *Indigenous* rights. In addition to having concrete international legal implications in terms of what rights instruments are applicable, framing rights violations as *Indigenous* rights violations, can help build public awareness and support, and create connections to Indigenous rights activists, organizations, and campaigns.

As Li (2000) argues, strategic self-representation is constrained by preexisting “fields of power,” into which communities must fit in order for advocacy efforts to be successful (151). Transnational advocacy campaigns interact with prefigured “regimes of representation or “places of recognition” (153). In the case of Indigenous self-representation, communities must fit into what Li calls “the tribal slot” and be “ready and able to articulate their identity in terms of a set of characteristics recognized by their allies and by the media that presents their case to the public” as being typical of “Indigenous peoples” (157). For Baka, self-representation is informed and constrained not only by outside understandings of indigeneity, but also by the narratives and

tropes of the “Pygmy Paradigm” (see Chapter One). Both indigeneity and the “Pygmy Paradigm” function as “regimes of representation” that help determine how Baka communities can frame themselves in order to accomplish political and social objectives.

Certainly, the necessity of framing issues in a manner that appeals to external audiences can sometimes involve difficult compromises between local goals and values and external concerns and perceptions. In a widely-cited article entitled “The Return of the Native,” Kuper (2003), argues that “the conventional lines of argument used to justify “Indigenous” land claims rely on obsolete anthropological notions and on a romantic and false ethnographic vision” (395). According to Kuper, Indigenous rights advocacy is essentially undoing (or at least ignoring) the deconstructionist work of late twentieth century anthropology, reviving the “ghostly category” of “primitive peoples,” more commonly associated with “classic anthropological discourse” “under a new label” (389). Kuper uses this supposed insight to dismiss Indigenous rights claims, noting, for instance that he is “doubtful about the justice or good sense” of handing over control of “large tracts of land...to extremely small communities” (395).

There are a number of flaws with this type of critique: First, it confuses a *method* used to advance Indigenous rights claims—namely, the mobilization of tropes, such as that of Indigenous peoples as “closer” to nature—with the *substance* of those claims: Indigenous communities have been, and continue to be, politically, economically, and socially marginalized. This has enabled more powerful groups to exploit them, including by forcing them off their lands. As we will see, for many Indigenous people, a connection to nature is genuine and deeply-held source of identity. Indigenous peoples, however, are no more demanding rights because they are “close to nature” than a grieving mother, crying in the witness box, is asking her son’s murderer to put in

jail because she is sad. Her tears may move and motivate the jury, but the murderer goes to jail because he violated the son's right to life.

These critiques also underplay the agency of local people in reshaping and reimagining primitivist stereotypes and tropes to advance local objectives. As Li (2000) notes, Indigenous communities “have some room to maneuver as they situate themselves in relation to the images, discourses, and agendas that others produce for or about them” (157). These communities can strategically select “elements from the local repertoire of cultural ideas and livelihood practices” in order to “characterize the group” in a way that will meet the requirements of outside, predetermined “fields of power” (Li 2000 166). Li calls this process the “cut of positioning,” and notes that it is important to avoid “attributing too much, or too little, agency” to local communities who seek to claim the “tribal slot” and its concomitant rights and recognitions, by engaging in this process (174).

What may appear to be a replaying of primitivist stereotypes and tropes, then, may actually be an example of local self-expression. As Clifford (2013) argues: “If the essences and traditions invoked by Indigenous activists sometimes seem to repeat older colonial primitivism, as dismissive critics like Adam Kuper have argued, they do so at another moment and for new purposes” (14-5). Similarly, writing about the context of the Congo Basin specifically, Rupp (2011) notes, citing Spivak (1988), “People strategically embrace identities—even essentialized identities based on stereotypes—for particular purposes in particular contexts (14). As Li (2000) argues, “A group's self-identification as tribal or indigenous” is “a *positioning*, which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle” (151).

My own experience, for instance, reveals that many Baka individuals and organizations possess a deep and nuanced understanding of outside perceptions of “Pygmy” culture and identity. Baka activists engage in what Bayart (2000) calls “strategies of extraversion,” drawing on the “Pygmy Paradigm,” Western understandings of indigeneity, and the aforementioned values of “freedom, democracy, and human rights,” to construct and promulgate narratives through TANS that will advance their community and individual goals. Individuals and organizations cannily make use of tropes—such as the idea that Baka are poor and marginalized, or the narrative of the Baka as ecologically responsible “guardians of the forest”—in a jujitsu-like tactic in order to advance personal or community agendas (see Scott 1990). The “guardians of the forest” narrative, for instance, has proven particularly effective in the pressure campaign against the WWF, given that, as discussed above, the organization itself has made use of the traditional “Pygmy,” living in harmony with nature, to promote its conservation activities in southeast Cameroon.

Furthermore, many attributes that may appear to outside audiences as “markers of indigeneity” are not only included in Baka advocacy due to a self-conscious process of strategic self-representation (though they may be emphasized for strategic reasons as well) but rather due to a genuine pride and affective connection. One short example will help to illustrate this point. Early in my research I participated, along with staff members from Okani, in the filming of a video about climate change in the Baka village of Mayos. Mayos is located close to a major highway. Community members are predominately sedentarized, working as agricultural labourers or in other odd jobs, rather than gaining their livelihoods from hunting. Some work or go to school in the nearby town of Dimako. The majority of residents of Mayos do not live in traditional Baka *mongulus* (small round dwellings made from the branches and leaves of the

ngongo plant) but rather reside in cement or wood houses. The village has electricity. Some houses have televisions and satellite dishes. Nevertheless, many community members keep a *mongulu* next to or behind their homes, using the structure for cooking or storage. (A few residents of Mayos also do live in *mongulus*.)

While observing the process of filming, I noticed that, when community members were interviewing one another, they often chose to position the interviewee in front of a *mongulu*, rather than a cement or wooden house. In one instance, a community member who lived in a cement house gave an interview standing in front of a *mongulu* and claimed that the structure was, in fact, his family home. At the time, I took this to be an interesting case of strategic traditionalism, demonstrating a canny playing on outside expectations.

When I questioned the community member about this hypothesis, however, he seemed offended. At first I thought that this was because he thought that I was accusing him of being misleading. In conversing with Baka community members about this and other similar events over the course of my research however, I came to realize that the man's offence had a different origin. Even though he did not live in a *mongulu*, he nevertheless believed that the *mongulu* was a truer and more accurate representation of his culture and identity than a wooden or concrete house. The man had not chosen to be interviewed in front of the *mongulu* in an effort to strategically take advantage of outside understanding of Baka culture, but because he felt a genuine connection to the dwelling, which he saw as representative of his personal and cultural identity. When I asked if his decision to stand in front of the *mongulu*, given that he did not live there, was strategic, he saw this as an accusation that he had lost touch with his roots and culture, and felt affronted.

As this example demonstrates, the inclusion of “primitivist” tropes in Indigenous self-representation is more complex than it may appear. Indigenous communities are not “trapped” by primitivist expectations, rather they cannily use these expectations to advance their interests, or to demonstrate aspects of local culture and livelihoods that they view as important.

Moreover, what may appear to be a simple evoking of “primitivist” stereotypes can actually help to reshape outside expectations of Indigenous identities. As Li (2000) notes, “the contours of the [tribal] slot are themselves subject to debate” (157). There is thus scope for local people to challenge and change outside understandings of indigeneity through the representations they construct. More and more, the process of “becoming Indigenous” is not about taking on tropes of being “primordial,” “endangered,” or even “guardians of nature.” Self-representation as Indigenous can also acknowledge and valorize the use of modern technologies and other practices that have become an important part of Indigenous cultures around the world. As Turner (1992) notes “Indigenous peoples...tend to be far more concerned with the pursuit of inter-cultural adulteration...on their own social and cultural terms, than [with] the maintenance of cultural virginity” (12-3).

John Nelson, Africa Director for Forest Peoples Program, provides an example of this type of self-representation, from a film made by a Baka filmmaker:

I was really inspired by was this film by a guy called Damélé. [...] He made this wonderful film where he was filming and he said, talking about “this is my mother. I’m going to go see my mother” who’s walking through the forest. And he comes to the *mongulu*, and [says], “Oh, this is my mother.” And she’s looking after the children. And he did this whole little film of her, you know, looking very traditional, in the little hut in the forest, going out to collect food, doing this this this this. And then at the end he talks about himself. And as he walks out—he’s walking in the forest—someone takes the camera and shows [...] him. And he’s fully dressed like a government civil servant, because he’s working for the project and he’s a “modern Baka,” in a sense, but he has all those traditional skills. But it’s that one generation: “Here’s my mom. She’s living in the woods in this little sort of lean-to, but I am a modern Baka.” But he probably goes home

to a house just like that anyway. [...] I thought, “Wow, that’s great.” (personal communication)

Such representations, which show the ways in which the “traditional” and the “modern” co-exist in the lives of many Indigenous peoples, are common in Indigenous media and advocacy, and have been for decades. Indeed, one might argue that the idea that Indigenous self-representation rests on “primitivist” tropes is itself a stereotype that fails to grapple with the nuance and complexity of Indigenous identities.

Critique 4: Indigeneity was imposed on local people by outsiders

In addition to theoretical critiques citing the “constructed” nature of Indigenous identity, or its supposed reliance on “primitivist” stereotypes, there are also those who have sought to dismiss Indigenous rights claims by arguing that they are largely constructed by NGOs and other outside organizations, rather than by local people themselves. According to such critiques, the emergence of Indigenous advocacy in Africa “was not a consequence of popular or mass and conscious self-identification,” but rather, a “long enduring external mission to have the concept of indigenous peoples in international law applied to certain pre-determined peoples in Africa” (Bojosi 2010, 96; quoted in Wachira and Karjala 2016, 394-5). These critiques cite unequal power relations between Indigenous communities and NGOs to call into question the degree to which claims to Indigenous rights and identity are truly authored by local people, as well as whether it is local people, or external NGOs, who truly benefit from Indigenous rights advocacy.

According to this line of argument, NGOs and other outsiders are the primary authors of African indigeneity. These outsiders impose external concerns, narratives, and stereotypes on local peoples in order to gain legitimacy, money, and prestige through their partnership with “Indigenous” communities. This would imply that activities that are labeled as “strategic self-

representation” are, in fact, simply strategic representation, with community members “representing themselves” in the manner that NGOs and other outsiders, wish.

NGOs and other outsiders do play a role in transmitting global concepts, such as indigeneity, to local communities. This can involve what Sally Engle Merry (2006) calls *vernacularization*, or the adaptation of international ideas and concepts “to local institutions and meanings” (38). As Engle Merry notes,

A key dimension of the process of vernacularization is the people in the middle: those who translate the discourses and practices from the arena of international law and legal institutions to specific situations.... Intermediaries or translators work at various levels to negotiate between local, regional, national, and global systems of meaning. Translators refashion global rights agendas for local contexts and reframe local grievances in terms of global human rights principles and activities. However, the source of global ideas and institutions is usually another locality that has developed an idea or practice that is translated into a form that circulates globally and is then transplanted into another locality. This work is done by actors who move between the discourses of the localities they work with, taking ideas from one place and redefining them or adapting them to another. Multiple translators connect transnationally circulating discourses and particular social contexts. (39)

Certainly this is the role that Okani plays in Baka communities.

It is also true that the relationship between Indigenous communities and the NGOs that often represent them in the international sphere is by no means unproblematic. Contrary to ideal type theories of transnational advocacy networks, which portray these as egalitarian collaborations between concerned parties (see Keck and Sikkink 1998, 8), these networks are in fact often highly unequal (see Englund 2006). International activism is mediated by differential access to financial resources, decision-makers, and technical/rhetorical abilities. Local organizations such as Okani rely on national and international NGOs for access to pressure points and decision-makers in the international sphere, as well as non-financial technical assistance and information, and, most importantly, money (see Sapignoli 2016). Generally, the power of an actor in a TAN increases as it moves from the local to the international sphere. Thus

a local, grassroots organization has relatively less power than its national partner organization, which in turn has less power than the international NGO funding the advocacy project. The “transnational advocacy network” devoted to Indigenous rights in general, and Baka rights specifically, less resembles a bicycle wheel, with organizations connected to one another through a common centre, than it does a ladder, where each organization must pass through another, relatively “higher” organization in order to advance its agenda.

While these organizations may share a common goal, when their opinions and needs come into conflict, it is most often those of the better financed, better networked international NGO that win out. This in spite of the fact that local organizations are often better informed about conditions on the ground, and thus more reliable when it comes to adopting strategies that will ensure project success.

One short anecdote will help to illustrate this power disparity: During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to accompany Okani staff as they visited Baka communities that were to participate in a major new development project, financed by the European Union. As a condition of the grant, Okani had been required to take on a European consultant to help with execution and oversight, and she travelled with us. In agreeing to provide funding for the project, the European Union had established certain targets or project milestones to be achieved. Due to various difficulties related to weather, transportation, and other factors, the visit to the communities had been delayed, and thus the project was behind schedule.

This trip provided a clear illustration of the relative power of the different actors in the project. The European consultant insisted that the Okani team ignore local cultural protocol, which would have involved meeting with local chiefs in order to receive permission to begin the project, as well as international law, which requires that Indigenous communities give their free

prior and informed consent (FPIC) to all development projects. Instead, she insisted they immediately begin conducting interviews and collecting information from communities. The consultant continued to insist on this despite protests from Messe and other Okani staff that a failure to consult with local chiefs and to obtain FPIC from the communities would harm the project in the long run, creating local animosity which would impede future work in the area. For the European consultant the goal was to hit the benchmarks established by the EU, and eventually, Okani, which was reliant on the EU funding, had no choice but to follow along.

As we have seen, the successful performance of characteristics of cultural distinctiveness, traditional livelihoods, and marginalization can attract public attention, facilitate rights advocacy, and help accrue financial resources to a community. When a community benefits, of course, NGOs working with that community benefit as well. This is not, on its face, a bad thing; however it can become problematic when an NGO and a community disagree about the extent to which they are willing to perpetuate stereotypes, emphasize poverty and marginalization, etc. This is also true of instances where NGOs may project a particular image of a community without the consent of that community, or of many members of the community. In short, there is a risk that NGOs will be tempted to traffic in narratives that, while successful in accruing resources to the community (and the NGO) in the short term, perpetuate harmful stereotypes and disempower the community in the long term (Englund 2006). There is, in short, always a risk that communities will “lose control over their stories in a transnational campaign” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 19).

These power dynamics do not only exist between NGOs and Indigenous communities—they can exist within Indigenous communities as well. More educated members of a community who are more familiar with international advocacy, and who have better developed relationships

with NGOs, may have an incentive to work with these organizations to represent themselves and their community in a particular way. This allows the NGO to claim that the community is “self-representing,” when in fact it is only a small elite within that community that is constructing the representation. As Igoe (2006) observes in his ethnography of pastoralist Indigenous activism in East Africa, local leaders often “become gatekeepers between western donors and the communities that they wish to assist” (881). Rights activism activities become an “important source of prestige and donor money” for local representatives who, in turn, are “of tremendous symbolic importance to the international human right organizations that fund[] them” (878-9). Local representatives thus risk getting swept up in international activism and leaving their community, and the desire and opinions of their fellow community members, behind. As Niezen (2010) explains, there is always a risk that individuals that “lack qualities that appeal to the Western imagination” may be left behind (101). Similarly, Li (2000), quoting Thomas (1994, 89), notes that “constructions of indigenous identities almost inevitably privilege particular fractions of the indigenous population who correspond best with whatever is idealized” (172). (I explore the role of Indigenous representatives—or “spokespeople”—such as Messe in more detail in the next chapter.)

That being said, however, it is too simple to say that an NGO that puts forward a representation of a community that includes depictions of traditional livelihoods, beliefs, etc. is always trafficking in “primitivist tropes” that benefit the NGO at the expense of the community. Critiques of NGO representations of local communities also tend to overstate the linear and hierarchical nature of the relationships between community members, NGOs, and international institutions. It is true that NGOs often represent Indigenous communities to outside audiences. Local people, though, find ways of making their voices heard as part of this representational

process. Indigenous representations thus need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis based on three factors: 1. Does the representation benefit the community? 2. Does the way in which the community is depicted accurately represent an aspect of local beliefs, practices, lifeways, etc.? 3. Most importantly, has the community provided free, prior, and informed consent to be depicted in this manner and given the opportunity to participate in the process of representation?

Indeed, one might argue that critiques portraying representations of indigeneity as wholly authored by NGOs and other outside actors are themselves guilty of perpetuating notions of helplessness and disempowerment. As we have seen, local people are often aware of external understandings of their communities and cultures, and play on these understandings in order to accomplish local socio-political objectives. It is also important to avoid overemphasizing the artificiality of representations of cultural distinctiveness. While alterity may be strategically framed or emphasized, this does not mean that it does not reference local circumstances, values, and identities.

Indeed, the objectification of traditional culture itself can be viewed as an articulation of Baka culture. As discussed in the previous chapter, the roots of Baka culture and identity are to be found not in specific cultural practices and traditions, but rather in certain values; namely, “autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and creativity/play” (Moïse 2011). Strategic traditionalism can be viewed as embodying all of these values; in particular, it is an excellent example of Baka entrepreneurialism.

When organizations such as Okani use depictions of “traditional” Baka culture, such as the interview with the community member who chose to stand in front of a *mongulu*, in service of Indigenous rights claims, they are often not imposing external concerns, tropes, or stereotypes, but merely helping to select an effective forum for the expression of local identities and

concerns. This is how transnational advocacy *should* work: Outside organizations provide expertise, including knowledge of what material and legal resources and recourses are available at the national and international levels to help communities address their problems and accomplish their goals.

Moreover, Okani also ensures community consent and participation by using a participatory video process that involves extensive discussion and consensus building (see Chapter Six). Recall that, in the case of the Yenga film, it was local communities that first raised the issue of ecoguard abuse and access to protected areas with Okani. While it was Okani and InsightShare that proposed making a video, the use of a participatory video process ensured that Baka community members largely determined the film's message and content. While Okani and other outside actors undoubtedly frame and contextualize the local testimonies that Baka community members offer in videos such as the one produced in Yenga, these testimonies nevertheless continue to reflect local narratives, values, and concerns. These testimonies travel "up the ladder" from local communities, to partner NGOs, to international forums, allowing local people to have their voices heard directly in the international sphere.

Critique 5: Indigeneity has little resonance for local people

It is true that, according to my research, the majority of Baka community members do not understand themselves to be "Indigenous" in an international sense. As Messe explained, "What does an old *maman* in a village know about "P.A."? What does she know about Indigenous? It's a term in Cameroon that is not more than ten years old—*peuples autochtones*. [...] It's very recent" (personal communication; my translation). Most Baka are more focused on immediate and concrete needs, such as water, food, health care, and education, and are less engaged with abstract concepts such as rights or indigeneity. The promotion of Baka Indigenous rights occurs

primarily at the level of NGOs. In Baka communities, it is usually only among community members working for or with local development and advocacy organizations and campaigns that one finds a conception of the Baka as “Indigenous peoples.” These individuals have had greater exposure to rights discourses. They have often been informed by external actors of the Baka’s “indigeneity” and have then taken on this identity to varying degrees.

The lack of widespread understanding by Baka community members of themselves as “Indigenous peoples” was brought home to me during my research when Okani attempted to screen videos made by other Indigenous communities from around the world, made as part of the “Conversations with the Earth” project, in Baka villages. The other Indigenous communities depicted in these films faced similar problems to the Baka: political marginalization, land dispossession, the impact of climate change on traditional livelihoods. Through a grant from InsightShare, I worked with Noël from Okani, as well as other Baka community members, to dub the videos from communities in the Andes, the Arctic, and other Indigenous communities around the world, into the Baka language. We then showed the dubbed videos at community screenings, which were followed by facilitated discussions.

It quickly became clear that Baka audiences were having a difficult time engaging with the films. In part, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter Six, this was due to technical issues with the screening equipment and dubbing. It was also, however, because many community members did not see themselves as having much in common with the other Indigenous communities depicted in the films. Indeed, Messe would often show Phil Agland’s documentary film about the Baka, *A Cry from the Rainforest*, or Baka music videos, after CWE screenings as a sort of reward for audience members. Invariably, while the audience had appeared relatively disengaged during

the CWE films, the screening area would fill up and people would become much more interested once the Baka film began to play. Noël explained to me during one of the screenings:

People were not entirely motivated [by the CWE films]. You know that when you show something to someone for the first time, people observe. And especially [when the film shows] communities that they don't know. And they don't exactly understand the language. Even though we translated. Because the film that we showed, for example the film that we are in the process of showing [*A Cry from the Rainforest*], it hits them directly. You see? But also the activities that those people are engaged in [in the CWE videos], and the way of life, is a bit not the same. And so a few people lost interest. (personal communication; my translation)

Noël alludes to one of the key reasons why Baka community members were less engaged by the CWE films: Many Baka, even those living sedentary lifestyles in villages like Mayos, maintain a strong interest in and attachment to the forest and to forest-based livelihoods of hunting and gathering. Videos depicting different landscapes—arctic tundra or savannah—or livelihoods such as pastoralism, thus held less interest. As Messe explained to me, when trying to explain the lack of interest in a video made by a Maasai community in Kenya, ‘women running behind a herd of cows means nothing to a Baka.’

The lack of immediate identification with other “Indigenous peoples,” however, should not imply that Baka claims to indigeneity should not be taken seriously. It is true that the specific claim that the Baka are “Indigenous” happens a little way up the organizational “ladder.” Often it is organizations such as Okani that are connected both to local communities and to international networks and discourses that choose to frame local rights claims specifically as *Indigenous* rights claims. This framing, however, would be ineffective if it did not line up with pre-existing characteristics and circumstances of Baka communities.

Videos such as the ones made about the issue of ecoguard abuse, for instance, are effective tools for Indigenous rights advocacy not because they are framed in a particular way by external NGOs, but because, while many participants in Baka video advocacy do not conceive of

the works they produce as articulating a claim to Indigenous rights specifically, many Baka do view themselves in a manner that is consistent with external understandings of indigeneity; that is, as members of a group that is distinct from the national majority population due to a unique culture and set of livelihood practices, and which is discriminated against and marginalized due to this distinctiveness. While the majority of Baka community members with whom I interacted during my research were focused primarily or exclusively on their local circumstances, and were relatively uninterested in the fact that there were similar groups facing similar issues in other part of the world, this lack of awareness does not at all imply that the Baka are not Indigenous, that they are not entitled to Indigenous rights, or that they are being somehow duped into participating in a false representation of their community. Moreover, there is a potential that, through projects such as CWE, Baka may increasingly come to identify commonalities between themselves and Indigenous communities from other parts of the world.

11. Questions of Identity

It is also possible that, by representing themselves as “Indigenous” or “P.A.,” Baka might come to take on these identities in a deeper way. As Foucault argues, identity categories are constantly being constructed and reconstructed through “discursive bricolage whereby an older discourse...is ‘recovered,’ ‘modified,’ ‘encased,’ and ‘encrusted’ in new forms” (Stoler 1995, 61). Similarly, Niezen (2004) argues that, “the collective sense of self...is not arrived at in isolation from behind closed cultural boundaries, but rather is inspired by and negotiated with others...and adjusted to the tastes of a universal public” (78). This process involves what Hacking (1995) calls the “looping effect of human kinds”:

To create new ways of classifying people is also to change how we can think of ourselves, to change our sense of self-worth, even how we remember our own past. This in turn generates a looping effect because the kind changes, and so there is new causal knowledge to be gained and perhaps, old causal knowledge to be jettisoned. (369)

By proclaiming themselves “Indigenous” or “P.A,” then, some Baka might, in a sense, be making these identities real. During the aforementioned project of dubbing CWE videos from other Indigenous communities into Baka, I witnessed Noël literally translating the term “Indigenous peoples” into Baka language. There is, of course, no direct translation. Li (2000) observed in her research in Indonesia that “activists writing in their own language continue[d] to leave the English term “Indigenous people” untranslated” (155). Noël, however, found a clever way to adapt this term to local circumstances: “*Peuples autochthones* has two meanings. *Peuples autochthones* means...“the people who conserve the forest,” “the guardians of the forest.” And we can also say... “those who conserve” [or] “the inhabitants, the people of the forest” (personal communication; my translation). Noël here was taking a general aspect of Indigenous identity—that it denotes people with a particular connection to specific land and livelihoods—and adapting it to resonate with local circumstance. Given the centrality of the forest to Baka livelihoods and identities, the general definition of indigeneity as promulgated by the U.N., which includes characteristics such as “ancestral connection to lands” and “determin[ation] to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories” (Cobo 1987) becomes “the people who conserve the forest.”

I asked Noël how this translation would work for videos where the community depicted did not reside in a forest, but rather in a savannah or Arctic environment. His answer was revealing:

Even the *peuples autochthones* who live in the savannah and other places, they still live in the forest! They take the savannah as their forest. Because it’s their environment. It’s their forest for them. But those who live in the forest, that’s their environment. And we need to recognize them according to their rights. Because those who live in the savannah have the savannah. They don’t have the possibility of having forests. But those who live in the forest have the forests. The people who live in the high mountains have the mountains. It’s like that. And all of that, for the Baka, is the forest. [...] And if that forest

is lost, everyone will lose themselves as well. No forest, no life. (personal communication; my translation)

Here, then, is one example of how Indigenous identity might come to be taken on in a more widespread, consolidated way in Baka communities. As NGOs translate—or “vernacularize”—international understandings of indigeneity to coincide with local values, Baka may come to feel both that they are “Indigenous peoples” and that they share this identity with other communities from around the world.

The process by which Baka take on Indigenous identity, however, is not simply about finding synergies between local practices, values, and beliefs (the trope of Baka as “guardians of the forest,” or the value of entrepreneurialism, for instance). The process of “becoming” Indigenous can also reshape understanding of Baka culture. To a lesser extent, the incorporation of new communities and groups in international indigeneity also has the potential to reshape international understanding of Indigenous identity. As Hacking explains,

There are changes in individuals of [a] kind, which means that the kind becomes different.... Next, because the kind changes, there is new knowledge to be had about the kind. But the new knowledge in turn becomes part of what is to be known about members of the kind, who change again. This is what I call the looping effect for human kinds. (369-70)

Li (2007) provides a specific example of how this “looping effect” can occur, through a case study of Freddy, an Indigenous activist from Indonesia:

Freddy came to see himself as a member of an indigenous group defending its territory against the state—an identity he did not carry with him when he left the village to pursue his studies years before. That identity emerged when a set of ideas to which he was exposed by the NGOs supporting his village helped him to make sense of his situation, locate allies and opponents, and organize. (24)

While the majority of Baka have not yet come to think of themselves as “Indigenous peoples,” as we will see in the next chapter, many of Okani’s Baka staff are beginning to embrace this identity and to transmit it to the communities in which they work. Through their

interactions with NGOs and a global discourse of Indigenous rights and identity, some Baka are coming to understand and reframe long-standing components of their identities—a spiritual/emotions to the forest, a desire to practice traditional livelihoods, marginalization vis-à-vis national “mainstream” culture—as evidence that they were “Indigenous peoples” in the international sense. This has led them to understand land dispossession and other issues as violations of *Indigenous* rights.

12. Conclusion

Certainly it is important to understand the power dynamics inherent in processes of self-representation and identity formation. As this chapter has shown, articulating Indigenous identity involves multiple agents, operating at different levels. The Baka cast themselves as Indigenous, but they are also cast as Indigenous by CBOs, NGOs, and other outside actors. Both the Baka and these outsiders are responding to discourses such as the “Pygmy Paradigm.” Individuals, communities, and NGOs, may also be responding to different structural and political incentives and imperatives. When indigeneity is successfully articulated, it is because these incentives and imperatives (more or less) align, allowing for the co-production of an image of the Baka as Indigenous peoples.

While NGOs and international institutions played an important role in the spread of Indigenous rights discourse in some African communities, however, it is important not to understate the agency of these communities themselves. As Hodgson (2002) argues, it is more accurate to understand the spread of Indigenous identity in Africa as involving a reciprocal relationship between international and local actors:

The explosion of indigenous rights movements during the past few decades has been at once a local and a global phenomenon, the product of both Euro-American interests in empowering marginal groups and of the success of certain minority groups in strategically representing and promoting their own identities to defend rights, mobilize resources, and advance certain political, economic, and cultural agendas. (1040-1)

All of which brings us back to back to Axel's proclamation: "*Je suis P.A.*!" Mostly, one hears the term "P.A." bandied about in conferences and meetings of Indigenous NGOs and activists. It was interesting, then, to hear Axel invoke it in a different context. This was not a meeting devoted to Indigenous rights; it was a seemingly spontaneous utterance. It was almost as if Axel was saying "*je suis P.A.*" to himself. Moreover, it was interesting that he applied this term to himself, stating "*je suis P.A.*," rather than using it as a generalized term applied to the Baka as a whole.

Was Axel's embracing of this identity simply strategic? An attempt to get Messe and I, whom he knew worked for an organization dedicated to supporting "P.A.," to give him something? Perhaps. Indeed, this strategy has long been used by Baka communities with regard to the moniker "Pygmy." Baka do not often refer to themselves as "Pygmies." Most consider this term to be offensive, and so invoke it only when the pros of obtaining something from an outsider steeped in the "Pygmy Paradigm" outweigh the cons of invoking an offensive term. As Messe often stated, 'If a Baka says "I am a Pygmy," it's because he wants something from you.' Messe noted that some Baka were beginning to use terms such as "P.A." in the same way: "It ["P.A."] is an advocacy term. [...] To do advocacy or something, or even attract resources, someone will say to you '*je suis P.A.*'" (personal communication; my translation). This was Messe's interpretation of Axel's spontaneous utterance of "*je suis P.A.*" It was an attempt to strategically mobilize an identity in order to gain resources for himself and his community.

What was interesting, though, given Axel's track record of asking for money and other favours every time I saw him, was that his invocation of his status as "P.A." was not directly tied to any substantive request. Moreover, there seemed to be a joy to Axel's proclamation. He had a sort of twinkle in his eye, as if shouting his identity as "P.A." at the top of his lungs was both

exciting and, perhaps, a little mischievous. My interpretation is that Axel was trying this identity on. Seeing what it would yield for him and his community, but also, in a deeper sense, how it felt as a new part of his self-image. Axel was toying with the idea of *becoming* P.A.

Chapter 5

Spokespersonship, Identity, and “Deep Actionism”

1. *Baka je suis*

The past four decades have witnessed an important shift in the way that Indigenous and marginalized communities are represented in global fora. During this period, it has become less and less common for non-Indigenous spokespeople, such as missionaries, government officials, and NGO workers, to speak on behalf of Indigenous communities.¹ Instead, there has been increasing promotion of, and requirement for, Indigenous self-representation. The process of self-representation is carried out by *Indigenous spokespeople*.

As noted in the previous chapter, much of the literature on international Indigenous rights and identity has explored the issue of strategic self-representation, examining the ways in which Indigenous groups mobilize various markers—marginalization, distinctive language/culture, traditional livelihoods, connection to nature, etc.—to achieve recognition or attract resources from international audiences. What is relatively undertheorized in such works is the fact that activities of translation and strategic self-representation are, in fact, undertaken not by groups or organizations, but by specific individuals.

According to Tania Li (2000), the “articulation of “indigenous” identity” among communities in the Global South required, “the existence of a local political structure that included individuals...mandated to speak on behalf of the group” and “a capacity to present cultural identity and local knowledge in forms intelligible to outsiders—an activity undertaken in this case by a literate elite.” (169) Participation in international Indigenous right advocacy, in other words, requires not only that a group engage in strategic self-representation; it requires the participation of specific individuals—spokespeople—to articulate local issues and identities in a

way that is compelling and legible to outside audiences. Similarly, Keck and Sikkink (1998) argue in their work on transnational advocacy networks that “however amenable particular issues may be to strong transnational and transcultural messages, there must be actors capable of transmitting those messages and targets who are vulnerable to persuasion or leverage” (28). Speaking about the alliance between Amazonian Indigenous groups and international environmental activists, Conklin and Graham (1995) write that, “The Amazonian eco-Indian alliance...depends on a few individuals to mediate communications between local native communities and the outside world. Go-betweens are needed to surmount constraints of linguistic and cultural differences, not to mention the logistical difficulties of communicating with remote rain forest villages” (704).

In the context of self-representation, constituting oneself as an Indigenous spokesperson involves a two-step process. First, one must be recognized as a member of the group for which one speaks. Second, one must be recognized as a legitimate spokesperson of that group. This legitimacy derives from a number of different audiences—local, national, and international—which employ different criteria for determining whether or not they will accept that a particular individual speak on behalf of a particular group or community. This requires a difficult and canny balancing act.

Given the current international focus on self-representation and self-determination, in order to be effective, spokespeople for Indigenous communities must successfully embody their group’s “indigeneity.” As Conklin and Graham (1995) put it, Indigenous spokespeople “serve as metonyms—symbols that stand for entire Indigenous groups. Leaders come to be seen not as individual personalities but as representatives of an amorphous, homogenous, authentic community” (704). At the same time, in order to effectively represent their communities in

international fora, Indigenous spokespeople must acquire skills and attributes not traditionally associated with indigeneity. If an Indigenous spokesperson fails to meet outside expectations of purity and authenticity they may find their position called into question: “If an international funding agency should deem a native leader corrupted or unauthentic, his or her fall from grace is swift. Resources are redirected to new and more ‘representative’ organizations” (Brown 1993, 318). At the same time, if the spokesperson is “too traditional,” they will be shut out from discussion and may risk losing local legitimacy due to their ineffectiveness in accruing resources for local communities or transmitting local views to outside audiences.

In addition to this authenticity testing by outside audiences, Indigenous spokespeople must maintain their legitimacy and relationships with the communities they represent. As we will see, these communities have different criteria by which they evaluate legitimacy. Many local communities are less concerned with superficial attributes and markers of “indigeneity” and more concerned with the impact of a spokesperson’s actions in attracting resources and benefits. There is always a risk, though, that, “in acquiring the linguistic skills, cultural savvy, and political connections required to deal with outsiders, bicultural mediators may become alienated from their local communities” (Conklin and Graham 1995, 704; see Jackson 1991). This is not to say, however, these skills and connections mark the spokesperson as inauthentic, but rather because they can mark him as having lost touch with the needs of his or her constituents.

When it comes to Baka Indigenous self-representation, the divergent requirements of local, national, and global audiences for determining the authenticity of spokespeople have had the effect of empowering an elite group of Baka community members. These individuals are often of mixed Baka and “Bantu” parentage. They can thus claim to be legitimate “Baka representatives,” but have also had access to educational opportunities and financial resources

not available to the majority of Baka community members. While hybridity is, in this sense, an advantage, however, it also renders the position of Baka spokespeople quite tenuous, as at any moment they risk having their legitimacy called into question by one audience or another.

This chapter explores the way in which Indigenous spokespeople constitute their legitimacy through a case study of Messe Venant, the director of Okani. The title of this section comes from Messe's unpublished memoir, which relates not only his work as a Baka spokesperson, but also his struggle, as a bicultural individual, to understand and embody his Baka identity. As we will see, Messe's unique personal history has left him well-placed to meet the exigencies of Indigenous self-representation. Through his work with Okani, and his career as a Baka rights activist and spokesperson more broadly, Messe has constituted his legitimacy through canny and shifting performances of identity for a variety of audiences. The remainder of this chapter examines the micropolitics of Messe's work as a legitimate Baka spokesperson, which involves strategically deploying a complex ethnocultural identity and personal history.

2. Messe's Story

Messe grew up in Andom, a village about 50 kilometres west of Bertoua, the capital of Cameroon's Eastern Region. Most people in Andom are of the Bamvélé Bantu group. As with other "Bantu" groups, the relationship between Bamvélé and Baka has historically been highly unequal. Messe and his siblings were unique in the village in that, while their mother was Bamvélé, their father was Baka. Inter-marriage between "Pygmy" women and "Bantu" men does sometimes occur in Eastern Cameroon. Marriage between a "Pygmy" man and "Bantu" woman, however, remains rare in most parts of Central Africa, and in many areas both "Pygmy" and "Bantu" informants deny that inter-marriage is possible (Bahuchet 2012, 16; Takeuchi 2014, 310).² Indeed, Messe explained to me that I was not the first anthropologist to express curiosity about his background:

Even Cameroonian anthropologists... I knew the [well-known Cameroonian anthropologist and author] professor Séverin Cécile Abega, when he discovered me—or rather, he made my acquaintance—I’m not an object that you have to discover! [laughing]. He was really very very very surprised [...] because [...] on the issue of marriage between Baka and Bantu, very often it is Bantu men who take Baka wives. But when I explained to them my situation, my family’s situation, that it’s the opposite, everyone opened their eyes [miming opening his eyes very wide]. And they wanted to send students to me, to come conduct anthropological and social studies to see how it happened, so that they could make big publications. (personal communication; my translation)

There is some evidence, however, that intermarriage in general—and intermarriage between “Pygmy” men and “Bantu” women specifically—has increased in recent years as “Pygmy” groups have sedentarized and become more culturally similar to “Bantu” (Hewlett 1996).

Certainly my own research indicates that sexual liaisons between Baka men and “Bantu” women are relatively common, though these only infrequently result in marriage and are often seen as a source of embarrassment in “Bantu” communities (see also Rupp 2011, 122-147).

Messe’s father, Jean-Baptiste, and Messe’s mother, Marie, met in elementary school in the 1960s. At the time, Jean-Baptiste was already “sedentarized” and living in Andom. Jean-Baptiste himself was of mixed parentage, the son of a Baka father and a Bantu (Maka) mother. His father died when he was young. He was thus already somewhat culturally assimilated at the time that he met Marie. Nevertheless, he was still regarded as a “Baka” by others, most notably Marie’s family.

In 1967, when Messe’s parents were in their late teens, Marie became pregnant. Owing to a policy that forbade pregnant woman from attending school, Messe’s parents were forced to withdraw from their classes. They married and settled with Marie’s family in Andom. As Messe explains, this was an atypical arrangement for a “Bantu” family, as in Bamvélé and other “Bantu” cultures it is more common for a woman to live with her husband’s family after marriage. For the Baka, however, the opposite is true, and so Jean-Baptiste’s family thought it

completely normal that he would go to live with his wife's family. Messe was born shortly thereafter, on October 7, 1967.

While Messe's mother faced resistance and even rejection from others in the community and from much of her family, her mother was somewhat supportive of her marriage to Jean-Baptiste. Messe attributes this to the fact that his maternal grandmother had no sons:

My grandmother had seven girls in a row. So when my mother fell in love with my father my grandmother said "at last I have a boy." That's how my father was welcomed into the family—to play the role of son in my grandmother's family. That was the little protection that my father had, but outside of that, it was really rejection. (personal communication; my translation)

During his childhood, Messe, his father, and siblings, were the only Baka living in Andom. While he grew up in a mostly "Bantu" cultural milieu, Messe knew that, owing to the fact that his father was a "Pygmy," he was "different" from others in his extended family. This was partly rooted in the fact that he and his siblings were treated as inferior by other family members, notably his maternal grandfather:

It often wasn't easy to get along with the other cousins, the children of my mother's sister, because whenever—and they didn't live in Andom—when they came [to Andom] on vacation [...] they were really treated well. We worked every day in the plantations. We harvested coffee, we carried pineapples, and when my [maternal] grandfather sold them, he kept that money for the other grandchildren who came and we, really, he wouldn't even buy us a piece of clothing. [...] I remember, even to eat, when they'd slaughtered a chicken or there was a good meal, it was for the others. And to us they would say, "No, no, you are here everyday and so you can't.... Let the others eat first." But actually, it wasn't true it was just for... People they really weren't very.... My mother she really put up with insults and everything. (personal communication; my translation)

We should note the parallels here between the way in which Messe and his siblings were treated and the way in which "Bantu" families have historically treated Baka families with which they are associated, requiring them to engage in agricultural labor for little or no remuneration (see Chapters Two and Three). Like his children, Messe's father also often undertook agricultural

work for his wife's family, and—as I witnessed myself during my research—his relationship with his in-laws very much resembled the quasi-feudal relationships that one often sees between Baka and “Bantu” more generally.

In spite of living a sedentary lifestyle with his Bantu in-laws, Jean Baptiste maintained some Baka beliefs and practices. In an unpublished memoir, Messe describes his father as follows:

JB...was condemned to spend the rest of his life living with his in-laws. Working very hard for his wife's parents, he was required to draw from the two cultures that he now possessed: Baka culture and Bamvélé culture. In short, he became both a hunter-gatherer and a farmer. No one imagined that, at such an early date, they would see a Baka adapt in this way. JB stayed Baka in terms of his knowledge of medicinal plants. They called him Doctor. It was this side of him that made him the most reputable traditional healer in the area. He healed with the help of plants. (Messe 2011 my translation)

The family also had a cabin in the forest, to which they would go during school vacations. There, Jean-Baptiste taught the children to hunt, fish, and gather honey—practices that Messe regards as putting him in touch with his Baka roots.

In spite of learning these livelihood practices, however, Messe did not partake of Baka ritual or spiritual beliefs and practices. Most importantly, Messe did not undergo Jengi ritual initiation, which most Baka regard as an essential step to becoming an adult male Baka. During the Jengi initiation, “initiates live together in an isolated camp in the forest where they learn about the roles and responsibilities of adults in society, techniques of hunting, and about spiritual life in the forest.... At the end of the ritual instruction, the initiates are ritually killed, to be reborn during the culminating ceremony as adult men ready to participate fully in social life” (Rupp 2003, 49; see Bahuchet 1992, 288-89).

During his childhood, then, Messe was much more culturally Bamvélé than Baka. Most of his friends were Bantu, and his day-to-day life shared little in common with those of children

growing up in Baka families in Baka villages, with the major exception of being discriminated against and marginalized by some Bantu relatives and neighbours. Messe spoke Bamvélé and knew only a few words in Baka. Perhaps most importantly, growing up in Andom with his mother's family afforded Messe educational opportunities to which he would not have had access had he grown up in a Baka village. Many Baka children lack access to quality of education. This is due to a number of factors: Schools are difficult to access due to the remoteness of many Baka villages. Schools in southeast Cameroon, where most Baka reside, are of poor quality, making them less attractive for putative Baka students and their parents. Many Baka parents are also resistant to the idea of formal, state-instituted education, as schooling interferes with seasonal livelihood activities and other practices. These parents prefer to practice traditional modes of knowledge transmission. Baka students and parents are also resistant to attending school due to the discrimination that Baka students sometimes face from their "Bantu" classmates. Finally, while Cameroon has instituted free primary education, the expense of ancillary materials, such as school supplies and uniforms, puts education out of reach for many Baka families. This is to say nothing of the fact that that one must still pay tuition in order to attend high school, making this almost impossible for Baka children without the aid of a patron or other form of support (see Egbe 2012).

In spite of the fact that his family was quite poor and indebted, Messe was able to complete primary school, after which he left Andom to attend high school in Bertoua. His new classmates, who were not from Andom, did not know his family background. They thus regarded Messe as Bantu. Messe chose not to challenge this belief. Indeed, he recounted to me his embarrassment when one of his teachers revealed the fact that he was a "Pygmy":

At a certain moment, I know I was in *classe de troisième* [roughly equivalent to tenth grade in North America], and that day the teacher was giving a lesson on the populations

of Cameroon.... [And we were talking about] *les Pygmées*. And I don't know how he knew I was Baka and that I was in the room. He started teaching, "Pygmies are...they are of short stature... hunting and gathering... we can find them here and here and here...." And then he said, "And there is even one here in the room!" [laughing]

I was barely fifteen or sixteen years old, I was in *classe de troisième* and... "There is even one here in the room...." Whereas, I knew that I was in Bertoua, and no one knew who I was in Bertoua. That I was a Baka and I was in Bertoua. Well, I don't know, maybe somewhere someone gave him some information without my knowing. But he said, "And there is even one here in the class!" And he said, "Mr. Messe, stand up." When I stood up everyone [miming, turning his head looking all around the room as if trying to spot something]...you know when everyone turns their head to find who this is about. It makes a big noise in the silence. (personal communication; my translation)

While he was studying in Bertoua, Messe met his wife, Edwidge. Edwidge is Bamvélé.

Like his father before him, Messe found that his wife's family was quite resistant to him on account of the fact that he was, according to them, a "Pygmy":

Ah, it was really complicated. "Ah you're going off to marry a Pygmy!" [...] But luckily [miming putting his fingers in his ears] she closed her ears and said, "I've made my choice." And that was really, pretty much the same response that my mother gave to people: "I've chosen. I've made my choice." [...]

People were so opposed [to my father marrying my mother]. And that's the same thing that I experienced with Edwidge. Because people say, well, first of all, "It's a poor family. What can they give you? We won't be able to drink and eat. You won't have a marriage celebration." [...]

I remember when I was taking Edwidge as my wife I really said to her, "Do you accept to be the wife of a Baka?" You see? Because at the start it was really very very strong. They made fun [of her] all over. (personal communication; my translation)

As these accounts make clear, many people were aware of Messe's Baka heritage during his adolescence. While he did not try to hide this, it was not something that he advertised. Indeed, at this time Messe seems to have been rather ambivalent about his Baka identity.

Messe cites a very specific moment at which this changed, and he decided to embrace his status as Baka. On a Sunday morning in 1992, Messe was at his father-in-law's house, watching the consecration of the new Catholic Bishop of Batouri (a large town east of Bertoua) on

television. During his speech, the bishop mentioned that he would be working on an initiative for “integrating” Baka in the region. Messe decided to write him a letter. He identified himself as Baka and asked if he could benefit from this new project, either through a job or a scholarship. At the time, the Catholic Church was undertaking major Baka education project, *Association pour l’auto-promotion des populations de l’Est Cameroun* (AAPPEC). Messe had finished high school, qualified as a teacher, and had gained experience working in an elementary school near Andom.

The bishop seems to have been intrigued by the idea of employing a Baka teacher on the AAPPEC project; however, he first sought to make sure that Messe was, in fact, Baka, sending a colleague to Andom to ask around and verify Messe’s background. Once these inquiries proved satisfactory, the bishop transmitted Messe’s letter to a colleague, Frère Antoine Huysmans, who arranged a meeting with Messe. During the meeting Frère Antoine passed along an exhortation, which the bishop had written in red ink on Messe’s letter, that Messe not attend university, but rather work for the betterment of “his people” by serving as a teacher on the AAPPEC project: “He said [...] ‘We can’t send you to university because if you go to university you will lose yourself. You will go study things that surely won’t even be important for your community,’ Messe told me. Instead, Frère Antoine explained to Messe that he wished to employ him to work in Baka schools (personal communication; my translation).

This proved to be a decisive moment in Messe’s life. Not only did he gain a new job, one that would set him on the path that would lead to the founding of Okani, it was the moment at which he truly reclaimed his Baka identity. Frère Antoine came to serve a close friend and mentor. Messe has described him as being “like my parent,” and one of Messe’s sons is named Antoine in his honour.

While Messe had felt some sense of Baka-ness prior to this, particularly when he was engaged in activities such as hunting with his father, it was only once he became involved in the AAPPEC project that he truly committed to “being” Baka. Not only had he claimed his Baka-ness in his letter, he now committed to learning Baka language and cultural practices.

In the AAPPEC project, I had to live in the [Baka] communities. I remember I called my father one morning and I said to him, “It’s unacceptable that, if I’m going to work with my people, that I speak to them in French, or in a language that isn’t Baka.” And it was starting from this moment that I took the firm resolution to really put myself into training. And that produced what you see today. (personal communication; my translation)

While there was certainly an element of instrumental self-interest at play here—Messe wrote “I am Baka” in his letter to the bishop in part to benefit from a project designed to benefit Baka—this was not the only, or even the primary, reason why Messe chose to embrace his Baka identity at this juncture. Rather, he describes his involvement with the AAPPEC project as an opportunity to embrace a longstanding desire to learn about his Baka roots. When I asked if he was disappointed that the bishop had refused his request for a scholarship to attend university, he replied:

No, I wasn’t disappointed; quite the opposite, it was like a calling from far away that was coming to fruition because some [time] before I was saying naively to my father, “But, we have to learn things about our roots [*chez nous*]. [...] So I wasn’t disappointed, but rather I sensed a calling that was inside of me. (personal communication; my translation)

Messe worked for the AAPPEC project for five years, helping to coordinate intercultural education for Baka children in schools in and around Mintom and Yokadouma, towns in southeast Cameroon with large surrounding Baka populations. Through working in Baka villages as part of the AAPPEC project Messe learned to speak fluent Baka and about Baka cultural practices and beliefs.

While this presented an opportunity to immerse himself in Baka culture, however, Messe was, at the same time, becoming more, not less, cosmopolitanism. Notably, around the same

period that he was working on the AAPPEC project, Messe also took time off to complete a graduate degree at the *Institution pan-Africain pour le développement d'Afrique Centrale* (IPDAC) in Douala.

It is also unclear to what extent Messe presented himself as Baka while working for AAPPEC. When I asked him about this he told me that he found relatives of his father in some of the Baka communities where he worked, and that these individuals welcomed him and made him feel “as if he was at home.” In 2014, however, when I interviewed some of Messe’s former students, none seemed aware that, like them, he was Baka; when he was their teacher they had always believed that he was “Bantu”.

For his part, Messe describes struggling, and continuing to struggle with his bi-cultural identity. It is not that he was making a conscious choice to accept or deny his Baka heritage during this time, but rather that he was trying to figure out who he was, and fearing rejection on both sides. He did not possess the traditional knowledge, skills, etc. to be “fully” Baka, and yet, as he told me, he would “never be Bamvélé” because of his Baka heritage. Messe compares himself to “a child born to a white father or a white mother and an African”:

For him it will be also, maybe, the same problem. Even if the child grows up in the West, and he has skin that is a bit lighter, they’ll say to him, “No, you are African.” And it can... I know cases like that where children are always under evaluation [*en ballottage*]. [...] The child never chooses to be in that situation, but he is there and he has to solve the problem, and that’s a bit the case with me. I didn’t choose to have a Baka father and a Bantu mother. That wasn’t my choice. If it had been given to me to decide [laughing] I think I would have decided to be on one side or the other. So there you go! (personal communication; my translation).

While Messe may have been able to “pass” as “Bantu” in certain circumstances, at other times, such as in his home village of Andom, this was impossible. “The thing is,” Messe told me, “in a very specific environment you can’t deny yourself. You can’t deny your identity, because everyone around you knows who you are. Me myself in Andom, for example, if I say that I am

Bamvélé, people will laugh at me” (personal communication; my translation). Messe’s Baka-ness was thus not an internal resource that he could choose to embrace (or not) for strategic reasons. Rather, it was an inextricable part of how people regarded him, and thus of his being, that he had to reckon with.

Messe eventually resolved this situation by choosing to embrace his role as a go-between, translating between the Baka and “Bantu” worlds. In arriving at this decision, he took inspiration from the Senegalese author Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s seminal postcolonial novel *L’aventure ambiguë* (1961), wherein a young boy named Samba is caught between the competing forces of tradition and modernity:

I identified immediately with little Samba Diallo—who was the main character in this work—who was really throw about [*malmené*] between the waves of the Occident and his native Senegal and who, finally, didn’t know who he was anymore. And I said [to myself], “maybe instead of not knowing who I am, I have to [...] identify myself and know who I am and use the two worlds, to do a bit on both sides, to bring people to understand one another easily. To be like an ambassador. Ambassador of the other side of the Bantu, and ambassador with the Baka to say ‘we can live together.’” (personal communication; my translation).

As noted above, during his time working in southeast Cameroon, Messe acquired the knowledge and skills to play this role, most notably by becoming fluent in the Baka language. Moreover, he came increasingly to embrace the Baka side of his identity. Indeed, Messe’s unfinished memoir, which he began writing in the early 2010s, is entitled ‘*Baka je suis!*’

In spite of the advantages entailed by Messe’s bicultural identity, however, his background also carries risk.

It can also be a disadvantage, because at any moment you can run the risk of being rejected by both sides. And to find yourself really not knowing who you are. That’s the side that is a bit dangerous of this situation. That is to say, you go to the Baka [and] the Baka say to you, “No, you are...you should go over there.” And the others say, “No, your father is Baka. You are not from here.” But if I go where there are Baka, for example Salapoumbé [or] Moloundou, will they accept me? No, they will say, “But you are already a Bantu.” You see? It’s really an ambiguous situation that can, at a certain

moment, be advantageous, but, at another moment, when [other] interests are at play, can be disadvantageous. (personal communication; my translation).

Messe's reclaiming of his Baka identity also eventually led him to work with colleagues to found a Baka development organization: Okani. As discussed earlier, Okani launched after the AAPPEC project collapsed in the mid-2000s, receiving funding and logistical support from Forest Peoples' Programme, a UK-based NGO active in Baka communities. Messe and Okani's co-founders explicitly presented their organization as "by the Baka, for the Baka," signalling this by adopting a Baka name. (Okani means "let's go" in Baka language.) (I discuss the founding of Okani in much more detail in Chapter Three.)

Today, Messe embraces both sides of his identity. He is perhaps more culturally Bamvélé than Baka. He speaks mostly in Bamvélé to his wife and children and participates in a number of Bamvélé community groups in Bertoua. Yet he has also made an effort to transmit Baka culture to his children, bringing home and screening films of Baka music and cultural practices, and encouraging them to spend time with their grandfather, Jean-Baptiste, whom Messe regards as the guardian of the family's Baka heritage:

With my children I'm always in favour... When they are in the village with their grandfather... Very often they flee there. When June comes, I arrive—maybe I went into town—and they are no longer here [at the house in Bertoua]. [...] They have gone [to Andom] to find their grandfather, because they know that they will...go fishing, they have honey to gather and they will run all over the forest with their grandfather, making traps and all that. (personal communication; my translation)

Nevertheless, Messe's children have little knowledge of Baka language and culture and live definitively "Bantu" lives in Bertoua. Messe speaks of his family's life in a large town as a regrettable necessity. The quality of education in the small villages, particularly in the East region, he explains, is not good. Thus, he has chosen to provide his children with education in Bertoua in order to give them an opportunity to advance:

Well, one of the reasons that caused me to settle in Bertoua, it was really the issue of education. Meilleur, Roland, Bijou, Tito [Messe's oldest four children], they all grew up in the villages. But education was a problem. There weren't good schools. There really wasn't anything in terms of education. [...]

That's a worry, and it's because of this that every holiday I tighten my belt a bit so that we visit all the villages where we worked and they can see their friends again. I would have really liked if they could have been there [in the villages], but in staying there would they really be getting the education that I was looking for, that I fought for for them? That's bit the big difficulty. (personal communication; my translation)

3. Baka Spokespersonship

Messe clearly feels a strong connection to Baka traditions, peoples, and culture. In spite of this, however, it is not clear if, given his ability to “pass” as Bantu, he would have been as willing to embrace his Baka roots were it not for a changing national and international climate. While, as we have seen, Baka still face serious discrimination and marginalization, the growing international and, to some extent, national, recognition of Indigenous and minority rights (see Chapter Four) has created greater space and opportunities for some people who are recognized members of Indigenous and minority groups. This is particularly the case for the “spokespeople” like Messe who represent these groups in external fora. The increased imperative for self-representation has also created financial and professional opportunities for Indigenous individuals who can successfully mediate between local communities and outsiders.

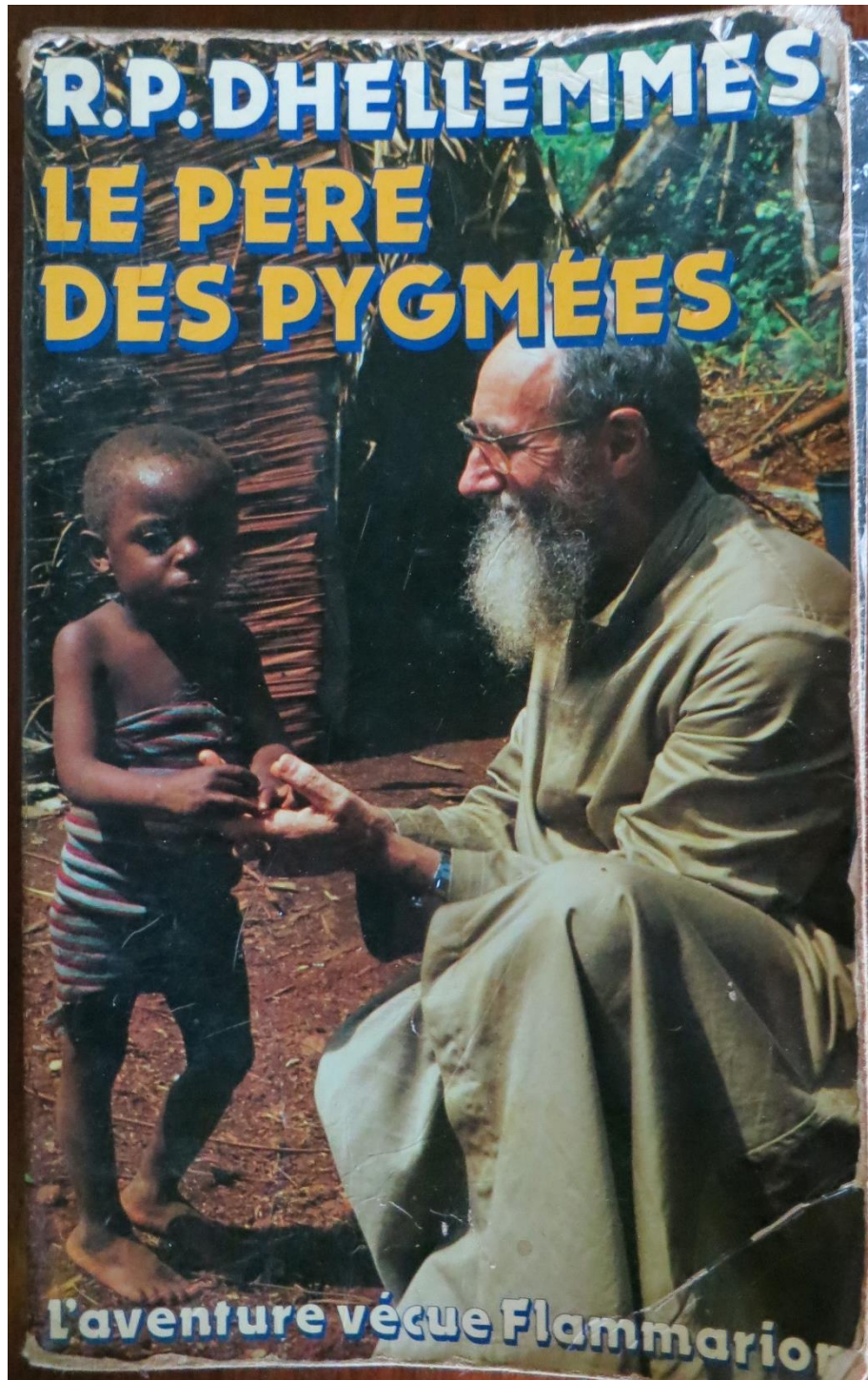
Previously, this role of mediator was usually filled by an outsider. During the colonial era, for instance, there was relatively little direct contact between Baka and European officials. This was due to a number of factors, including the location of Baka territories far from colonial power centres, Baka political marginalization as compared to “Bantu” populations, and the desire of many Baka to eschew participation in European institutions in favour of preserving a semi-nomadic, hunter-gatherer lifestyle. During this period, it was often “Bantu” farmers (who, as we have seen, were by this time engaged in quasi-feudal and often exploitative relationships with

Baka communities) who purported to represent the interests of “their” Baka to outsiders. This was done with varying degrees of benevolence and self-interest.

Gradually, however, tensions built up between “Bantu” and European missionaries. As the latter increased their presence in regions with large “Pygmy” populations, they came to see themselves as “protectors” for the Baka and other “Pygmy” groups. They sought to serve as a counterweight to exploitative “Bantu,” and increasingly took on the role of speaking for and advocating on behalf of Baka and other “Pygmy” populations to colonial, and later national government, officials.

The most prominent of these missionaries in Cameroon was the Père Dhellemmes, a French priest who worked extensively in Baka communities from 1947 until his death in the mid-1990s. While Dhellemmes is widely praised by both Baka and non-Baka Cameroonians for his selflessness and long commitment to Baka communities, there was more than a little paternalism in his approach. One need only look to his memoir (Dhellemmes and Macaigne 1985), which is entitled *Le père des pygmées*, and which, on its cover, features a benevolent-looking Dhellemmes kneeling with outstretched hands next to a young Baka boy. Dhellemmes served as a mentor and model for a generation of clergy who undertook some of the first “development” programs in Baka communities.

By the closing decades of the twentieth century, however, a group of Baka spokespeople had begun to emerge. This was in part a result of changes due to sedentarization programs (see Chapter Two). As many Baka resettled to live in permanent villages, they were increasingly compelled to abandon egalitarianism and adopt governance structures that resembled those of



*Figure 5.1. An image taken by the author of Messe's copy of *Le père des pygmies*, which he kept on his desk at the Okani offices in Bertoua.*

their “Bantu” neighbours, with a permanent, hereditary village chief in charge of a fixed territory (Taloussock 2011, 60). A similar development can be observed in other “Indigenous” communities around the world, beginning in the colonial period, as the requirements of intercultural communication required a new type of leader. As Brown (1993) explains in reference to the Amazon:

Colonialism...changes the nature of leadership in indigenous communities: As Indians come into the orbit of alien institutions, their leaders are called upon to master the skills of intercultural relations: bilingualism, behavioural flexibility, and literacy. The headman who possesses undisputed knowledge of his own culture is pushed aside by the chameleon-like leader who can successfully walk in two worlds. (311-12)

Often these new leaders were people with dual identities. Andrew Gray, for instance, distinguishes between “traditional” “community leaders” and “boundary leaders” who “can negotiate with non-Indigenous groups and act as a sort of go-between” (108; cited in Brown 1993, 312n6).

The emergence of Baka spokespeople was accelerated by the “participatory turn” in development practice (see Chapter Three). The impetus for greater grassroots participation in development beginning in the 1990s led international and national NGOs to look for new ways to incorporate Baka community members into projects. There was an increased emphasis, for instance, on hiring people of Baka heritage to work on development projects. This is what happened with Messe’s hiring to work with AAPPEC. These projects, however, required individuals who had already achieved a relatively high level of education, had a working knowledge of French, and who could navigate the different cultural norms of Western development workers and NGOs.

Protestant and Catholic missionary schools, established decades earlier in Baka territories, proved to be a valuable source of such individuals. As John Nelson, former Africa

Regional Coordinator for Forest Peoples Programme (FPP), explains, “some of [the Baka’s] best spokesmen were sort of drawn out of these missionary church things, you know. So some of the best spokespeople were Protestant preachers, because they were the smartest kids in the family and they ended up going to school, they got a great education. Others were educated by the Catholic missions” (personal communication). Attending a missionary school provided Baka students with a different way of seeing the world, which would prove useful in their interactions with outsiders:

It was actually these people sort of being exposed to a different way of looking at the world which is like that orderly work where there is structure and order and things fit together in a certain way. Which meant that they were able to actually bridge that gap between a very traditional culture and the sort of more modern Western literate thing. And I think they were key. I think they still are key. (J. Nelson; personal communication).

When Messe founded Okani, in the mid-2000s, he recruited many of his former colleagues from the AAPPEC project to work in the organization. Perhaps owing to the fact that “Bantu” tend to be relatively economically advantaged and have greater access to education, many of these individuals were also of mixed parentage. Indeed, while Messe is the only case I know of where a spokesperson has a Baka father and a “Bantu” mother, I encountered several cases during my research where the opposite was true.

Although in both Baka and “Bantu” communities, ethnicity is, formally, patrilineal (Hewlett 1996, 231), individuals with Baka mothers and Bantu fathers are often more culturally Baka than Bantu. As Rupp (2011) points out, in both Baka and “Bantu” communities, the mother tends to take a larger hand in the day-to-day raising of children, and thus in “fundamental markers” of ethnicity such as language acquisition (123). Not to mention the fact that children of Baka mothers and “Bantu” fathers are often raised with their mothers in Baka villages. As Messe explains, “If it’s a “Bantu” man who takes a Baka wife, for [their] kids as well, it’s not easy. Very

often they are more likely to be assimilated in relation to their mother. [...] They will see their provenance [as coming] from the maternal side. And they are often insulted or ridiculed because they are the children of a Baka woman” (personal communication; my translation). While, as Messe points out, mixed parentage can thus be a source of discrimination, it can also serve as an advantage in becoming a spokesperson, as people with “Bantu” fathers and Baka mothers may have acquired the key linguistic and cultural knowledge in childhood.

Messe emerged as the leader of Okani mostly due to his higher education and charisma, but it is safe to assume that he was also aided by his unique family background. As we have seen, his mother’s Bamvélé ethnicity allowed him access to economic and educational opportunities usually not available to Baka children; or, for that matter children with Bantu fathers and Baka mothers that were raised Baka villages. At the same time, in more recent years, his father’s Baka ethnicity—formerly a source of discrimination—has allowed him to act as a legitimate representative of the Baka, accessing funds and opportunities targeted to encourage Indigenous self-representation. Messe explains the way in which he is able to invoke his father’s Baka-ness when people question his lack of “Baka” attributes:

People from the government, [...] because they wanted to exclude me, they said, “No, he is not one hundred percent.” And I said, well, anthropologists and sociologists study belonging and children; who does a child belong to? The child belongs to the father. In most traditional African societies, outside of countries like Gabon where children are matrilineal. But in Cameroon, like most other countries in the region, the child is patrilineal. [...] So even when someone comes and says foolish things to me, this and that, “Your head, it’s not like that other [Baka] head,” or, “You don’t speak like, you don’t turn your tongue like a Baka,” and so on... [...] So patrilineality is [important] for me.... And these are all elements that make me stronger and stronger. (personal communication; my translation).

Outside organizations such as FPP, which during my research was the major source of Okani’s funding, view Messe as someone who was comfortable in, and has legitimacy with local communities, but who, at the same time, has the organizational and communication skills to

participate effectively in national and international advocacy. Messe recalls an early trip to Ba'aka villages in the Central African Republic with John Nelson from FPP, during which he felt he was being required to prove his hardiness. "We were sleeping on mats on the ground.... We were walking through swamps in the mud.... We were climbing trees." After they returned, John informed Messe that FPP was going to hire him. In Messe's view, FPP was testing him, seeking to determine if he could operate like a "real" Baka, and if he would be comfortable and willing to work in conditions that might not appeal to a more urbanized development worker (V. Messe, personal communication; my translation).

While John does not recall explicitly thinking of the trip as a test, he cites Messe's Baka identity as a key reason that FPP decided to support him. "He is someone who can stand up with Baka and talk their language and inspire them," John explains. "The key issue was that this was a Baka, who was respected within the Baka community, who was getting international... a reputation which had helped him open doors" (personal communication). A few years later, Messe became Cameroon Program Coordinator for FPP, receiving a decent salary and additional opportunities for travel and networking.

In part through his position with FPP, Messe was able to consolidate his access to the international network of development donors through which he secured funding for his organization. During the time I spent with Okani, Messe would often emphasize the hardships of the early years of Okani (even if, by this time, he was more likely to stay in a hotel than in a Baka village when travelling). He spoke frequently about walking on foot from village to village through the forest, and of sleeping on reed mats on the floor of Baka dwellings. This narrative served to demonstrate Okani's authenticity and closeness to the communities where the organization works, and to contrast Messe and his colleagues with the oft-criticized class of

“pygmologue” development workers who spend their time going “from airplane to airplane” and attending conferences in fancy hotels.

At the same time, Messe’s cosmopolitan background also allows him to stand a bit above the communities that he represents. For some, especially in Cameroon, where the idea of Indigenous self-representation is still relatively novel, he appears more as a benevolent protector, akin to a missionary, than as a member of the communities for which he advocates. During my research, for instance, a Cameroonian television crew came to the Okani offices to film a story about the organization. On his desk, Messe had a copy of Père Dhellemes’ book *Le père des pygmées*. The film crew took images of the book to intercut with images of Messe meeting with a young Baka man who Okani was assisting. The implication here was clear.



Figure 5.2 Messe gives an interview in his office in February 2014. Image taken by the author.

4. Constituting Local Legitimacy: “Deep Actionism”

In order to become a legitimate and effective spokesperson, Messe first had to establish his “Baka-ness.” The previous sections illustrates some of the ways in which he did this: learning the Baka language, engaging in traditional livelihood practices, living in and working for Baka communities, and demonstrating his willingness to endure “harsh” conditions. Messe was also fortunate to be able to reference the fact that his father is Baka. This complemented his actions and, for some, offered “proof” that he was, indeed, Baka.

Messe’s reclaiming of his Baka identity thus drew on two different understandings of identity. The academic literature on ethnic identity (see Hutchinson and Smith 1996; Hirschfeld 1996) distinguishes between two main ways in which people understand and arbitrate ethnic group belonging. The first approach, variously termed “primordialism,” “essentialism,” or “substantialism,” argues that people understand ethnicity as an “overpowering,” unshakeable bond “attributed...to the ties of religion, blood, race, language, region, and custom” (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 8). To put it simply, race or ethnicity is inherited; it is *who you are*. Such views often reference shared biology, genetics, or “blood.” Substantialist understandings posit that ethnic identities are deeply rooted and cannot be changed, or that they can only be changed with great difficulty, often over many generations. According to one substantialist view of ethnicity, for instance, because Baka descent is patrilineal, whether or not you are Baka is determined by whether or not your father was Baka. You may not look, talk, or walk like a Baka, but if your father was Baka, then so are you. Conversely, you may look, talk, and walk exactly “like” a Baka, but if your father was not Baka, you can never be Baka.

The second approach, called “instrumentalism,” “constructionism,” or “actionism,” views ethnic identity as more mutable. Ethnicity is “a social, political, and cultural resource for different interest and status groups.” Actionist understandings posit that ethnic identities are

“socially constructed” and that individuals can thus “‘cut and mix’ from a variety of ethnic heritages and cultures to forge their own individual or group identities” (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 9). For actionists, identity is ascribed; it is linked to *what you do*. Do you behave in a manner that is consistent with the cultural group in which you are claiming membership? According to such a view, you may have “Bantu” parents but if you identify as Baka, live your life in a manner consistent with Baka culture and values, and are accepted by (other) Baka, then you are, in a sense, Baka.

As Peter Geschiere (2009) and others have pointed out, however, neither substantialist nor actionist views can fully explain the ways in which people in southeast Cameroon (or anywhere else, for that matter) understand ethnic identity. A substantialist approach fails to consider that communities sometimes admit and accept new members who are not genealogically related. It also cannot explain the fact that, in some cases, community members “lose” their status through anti-social or other actions. A purely actionist approach, on the other hand, “risks resulting in a kind of instrumentalist view, reducing the impact of these notions [of identity] to conscious choices and strategies of key figures. It thus becomes almost impossible to address...the main challenge: understanding the impressive emotional power [that identity] can have” (Geschiere 2009, 31). It fails, in other words “to take seriously the participants’ sense of the permanence of their *ethnies*” (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 9). In order to understand how Baka adjudicate group belong, we must thus seek a middle ground that will “take this emotional force [of identity] into account without succumbing to the notion’s apparent self-evidence” (Geschiere 2009, 31). My own research bears out the fact that identity in Baka communities is at once substantialist and actionist. Neither possession of a particular ethnic lineage, nor performing

specific actions, is sufficient to gain recognition as Baka; rather, these two elements work together to co-constitute identity.

In his compelling study of identity and spokespersonship among Cofán Indigenous peoples in the Ecuadorian Amazon, Michael Cepek (2012; 2014) describes a way of evaluating group membership that very much resembles that which Baka communities employ. In Cofán communities, belonging is related in part to both “body type” and “genealogy”; neither of these characteristics, however, is a “sufficient condition for acceptance as Cofán,” though both “can help” (2012, 63). Arguably more important than body type or genealogy is the regular performance of particular actions. These include wearing traditional dress, eating traditional food, “hunting and gardening; music and dance styles; traditions of shamanic activity and knowledge/power; marriage practices; and ritual activities and festivities” as well as being a “forest dweller” and depending on the forest for one’s livelihood (63). This manner of constituting identity allows both for the entry of new individuals into the Cofán collective, and for the expulsion of genealogically Cofán individuals from that collective: “Individuals can enter and exit Cofán-ness in a way that transcends the distinction between constructivist and essentialist approaches to identity” (77).

The revelation that identity is partly, or perhaps even primarily, determined by one’s actions, opens the possibility of group membership to individuals who have no genealogical ties to that group. Cepek’s work, for instance, focuses on the case Randy Borman, a man of “Euro-American descent” who was raised in a Cofán community” (2014, 82). Cepek explains Borman’s “transformation” into a Cofán as follows: “The possibility of transidentification depends on an individual’s desire and ability, as well as a community’s collective permission, to learn how to

perform Cofán life in a Cofán setting. In other words, Cofán identity is constructed, but only through a long-term process that transforms one's essential being" (2012, 77-8).

Similar cases exist among "Pygmy" groups. There is, for instance, the example of Louis Sarno, an American man who lived for over thirty years in a Ba'aka community in the Central African Republic (CAR), until his death in 2017. Sarno originally traveled to CAR to study Ba'aka music. In his memoir (Sarno 1993), he describes how he slowly gained acceptance as a member of the village by demonstrating his interest in Ba'aka culture, engaging in local practices such as eating particular foods, learning the Yaka language, and taking up Ba'aka values of egalitarianism and reciprocity. While certainly not "fully Ba'aka," Sarno became accepted as a member of Yandoumbé, the village where he resided, and of the larger Ba'aka collective. He underwent initiation and was thus able to participate alongside other men in traditional ceremonies. He would eventually marry a Ba'aka woman and become the adoptive father to two Ba'aka children (Swains 2015). While traveling from time to time for medical treatment and to give presentations about Ba'aka musicology, for the most part Sarno lived in the same manner, and in the same place, as his Ba'aka compatriots.

As the above examples reveal, Borman and Sarno's belonging is not constituted merely through their partaking in "traditional" Cofán or Ba'aka activities. Rather, through their participation in these activities, they are demonstrating their willingness to labour and experience discomfort in order to gain acceptance from their new community. The labour and hardship required to learn and undertake these activities attests to one's commitment to the Cofán or the Ba'aka. As Cepek (2012) explains, participating in Cofán customs functions as a double sign: "Not only are they ethnic characteristics in themselves, they also point to the effort an individual

expends in developing them. In this way, they express one's commitment to establishing and maintaining relationships with other Cofán people—an important indicator of Cofán-ness" (62).

Actions are similarly important in constituting Baka identity. Actions are important not only because they are shared with other community members; they also function at a deeper level. In speaking about the ways in which Baka communities evaluate membership, we can distinguish between "shallow" and "deep" actionism. Shallow actionism involves partaking in aforementioned activities and customs of dress, diet, religion, ritual, and livelihood practices. Such actions are important, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient to constitute Baka identity. More important than one's actions are one's *values*. These values can be demonstrated through action, but it is the values, not the actions that really matter. This leaves open the possibility that an individual may find alternative means of demonstrating their possession of core cultural values, thereby gaining membership in the group without engaging in more surface level performance of "traditional" customs and activities.

A deep actionist perspective looks not at actions on their own terms, but rather at the way in which one's actions demonstrate one's commitment to key cultural values. As discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, in Baka and other Pygmy communities, core values include autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and creativity (Moïse 2011, 5). To this list we might add egalitarianism and reciprocity. As we will see, abiding by these latter values is particularly important for those, such as Messe, who may be vulnerable to being viewed as members of an external group, Western or "Bantu," that the Baka regard as unequal and acquisitive.

Messe differs from Borman and Sarno in two important respects: First, he does not live in a Baka community and does not fully partake in a Baka "way of life." Importantly, as previously noted, he has not undergone initiation. Messe also does not regularly engage in hunting,

gathering honey, and other activities that tend to be central for Baka men (though he does perform these activities from time to time) nor does he have a deep knowledge of the forest. While such characteristics are undoubtedly still an important part of Baka self-conception, however, as noted in Chapter Two, they are becoming less so. Indeed, there are many Baka—particularly Baka from younger generations living in villages near major roads and towns—who do not possess these characteristics either.

Messe does speak Baka, though the fact that he acquired the language later in life would be apparent to a native speaker. Nevertheless, his knowledge of Baka language helps to legitimate his Baka identity. Messe is conscious of this. For instance, during a meeting in a remote Baka village, where Messe was explaining the benefits that one of Okani's projects could bring should the villagers choose to participate, he explained to them: 'I am speaking to you in *our* language, in *my* language. I could be speaking to you in French, but I want to show that we are together.'

More important than his knowledge of the Baka language, however, is Messe's commitment and devotion to contributing to the well-being of Baka communities. Moreover, Okani's manner of working, including its use of a participatory methodology, distinguishes the organization from other development NGOs. As Messe explains, "The important thing is in the fight, and in my method of fighting. If at a certain moment people say to me, 'No what you are doing there, you are no longer doing it for the interests of the Baka,' I will stop" (personal communication; my translation). Similarly, Cepek (2012) explains that, in Borman's case, whether his claim to Cofán-ness "was "strategic" or "authentic" is entirely beside the point," because "a central element of Cofán-ness is the desire and ability to sustain a satisfying quality

of life in Cofán communities,” and Borman was clearly contributing to realizing this collective goal (72).

Messe also has an important attribute that Borman and Sarno do not, however: Baka ancestry. When Messe’s identity is challenged he is able to reference the fact that his father is Baka in order re-legitimate his claim to Baka-ness. Indeed, it is likely that Messe’s family connection to Baka communities allowed community members to accept him in spite of his failure to participate in initiation, hunting, and other core activities in a way that they would not have had he been a non-Baka outsider. Messe combines substantialism—by referencing his Baka heredity—and “deep actionism”—by working for the benefit of Baka communities—to legitimate his claim to Baka-ness. He engages in some “shallow actionism”—speaking the Baka language, for instance—but this is less significant in bringing about his acceptance by Baka community members. Sarno and Borman, on the other hand combine shallow actionism—living a Ba’aka or Cofán “way of life”—and deep actionism—abiding by local values and working to benefit local communities—to legitimate their claims to Ba’aka-ness or Cofán-ness.

Before moving on, it is important to note that, contrary to the impression that this section may have given, identity in Baka (or Ba’aka, or Cofán) communities is not a zero sum game. To put it simply, some people are more Baka than others. While Messe may thus be Baka, most Baka would agree (and Messe probably would too), that he is “less” Baka than someone living in a remote village who regularly engages in lengthy hunting expeditions, is deeply involved in spiritual and ritual activities, has a deep knowledge of the forest, etcetera. The understanding that there are degrees of Baka-ness is, again, very similar to what Cepek observes among the Cofán: “People claim that some individuals are more Cofán than others.... During my fieldwork, I heard a number of phrases that indicate different levels of Cofán-ness. The phrase “Cofán Cofán,” for

instance, was used to refer to individuals who lived particularly “traditional” lifestyles and/or had a particularly “Cofán looking” body type” (2012, 67). During my research with Baka communities, I heard the exact analogue term employed, with more “traditional” Baka described as “Baka Baka,” “*vraiment Baka*,” “*vraiment très Baka*,” and so on. Bearing this out, Leonhardt (2006) explains that, “for some Baka, those who farm and do not know how to hunt are not really Baka. Baka farmers are apt to regard hunters as the “real” Baka” (72).

5. Assimilationist Pressures

Messe’s trajectory, as someone with Baka ancestry who was raised in a “Bantu” milieu, and then chose to learn and embrace his Baka heritage, is exceptional. Historically-speaking it has been much more common for people with “Pygmy” heritage in Cameroon and other parts of Central Africa to seek to deny and obfuscate this background in order to assimilate to “mainstream,” “Bantu” society. In his research in the village of Bigotsa, about 30 kilometres south of Messe’s hometown of Andom, for instance, Alec Leonhardt (2006) found that many community members with Baka parents considered themselves “ex-Baka.” These individuals reported that their “grandparents were Pygmies,” but did not identify as “Pygmies” themselves. In terms of culture and livelihood strategies, they were almost indistinguishable from their neighbours, who were members of the Maka Bantu group, though their residual “Pygmy” ethnicity meant that they could not become “fully Maka”:

They seemed to be saying that they were not Pygmies and not very much Baka because they lived in the village, not in the forest, and they were farmers, not hunter gatherers. On the other hand, they regarded themselves as to some degree residually Baka since their transformation to Maka was not complete. They considered themselves Baka by ancestry, but since they had converted to Catholicism and full-time farming, by their own estimate they did not practice a Baka way of life, and they barely spoke the Baka language; thus they were primarily Maka. (80)

Importantly, Leonhardt’s informants also “reported regular marriage between ex-Baka men and Maka women” (80). Hewlett (1996) identifies a positive correlation between Baka-“Bantu”

intermarriage and proximity to major roads and cities. In the area surrounding Bertoua, intermarriage can be regarded as part of a larger trend toward cultural hybridity and assimilation.

Messe told me of a number of specific cases where Baka had sought to deny their heritage. The impetus for some Baka to “pass” as “Bantu” is understandable given the structural discrimination that Baka face from national majority populations, and from government institutions. Indeed, the examples that Messe gave all related to individuals who had obtained jobs in the public sector, for instance as soldiers or police officers.

When a Baka community member denies his or her heritage, this is viewed with a combination of scorn and hurt by the community members left behind. Some community members drew a comparison between those who denied their heritage and Messe, who, in spite of how relatively easy it would have been for him to live his life as a “Bantu”, chose instead to embrace his Baka roots and proclaim his Baka identity:

When I say to you [I am an] exception, it really is exceptional. I know young people even in [...] Bonando [a mixed Baka and Maka village where Okani sometimes works]. [...] We can go have a focus group as well with the people there, to ask for the story of certain children from Bonando who have Baka fathers and Baka mothers, but, because they have “emerged,” they totally deny their provenance. They say they are no longer Baka. [...]

They don’t even come back to the village. They are soldiers. There is one there, he is a soldier.... and he has categorically denied his membership in the village. And over there people are always astonished, “But how come you continue to come back to us when there are even children born in this village who now deny that they are Baka because they are already soldiers and other things?” [...]

So there are a lot of cases like that where, even in Cameroon or in Congo, Baka people, or people from other Pygmy groups, once they have emerged, they cut ties with their roots. And I could have done the same thing, but I know that.... I sensed that there were things to do. That I had to accomplish a certain number of things. (personal communication; my translation)

In addition to losing one’s membership through not performing certain livelihood practices, one can lose one’s status by failing to abide by core cultural values. Similarly, Cepek

(2014) argues that “typically...the Cofán-ness” of community members “is not in doubt because they happily and successfully perform the sociopractical norms that define life as a Cofán person. When, however, “individuals display behaviour that contrasts with the expected comportment of a successfully socialized Cofán person” their “identity can be called into question” (95-6).

Identity is also more tenuous for some than for others. While Leonhardt’s work reveals that it is possible even for individuals with two Baka parents to “lose” their Baka identity, individuals who are unable to fall back on “substantialist” characteristics such as body type or genealogy to substantiate their identities are more vulnerable to having their membership challenged. Moreover, it would be much easier for individuals with two Baka parents who have “lost” their Baka identity to reclaim their status than it would be for an outsider to “become” Baka. Indeed, it is perhaps more accurate to say that these people’s Baka-ness is “paused” or “dormant,” rather than “lost.”

6. Sketch 1: A Local Challenge to Messe’s Legitimacy

I saw community members challenge Messe’s Baka-ness on two or three occasions during the eighteen months that I worked with him. The most striking example of this occurred early in my research during a meeting about Okani’s activities in the village of Mayos. At the time, Okani was attempting to organize the creation of a participatory video about cultural change in Baka communities, which had been solicited for an academic conference on hunter-gatherers at the University of Liverpool (for more on this video, see Chapter Three). I had accompanied Messe to the village in order to make arrangements for filming.

We pulled into Mayos around five in the evening. We parked the Okani pickup truck beside the home of Noël, the Okani staff member, who lived in the village. Ten or twelve people were gathered in front of the house, mostly young Baka men. I recognized these men from

previous visits. Many were Okani collaborators and had participated in the initial participatory video training workshop that the organization had run in 2009 (see previous chapter).

The familiar smell of cooking fires wafted over me as I stepped out of the truck. Three or four of the men shuffled down the steep, muddy hill from the house to greet us. As they got closer I noticed that their eyes were watery and bloodshot and recognized the sour scent of alcohol on their breath.

‘Nico! Nico!’ they greeted me, shaking my hand and grabbing my shoulder. They were drunk but friendly. Happy to see me. With Messe they were more reserved, but they all went over to greet him as well.

‘Looks like you’re having a party tonight!’ I commented, noticing three large boxes of “Officer” brand vodka sachets on a wooden table in front of Noël’s house.

We scaled the hill to the house, where Noël was waiting along with a couple older men from the village. Messe and I shook hands with Noël and greeted the elders. Noël explained that women from the village had bought the alcohol, though it was unclear to me what the occasion was. As usual, he himself had not been drinking. One of the young men went into the house and fetched two pink plastic lawn chairs for Messe and me. We joined the circle of people seated under the rattan awning in front of the house. The villagers were chatting amongst themselves. Noël sat down next to Messe and the two of them discussed a plan to undertake a day-long participatory video exercise in the village later that week.

Before Messe and Noël could make their proposal to the gathered community members, however, one of the young men approached Messe and explained that he had concerns about Okani’s work in the village. The conversations around the circle stopped, as the assembled group listened to the young man.

Okani, he said, had promised to deliver benefits to the community, but had not done so. “I have accepted Okani, but Okani is refusing me,” he explained. ‘*Toi, tu as bouffé Okani,*’ he said to Messe, ‘*Moi aussi je veut bouffé!*’ Figuratively, “You are eating Okani’s money. I want to eat money as well!”

Others joined in on the young man’s complaint. One man became quite animated, at one point even getting down on his knees in the dirt in front of Messe in order to plead with him. Dieudonné, the young hereditary village chief, tried to defend Messe, but overall the mood was decidedly negative and uncomfortable.

The men, perhaps being under the misapprehension that I had influence over Okani’s funding or activities, spoke in French so that I could understand them, although there was the occasional side conversation in Baka. One of the men said, to the crowd in general, ‘I hope that Nicholas can understand me.’

About ten minutes into this conversation, one of the men raised the question of identity: ‘The Baka are not in Okani!’ he exclaimed. Others agreed. There were too many Bantu and not enough Baka working for Okani, they argued.

Here they were referencing not only Messe’s identity, but Noël’s. Like Messe, Noël is of mixed parentage: his father is Bantu; his mother is Baka. Other Okani staff members, including Messe’s brother Romial, are also of mixed parentage.

Allow me to interrupt this sketch with a brief digression about Noël’s background: In part because his father was Bantu, Noël has access to educational opportunities that other Baka children did not. He attended a missionary school and trained as a teacher. Noël’s family history, and relation to Mayos, are too long and complex to relate here. His father’s brother was the Bantu chief of the village. Like Noël’s father, his uncle married a Baka woman. Noël did not

grow up in Mayos, but was sent to the village by missionaries in 1998 as part of a development project, in part owing to these family connections. His work with Okani also means that he is wealthier than other community members, though he lives modestly and would be considered poor compared to most Cameroonians. Noël thus enjoys high status in Mayos. This is in part due to his Bantu lineage. Nevertheless, he proudly proclaims his Baka identity. Whereas Messe sometimes switches between “us” and “them” when discussing Baka issues depending on audience, for Noël the Baka are always “us.” Noël also speaks Baka much better than Messe does.

Usually, community members in Mayos are accepting of Noël and are happy to have him act as their spokesperson. His work with Okani allows him to bring resources into the community. Okani provides per diems, food, and other opportunities to villagers who help with the organization’s programs. Other than on the occasion I am now relating, I only saw Noël’s Baka-ness challenged once during my time in Cameroon. A Baka villager, unhappy with the way that Noël had distributed rice, salt, and cooking oil that we had brought to Mayos as a gift to project participants complained, ‘Why do you always give the food to the *kaka*?’ *Kaka* is the Baka word for “Bantu”.

On the evening in question, the disagreement about the purported lack of Baka involvement in Okani played out along generational lines. A Baka elder, who had a close relationship with Messe, and who had been sitting silently, observing the proceedings, during the early part of the discussion, jumped in to defend the organization: “What Bantu are working for Okani?” he challenged.

“There are many!” replied the young man.

One of the young men then directly questioned Messe's claim to Baka identity: "You say you are going to help us; you say you are Baka; I don't know if you are Baka or Bamvélé or what!" he exclaimed.

Upon hearing this, the elder once again intervened. "He is Baka. He is Baka," he reassured the group.

Messe attempted to defend Okani's work, though he did not directly address the young man's challenge to his identity. To the complaint that Okani did not work enough in Mayos, he explained that Okani now worked all over the country. The organization had spread as far as Bagyelí Indigenous communities near the Atlantic coast, and could not be expected to focus all of its efforts on Mayos. To the accusation that Okani was shutting them out, he replied that Okani needed and accepted people, but only those who were willing to work. 'I want people who want to work,' he explained. He gave the example of André, the young Baka man from the nearby village of Loussou who frequently acted as a facilitator on Okani projects. 'Now he goes all the way to Kribi and washes himself in the ocean!' Messe said, citing the seaside resort town where we had recently stopped after completing workshops with Bagyelí communities. André had earned this privilege, Messe explained, because he had proven reliable and hardworking. The implication was that if the young men from Mayos would work as hard as André, then they too would could enjoy such benefits.

This example, however, was somewhat unfair. André had a relatively advanced education and spoke perfect French. This was not the case of the men in Mayos, many of whom had not advanced beyond elementary school. Messe confirmed as much when he scolded the men for not completing their educations, and for not sending their children to school. Plan Cameroon, a major NGO, he explained, had asked him to find two Baka with their high school diplomas to

work on a project, but he had been unable to do so. ‘Do you know any Baka with their diploma?’ asked Messe. No one in the crowd answered.

After half an hour or so, the complaints subsided. Some of the men left the area in front of Noël’s house. Others sipped sullenly from vodka sachets or bottles of beer. Messe and Noël huddled together; I wondered if they were altering their plans for the video workshop.

On the drive back to the Bertoua, Messe explained that the unhappiness in the village proved a point he had been trying to make to the larger organizations that provided Okani with funding: Funds needed to be set aside for small, concrete development projects in addition to the larger-scale initiatives that focused on rights and policy action. Repeating one of his favourite phrases, he told me, “One cannot eat rights.”

7. Perils of Bi-Culturality

This short example reveals the importance of “deep actionism” in constituting Baka identity. Individuals such as Messe and Noël, whose claims to Baka identity are relatively less secure than those of other Baka, must successfully demonstrate that they are abiding by community values in order to have their claims to Baka-ness accepted. The challenge to Messe’s identity articulated in Mayos that night did not reference the way he looked, acted, or spoke (though the men may have been thinking about these aspects of Messe’s identity as well.) Rather, the issue at hand was whether Okani was contributing sufficiently to the well-being of the community. The reference to Messe’s mixed parentage (“I don’t know if you are Baka or Bamvélé or what”) occurred only in the context of a perceived failure of “deep actionism.” It is unlikely that the young men would have brought this up were they completely satisfied with Okani’s work.

When I asked Messe about this incident, he explained that he felt the community members had challenged his identity because they did not understand how hard he was working on their behalf, and how devoted he was to them:

N: How do you feel—because I have the impression that sometimes, if there is a problem in a Baka village where Okani is working, the people say, ‘He’s Bamvélé. He’s not Baka.’ There was that night that we were in Mayos. That night when [name of one of the young men] and the others were really drunk and they were complaining...

M: [laughing] Ah yes.

N: And at a certain moment you were talking and someone [...] said ‘I don’t know if you’re Baka or Bamvélé or what.’...

M: [laughing]

N: ...and it was the Baka elder who said, ‘No, he is Baka. He is Baka’ ...

M: [laughing] Uh huh

N: ...but, does that....does that cause problems? Is it when people think they aren’t getting something, that’s when they say, ‘No, you’re no longer...’

M: Well, it’s...it’s...exactly. You’ve done very well to bring up that question because it’s a question that, very often, shocks me, that touches me. Because when I look at all that I’ve sacrificed in my life to be what I am today, it’s in relation to a people, and also in relation to everything that I’ve received like... They formatted my brain. From the missionaries who told me, ‘You can’t work for the others; you have to work for your brothers.’ That is always resonating in my head, at all times.

But they [the villagers] are not in my place, to understand what is going on inside me. And when someone says that [I am not Baka], it can appal me. But I also put myself in their [shoes]. It’s because of that that I also appreciate a bit all the psychology courses that I’ve taken [...] I understand very easily why someone can say that and... I always say, ‘In order to know me better, you have to come towards me.’ You can’t stay in the distance criticizing, “No, he is...” You have to come towards me. (personal communication; my translation)

Whereas, as we will see, external actors, such as Western development workers, sometimes interrogated Messe’s Baka language skills, dress, and heredity in order to determine if he was a “real” Baka representative, such interrogations were mostly absent in Baka

communities themselves. In local communities, challenges to identity that appeared to reference substantialism or “shallow activism” almost always turned out to be rooted in dissatisfaction about “deep actionism.”

Messe explained to me, for instance, that he sometimes felt uncomfortable driving into Baka villages in the Okani truck, or wearing clothes that were “too nice” when visiting a Baka community. This was not, however, because he believed that his possession of a truck and “nice clothes” made him “too Bantu,” “too Western,” or insufficiently Baka, but because he worried that community members would think he was not distributing resources appropriately. As Messe explains:

Sometimes [we are] not very well understood by the others [in Baka villages] who don’t know that what we are doing is well founded and who think that all [the resources] that can come [to the organization] are for them. “Our money,” they often say. “*E moni anda*: It’s our money.” So if you pass by [a village] with a vehicle, they say, “Ah, there’s our vehicle.” When it’s a vehicle that often has a set *ordre de mission*, that has a specific defined amount of gas in it for the work that you doing. But for the Baka, “It’s our vehicle.” They would have even preferred if you drove around with them all day until the tank was empty. (personal communication; my translation).

The issue that Messe is describing here is not that he is performing an action that is not “typically Baka” (driving a truck), but that he appears to be using the truck for his own purposes, rather than for those of the community.³

While deep actionism is thus the most important metric by which Baka community members adjudicate identity, however, substantialist and “shallow actionist” understandings come into play when identity is challenged. Messe tends to fall back on his father’s Baka-ness and connection to the communities where Okani works. Similarly, Cepek (2012) finds that, “individuals who occupy marginal positions in Cofán communities often point to reputed Cofán ancestors as justifications for their inclusion” (61). I can only speculate about the reasons for the old man’s intervention in Messe’s defence (“He is Baka. He is Baka”), but I will note that the

man was around the same age as Messe's father and Messe's father had spent time in the Mayos area. Indeed, some of the villagers in Mayos are Messe's cousins. It is thus quite possible that the man was thinking of Messe's heredity in making his intervention.

Noël, on the other hand, who has a weaker hereditary claim to Baka identity (because the Baka are patrilineal and his father is Bantu) is able to consolidate his Baka identity through "shallow actionism": he lives in a Baka village, partakes in Baka livelihood practices, speaks excellent Baka, etcetera. I wonder if, were Noël to live as Messe does, Baka community members would still accept him as Baka. Messe is able to "get away" with his non-Baka lifestyle in part because he has a Baka father, and in part because, as the head of Okani, he brings more resources into the community than Noël does.

The old man's intervention on Messe's behalf also points to an important caveat when talking about how Baka community members evaluate identity: Not all Baka employ the same criteria for determining who is and is not Baka. Similarly, in the case of the Cofán, Cepek argues, "Identity is not a simple, status, all-or-nothing game. People disagree about who is or is not Cofán. At different points in time, and in different social situations, a person may or may not identify herself or another individual as Cofán" (66-7). The old man's intervention may point to a generational divide: While older generations are more likely to reference parentage in evaluating group membership, younger generations are more interested in questions of resource allocation. Different Baka communities also evaluate identity in different ways. In general, I found that communities located closer to major towns and roads were more accepting of Messe and other bi-cultural individuals. These communities tended to be more ethnically diverse, and to have higher rates of Baka-"Bantu" intermarriage, including marriage between Baka men and "Bantu" women (see Leonhardt 2006). Residents were also more likely to participate in the cash

economy, rather than “traditional” livelihood activities of hunting and gathering. These communities were usually happy to proclaim Messe—with his Bantu mother, Bantu wife, pickup truck, concrete house in Bertoua, etcetera—as a “son of the village.”

More central communities are also characterized by more egalitarian relations between Baka and “Bantu.” More remote communities, on the other hand, where relations between Baka and “Bantu” continue to be highly unequal and exploitative, evinced a more conservative view of Baka identity. It is not surprising that, in a part of Cameroon where Baka are often exploited by and subservient to “Bantu,” community members are less likely to accept someone who is partly “Bantu”, and lives in a manner that is more “Bantu” than Baka, as “one of their own.” Similarly, Cepek (2012) finds that highland Indigenous leaders in Ecuador were less likely to accept Randy Borman as a legitimate spokesperson. Whereas lowland Indigenous leaders “who have less experience with an explicitly race-based system of oppression” were more open to doing so (44).

The more conservative attitude to identity in remote communities was apparent to me during a research trip to the southeast. One afternoon I found myself at a roadside bar, outside of the town of Moloundou, waiting for a motorcycle taxi to take me into town. I was sitting with my research assistant and a group of Baka musicians when I noticed, at the far end of the table, that one of the musicians was engaged in a rather heated conversation with another bar patron, who turned out to be a Hausa merchant. The Hausa man had overheard some of the Baka men complaining about the problem of local “Bantu” men pursuing married Baka women. He had responded by insulting the sexual prowess of Baka men, hypothesizing that Baka women chose to have relations with “Bantu” men because their Baka husbands could not satisfy them. ‘Baka men just sleep all night,’ he explained.

The Hausa man went on to explain that his theory was borne out by the fact that Baka men never marry “Bantu” women. ‘Is this not the case?’ he asked the musicians. This being an area with relatively low levels of intermarriage between Baka men and “Bantu” women, I was not surprised when most of the musicians agreed. Indeed, earlier in the day I had mentioned to a local NGO worker, who knew Messe, that Messe’s wife, Edwidge, was Bamvélé. The NGO worker was visibly shocked. “Has Messe married a Bantu?!” he exclaimed.

One of the musicians, however, stated that, in fact, he knew of a few cases where Baka men had married “Bantu” women.

Then I spoke up: “I know one too,” I began.

My research assistant looked me urgently. “Don’t say who it is,” he whispered to me in English.

Later, I asked my assistant why he had cautioned me against telling the musicians that Edwidge was Bantu. He explained simply that it was ‘not their business.’ Given the fact that many had expressed the belief that such a marriage was impossible, however, as well as the surprise that the NGO worker had demonstrated earlier in the day, it is not a stretch to assume that my assistant may have been worried that I would be calling Messe’s identity, and thus the legitimacy of Okani, into question were I to reveal the details of his marriage. Baka in this area were much more likely to regard “Bantu” in an oppositional manner, and so revealing that Messe was part “Bantu” may have caused them to doubt if he was truly, “on their side.”

8. Spokespersonship and Cosmopolitanism

In discussing the ways in which community members recognize (or do not recognize) Messe as Baka, it is important not to lose site of a key, central fact: Messe is not just any Baka; he is one of the most prominent Baka spokespeople in the world. Messe’s status as a spokesperson is a vital part of his “deep actionism.” There is a reciprocal relationship here:

Messe's spokespersonship allows him to provide resources to Baka communities, and his provision of resources to Baka communities cause the Baka to recognize Messe as a legitimate spokesperson. His status as Baka not only enables his role as a Baka spokesperson; his success as a spokesperson is, in a sense, what makes him Baka.

There is a long history of hybrid and ethnically ambiguous individuals acting as spokespeople for Indigenous communities. Indeed, both Randy Borman and Louis Sarno serve as spokespeople for their communities as well.⁴ In addition to people such as Sarno and Borman, who are not ethnically members of the Indigenous groups they represent, one finds bi-cultural individuals at the forefront of many Indigenous rights movements, including in sub-Saharan Africa. This issue was brought home to me at an academic conference I attended in Vienna in 2015. I was enjoying a schnitzel and a stein of Austrian beer with a friend, a San rights activist from Botswana. Somehow we got onto the topic of middle names. Mine was Campbell, I explained, a result of my father's Scottish heritage. "My father is Scottish too!" exclaimed my friend.

Bi-cultural heritage often serves as a major advantage for spokespeople wishing to participate in international forums. In addition to demonstrating the proper lineage and local support, Indigenous spokespeople must possess a number of other characteristics—such as fluency in European languages, familiarity with technology, and knowledge of the international architecture of development and human rights—in order to participate successfully in what Conklin and Graham (1995) call the new "middle ground" for communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists: "a political space, an arena of intercultural communication, exchange, and joint political action" (697). As discussed earlier, in Baka communities, bi-cultural children often have great access to education. Formal education, in turn,

combined with the continued discriminatory attitudes toward Baka held by many Cameroonians, means that bi-cultural Baka who can “pass” as “Bantu” in some situations, have greater employment opportunities. These individuals are then able to further develop their linguistic and technological skills, as well as their economic status and political connections.

These attributes allow spokespeople to “present their concerns and engage in dialogue in styles and forms readily comprehensible to outsiders” (Lewis 2000, 9). As Messe explained to me, his bi-cultural background allows him to “have one foot here and one foot there,” mediating between outside audiences and local communities: “It’s a wealth because I understand the two worlds better. And I can advise [both] one part and another well, and bring people together. [...] It’s a double advantage, because, socially, you can play in the two worlds. You can know where there are difficulties and try to see how to get around them” (personal communication; my translation). Indeed, as we will see below, Messe is a master at framing arguments about Baka rights, and in framing his own identity, in order to appeal to a wide variety of audiences.⁵

Indigenous spokespeople are, in many ways, quintessential cosmopolitans. Indeed, some have even gone so far as to argue that such individuals are much more cosmopolitan than the groups of U.N. officials and international development workers that they often address. Harper (2011), for instance, contrasts “the parochialism of internationals against the cosmopolitanism of ‘locals’,” arguing that “global experts” are “closed off from other epistemologies,” whereas, local development workers display, “reflexive distance from [their] culture,” and are thus “open to new ways of knowing and belonging.” This is how Hannerz (1996) defines cosmopolitanism (Mosse 2011, 14). For spokespeople such as Messe, cosmopolitanism becomes a self-reinforcing process. “Constant movement” between local, national, and international environments helps to

further develop “the intercultural competence that enables...political activism in local, national, and international arenas” (Cepek 2014, 86).

Writing about Indigenous spokespeople in San communities in the Kalahari, Maria Sapignoli (2016) argues that “indigenous rights requires a new form of leadership” (275). Previous traditions of San leadership required that individuals “seek to avoid being seen as leaders” and “endorse[d] personal qualities such as humility, graciousness, equanimity, a soft-spoken manner, self-effacing behaviour, even-handedness and generosity” (Biesele and Hitchcock 2011, 64; cited in Sapignoli 2016). In other words, leadership was “authoritative rather than authoritarian” (Silberbauer 1981, 34; cited in Sapignoli 2016). The new institutions of Indigenous rights, on the other hand “require[] someone who can articulate local issues in a national and international context” (Sapignoli 2016, 275).

As discussed in Chapter Two, the Baka have a similar tradition of egalitarianism to the San. Of course, in discussing such traditions, we must acknowledge that practices and institutions were never static, and have always been influenced by outside forces (Brown 1993; Ranger 1983). Nevertheless, we can identify a general historical trend wherein Baka culture was built around the twin poles of autonomy and entrepreneurialism, with the “fundamental commitment to individual autonomy...preclud[ing] the emergence of power relations” (Moïse 2011, 5; see Moïse 2003; Vallois and Marquer 1976, 118-9). One finds similarly “flat,” non-hierarchical political structures in “Pygmy” communities more generally (Turnbull 1961; Turnbull 1965; Bahuchet 1992). “There is no evidence in the historical record,” explains Robert Moise (2011), “of any Pygmy ‘chiefs’ who wielded power over their subordinates. Nor is there evidence for the development of...hierarchical political organisation” (13).

This is not to say that Baka, or other “Pygmy” communities, were free from any form of authority. For one thing, authority existed within families, with formal authority resting with the male head of household. For another, temporary leaders often emerged in specific situations; however, leaders only ever “had authority in a limited sense and for a certain activity” (MINAS 1982, 13).⁶ Messe often spoke of this circumstantial leadership tradition when explaining the difficulties that Baka experienced working within a broader national and international political system that demanded clear, permanent lines of authority. The system was in part gerontocratic. Elders usually had more authority to make decisions. A hunting party, for instance, would have a clear leader or leaders, often the most experienced hunters in the group. When the expedition concluded, however, these individuals ceased to have authority over others.

In some senses, then, the role the Indigenous rights spokesperson is fundamentally new. Never before have Baka communities harboured a cadre or educated, mobile, outwardly focused individuals. This is true of many other Indigenous communities as well. In another sense, however, the role of the Indigenous spokesperson fits into a Baka tradition of leadership in which the exercise of authority is permissible, provided that it is done with limited scope, for a fixed period of time in a fixed set of circumstances.

Messe’s unique background allows him to act as a spokesperson while respecting values of egalitarianism. Messe only has authority in a specific area: rights advocacy and development work. Moreover, Okani’s use of a participatory methodology means that even this authority is circumscribed by community consultation (see Chapter Six). Messe does not have, nor could he ever claim, authority in other areas of Baka life, such as hunting, or religion. These aspects of Baka lifeways are arguably more significant to many Baka than are the activities that Okani carries out.

Given that the imperatives of spokespersonship are often at odds with Indigenous lifeways, bi-cultural spokespeople such as Messe can serve as a conduit, allowing Indigenous community members to express their views in outside forums without having to abandon “traditional” practices. Cepek (2012), for instance, argues that, in the case of the Cofán, a group of “ethnically ambiguous leaders...provide the enabling conditions for community life by participating in that which exists outside of, and often in opposition to, an ideally seamless internal conviviality” (78).

When spokespersonship works well, intermediaries such as Messe allow local people to live as they wish, controlling and making use of outside resources as they see fit, in order to accomplish community social and political goals. As we saw in Chapter Four, however, things are not quite so simple. In order to allow local communities to access external resources—international Indigenous rights instruments, for instance—spokespeople must interpret and relay new concepts, ideas, and information to local communities, a process that Sally Engle Merry (2006; 2009) terms “vernacularization.” Vernacularization is an iterative process. As spokespeople engage in the process of representation, they “encounter Western value systems and technologies of representation that offer[] new perspectives on their own cultures and new channels for communicating their concerns with influential outsiders” (Conklin 1997, 712). This can influence the ways in which communities understand and present themselves.

Indeed, one could argue that Messe’s acceptance as a spokesperson comes about not only because he manages to respect traditional norms of autonomy and egalitarianism, but because the process of spokespersonship itself is part of a broader transformation of Baka culture. Just like Sapingnoli’s (2016) “new kind” of San leader, Messe is, to a certain extent a “new kind” of Baka. Unlike Randy Borman and Louis Sarno, he does not engage in “shallow activism,” and he

has not fully adopted a “Baka way of life.” While he has embraced his Baka identity in a genuine way, he has by no mean has he relinquished him Bamvélé identity. Perhaps Messe’s acceptance points not only to a transformation of Messe’s being, but to a broader transforming of what it means to be Baka.

As we saw in Chapter Three, Baka, especially younger Baka and those living in more central villages, understand Baka identity and culture in a new way. Rather than rooted in biology (essentialism) or cultural/livelihood practices (shallow actionism), Baka-ness is determined by one’s subscription to values such as autonomy, egalitarianism, and entrepreneurialism. Hence, as Oishi and Hayashi (2014) have argued, a seemingly “inauthentic” action such as opening a bar that serves alcohol and plays Western music, can actually augment, rather than detract from, one’s “Baka-ness” if this action is viewed as furthering shared goals and values.

Similarly, far from calling his identity into question, Messe’s seemingly “inauthentic” actions—his international travel, for instance—were more often than not viewed as a source of pride by villagers. Communities sought to claim Messe as a member, believing that it reflected well on them that a “son of the village” had travelled so widely and become so successful. The way in which Messe was accepted or not accepted is thus reflective of the complicated and ambivalent nature of Baka attitudes toward development and modernity.

Indeed, Messe sometimes used his international travel and connections to impress and build his status and legitimacy. While, as will be discussed below, he more often did this for non-Baka Cameroonian audiences, Messe played on this narrative in Baka villages as well. During a meeting in Baka village in which Messe was trying to arbitrate a dispute regarding the sale of village lands to Bantu, he spent a good deal of time bolstering his authority by citing his

international connections. ‘I’ve walked everywhere in the whole world,’ he explained to an assembled group of villagers. ‘Even in the office of Barack Obama. I’ve been there.’ (I do not believe that this was, strictly speaking, true. After this quote, my field notes read, “Um, what?”) Interestingly, Messe combined this narrative with a discussion of his father’s connection to the village.

Some villagers accept Messe because he is a model of what they aspire for themselves. A “modern,” relatively affluent lifestyle. Let’s return to an earlier example, in which Messe mobilized his knowledge of Baka language to assert his Baka-ness during a meeting in a remote village. Earlier I explained that Messe told the villagers, “‘I am speaking to you in our language, in my language. I could be speaking to you in French, but I want to show that we are together.’ I left out the continuation of this quote. After saying this, Messe added, “I want to help you be like me.”

Indeed, I noticed more broadly that ostentatious displays “modern” technologies and other trappings were a way in which younger people in Baka villages sought to gain status. I recall a visit to a village in which a young man who had collaborated with Okani on mapping and video projects arrived at the meeting wearing a pair of fancy blue headphones, which included a mini remote control that clipped to his shirt. The headphones were not plugged into anything. The man was using them as a display, not for their functionality. He was also carrying a fancy GPS unit that Okani had lent him for the mapping project. We were not planning to do any mapping that day, nor did the meeting have anything to do with mapping.

This is not to say that engaging in activities such as international travel and using technology does not present a risk to one’s legitimacy in the eyes of the communities that one represents. As the example from Mayos shows, Messe’s cosmopolitanism served as an asset only

when people believed that he was working to advance community, and not his own, interests.

During my research, I often heard Messe and other NGO staff members speak critically of spokespeople who spent their lives going “from airplane to airplane.”⁷ Indeed, John Nelson of FPP sees a deliberate strategy at work, designed to undercut effective spokespeople:

You have this [...] innovation in Indigenous politics where you have these sort of [...] elites who suddenly get sucked into meetings on a national level. And this is a chronic problem across the region where you get these people who are great community organizers—activist, thoughtful, connected to the community. People say, “Oh, they speak really well, let’s get them in that meeting and they can talk.”

And then they end up in this world, nationally, where they do that. And then they get sucked up into international stuff. [...] And they disappear. And they lose their connection with the communities. This becomes a business and you’ve lost... It’s almost a way... It’s a clever way of extracting the most effective people out of the community and getting them away from the problem. And so then the spokesperson’s gone, and then they [government and corporate actors] can just carry on doing whatever they’re doing. [...]

[The travel and hotel are] tempting but it’s also, you know, per diem everyday that you don’t need. That you collect. You come home. It becomes a business. And then of course, while you’re there, people like you, are interested. And then, “Oh, there’s another meeting.” And then you get hooked into that whole thing. Never coming back. (personal communication)

As Sapignoli (2016) notes, “There are often major challenges to individuals in leadership positions in NGOs. Staff members, who often receive salaries, houses and cars, wear nice clothes and travel internationally, are often viewed with jealousy and suspicion by other members of their communities, both youth and elder” (275). Hostile governments have sought to exploit this jealousy, highlighting “flashy” or ostentatious behaviour by spokespeople in order to undercut local support. In the case that Sapignoli describes, for instance, the government of Botswana published photos of San activists relaxing on the beach while attending a conference in the United States (275).

There is a delicate balancing act here. Wealth and status are recognized, but it is important to demonstrate that one is not growing rich off one's work in the community. The key is to project importance and authority without being ostentatious. For instance, most of the time, Messe refused to wear dress pants or shoes when visiting a Baka community. He also refused to put the Okani logo on the pickup. At the same time, he would carry around his smartphone and car keys, and would talk about his international travel. The message that Messe wanted to deliver was that he could serve as a point of connection, as someone who could bring external resources into the community. I should note that I, the visiting Western anthropologist, also played a role here. My presence helped to testify to Messe's importance and to the external interest in Okani's work. Indeed, at the lower points in my research, I sometimes felt that I was not much different than the car keys that Messe would swing around his fingers when we visited a Baka village.

9. Constituting External Legitimacy

Success as an Indigenous spokesperson requires acceptance not only by local communities, but by a variety of outside actors. Local communities are, of course, the "rightful arbiters" (Cepek 2014, 103) of who is accepted as a member and who is permitted to speak on the community's behalf. Nevertheless, as Lucero (2006) notes, "indigenous representation is produced across scales, both from "below"... as well as from "above."

Among the criteria employed by external audiences for evaluating the legitimacy of an Indigenous spokesperson are the following: 1) *representivity*—that is, whether the spokesperson can demonstrate that they have the support of the local communities on whose behalf they purport to speak; 2) *shallow actionism*—that is, whether the spokesperson acts in a way that is consistent with outside understandings of a group's customs of language, dress, and other surface-level markers; 3) *cosmopolitanism*—paradoxically, some of the same people who demand shallow actionism also demand that spokespeople have knowledge of and ability to

converse in Western spoken/written and conceptual languages, as well as attributes such as technological know-how and willingness to travel internationally; and, finally, 4) *engaged actionism*. Engaged actionism consists of demonstrating commitment to “helping” a community, group of communities, or a people. It thus references Western norms of development and charity. This is different from shallow actionism, which consists of surface level performances of language, dress, and other cultural practices. Engaged actionism is also different from deep actionism, which consists of abiding by and enacting local values that may not be consistent with Western development norms. Outside audiences are unlikely to employ a deep actionist perspective when evaluating legitimacy.

There are, of course, a variety of different outside audiences that Indigenous spokespeople address, and each of these audiences may employ different criteria.⁸ These criteria are sometimes at odds with one another, creating competing imperatives for spokespeople. This is to say nothing of the competing criteria employed by local communities, as discussed in the previous section. As Conklin and Graham (1995; citing Karttunen 1994) note, “Indigenous mediators are frequently “uncomfortable bridges” who occupy a precarious position” (704).

We might, for instance, distinguish between “expert” and “generalist” outside audiences. (I should note, however, that, while it is heuristically useful to separate “expert” and “generalist” international audiences here, in reality people do not fall into these two, neat categories. Rather there is warp and bend between them.) Expert audiences consist of the development workers, anthropologists, human rights activists, and other cosmopolitans who populate the halls of the United Nations, academic conferences on hunter-gatherers, and meetings of major development organizations. Expert audiences have a decent familiarity with Indigenous groups, as well as the global discourse surrounding Indigenous rights and identity. They play an important role in

adjudicating Indigenous rights claims and serve as a vital source of political and economic support for Indigenous organizations. Generalist audiences consist of members of the general public who are interested in, but not deeply involved with, Indigenous issues. While generalist outside audiences generally have less influence in adjudicating legitimacy, a spokesperson's acceptance by a generalist international audience can help to constitute their legitimacy for an expert audience.

For expert audiences, representivity is an important evaluative criteria. Indigenous organizations and spokespeople must prove that they have the support of local communities. "The belief that an organization truly speaks and acts for a particular constituency, becomes simultaneously a selection criteria for supporters as well as a terrain of contestation for leaders" (Lucero 2006, 33-34). At the same time, however, these audiences remain susceptible to shallow activism. As Lucero (2006) notes, perceived "authenticity can often trump numbers in the eyes of important national and international audiences before which the political performances of social movements take place" (33-4). In other words, some expert outside audiences might be inclined to accept a leader who performs his or her identity in a more "traditional" manner that is in line with outside expectations over a leader who has greater support from his or her community, but does not act in a way that is commensurate with traditionalist tropes.⁹

Generalist international audiences are also particularly likely to employ shallow actionism to evaluate legitimacy, accepting and responding to spokespeople who visibly partake in "traditional" cultural and livelihood practices. It is important to note here that the shallow actionist performances demanded of spokespeople are shaped by Western expectations. Conklin (1997), for instance, explains how Indigenous spokespeople "reframe" local "body representations" to conform to "Western visual codes." Indigenous spokespeople also "reframe

their cosmological and ecological systems in terms of Western concepts like “respect for Mother Earth,” “being close to nature,” and “protecting biosphere diversity,”” combining these two strategic representations to put forth “a permissible image that identifies native elements with Western concepts and thereby wins the approval of outsiders” (712-3).

Shallow actionist perspectives can also incorporate essentialist understandings of identity. Notably, for instance, hostile actors have sought to undercut the legitimacy of bi-cultural spokespeople simply by highlighting their bi-culturality. For this reason, bi-cultural spokespeople often choose not to advertise their dual heritage to outside audiences. My impression is that they do not make this decision because they fear rejection by the communities they represent—we have already seen that many local communities are quite accepting of the membership of individuals with a variety of backgrounds, provided these individuals engage in “deep actionism.” Rather, these individuals worry that external opponents of Indigenous rights movements—notably national government officials—will exploit their background in an attempt to de-legitimize them in the eyes of external audiences, which are more likely to rely on essentialist/substantialist understandings of identity.

A fellow anthropologist who had conducted research with a prominent African Indigenous rights activist, for instance, revealed to me that the activist was, in fact, only partly Indigenous. I asked if my colleague had written about this and the colleague explained that she had, but not in English. While in the activist’s home community “everybody knows,” about their bi-cultural heritage, my colleague explained, she was nevertheless concerned about a broader group of people in the activist’s home country gaining access to the information. The fear was that the complication of the activist’s identity in this way would undermine public support for their status as a spokesperson. The spokesperson’s “deep actionism” on behalf of their

community was less visible and tangible to outside audiences and thus could not temper a failure of essentialism or “shallow actionism,” which tend to be given more weight by outside audiences.

To different degrees, both expert and generalist outside audiences also demand cosmopolitanism, requiring spokespeople to have a number of attributes, including communication skills, international connections, and knowledge of Western languages and concepts. Indeed, Sapignoli (2016) goes so far as to argue, “Usually the success of an indigenous NGO and its possibility to survive is related to the degree to which its staff is ‘assimilated’ or ‘acculturated’ in the ‘western way to do things’” (277; see Nicholson 1992).

Cosmopolitanism, however, is a double edged sword. Become *too* cosmopolitan and external audiences may begin to doubt that you are sufficiently “representative” of your home community. This doubt may occur whether a spokesperson has truly lost support from local communities or not. As Messe explained:

M: And the real problem is that [...] in the time we have been here in this office since this morning, I’ve already lost many traditional things that I could have been doing. I could have been running [...] in the forest. But now with education and civilization, there you go, we’re obliged to stay here with microphones in our hands and our computers open...

N: “You can’t do both?”

M: [laughing] “Well, if you are in the forest with a parabolic antenna you can do both! [...] But, you see, you have to be somewhere where there is internet... Afterwards it’s the same people [who require that you have advanced communication capabilities] who come to ask you questions like, “Why don’t you have dirty teeth and with the...? [laughing, miming the pointy ends of filed teeth] (personal communication)

10. Sketch 2: An External Challenge to Messe’s Legitimacy

Shortly after completing my field research, I was speaking with a fellow anthropologist who conducted research with “Pygmy” communities. He had met Messe once or twice and I told

him that I planned to make Messe's story a central part of my thesis. He paused, then interjected: 'Now, what is the deal with Messe?'

I asked him what he meant.

He explained that he had been speaking with a mutual acquaintance, a Western academic who lived in Cameroon and worked extensively with the Baka. We'll call the academic Louie.

'Louie said that Messe presents himself as Baka, but—Louie speaks Baka pretty well. He spent over twenty years studying the language—Louie said that when he tried to speak to Messe in Baka, Messe seemed uncomfortable and switched to French.'

The implication of this anecdote was clear. Louie, and perhaps by extension my colleague, doubted whether Messe was "really" Baka. Maybe he was passing himself off as Baka in order to advance his own interests or those of his organization.

Louie's suspicion, it should be said, was somewhat understandable. During my time in Cameroon I heard a number of stories of people with no Baka heritage, and no legitimacy from local communities, claiming to be Baka. Sometimes this was done superficially, in a "tongue-in-cheek" sort of way. For instance, when travelling to Yaoundé and other large cities, people from the East would sometimes introduce themselves by saying something like "*Je suis un Pygmée de l'est*." This was done as a way of referencing and undercutting the perception that people from that part of the country were primitive or underdeveloped.

In other circumstances, however, the claiming of Baka identity was more insidious. One day I was taking the bus from Bertoua to Yaoundé for a few days of much needed rest and relaxation. The bus stopped in Dimako, the town closest to the Baka villages of Mayos and Loussou, where Okani often works. A man, who appeared to be Bantu, boarded, followed by a group of ten or so Baka youth, both men and women. I found out later that they were musicians

and dancers, and were travelling to Yaoundé in order to audition to represent Cameroonian culture in the opening ceremonies of the upcoming 2014 World Cup of Soccer in Brazil.

Unfortunately, they never made it to their destination. The bus stopped at a police checkpoint on the outskirts of Yaoundé. When none of the Baka performers was able to produce an ID card, police officers demanded that the whole group disembark. As we pulled away, I saw a police officer and the Bantu man engaged in what appeared to be a good natured negotiation, presumably about how much he would be required to pay for the group to be allowed to continue on their way.

A few days later, on a visit to Mayos, I related the incident to Messe and Noël. Noël was aware of the situation as many members of the group were from a nearby village. The performers, he told me, had already returned to Dimako, and had been unable to make it to their audition. I asked if they thought this was the end of the story, or if the performers might be given another chance. Messe replied in a way that surprised me:

‘Even if they succeed in an audition, they’ll never go to Brazil,’ he said, chuckling. He explained that it was not uncommon for Cameroon to send “Baka musicians” to international events in order to demonstrate “Cameroonian culture.” What often happened in these cases was that, rather than pick Baka performers, organizers would select non-Baka friends and family, or people who were willing to pay for the opportunity. These people would pass themselves off as Baka in order to enjoy a free trip.

Would people not notice that the musicians were not Baka? I asked.

Messe chuckled again. ‘That’s what I call *‘la naïveté des Occidentaux’*,’ he explained. ‘Westerners [*les Occidentaux*] are very naïve. You take a Maka or whatever and give him a grass skirt and a traditional instrument and they won’t know the difference.’ He related other, similar

stories: A Bantu student who had claimed to be Baka in order to get a scholarship to study in Europe; a prominent Bantu who had traveled to Europe with a group of “Baka musicians” who turned out to be his sisters.¹⁰

During my time in Cameroon, I too had non-Baka people play on my occidental “naïveté.” In one case, a representative from a small NGO told me, both informally and in a recorded interview, that he was Baka. After the interview, while we were driving in the Okani pickup truck, Messe and a few colleagues started chatting about this person. One of them remarked that this man was insecure because he was embarrassed that he had married a Baka woman.

‘But wait,’ I said, ‘isn’t he Baka?’

‘No!’ one of my colleagues exclaimed. ‘Who told you that?’

‘He did, in the interview I did with him.’

The other men in the truck looked at one another.

‘Why would he do that? Why would he say he was Baka if he wasn’t?’ I asked.

‘Ah, he probably thinks you have money to give to his organization,’ Messe explained.

The implication here was that an Indigenous NGO was more attractive to outside funders than an organization working on Baka issues run by a Bantu.

Indeed, early on in my research, I, like Louie, wondered about Messe’s Baka identity. I quickly realized that Messe was unlike the majority of Baka whom I met: He was relatively wealthy. He lived not in a rural Baka village but in a predominantly Bantu neighbourhood of a large town. He was married to a Bantu woman. At home, the family did not speak Baka, but Bamvélé. As discussed earlier, I also found that people in communities where Messe had worked early in his career did not seem to know that he was Baka.

At times, Messe also seemed uncomfortable answering my specific questions about Baka culture. Early in my research, for instance, we were driving on the narrow dirt road leading to Mayos village. At the roadside, in front of a seemingly abandoned daub and batten house, I notice a crude wooden cross: a long vertical branch stuck into the ground, transversed by two smaller, horizontal sticks. The cross was bound together by strips of faded red fabric, and adorned with leaves and pieces of bark. I asked Messe the meaning of the object.

It was simply a sign warning people to keep out of the house because the residents were away, he explained.

Was there a spiritual component to the symbol? I asked.

No, Messe replied quickly.

Sensing he was uncomfortable with the topic, I left it at that; yet I wondered afterwards about the source of Messe's discomfort. Was he uncomfortable because the cross related to aspects of witchcraft or other beliefs that he found distasteful? Messe was a regular churchgoer and an elder in the local Seventh Day Adventist congregation; he seemed interested in Baka spirituality but did not partake in its practices. This was yet another characteristic that set him apart from the majority of Baka community members. Was he unwilling to talk about the cross because he felt that, so early in my research, a conversation about witchcraft beliefs would reinforce a one-dimensional, primitivist, Orientalist/Africanist view of Baka culture? Or, I wondered, was he uncomfortable because he himself did not know the meaning of the cross? Was he concerned that revealing his lack of knowledge of some aspects of Baka culture would call his Baka identity into question?

I think back on these early suspicions about Messe's identity with embarrassment. I now realize that his behaviour and atypical (for a Baka) lifestyle, were completely explained by his

unique life story and background. My embarrassment relates to the unfounded apprehension I felt about asking Messe about his identity, as well as the fact that, as I now realize, I was subscribing to the same notion of ethnic “authenticity” as other outsiders. I spent the first months of my research feeling apprehensive about questioning Messe’s Baka-ness. I worried that he would think I was trying to expose him or question his legitimacy. When I finally worked up the nerve to ask him about it though, he was completely forthright. He explained his family lineage, explained how he had been raised in a predominantly “Bantu” cultural milieu and had embraced his Baka heritage only when he was in his twenties. Moreover, he gave me permission to relate all of this in my dissertation!

Similarly, when I explained Messe’s background, including the fact that his father was Baka but that Messe had only learned to speak Baka in his twenties, to my colleague who had relayed Louie’s suspicions, this seemed to settle the matter. The revelation that there was an explanation for Messe’s “inauthentic” behaviour, but that Messe was, nevertheless, hereditarily Baka, meant that he was “legitimate” in my colleague’s eyes. For my colleague, Baka lineage, not language or any other acquired trait, was the most important factor in adjudicating Messe’s legitimacy.

On the surface, this example would seem to involve a failure of shallow actionism, overcome by a reference to essentialism: Messe’s failure to speak “proper” Baka called his identity into question, but this was forgiven once my colleague knew more about Messe’s family background. Messe’s lineage, however, was only one factor in arbitrating his Baka-ness. In addition to the information that I provided him about Messe’s background, for instance, my colleague was aware that Messe had been working in and with Baka communities for a long period of time. Moreover, I vouched for the fact that, by and large, Messe enjoyed good relations

and support in the communities where Okani worked. While Messe's heredity was important in establishing the legitimacy of his Baka identity, it would not, on its own, have been enough to ensure his recognition as a legitimate group member, much less a legitimate spokesperson. It was necessary, but not sufficient. Also important was the perception that Messe had been accepted as a legitimate representative by Baka communities ("representivity") and was working on their behalf ("engaged actionism").

Throughout his work, Messe cannily demonstrated his representivity and engaged actionism to outside audiences in order to make up for his failures of shallow actionism. He did this in a variety of ways, including by circulating videos and other materials that showed Okani's work and expressed community members' support for the organization (see Chapter Six).¹¹

Messe also drew on his cosmopolitanism. As we have seen, he is well versed in the language, organizations, and instruments of international Indigenous rights and development, and he would frequently show off this knowledge in meetings with NGO officials. Indeed, it became clear that this type of knowledge was a major reason why international NGOs chose to work with Messe. In one instance, for example, a staff member from a British development organization phoned Messe looking for Baka representatives to attend preparatory meetings for the 2014 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in Chiang Mai, Thailand. 'We don't want tourists,' he told Messe, imploring him to find people who, like him, were 'good communicators' and who had experience in similar meetings. In another, case, a friend working for another NGO sent me a transcript of an interview that his organization had conducted with Messe. In the interview, Messe discussed a variety of collaborative projects that Okani had underway with national and international development organizations. In the margin of the transcript, someone from my friend's organization had written, "Let's talk to him. He has a good address book!" Indeed, in

working with Indigenous spokespeople, one realizes that strategic self-representation involves not only *strategic traditionalism*, wherein representatives objectify and perform visible aspects of their “traditional” cultures, but also *strategic cosmopolitanism*, wherein they demonstrate their fluency in the language of international human rights, their adeptness with technology, the breadth of their international contacts, etc.

This is not to say that Messe did not also play on international audiences’ receptivity to strategic traditionalism and shallow actionism when the opportunity presented itself. I noticed, for instance, that when we attended meetings with European funders and other outsiders, Messe often chose to wear more “traditional” or “African” looking clothing. Interestingly, this clothing was not “Baka” but nevertheless had the effect of conveying Messe’s difference or “authenticity” to people who did not know precisely what Baka clothing looked like. Messe’s use of markers of authenticity, such as clothing, however, was rather superficial, functioning as a sort of shorthand that emphasized his legitimacy without his having to engage in a detailed discussion of his life story.

Messe’s willingness to engage in strategic traditionalism had limits, however. In Chapter Three, for instance, I related the anecdote of Messe’s attending a conference in the UK, where he had been preparing to deliver his remarks wearing a dress shirt and dress pants, and an anthropologist suggested that he change into more “authentic” clothing. Messe took offence to this. Exaggerating for effect, he told me that people like the anthropologist thought that Baka should all wear ripped clothing and have dirt in their hair. He linked this desire for “authentic” dress to underdevelopment. Whereas Baka wanted to use technology and send their kids to school, people like the anthropologist wanted to keep them in the forest. If a spokesperson was

not “Baka Baka,” Messe told me, meaning Baka in a traditional or stereotypical way, these outsiders did not recognize him as legitimate.

M: Someone actually told me, “You have to have disheveled hair, dirty teeth, so that we can see that you are Baka.

N: Oh yeah? Like, “you have to file your teeth in order to...”

M: There you go. I have to file my teeth. I have to... and all that. Well, if people limit themselves to that we’ll have the same issue of people travelling around with feathers on their heads because they want to be different from the others. And that, I don’t find that important. (personal communication; my translation)

In this case, the demand that Messe engage in “shallow actionism” conflicted with his belief that his legitimacy was constituted by “deep actionism.” Indeed, Messe felt that a superficial performance would in fact be betraying Baka values and thus would be betraying, not demonstrating, his Baka identity.

This example also points to a conflict between competing evaluative criteria. While some expert outsiders, such as the development officials with which Okani works, valued Messe’s cosmopolitanism, for the anthropologist, Messe’s cosmopolitanism, as evidenced by his “inauthentic” clothing, called his legitimacy into question. Of course there are plenty of anthropologists and others who have moved beyond essentialism and shallow actionism in their evaluations of Indigenous identity. I count myself among them. The more one works in Indigenous communities, the more one realizes that outward attributes of “authenticity”—be they dress, behaviour, or even knowledge of local beliefs related to outsiders—are a red herring. Not only can such characteristics be easily taken on by non-Indigenous individuals for selfish reasons, an individual’s purported lack of such characteristics can serve as a way for outsiders to delegitimize them.

11. Constituting National Legitimacy

There actually a great deal of similarity in the ways in which some outside experts and local communities evaluate the legitimacy of Baka Indigenous spokespeople. Both are nominally concerned with, or in some ways reference, heredity, but this is a necessary but not sufficient characteristic. In order to be a legitimate spokesperson one must bring resources into the community and abide by local values, the local recognition that this affords will, in turn, help to establish one's legitimacy internationally.

The seeming synergy between these two audiences, however, is complicated by the fact that national-level, non-Baka Cameroonians use very different markers for evaluating whether someone is Baka. For many Cameroonians, Baka-ness is determined by livelihood practices and marginalization. The particular history and social position of the “Pygmies” mean that, perhaps more than any other Indigenous group, visible signs of poverty have become a marker of their identity. While other Indigenous groups have traditional clothing or adornments, the Baka do not; or, that is, they do not have clothing that provides the right combination of durability (ceremonial Baka clothing is made from plant materials), modesty (the clothes traditionally worn to hunt were often only a *cache sex*), and indigeneity (for centuries Baka have traded for clothing with “Bantu” and much of what they wear is the same as what “Bantu” wear) in order to portray indigeneity to an outside audience. This combined with the fact that marginalization plays such a long role in Baka history, whereas other Indigenous communities can often reference a pre-contact period in which they were not marginalized, and poverty and marginalization have become integral to Baka identity in a way that they are not for other groups. The marker of Baka-ness becomes poverty itself. Messe once put it to me this way. Referencing the Mbororo, an Indigenous pastoralist group in Cameroon, he said, ‘If a Mbororo becomes rich, he is still Mbororo. If a Baka becomes rich, people think he is no longer Baka.’

According to this view, if a person becomes too assimilated, he or she can literally cease to be Baka. This can be regarded as a version of shallow actionism (see Leonhardt 2006). Similarly, someone such as Messe, who does not fully engage in Baka cultural and livelihood practices can never “become” Baka by referencing other evaluative criteria, such as deep actionism.

Thus, rather than “proving” his Baka-ness to national audiences, Messe often chose to “pass” as “Bantu,” referring to Baka as an outsider would, rather than using the collective “we.” Messe’s hybrid background was a major advantage here. In one memorable incident Messe and I were chatting informally with two female Cameroonian government officials as we were leaving a conference on Baka development. As we stood in the parking lot of the hotel where the conference had been held, in front of the government workers’ white SUV, the women began listing a number of stereotypes about Baka: They were lazy, they were alcoholics, they did not want to advance, they could not be trusted. It became clear that the women had no idea that Messe was Baka. Messe did try to push back by stating that these were stereotypes, but he did not reference his background. When I asked him about this later, he explained that there would have been no point, as explaining his heritage would not have made the women recognize him as Baka. “They would say ‘*tu n’es plus un vrai*’” (you are no longer a ‘real’ [one]) he told me.

Some national audiences’ lack of recognition of Messe as an Indigenous, Baka spokesperson, however, did not negatively impact his or his organization’s ability to participate in conferences and meetings, or to attract resources from national-level donors. This is because the requirement for Indigenous self-representation does not function the same way at the national level as it does internationally. As noted earlier, since the launching of the first national-level development initiatives for Baka communities, Baka have been represented by a collection of

missionaries, NGO workers, and government officials. While these types of actors are becoming increasingly less present on the global stage, in Cameroon it is still much more likely to find an outsider speaking on behalf of Baka communities, rather than to find these communities speaking on their own behalf. Often, the activities of NGOs and other outside actors is framed as “*accompaignment*.” Baka communities, it is assumed, are unable to stand on their own and must instead be “accompanied” by outsiders who can advocate on their behalf. Given this atmosphere, Messe’s ability to “pass” as “Bantu” was a major asset, allowing him to avoid discrimination and instead take a leadership role in these meetings.

There were, however, exceptions to Messe’s tendency to de-emphasize his Baka-ness to national audiences. The most important of these was in the realm of politics. During my research, Messe was elected as a city counsellor in his home village of Andom. He was able to achieve this position in part through his status as an “Indigenous person.” As noted in the first section of this chapter, while Messe could “pass” as “Bantu” in most places, this was not possible in his home village, where many knew his family background. In this case, others’ knowledge of Messe’s Baka heritage provided a significant advantage. At the time of his election, there was a push underway to increase the number of “Pygmy” city counsellors in areas with significant “Pygmy” populations. Political parties were thus motivated to find “Pygmy” individuals to include as part of their slate of candidates. Messe thus proclaimed and performed his Baka identity in order to bolster his chances of being included as a candidate.

The way in which Messe, and other “Pygmy” city counsellors, perform and speak about their identities may represent a shift in the ways in which “Pygmy” identity is conceived in Cameroon. In some circumstances, identity has become a question of heredity (i.e. essentialism), rather than cultural practices (i.e. shallow activism). This shift was clearly illustrated to me on

the day of Messe's inauguration. After the inauguration ceremony, which was followed by a party at a home in Messe's village, we were invited to a more intimate gathering at the home of the newly-elected mayor (who was Bantu.) We arrived in the Okani truck, pulling in beside a simple concrete building decked out with couches and chairs for the mayor's guests. When we arrived we found the mayor and other members of the city council seated in a circle. A group of women were standing in the middle of the room singing and clapping. Once they finished, the women were ushered out. A young man directed us to a couch, where we sat down. A woman came and asked us what we would like to drink; reemerging a few minutes later with a plastic case containing soda and beer, which she distributed to the assembled men.

After we were seated, the mayor began to speak. He thanked the team that he had assembled and discussed his goals for his term. It became clear as he spoke that he was quite drunk.

The mayor was particularly focused on the issue of tradition. He spoke of his concern about the loss of tradition in the area, arguing that the city council should seek to identify why the community was losing its traditional values and practices. At one point the mayor, who was slurring his speech and was thus difficult to follow, mentioned a tradition whereby men abstained from sex in the days before fishing or hunting in order to improve their luck. The mayor then reached his hand into the middle of the room and said, "I want to do something tonight. I want us all to take a vow not to have any contact with a woman for two weeks." The implication here was that, just as a hunter would traditionally abstain from sex in order to improve his hunt, the city council should abstain from sex in order to generate good luck for their time in office. The mayor invited anyone who wanted to participate in the pact to come lay his their hand on top of

his. An awkward moment ensued as no one in the room moved. Finally the mayor exclaimed, in a lighthearted way, “Ah, you see! We are losing our traditions!”

A number of other members of the city council spoke until, finally, Messe made an intervention. He built on the preceding discussion of tradition. He argued that restoring traditional practices could function as a competitive advantage. “*Qu’est-ce-qu’on apporte à l’échange mondiale?*” [What are we bringing to the global exchange?], he asked rhetorically, arguing that the village’s authenticity and traditions could help to attract tourists and investment. Messe then started to explain how he knew that traditions could attract outside resources.

‘Some of you might not know me,’ he began, ‘I am the son of Mabaya Jean-Baptiste, the Baka Pygmy.’ He went on to state that, while “Pygmy” traditions were relatively well preserved and well studied, this was not the case with Bantu traditions such as those that had been discussed earlier. Messe suggested a plan for attracting cultural tourists. There should be a big traditional festival in the village that would attract people from all over, ‘Even outsiders from the West like Nicholas,’ he said, gesturing in my direction. It is interesting that Messe began his discussion by referring to his Baka lineage. The implication being that his Baka-ness made him an expert not in any particular tradition, but rather in *knowing how to use tradition for instrumental purposes*.

In addition to referencing his status as a “Pygmy,” however, Messe also made frequent reference to his travels and international connections. Several times he referenced a trip that he had taken to Japan. Indeed, on the day of the inauguration, he had even brought a photograph of himself in Japan, as he had told me earlier that, in the course of the election, some had cast doubt on his claim to have travelled internationally. Messe thus presented himself both as “Baka” but also, and perhaps more importantly, as *cosmopolitan*. His place on the winning list of candidates

may have been secured because he was, hereditarily, Baka, but he was now seeking to assert authority for himself on the council by citing his international connections. Interestingly, Messe was also citing the Baka as leaders in a type of strategic traditionalism that, he suggested, Bantu could learn from in order to attract resources to their community.

12. Inequality and Spokespersonship

Messe is able to draw on his complex personal background to be at once cosmopolitan and “traditional,” and to “code switch” for different audiences, which have different expectations and demands of Indigenous representatives. While this makes Messe an effective spokesperson, it also illustrates a major deficiency in the “regimes of representation” that Indigenous people must navigate to have their voices heard in the halls of power. Simply put, the majority of Baka are not like Messe. They do not possess the linguistic, educational, and other resources to undertake the complex performances that are sometimes required of Indigenous representatives.

As previously discussed, there is now fairly widespread acceptance of Indigenous spokespeople engaging in “modern” practices. (The exception to this rule being in some situations at the national level in Cameroon.) The converse, however, is not always true. An Indigenous person who lacks the education, language, and other attributes needed to effectively communicate her indigeneity would certainly still be recognized as Indigenous, but is unlikely to be recognized as a spokesperson for her community, and thus will be unable to reap the benefits that spokespersonship sometimes entails.

Jerome Lewis (2000) explores this issue among Aka “Pygmies” in Congo-Brazzaville in his article “Forest of Village People. Whose Voice Will Be Heard.” He notes that, although “Pygmy” organizations in Congo “have been participating in international Indigenous rights meetings since 1994, the processes and activities involved are so elaborated and abstract that only the most educated are confident enough to participate” (9). This creates inequality among

the Aka, as more educated community members, who tend to live in sedentary villages and thus have had more exposure to other cultures, and greater access to education, become spokespeople. Meanwhile, the Aka that Lewis calls “forest people,” who live more “traditional” lifestyles, lack the requisite characteristics to navigate the complex world of international Indigenous advocacy. “There is no ‘political space,’” Lewis argues, for Indigenous individuals and communities that are “ignorant of formal education, national and international power structures and their relations, and intimidated by urban environments, formality, bureaucratic procedures and modern technology” (9). Importantly, Lewis notes that this power imbalance results in a bias in favour of the concerns and objectives of “village” Aka over those of “forest” Aka in the group’s international advocacy.

One sees a similar dynamic in Baka advocacy. Owing to Messe’s unique background, Okani is a rather exceptional organization. The majority of Baka representatives attending national-level meetings and conferences, however, come from Baka community-based organizations (CBOs) that were established by outside NGOs, often to meet funders’ requirements that the NGO have a local partner organization (see Chapter Three). Baka CBO staff are generally less educated. They may have attended a village school, and perhaps a local high school, but they have not attended university or received other advanced schooling. As such, they are relatively less conversant in international concepts of rights, development, etc. They usually reside in Baka villages. They are also often younger than the cosmopolitan spokespeople such as Messe. These individuals are less likely to be of mixed parentage. In the words of Baka community members, they are “Baka Baka” in a way that cosmopolitans, such as Messe, are not. International and national non-Baka NGO staff often take a large hand in running these organizations.

Baka CBO representatives have a much more difficult time having their voices heard in meetings with outside decision-makers. While there has recently been a push for greater involvement of “Pygmies” in national-level meetings and conferences on issues such as development, education, and forest stewardship, there has been no concomitant effort to ensure the fulsome participation of the Baka and other “Pygmy” representatives who attend these meetings. Messe is the rare exception of a Baka who is sufficiently conversant in the language of international development, and has sufficiently high status, to participate in such meetings on equal footing with “Bantu” and Western development workers and government officials. More often, Baka attendees often function as window dressing and non-“Pygmy” NGO actors seem content to plan and advocate on their behalf while they look on. Some organizations seem more concerned with the *appearance* of representivity than with ensuring that “Pygmy” representatives actually speak on behalf of “Pygmy” communities. As Messe explained to me, “There are some [organizations] that are just waiting for someone to come say that he is Indigenous, with a very Indigenous [looking] face, who doesn’t necessarily have anything pertinent to contribute” (personal communication; my translation).

I witnessed this dynamic while attending a plenary meeting of RACOPY (*Réseau Recherche Actions Concertées Pygmées*) in October 2013. (RACOPY is a national network of NGOs working “for the needs and interests” of “Pygmy” communities in Cameroon. See Chapter Three.) While RACOPY now makes efforts to invite Baka and other “Pygmy” representatives to its meetings, the organization is still controlled by outsiders. At the meeting, I watched in dismay as sessions were dominated by a European consultant and two Bantu officials from a major development organization. While there were more local Baka and Bagyelí CBO representatives

than non-“Pygmy” development workers at the meeting, the development workers sat around the central conference table, while most of the CBO representatives sat in chairs around the outside wall of the room. The development workers made little effort to proactively encourage local representatives to participate in discussions. The attitude seemed to be that these individuals were not capable of undertaking the project planning activities to which the plenary was dedicated. Indeed, the European consultant later expressed that she felt that the Baka CBOs “needed a lot of accompanying [*accompagnement*]” from outsiders such as herself.

The local representatives, however, had a different take on the ways in which they were being shut out from the meeting. On the morning of the second day of the meeting, a young Baka man addressed the full group. ‘The style that we are using here does not allow us to express ourselves easily,’ he explained. ‘We were completely closed off.... The French was a bit elevated [and] we didn’t have the courage to speak up.’ He added that he was disappointed that no one had asked if the Baka and Bagyelí representatives were following the discussion or had anything to add. On the third day of the meeting, almost none of the CBO representatives showed up.

This anecdote illustrates the continued divide between outside development officials, cosmopolitans like Messe, and local community representatives. On one hand, the fact that local people are now invited to attend meetings of organizations such as RACOPY is to be applauded. On the other hand, too often the involvement of these individuals is not substantive. RACOPY invited “Pygmy” representatives to attend, but did not make any efforts to change its structure in order to encourage their participation. This was especially ironic given that, at the same meeting, the organization was discussing MAPPAPY (*Méthodologie d’Approche Participative Pygmée*), a

methodology for development organizations to work with “Pygmy” communities in culturally appropriate ways, such that they can truly participate in consultation as discussion.

At the RACOPY meeting, I asked a development official from Plan Cameroon if his organization had given thought to measures to improve the substantive participation of Baka and Bagyelí in planning meetings. He agreed that this would be good, but argued that participation moved along a gradual scale: ‘First, are they there? Second, are they participating? Third, is what they say being taken into account?’ RACOPY, he argued, was still working on the first step. Once this had been accomplished, the network could move onto the second and the third. This perspective, however, was belied by the way in which the meeting was conducted. It would have been easy to include the Baka and Bagyelí representatives in the discussion had those chairing the meeting simply made the effort. Here the perspective of “scales of participation” seemed a convenient excuse to prioritize externally-imposed evaluation metrics over more substantive participation. On paper, this meeting would look like a success: A good number of Baka and Bagyelí representatives attended. The meeting produced a work plan for the project, etcetera. Obscured in this type of evaluation, however, is the fact that the Baka and Bagyelí representatives did not contribute very much to the work plan. This type of substantive participation is more difficult to measure. In the absence of more foundational shifts in methods and approach, then, Baka and other “Pygmy” communities must continue to rely on cosmopolitans such as Messe to advance their views.

13. Conclusion

To be a successful in his work, Messe must perform actions that result in his being recognized both as Baka and as a cosmopolitan Indigenous spokesperson. The actions and performances needed to achieve this recognition often come into conflict. Due to his bicultural heritage and education, Messe, like many other Indigenous spokespeople, is well-positioned to

navigate these complex dynamics. His “Bantu” upbringing afforded him the educational and employment opportunities that allowed him to gain the skills necessary to participate in international Indigenous rights networks, while his Baka heredity allows him to gain recognition as an Indigenous self-representative.

While Baka communities seem mostly content with Okani’s work, Messe’s story also reveals the ways in which competing imperatives for constituting legitimacy can have the effect of marginalizing or even shutting out the majority of Baka from international spokespersonship. If only individuals with such specific and unique backgrounds can achieve international recognition as legitimate Indigenous spokespeople, it begs the question: Are international Indigenous rights organizations truly allowing a meaningful space for Indigenous self-representation?

Okani has attempted to account for and address this inequality in its work, namely, by adopting a participatory methodology. By undertaking participatory video (PV) and other participatory development projects, Okani seeks to enable “Pygmy” community members who lack Messe’s cosmopolitan attributes to determine the form and content of projects and the representations of Baka communities. The following, final chapter will explore this methodology, including its successes and shortcomings in addressing structural inequality between Baka spokespeople and community members.

Chapter 6

Indigenous Media, Participatory Video, and the Okani Video Project

1. “*Mais il n’y a rien!*”

Prior to starting my doctorate, I worked in the film department of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian George Gustav Heye Center in New York City. During that time, I had the opportunity to meet the director of a small French film festival. The director was recognized as an expert on African film, and his festival also often included films by and about Indigenous peoples. Given this confluence, I was excited to speak with him about a budding interest in filmmaking in African Indigenous communities. When I brought up this topic, however, his reaction was disappointing: “*Mais il n’y a rien!*” he exclaimed. But there is nothing!

The festival director’s response was surprising, but not unexpected. While there is now an extensive academic literature on “Indigenous media”—that is, films, videos and other media objects produced by Indigenous peoples and communities—books and articles about this topic have most often drawn their case material from the Americas, the Pacific, and (occasionally) the Arctic regions of Europe, leaving out African examples. There are two principal reasons for this exclusion. First, there has historically been a relative lack of access to, and funding for, technologies of film production and circulation in rural Africa. Second, as discussed in Chapter Four, articulating and gaining recognition for Indigenous group identities has been more difficult and contentious in Africa than in other parts of the world. Because of this, fewer Indigenous films and videos are produced in Africa than in the Americas or the Pacific, films that are

produced are not always widely circulated, and films that are circulated are not always recognized as “Indigenous media.”

As we have seen, however, various sub-Saharan African groups, including the Baka and other “Pygmies,” are now recognized as “Indigenous peoples” by international organizations such as the United Nations and by other, non-African Indigenous communities. Many of these groups are also producing films, videos, and other media. African Indigenous media projects have much in common with some of the paradigmatic examples of Indigenous media from other parts of the world. Like works from the Americas and the Pacific, African Indigenous films and videos address objectives such as cultural preservation, self-determination, and solidarity building, while also serving as tools for transnational advocacy. They accomplish these goals by addressing a variety of *audiences*, including the subject community itself; other Indigenous communities; government and development officials and other decision-makers; and general publics at the national and international level.

As in other parts of the world, African Indigenous media, including Baka and other “Pygmy” media projects, has been influenced by the legacy of outside, Western filmmaking. In many cases, ethnographic and documentary film projects provided community members with training and access to equipment, which enabled them to begin constructing their own mediated self-representations. Outside films also provided a political impetus for Indigenous mediamaking, as communities sought to “write back” to stereotypes, narratives, and tropes constructed by outsiders.

In Africa, perhaps more than elsewhere, Information and Communication Technology for Development, or ICT4D, projects have also been a particularly important way in which communities have gained training and access to filmmaking equipment. Many of these projects

sought to respond to the “participatory turn” in development in the late twentieth century. As we will see, some participatory development projects sought to use media to empower local communities to have greater voice in development interventions, using techniques such as photo voice and participatory video.

Participatory video (PV) has been a particularly important technique for advancing mediamaking in many Indigenous communities, including Baka communities. In a PV project, a community (often aided by an outside facilitator) builds consensus about a particular political or social issue, and then films and edits its own video, to be distributed to a relevant audience, usually with the goal of effecting change. While some examples of Indigenous media are auteurist works that represent the vision of a single filmmaker, PV is intended to represent the consensus view of a full community (or at least a substantial portion thereof.) In short, *Indigenous media* refers to films, videos and other media produced by, rather than about, Indigenous peoples. *Participatory video*, on the other hand, is produced by (rather than about) a *community* using a participatory methodology. Not all Indigenous media is participatory video and not all participatory video is Indigenous media.

This chapter explores African Indigenous mediamaking through a case study of video work carried out by Okani, the Baka NGO with which I conducted my fieldwork. Okani’s videos can be considered both “Indigenous media” and “participatory video.” I thus refer to Okani’s work as *Indigenous PV*. I will first provide a brief history of Indigenous media and participatory video, including how they emerged in African Indigenous communities. I will then explore the *effects* of Indigenous media and participatory video through an examination of the various *audiences* that view these works. As we will see, works may have different political effects and intentions depending on their target audience.

2. History of Indigenous Media

Wilson and Stewart (2008a) define Indigenous media as “forms of media expression conceptualized, produced, and/or created by Indigenous peoples across the globe” (2). The key aspect of this definition is Indigenous agency: Indigenous media is not simply media *about* Indigenous peoples; it is media *by* Indigenous peoples. As Ginsburg (2002) explains, Indigenous media allows communities to “narrate stories and retell histories from an indigenous point of view...through media forms that can circulate beyond the local” (10).

Indigenous media originated from a number of interrelated phenomena, beginning in the mid-twentieth century. These included the growth of ethnographic filmmaking, the spread of portable and affordable mediamaking technologies, the increased use of media technologies as part of participatory development projects, and the expansion of the global Indigenous rights movement.

The growth of ethnographic filmmaking in the 50s and 60s coincided with a period of reinvention in the discipline of anthropology, and in the social sciences more generally (Hymes 1972). Influenced by a growing preoccupation with human and civil rights in society at large, anthropologists began to develop more democratic and “politically self-conscious” approaches that sought to bring “the native voice” into “direct dialogue” with ethnographic representation (Ginsburg 1991). Some scholars saw film as a medium that could help to reduce the bias and artifice of written accounts of other cultures. Around this time, a number of filmmakers began experimenting with projects of “participatory cinema,” which attempted to unsettle the relationship between author and subject (MacDougall 1975, 109-124). Groundbreaking efforts included Jean Rouch’s “shared anthropology” film projects, such as *Jaguar* (1955) and *Moi, Un Noir* (Rouch and Ganda 1958), in which African “subjects” actively contributed to the creative

process and were envisioned as the films' primary audience (Ginsburg 1995).¹ As Ginsburg explains, "the increasingly collaborative approach to ethnographic filmmaking" pioneered by Rouch and others "foreshadowed and encouraged the development of indigenous media" (Ginsburg 1991, 94).

In addition to the foundational role of ethnographic filmmaking and "participatory cinema," increased accessibility of media production and consumption technologies in the closing decades of the twentieth century also helped lay the groundwork for the emergence of Indigenous media. The development of relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use video recorders made aspiring Indigenous filmmakers less reliant on the equipment and expertise of outsiders. At the same time, Indigenous communities were increasingly exposed to outside media through the spread of "small media technologies"—"digital video, VCR players, VCD/DVD machines..., laptop computers, GSM phones, iPods, and the Internet," as well as infrastructures such as mobile phone and Internet networks—to rural communities (Ugor 2009, 393). Access to Western film and television, including stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous cultures, also helped stimulate an interest in self-representation (Ginsburg 1995, 67; Salazar 2004, 65).

The growth of Indigenous media was also spurred along by the expansion of Information and Communications Technology for Development, or ICT4D, projects in Indigenous communities. ICT4D projects can be traced to the "participatory turn" in development practice, beginning in the 1970s (Chambers 1994; McBride 1980; Berrigan 1979). Rather than arriving in communities to implement preconceived, prescriptive development projects, practitioners of participatory development sought first to open "new 'communicative spaces' in which dialogue and development [could] flourish" (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 3). There was thus a logical compatibility between participatory development and media technologies. Development

organizations began to experiment with using media to democratize interventions and make them more responsive to community needs and concerns (Dyson et al. 2006; Braden and Mayo 1999; Frost and Jones 1998). The rise of participatory development also anticipated the anthropological “crisis of representation” (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986), which caused researchers to seek ways of unsettling the power dynamics inherent in the project of ethnographic representation. This included enticing some visual anthropologists to look for ways to hand over mediamaking tools to the Indigenous subjects, building on the pioneering work of Rouch and others.

Finally, as Ginsburg (1991) points out, the growth of Indigenous media was interlinked with the rise of Indigenous rights activism in the second half of the twentieth century (see Chapter Four.) Organizations such as the American Indian Movement in the United States questioned “not only how conventions of representation [were] culture bound” but also “central issues of power regarding who control[ed] the production and distribution of imagery” (96). Many Indigenous organizations and communities thus sought to create their own self-representations and to circulate these globally. Some Indigenous films and videos from this era sought to effect change on particular issues (e.g. land rights claims) while others aimed more generally to “write back” to Western tropes of primitivism, degradation, etc. As part of their broader rights activism, Indigenous communities used media to re-insert local experiences and histories into national and global “imaginaries” on more favourable terms (Ginsburg 1994, 378). As Graham (2016a) argues, “New media technologies [gave] Indigenous Peoples powerful means to destabilize hegemonic stereotypes that circulate in the mass media and achieve greater representational sovereignty” (see also Graham 2016b); or, as Tacchi, Foth and Hearn (2009; citing Couldry 2000) put it simply: “Power relations shift when people achieve access to media.”

By the early 1980s, often drawing on skills and equipment acquired through outside film projects and ICT4D initiatives, Indigenous artists from many parts of the world (sometimes still aided by non-Indigenous filmmakers and/or development workers) were producing films and videos, which were circulated nationally and internationally, as well as locally within Indigenous communities. Some of these works screened in prestigious film festivals and/or received mainstream theatrical releases. Prominent examples include the films of the Video in the Villages project in Brazil and the Igloodik Isuma collective in the Canadian Arctic (Ginsburg 1995, 67). While high-quality works that screen in prestigious venues are the most high profile examples of Indigenous media, however, this heading encompasses an enormous variety of films, videos, and other media objects, ranging from “small-scale community-based videos, to broadcast quality television, to major independent art films” (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, 9). Multimedia projects such as online digital archives and interactive websites are also an increasingly important example of “Indigenous media.”²

By making and circulating films and videos, Indigenous communities have carved out a place in what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls global “mediascapes.” Mediascapes include the “distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information” and “the images of the world created by these media,” as well various locations throughout the world where media is produced or circulated (35). We can thus talk of a global Indigenous “mediascape” encompassing the sites and technologies of video production, the videos themselves, mediamakers and audiences, and the sites where videos screen, including international meetings and film festivals (Ginsburg 2008, 302). The concept of mediascapes highlights “the interdependence of [Indigenous] media practices with the local, national, and transnational circumstances that surround them” (Ginsburg 1994, 366). Appadurai’s term

references the concept of a landscape in order to incorporate an understanding of positionality:

Like a landscape, a mediascape can only be beheld from one angle/perspective at a time, with the position of the beholder determining which features are revealed and which are obscured.

3. Purposes of Indigenous Media

While many Indigenous mediamakers have narrative and aesthetic goals for their works, there is no doubt that Indigenous media is inherently political. The political intentions and effects of Indigenous media differ by project. As Terence Turner (1993) notes, in reference to his ground-breaking work with the Kayapó Video Project in Brazil, these effects can be internal, with films and videos serving as “bases for group solidarity and mobilization,” and external, with media enacting “claims on the support of other social groups, governments and public opinion all over the globe” (424). Broadly speaking, we can identify three principal objectives of Indigenous media:

1. Building, recovering, reconstituting, strengthening, and safeguarding group identity and solidarity, including through the revival and re-imagining of cultural practices and traditions.
2. Creating and strengthening links with other Indigenous groups and communities for the purpose of intercultural learning and forming/solidifying political alliances.
3. Informing the non-Indigenous world about Indigenous culture and living conditions in order raise awareness, build understanding, and garner support for political activities.

While Indigenous media can serve a more general function of building solidarity, telling important stories, or challenging outside imaginaries of Indigenous peoples, many Indigenous media projects have as their primary objective advocacy around a specific political issue. As

discussed in Chapter Four, Indigenous communities and their allies often conduct advocacy through “transnational advocacy networks” (TANs). These networks consist of local communities, grassroots organizations, international NGOs, and members of the general public. Through TANs, local communities and organizations can seek to generate a “boomerang effect” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 36), transmitting information to powerful outside organizations and individuals who can exert pressure on companies, governments, and organizations to promote and preserve Indigenous rights. As Keck and Sikkink (1998, 21) note, TANs are “bound together” in large part by “exchanges of information” (21). The circulation of films, videos, and other media through TANs is thus a key part of generating a “boomerang effect.” As Noël, one of Okani’s most experienced video facilitators explained to me, “The international community is fighting for rights. Our rights and the rights of the entire world. We can see that video is really very effective for showing certain things, and certain abuses that are done to Indigenous peoples” (personal communication; my translation).

The political effects of Indigenous media are not only attached to the films and videos produced by mediamaking projects. Rather, the *process* of mediamaking itself can have important political and social impacts. For instance, Indigenous media can bring community members together to build consensus on important issues, or can allow community members to gain new skills, or it can simply provide an enjoyable activity. Some Indigenous media projects also bring fame and resources to participant communities. Indeed, the evaluation of Indigenous media in Indigenous communities themselves often focuses more on the process of production, rather than on the textual content of the works produced. For this reason, Ginsburg (1994) advocates for an “embedded aesthetics” approach to Indigenous media. This approach examines films and videos in the context of “the cultural mediations, social relationships, possibilities and

connections with others that Indigenous media opens up from within and across local communities to global partnerships and collaborations” (Graham 2016b, 2). Similarly, Juan Salazar (2004) argues that scholars should focus on the “poetics of indigenous media”—that is, “the way media comes into being and functions in a given community, group or culture” and how the “social practices of media are grounded in cultural politics and social action” (7).

4. Indigenous Media in Africa

In spite of the tremendous growth of Indigenous media during the closing decades of the last century, there are relatively few examples of African Indigenous media projects from this period. Indeed, Wilson and Stewart’s otherwise excellent edited volume *Global Indigenous Media* (2008b) does not contain a single chapter devoted to an African example.

This is not to say that many of the preconditions for the development of Indigenous media did not also exist in African communities, including “Pygmy” communities specifically. These communities, like their counterparts from elsewhere in the world, also have a legacy of ethnographic and documentary filmmaking and an interest in self-representation. Indeed, films made among African groups, especially Eastern African pastoralists such as the Maasai, Nuer, and Turkana, as well as the San in the Kalahari, are among the most well-known works from the early decades of visual anthropology in the 1960s and 70s. These include the works of John Marshall (with the San) and David and Judith MacDougall (with the Turkana.) As occurred elsewhere, these filmmakers launched a self-reinforcing process in the communities where they worked, passing on technical skills and technologies to local people and encouraging students and collaborators to take up their work.

In spite of the presence of ethnographic filmmakers, however, African Indigenous media did not develop at the same time as Indigenous media in the Americas and Oceania. In large part, this was due to the relative economic underdevelopment of African countries, which meant that

African Indigenous communities were less likely to be integrated in the global flows of media that helped to catalyze Indigenous filmmaking in the Americas. While, during the 1960s ‘era of independence,’ a few African directors began making accomplished films in the continent’s metropolises, the majority of Africans, especially in rural areas, rarely had meaningful access to filmmaking and communications technologies (Armes 1987, 214). As Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike (1994) explains, “film production, even when under the control of Africans in independent countries, has mimicked the general uneven pattern of Africa’s overall development” (1). The most important reason for the relative dearth of African Indigenous media, however, is that, until the 1990s, African communities did not participate in the global Indigenous rights movement. They did not consider themselves Indigenous in a global sense and were not generally seen as Indigenous by others (see Chapter Four).

Gradually, however, African Indigenous communities, including Baka and other “Pygmies,” have begun to carve out space for themselves in the global Indigenous “mediascape.” This has been greatly aided by the aforementioned spread of “small media technologies,” including through ICT4D projects. While these technologies remain less accessible to rural Indigenous peoples than to other segments of the population, video cameras, televisions, and smartphones are nevertheless increasingly commonplace in African Indigenous communities. In many cases, these technologies were introduced by NGOs as part of development projects. At the same time, as discussed in Chapter Four, these communities have started to participate in the international Indigenous rights movement, which provides access to new networks of circulation and screening venues for the films and videos that they produce.

5. The Baka on Film

As in other parts of the world, Indigenous media in Africa is, in part, an effort to “write back” to outside stereotypes and tropes included in films made by outsiders. Certainly, this is the

case for mediamaking among Baka and other “Pygmies.” We have already seen how tropes of primitivism and degradation are omnipresent in academic and popular writings about “Pygmies.” It should not be surprising, then, that such representations are also prevalent in the films that Western outsiders have made about “Pygmy” communities.

There are a number of well-known ethnographic and documentary films depicting “Pygmy” communities.³ Early examples include Aurelio Rossi’s pro-colonial exoticist travelogue *In the Land of Giants and Pygmies* (1925) and Eugene Castle’s short *African Pygmy Thrills* (1930), which features a famous scene of community members building a vine bridge over a river—a technique which, as it turned out, they learned from the filmmaker! (Vaughan 1992, 114). Jean Rouch (1995), for his part, cites the footage produced during the 1946 Ougooé-Congo expedition, which included a filmmaker who shot “very beautiful 35mm” film (226).

Beginning in the 1960s, “Pygmies” were also featured in a number of television documentaries. This was in part a result of public interest stimulated by the popularity of Colin Turnbull’s work with the Mbuti (see Chapter One). Indeed, Turnbull himself shot footage in the communities with which he worked and appeared on “numerous TV chat shows” to discuss it (Frankland 2016, 106; Grinker 2001, 78). Owing to an active community of Japanese researchers in the Congo Basin, there have also been a number of Japanese-language films produced about “Pygmies,” though the majority of these are difficult to access outside of Japan.

Perhaps the most well-known film about the Baka specifically is the BBC documentary *People of the Rainforest* (1987), directed by Phil Agland. This film is a typical, “BBC-style” nature film produced for popular consumption. The film shows the “daily and ritual life” of a Baka community and features “extensive voice over narration” from Agland, who draws “no clear boundary between ethnology and ethnography” (D’Amico 2007). The film also makes use

of “realist fictionalization” techniques reminiscent of those used by filmmakers such as Robert Flaherty. Agland’s “fabrication of a half-finished hut to permit the unhindered filming of its occupants as they pretended to sleep” (Wright 1998, 20-21 n8), for instance, recalls an identical technique used by Flaherty during the famous igloo scene in *Nanook of the North* (1922).⁴

Today, the Baka and other “Pygmy” groups continue to be the subjects of a number of documentary and narrative films.⁵ Agland, for instance, has produced a follow-up documentary, *Baka: A Cry from the Rainforest* (2012), which follows the descendants of Likano, the Baka hunter who served as his original film’s protagonist. Whereas *People of the Rainforest* engages in romanticism and essentialism, its sequel engages in tropes of corruption and degradation, emphasizing culture loss and alcoholism (see Chapter Three.) This is not surprising, as romanticism and degradation narratives are often two sides of the same coin.

Baka and other “Pygmies” are also frequently the subject of television coverage and documentaries within Cameroon. These depictions also tend to traffic in simplistic narratives of primitivism and/or degradation. As discussed in Chapter Three, for instance, during my fieldwork, I observed the filming of a news program by the *Agence Africaine d’Information et de Communication* (AAIC), which engaged in both fictionalization and degradation narratives, lingering on issues such as teenage pregnancy (the film featured leering shots of pregnant young woman preparing food) and deforestation (the filmmaker elected to illustrate this with a shot of a large tree that, in fact, had fallen over on its own during a recent storm.)

We can attribute the shortcomings of these aforementioned films in part to the fact that they were made by outsiders. While some of the filmmakers, such as Agland, have extensive experience in Baka communities, they are nevertheless informed and influenced by the “Pygmy Paradigm” and degradation narratives. When films are made by others with less experience in

Baka communities, such as the AAIC filmmakers (the cameraman for the AAIC film turned to me shortly after we had arrived in Mayos and exclaimed, “This is my first time seeing Pygmies!”), the use of negative stereotypes and tropes tends to be even more pronounced.

Before moving on, however, I should note that, in spite of the use of primitivist stereotypes, degradation narratives, and other harmful tropes, some outside works do have a pro-Baka political agenda, and include some positive portrayals. *Baka: A Cry from the Rainforest*, for instance, devotes time to the story of Likano’s granddaughter, one of the first Baka children to attend primary school. The AAIC documentary, for its part, attributed poor living conditions in the village to inaction and unfairness on the part of government officials, and made the case for a more equitable sharing of revenues from local forestry projects. Perhaps in part because of this, Baka often displayed ambivalent, or even positive, attitudes towards outside depictions of their communities. For instance, Okani frequently screened *People of the Rainforest* and *A Cry from the Rainforest* in Baka villages. These films were very popular with community members, who did not usually express any concerns about misrepresentation.⁶ Similarly, when I watched the AAIC piece with Noël, who had helped facilitate its production by showing the film crew around Mayos, he was surprisingly complimentary of the work. While acknowledging that the narration was exaggerated, he explained to me that he felt it nevertheless depicted a reality of discrimination and poverty that needed to be addressed.

In accounting for these attitudes, it is important to note that different Baka view outside representations in different ways. For some, an ambivalent or positive attitude is simply a result of the pleasure of seeing one’s community depicted on screen. This can overwhelm any desire to question the accuracy and politics of representation. Others may see a strategic opportunity in these depictions. Indeed, it is important not to ignore the ways in which Baka community

members are able to exercise agency even within problematic outside representations. Community members are not passive subjects, but rather seek to put forth and capitalize on narratives that will advance their social and political goals. As noted in the earlier discussion of media and advocacy, this can involve strategic self-representation, which can include communities' "leaning in" to primitivist stereotypes or degradation narratives to further political and social objectives.

During the making of the AAIC documentary, for instance, Noël encouraged the filmmakers to emphasize Mayos' poverty: During an interview with a fellow community member Noël yelled suggestions from off-screen as to what the man could say: 'Look around! Look at our houses! There is nothing!' Noël's role in helping sharing the AAIC documentary's degradation narrative should complicate our views of this work. Rather than an exploitative attempt to sensationalize poverty, we can also view it as an example of (indirect) strategic self-representation in service of a political objective; namely, attracting resources and assistance to Mayos.

6. The Okani Video Project

In addition to finding opportunities for strategic self-representation in works produced by outsiders, Baka and other "Pygmy" communities now also advance social and political goals by making their own films and videos. These works can also provide a counterweight to outside representations. In the case of the Baka, the work of Okani has been particularly important in providing communities with the skills and tools for self-representation, though technology and mediamaking has spread into Baka communities through other channels as well.

Okani's interest in video was first piqued when, in the early 2000s, Messe purchased a small video camera at a shop in Yaoundé. He brought the camera to the Baka villages where he was working on development projects, and filmed people playing music and doing other

activities. Luckily for Messe and Okani, at the same time that he was becoming interested in using video, two of Okani's main funders—Plan Cameroon and Forest Peoples' Programme (FPP)—were also interested in providing support for ICT4D projects. Knowing of Messe's interest in video, John Nelson, then Africa Regional Coordinator for FPP, put him in touch with Nick Lunch, the Director of InsightShare, a UK-based organization specializing in participatory video.

In April 2009, using grant funding from the United Nations Global Environment Facility (GEF), Nick Lunch travelled to Cameroon to lead a training in participatory video. The training sought to build Okani's video-making capacity, and also to produce a video that would form part of a travelling video exhibition entitled *Conversations with the Earth: Indigenous Voices on Climate Change* (CWE). (For more detail on CWE, see Chapter Four). Okani recruited approximately ten participants from the Baka villages of Mayos, Loussou, and Nkolbikon. Two of the trainees were women. Some of the participants were Okani staff members, including Messe, Noël, and Messe's brother Romial. Others were community members who were not directly affiliated with the organization. The group gathered at the Okani offices in Bertoua for an initial three day training, then traveled to the villages where they made a film about subsistence livelihood practices.

This initial training helped provide Okani staff members and Baka community members with skills, equipment, and connections that enabled them to continue making videos. As part of the GEF grant, InsightShare provided Okani with video-making equipment, including two small cameras, microphones, and a laptop equipped with editing software. After the training concluded, Okani continued to work to improve its video-making capacity. The organization was already conducting participatory mapping in some communities to document the impact of illegal

logging, and now began to shoot images of felled trees, trees that had been marked for cutting, and other evidence. Not only did shooting these images provide additional support for Okani's advocacy and awareness-raising activities, it was an opportunity for Okani's staff to refine their skills with the cameras.

Okani also used a portion of the GEF grant to hire a visual anthropology professor from the University of Maroua, in northern Cameroon, to provide training on video editing, which had not been part of the original InsightShare training. Messe hoped that, once the organization had the ability to edit, they would not be reliant on outsiders; they would have the capability to shoot, edit, and distribute videos in-house.

Now possessing skills, equipment, and connections, Okani was able to expand its video making activities. Notably, a few months after the training, the organization began negotiations with Plan Cameroon to undertake a major contract of \$40,000 to work on Baka education. Okani's work as part of this contract included making videos about the problems in Baka schools (see below).

Okani also continued to profit from its relationship with InsightShare, and arrangements were made for a follow-up training with an InsightShare facilitator. In late 2010, Jean-Luc Blakey from InsightShare travelled to Cameroon. He reviewed video-making techniques with Okani staff and then travelled with them to Baka villages near Moloundou in the extreme southeast to make a film about abuses being committed against Baka by ecoguards charged with patrolling nearby national parks (see Chapter Four). Jean-Luc and the Okani staff trained local community members from the Moloundou area in video-making. The Okani staff who had begun as participants in the initial training were now learning how to act as facilitators themselves. This was the final piece of the puzzle to allow Okani to run video activities independently: The

organization now had equipment, video-making and editing capabilities, and facilitation training. As discussed in Chapter Four, the videos made as part of this training would come to play an important role in setting off an international human rights complaint against the World Wildlife Fund.

7. History of Participatory Video

As noted in the previous section, the initial training and video production activities that Okani undertook with the support of InsightShare use a *participatory video* (PV) methodology. PV is a relatively nebulous term for which there is no consensus definition. It is applied to a wide variety of research and development interventions, and there is a relative dearth of academic work on the topic (Mitchell, Milne, and de Lange 2012, 3; White 2003, 24). While acknowledging that PV can be “used to describe several quite distinct practices,” Tony Roberts and Chris Lunch (2015) propose the following working definition, which was put forward by a network of PV practitioners: PV is “a collaborative approach to working with a group or community in shaping and creating their own film, in order to open spaces for learning and communication and to enable positive change and transformation” (1; see also Shaw and Robertson 1997, 11). This definition points to two key elements that are present in every PV project: First, PV requires local *agency*. There is a similarity here with the definition of Indigenous media, where the key element was Indigenous agency. Unlike a documentary, however, where a single filmmaker (whether Indigenous or not) can select images and shape at the narrative, in PV these are determined by a collective from the community that is being represented. The second key element is that PV has a political goal. Rather than aiming for artistic or aesthetic achievement (though these may be goals as well), a PV project seeks to engender some sort of positive change.

Most books and articles on PV trace the technique's origins to the work of Don Snowden on Fogo Island off the eastern coast of Newfoundland. In 1967, Snowden and his collaborator Colin Low produced 27 films in collaboration with Fogo Islanders through the National Film Board of Canada's Challenge for Change Program. These films sought to address poverty and underdevelopment, and to improve communication between islanders and government officials. Snowden and Low used a technique that came to be known as the Fogo Process:

The "Fogo process"...was based on the following elements: the collaboration between filmmaker and permanent community-development officer; the selection of an isolated community that lacked community organizations to deal with its economic problems; the state having goals of stimulating grassroots problem-solving and improving government-community communications; filming techniques based on rapport between filmmaker and subjects; a certain involvement of the community in editing decisions; and much emphasis on the playback of materials as a stimulus to discussion and problem solving. (Wiesner 2010, 87)

As Lunch and Lunch (2006) explain, "by watching each other's films, the different villagers on the island came to realize that they shared many of the same problems and that by working together they could solve some of them" (11). The films were also screened for government officials on the mainland, resulting in policy changes. After its success in Newfoundland, the Fogo Process was used around the world, becoming "a communication for development prototype in using media to promote dialogue and social change" (Roberts and Lunch 2015, 1).

In addition to the Fogo Process, many PV practitioners and techniques were heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Freire argued for a system of education in which knowledge was not transmitted from teacher to pupil, but rather co-created in service of popular *conscientization* and radical, progressive social transformation. Freire's ideas helped to launch the aforementioned participatory turn in development practice. As noted above, many practitioners of participatory development attempted to incorporate technology in their work, with some turning to PV as well as related techniques such as photo-

voice (Wang 1999; 1997). As Roberts and Lunch (2015) explain, like Freire's pedagogy, "the process of making films about their own social circumstances" can stimulate participants to "use the camera to "read the world" more critically, reflect on the causes of social injustice, and better articulate the change they want[] to see" (2).

PV, then, is about much more than teaching community members how to use video equipment. It is a profoundly political process, and involves discussion, consensus building, and empowerment. Friere famously distinguished between political literacy and formal literacy, arguing that, "teaching someone to read and write is not what leads to liberation; rather, liberation is gained by how he or she is taught to read and write and what uses are made of that literacy.... A fully literature population, in this view, would be one that is mobilized against oppression and exploitation" (Gupta 2012, 216). Similarly, simply teaching a community how to make videos would not be sufficient to create political empowerment. By grounding that teaching in the broader process of PV, however, Okani and other PV practitioners are able to increase political literacy at the same time as technological capacity.

PV can help local people participate more fully in political conversations. As Crystal Tremblay (2013) explains, we can think of participatory video as a potential contributor to "knowledge democracy," helping to create space in political conversations for forms of knowledge and understanding that are not easily expressed in traditional bureaucratic or political communication due to strictures of language, procedure, framing, etc. (see Budd Hall 2013). PV can foster deeper "public engagement" with Indigenous communities by creating "participatory spaces." There is a "paradigm shift from traditional...approaches to policy and planning" that allows for more "knowledge co-creation and power sharing with communities" by outsiders such as government officials and development organization representatives (Tremblay 2013, 184). PV

is thus an valuable means of “yielding and validating community knowledge and understanding” in order to “guide policies and programs to reduce social disparities, particularly by improving communication between stakeholders” (Tremblay 2013, 177).

Of course, not all PV projects are the same. There is great variation in the way that PV is practiced by different individuals and organizations. While these variations are too numerous and complex to fully account for here, two key differences are worth noting. First, different PV projects are characterized by different *degrees of participation*. As Roberts and Lunch (2015) note, “while all participatory videos involve a group of people making their own film, projects differ radically with regard to what degree of control “participants” have over which elements of the film’s conception, planning, filming, editing, and distribution” (2).

Second, PV projects differ in the degree of emphasis they place on *process vs. product*. Some PV processes may actually place relatively little focus on the video being produced, focusing instead on the ways in which the collaborative *process* of making the video can provide an occasion for community members to come together to discuss issues of importance, achieve consensus, gain self-confidence, and build technical skills. Often the videos produced as part of this type of PV workshop are intended only to be seen by the participants themselves. Indeed, I have worked on PV initiatives where the film was never completed, but where the process could nevertheless be judged a success because it generated productive discussion among community members. As Chris Lunch, co-founder of InsightShare, argues in his TEDx presentation, *This is Not a Video Camera*,

The qualities of video technology...when embedded in a participatory process, enable the camera to act as an “empathic ear,” as participants watching previously recorded material listen to each other in new ways without interruption; or as a “people magnet,” drawing people together and reaching out to those who would never normally take part in community workshops. (cited in Roberts and Chris Lunch 2015, 3-4)

Other PV initiatives place greater emphasis on the narrative and aesthetic qualities of the videos being produced. These are often projects where the film is intended to play an advocacy role, being screened to outside audiences in the hope of engendering political support or change. Especially when working with communities that have limited experience with mediamaking technologies, there is often a trade-off between the degree of community participation, and the “slickness” of the resulting films. If videos are shot and/or edited by individuals with no previous experience with filmmaking, they are likely to look less professional than those shot and/or edited by an outsider with the input of the community. As Roberts and Lunch (2015) point out, however “process/product distinction is not binary” but rather a sliding scale (3). The degree to which a PV project emphasizes process or product is determined by a host of factors, including the intended aim of the project, the desires and experience of the participants, and the physical conditions of production. Moreover, “some participatory video processes that begin as internally focused subsequently develop a desire as the process unfolds to also represent themselves and their issues to external audiences” (Roberts and Chris Lunch 2015, 3).

8. Methodology of Participatory Video

As Lunch and Lunch (2006) note, “there is no fixed way in which PV has to be done, other than that it involves the authorship of the group itself and that it be carried out in a truly participative and democratic way” (11). Nevertheless, there are many commonalities in the approaches laid out in the most popular “how to” guides, such as Shaw and Robertson (1997) and Lunch & Lunch (2006). Drawing on these guides, we can identify an ideal type process that a PV project should follow.⁷ It should be noted, however, that many PV initiatives, including some of those carried out by Okani, do not always follow best practices. External constraints of time, money, weather, and equipment often mean that PV processes cannot be as robust or comprehensive as one would like (see below; see Barber 2014).

The ideal type PV process consists of 10 stages:

1. Community consultation and consent

As with any project in an Indigenous or marginalized community, it is essential to gain the community's consent before proceeding. When working with Indigenous communities, most PV practitioners abide by the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), as enshrined in the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Obtaining FPIC requires communicating with a community well in advance of any planned PV project. When time and money permit, the best way to do this is through an initial visit to the community by the facilitation team. During this visit, a community meeting is held and community members are informed about PV methodologies, as well as what type of training is possible, what benefits and potential harms it might entail, and what will be required of them.

The facilitation team should also outline the parameters of the project. In a perfect world, every PV workshop would enable a community to make a film about any topic they would like and to screen this video for any audience they would like. This is usually not the case, however. Often the organization funding the workshop is seeking a video for a particular purpose—to be screened at a meeting about a particular issue, for instance.

Community members are given the opportunity to ask questions, consult among themselves, and make a decision in accordance with local governance traditions. In some communities, it may be necessary to allow several weeks or even months for internal discussion and consultation. In some Baka communities, for instance, community leaders may travel away from the village for long periods to hunt in the forest. It is sometimes necessary to delay a project so that these community members can be consulted and give their consent. If a community decides to participate in the PV project, a leader or local contact person can inform the group or

organization that is facilitating the project and, together, they can begin to make logistical arrangements.

2. Selection of project participants

Once a community agrees to undertake a PV process, the next step is to select a small group of community members who will actually carry out the process. In addition to this group, there will also be opportunities for the broader community to give input (see below). The selection of participants can be tricky. On one hand, it is often desirable to ensure that this group is representative, and includes a mix of men and women, youth and elders, etc. On the other hand, one must respect local decision making processes and sensitivities (about men and woman working together, for instance). Failure to do this has undermined more than one PV workshop. In order to balance these two considerations, it is good to explicitly discuss these issues ahead of time with contacts in the community. In some cases, splitting participants into subgroups (men only and women only, for instance) may help marginalized people, who might not be comfortable speaking up in a mixed group, to have greater voice in the project.

3. Discussion and brainstorming

The next step is to determine the topic or topics that will be addressed by the videos, as well as what audience should be targeted. Facilitators can outline the various possible audiences and objectives to participants (see below) and help lead a discussion about community problems and/or objectives. Some PV facilitators choose to involve the whole community in this part of the process, rather than limiting it to participants only. There are various facilitation techniques that can assist with this. Before beginning this discussion, facilitators should review any project parameters imposed by the funding organization with participants.



Figure 6.1. Noël (far left with camera) and Messe (seated in centre with hand raised) hold a consultation with Bagyel community members about a proposed PV workshop in May 2013. Image by the author.

4. Topic selection

Through brainstorming and discussion, participants will have identified a number of potential topics for their video(s). The next step is to achieve consensus as to what topic would be addressed. Sometimes everyone will agree. In other cases, various voting techniques can help achieve consensus.⁸

5. Technical training

As PV seeks to enable community members to “make their own film” a key part of the process involves their learning the technical skills of filming. As discussed above, the degree and manner in which facilitators assist with this is determined by a number of factors, including the technical capacity of participants, the desired quality of the videos being produced, and the amount of time designated for the projects. Some PV facilitators prefer never to touch the

camera at all, but rather set it down in the middle of a circle of participants and verbally explain to them how to turn it on, record, etc. This helps participants feel a sense of ownership over the equipment. Other facilitators may be more hands-on in transmitting technical skills to participants. In either case, technical training usually involves at least one day of practice filming, practice interviewing, and discussion about basic composition techniques such as framing and shot length. There are a variety of games and activities that facilitators can employ to help with this.

6. Storyboarding

Once the participant group is ready to start shooting their video(s) it is helpful to plan what scenes will be included. These could include interviews with particular individuals, shots of activities or places, and narration. The scenes to be shot can be plotted out on a “storyboard”



Figure 6.2. Storyboard for a participatory video about the uses of the ngongo plant (see below). Mayos village, March 2013. Image by the author.

which participants can consult for planning. The process of creating the storyboard is also another opportunity for participants to give input and achieve consensus, this time on the specific content of the film, rather than the general topic.

7. Shooting

The length of time for shooting in a PV project varies widely. In most cases at least two days are required. Again, the degree to which facilitators assist with this varies. In projects where shooting occurs over multiple days, it is helpful to screen back rough footage to participants and, in some cases, other community members. This is often done in the evenings and helps to “engage participants in a dialogic process of collective deliberation designed to raise their critical consciousness about the social issues raised in the film” (Roberts and Lunch 2015, 2).



Figure 6.3. Romial shoots footage of a marker showing the boundary of a proposed palm oil plantation for a participatory video about deforestation. Near Bella village, May 2013. Image by the author.

This is also an opportunity for participants to begin discussions among themselves and with other community members about what scenes should be included in the final film, what additional scenes should be shot, etc.

8. *Editing*

When filming is complete, there are various possibilities for collaborative editing. In situations where there is no electricity, limited time, or other technical obstacles, project participants can undertake a *paper edit*. In this case, participants draw a representation of each scene that has been filmed on a piece of paper, and, working together, place the pieces of paper in the order that they should appear in the film, setting aside scenes that they wish omitted. In others situations, where there is more time and technological capacity, community members can be engaged on a *collaborative edit*, working on site with a trained editor, watching as the film is put together in Final Cut or another program and giving real time input. Sometimes this is accomplished by hooking the editor's computer to a projector so that the editing process is displayed on a large screen in a publicly accessible building like a school or church. Other PV practitioners use a "no editing required" (NER) method in which footage is shot in order and reshot in the case of mistakes (Mitchell 2011, 74). This can give participants greater ownership over the finished product when time and/or editing capacity is limited.

9. *Screening and discussion*

Once editing is complete, the video(s) are screened for project participants and for the community as a whole. These screenings are followed by facilitated discussions in which community members can ask questions and raise objections. These discussions are an opportunity to determine what other audiences (if any) the community wishes to screen the video(s) for, and to ensure that there is community consent for these screenings. In some cases it

may be necessary to re-edit in order to address concerns. Perhaps most importantly, the video provides community members with the opportunity to discuss the issues addressed in the film and to plot next steps to address these. Next steps may involve circulating the video to outside audiences (see below) but can also entail actions to be taken at the local level.



Figure 6.4. Messe (seated in blue shirt), hosts a community screening in Loussou village, April 2014. Image taken by the author.

10. Distribution

Depending on the community's wishes, the video can now be distributed to outside audiences. As we will see in the next section, there are a variety of different audiences and fora (both real and virtual) for/in which Indigenous media and participatory video can be shown. Often distribution is undertaken by an outside individual or organization with more connections outside the community and greater technical capacity for travel and organizing screenings. It is very important that there is continuing strong communication with the community so that they can be apprised of the effects the video is having, and any political opportunities it may have

engendered. When possible, it is even better if community participants can travel with the film to conferences, film festivals, etc. so that they can answer questions and build connections.

9. Shortcomings of PV Methodology

Sometimes, Okani was able to follow an ideal type PV process relatively closely. In other cases, however, engagement with community members could be much more superficial. The most frequent obstacle to Okani's ability to employ a fulsome PV methodology was a lack of funding. Okani was often asked by funders to make a "participatory video" but not given enough resources to conduct a genuinely participatory process. Time for community consultation, training, and discussion were thus cut short, and the goal became to make a video meeting the minimum requirements of the funding organizations as quickly and cheaply as possible. Okani's PV workshops were often brief in duration, lasting only a few days; whereas, ideally, a PV workshop would take place over a week or two. Okani could not afford to pay its staff for longer workshops, nor could it compensate community members with cash payments, food, or other items for their participation. As a result, villagers were often unable to take significant time away from work to participate.

In addition to imposing time constraints on planning and filming, limitations of funding most significantly impacted the Okani's PV process at the editing stage. In its current video work, Okani does not usually have sufficient funds to spend the additional days necessary to complete a paper or collaborative edit with community members. Editing is thus completed away from the community. Romial, Messe's brother, is the Okani staff member most skilled with editing software such as Final Cut. Footage is uploaded to Romial's laptop and he usually edits at the Okani offices in Bertoua where there is reliable electricity and internet.

In one extreme case, Romial recounts Okani's being given a small amount of money to make a short video about Baka street children that a funder wanted to show at an event for the

International Day of the African Child. Time limitations, a hard deadline, and a power outage at the Okani offices, meant that Romial sat up until three a.m. in the Bertoua bus station, editing on his laptop, before catching a bus to show the film at the funder's event later that day. Romial, who takes pride in his work and technical skills, expressed his frustration that the film did not come out as he had hoped:

There was really a lack of time. Because that is often what creates problems with the funders, with our partners who give us a bit of money to edit the film. They delay everything with the funding, and the funding arrives maybe one week [before]. If you need to prepare to go into the field, film, come back and start to... Editing can't be done in one or two days! To do a good job you really need to take time. Sometimes you need to leave it for a few days and then take it back up. But if you have to do it hastily, then you are obliged to diminish certain things. (personal communication; my translation).

As Romial references above, as a small NGO, Okani did not have a regular operating budget. Rather, it was reliant on cash transfers from donors for specific projects. These transfers often arrived at the last minute, limiting Okani's ability to prepare for PV workshops and other activities.

The tying of funding to specific, discrete projects, also means that Okani has rarely received money that could be used to renew the organization's videomaking equipment. As a result, they have been unable to replace ageing cameras, generators, and computers. This equipment frequently broke down, causing delays and, in some cases, leading to an inability to produce a video altogether. Indeed, equipment failures were perhaps the most important factor when Okani was sometimes unable to complete a "genuinely" participatory consultation process with communities.

Okani cannot afford expensive cases or cupboards for equipment transportation and storage, meaning that cameras are placed in the bottom of backpacks and jostled in the back of the pickup truck along dusty, potholed roads. The organization also does not have disposable

income to purchase new equipment, unless this is built into the funding for a specific project. Batteries are damaged, lost, or simply reach the end of their lifecycle; computers pick up viruses from USB keys infected at dodgy internet cafés or bootlegged copies of programs, purchased because un-pirated versions are prohibitively expensive, or simply not available. Once, during a screening in a village that was likely illegally siphoning electricity from the grid, a power surge and a faulty regulator caused Okani's speaker to start sizzling and smoking, damaging it beyond repair. This is to say nothing of the general wear and tear that comes from having technologically inexperienced community members handling video equipment, often for the first time, in a humid, sometimes muddy, sometimes dusty, jungle environment where rain is frequent and unpredictable.

These problems may seem relatively trivial, but they are not. PV, when done properly, is a time consuming process. Conducting a PV workshop is also relatively expensive—Okani staff receive modest per diems, and the organization provides food and sometimes monetary compensation to community members who take time off from waged jobs, or subsistence farming/hunting/gathering to participate. When a project is delayed by a day—say because the camera batteries could not be charged because the community is off the grid and the gas that was purchased from a roadside vendor for the generator was of poor quality—extending the workshop by a day can cost hundreds of dollars, which for Okani is a large amount of money. This is to say nothing of the fact that the Okani staff likely have another workshop or meeting planned for the day after the workshop. The easiest solution in such situations is simply to reduce the time spent on things such as community consultation and training community members how to use the cameras. It is easier, and less time consuming, if Okani's staff take a larger hand in planning the content of the video, shoot large parts of it themselves, and edit the footage back at

the Okani offices. Community members certainly give input, and their voices and opinions are reflected in the film, but their level of participation is reduced. In many cases, however, this is the only option: The funder requires a video and so, come what may, a video must be produced.

It is not only donor expectations related to timelines and cost that can render PV less participatory. Donor expectations regarding the technical quality of the films they fund also often provide an incentive—or even an imperative—to produce videos in a more “top down” manner. Both Okani staff members and donors discussed this tension between participation and quality with me during my time in Cameroon. For instance, at a conference of Baka community associations and NGOs that I attended, a representative from the development organization Plan Cameroon spoke about the video Okani had made documenting problems in Baka schools, which Plan had funded. As I will discuss in more detail below, Messe and other Okani staff members often cited this video as a prime example of the effectiveness of PV, because it had compelled the regional Ministry of Education to investigate problems, such as teacher absenteeism, that it has previously been ignoring. The video, the Plan representative argued, was of poor technical quality. Indeed, if one compares this video to a professional documentary, this is certainly true. The goal of PV, however, is not to produce slick, professional-quality work; it is to accurately capture community views about a particular issue. ‘The video is not salable,’ the representative explained, going on to state that it needed to be re-edited before Plan would show it elsewhere.

In the subsequent weeks, I noticed that this comment from one of Okani’s primary funders had an effect on Messe. At the time, Okani was putting together a proposal for funding from Plan for a second set of videos regarding education in Baka villages. After the Plan representative’s comments at the conference, there seemed to be a tension in the way that Messe discussed the video project, which I had not noticed previously. On one hand, Messe continued

to stress the participatory nature of the video. ‘It is not a documentary,’ he explained to the Okani staff during a meeting to discuss the proposed project a few days after the conference. ‘You talk to the students, the teachers [and ask them] what they want to put in it, as participatory video requires.’ On the other hand, though, Messe, started talking about renting a professional quality camera, and hiring a professional cameraman to do the filming. Indeed, he asked me to help arrange this through a friend who was a musician in Yaoundé and had connections to people working in media. I managed to find a cameraman willing to do the job. Even after I told Messe that the cameraman’s quote was very high (CFA 50,000, or about \$100 per day), however, Messe still wanted to proceed. ‘We need something of good quality!’ he explained to me.

In addition to insufficient funding, donors often used the limited funding they did provide in order to exert control over the topics of the films that Okani made. As noted above, in a truly participatory process, a community would be able to make a film about any topic of its choosing. This decision would be based on the community’s collective evaluation of its most pressing needs. In reality, however, grassroots organizations such as Okani usually obtain funding that has already been earmarked for a certain topic. As Noël explained to me, “there are themes”; donors “have a bit of oversight and tell us that within a certain period you need to produce a certain type of video that speaks about this or that” (personal communication; my translation).

In addition to the power imbalances between funding organizations, Okani, and local communities, deficiencies in Okani’s use of PV were also a result of what Cooke and Kothari (2001) call the “tyranny of method.” While Okani facilitators had good familiarity with *how* to conduct a PV workshop (i.e. the specific steps to be followed), they did not always fully seem to understand the principles and philosophy underlying the technique. Not all Okani staff members had a good sense of what PV was and why it was important, and thus sometimes characterized

certain activities as “participatory” because they met superficial criteria (a storyboard was made, for instance), rather than evaluating them based on a deeper analysis as to whether community members had been sufficiently engaged. Facilitators adhered to the *procedures* of PV that they had been taught, but not always to the *ethic* of PV, which requires genuine community engagement and participation.

PV projects conducted along expedited timelines tended to privilege elites within a community. These elites are often more educated, more literate, and have more familiarity with the expectations and narratives of development. When a PV process plays out in an ideal-type way, there is greater time to identify and address local inequalities. Facilitators may notice exclusions within the community of which they were initially unaware, and take steps to bring excluded groups of individuals into the process. Inclusion, however, takes time. Owing to time pressure, Okani often worked over and over with the same individuals in particular communities. Many of these individuals had participated in the initial training with InsightShare in 2009 and thus were already familiar with the PV process and knew how to operate the video equipment. Most also spoke French, eliminating the need for translation and subtitling, allowing videos to be completed more quickly.

In other cases, Okani facilitators took principal roles in the filmmaking process. For instance, I noticed that when we filmed in Mayos, where Noël lived, he often did the bulk of filming, and appeared in the films in order to explain the topic being explored. This certainly made the filmmaking easier. Noël was very comfortable with the camera, knowledgeable about a host of development issues (owing to his long experience working in this field), and completely fluent in French. He was also Baka and a resident of Mayos. Having Noël play this role thus allowed video to contain a “local perspective,” while greatly expediting the videomaking

process. On the other hand, however, Noël was certainly not representative of the entire community of Mayos. Owing to his job with Okani, as well as the fact that he had dual Baka/Bantu heritage (see Chapter Five), Noël was much more economically advantaged and educated than the average Mayos community member. While videos that prominently featured Noël's views did, in a sense, represent a local perspective, they certainly did not represent the totality, or even the mainstream, perspective of the "average" resident of Mayos.

10. Inequality and Gender

The privileging of certain individuals and groups in Okani's PV workshops had a particularly negative impact with regard to gender equality. There has been a particular concern in the literature on participatory development with the exclusion or marginalization of women in participatory approaches (e.g. Gujit and Shah 1998). As Maguire (1996) argues, in participatory development, gender is often "hidden in seemingly inclusive terms: 'the people', 'the oppressed', 'the campesinos', or simply 'the community'." "The community," as conceptualized and addressed by these participatory development projects, "was all too often the male community" (29-30). Similarly, Agarwal (2001) identifies "a striking neglect of a gender perspective on who participates, what effects this has, and what factors constrain participation" (1624).

Almost since the inception of participatory development, there have been attempts to rectify this problem. Practitioners and theories have designed "gender aware" participatory methodologies (Cornwall 2000) that seek to ensure female participation. Early efforts that used a Women in Development (WID) approach that sought to "increase the number of women involved in a project" were replaced by those that employed a Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which focused on examining "social relations and interactions between women and men" rather than simply aiming to boost women's numbers (Akerkar 2001, 2). As Cornwall (2000) explains, "rather than creating space within existing approaches to development for the

inclusion of women, as WID sought to do, proponents of GAD focused more directly on female subordination as itself productive of exclusion, and on how mainstream development practice perpetuates gendered inequalities” (6).

GAD methodology too, however, falls short in certain ways. Akerkar (2001), for instance, notes that such approaches “assume that women share a set of interests which differ from a set of interests shared among men.” This underestimates “the diversity and conflict within communities, and within groups of women and men, and that the lines of division may be multiple: ethnicity, caste, race, class, culture, sexuality, education, physical ability as well as gender, economic difference and many other factors” (5). In other words, an intersectional approach is needed. Moreover, as Cornwall (1998) argues, development practitioners must also not take Western understanding of gender identity and gender difference for granted, and instead seek to “find out what categories of difference are appropriate and relevant to people and, more specifically, what it means to be a man or a woman in a given context” (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 6).

In the case of Okani’s video, in addition to these structural dynamics, there was often simply a lack of involvement of women in video production altogether. Indeed, gender inequality has been a challenge from the outset of the Okani PV project. While both InsightShare and Okani had sought gender balance within the group of Baka trainees for the initial PV workshop, for instance, they ended up with only two of ten participants being women. As Messe explained to me, “a lot of men didn’t want to let their wives come alone to participate in the training that would last about ten days. And, there you go, that was the handicap that we had” (personal communication; my translation).

This initial power imbalance created longstanding difficulties. By the time I arrived in Cameroon, neither of the two women who had participated in the initial training was working with Okani. Indeed, all of the facilitators who regularly conducted Okani's PV activities were men. Because of this, in spite of the organization's best efforts, it was difficult to include women's perspectives and to have them participate in a fulsome way in videomaking.

In some cases, however, Okani was more successful at including women in PV activities. Certainly, Okani facilitators were well aware that there were differences of opinion within the communities where they worked. As Romial explained to me succinctly, "the opinions of the men are not often [the same as] the ideas of the youth or the women" (personal communication; my translation).

Okani's work also often explicitly accounted for gender differences. This occurred both in the process of videomaking and in the text of the videos themselves. Separate discussions, for instance, were often held with men and women, and community members were often split into men's and women's groups for filming. In mixed-gender groups the women tended to defer to the men. This technique allowed women to express themselves more freely (though participation would have been further improved had these groups been led by female facilitators).

I witnessed the advantages of splitting participants by gender first hand while shooting footage for a film about the uses of the *ngongo* leaf in Loussou village. The *Ngongo* (marantaceae) plant is an important part of Baka material culture: *Ngongo* leaves are used as the roofing for *mongulus* and for wrapping and carrying food and other items; the stalks are used provide the structure for *mongulus* and, when dried, are woven into baskets and sleeping mats (see Hattori 2006wo). The film about *ngongo* was the rare example of an idea that was truly generated by Baka communities, without strictures imposed by a funder. The idea originated at a

community meeting in mid-2014, at which community members identified plastic litter as a major problem that they would like to address. The meeting participants thought that producing a film about the uses of *ngongo* and screening it in other Baka villages could help to revive the practice of using *ngongo* in place of plastic, and also serve to preserve traditions and build cultural pride.

Messe was keen to pursue the idea of a film about *ngongo*—the use of traditional plants and the problem of plastic pollution were both topics he was personally interested in. More importantly, this topic had been generated organically by Baka community members themselves. Moreover, a film about *ngongo*, Messe believed, had the potential to generate concrete benefits for Baka communities. If local merchants could be convinced to use *ngongo* leaves in place of plastic bags, Baka could set up a commerce to sell these.

Some time elapsed, however, between the initial community meeting and the video workshop. Because the idea for the *ngongo* film had come from a local community, rather than from a development funder, it kept getting pushed down Okani's priority list, as the organization sought to satisfy timelines and demands imposed by funders who had commissioned videos and projects on other topics. When Okani was finally able to undertake the *ngongo* film, in February 2015, this was done using the organization's own meager resources. There was thus neither time nor money to conduct a full scale PV workshop. Instead, the film was to be made over two days—one in Mayos, and one in Loussou. Okani would edit the footage without input from the communities. The distribution plan was unclear.

The workshop in Loussou did not begin promisingly. Okani facilitators, especially Noël, again dominated the storyboarding and planning process. When they asked for community members to participate, the village chief immediately stepped forward. "I'm the chief, I'll go

first!” he said loudly. While the men from the village sat in a circle around the storyboard, many of the women stood or sat on the outside of the circle. Though community members, including women, did shout out some suggestions as to scenes that could be included in the film, we ended up with a plan that very much resembled ideas that Messe had mentioned to me in the Okani truck on the way to the village, before the storyboarding process began.

Interestingly, though, once we began to shoot the video, the gender dynamics of the participant group changed. The facilitators had decided to split the participants into men’s and women’s groups for the purposes of filming. This was not only an external PV facilitation technique, learned from InsightShare, aimed at increasing women’s participation (though it was this as well); it was also an organic choice that reflected the fact of a gendered division of labour within Baka communities. Men and women did different things with *ngongo* plants. It thus made sense to film the women doing “women’s” tasks and the men doing “men’s” tasks.

Baka women use *ngongo* stems for a variety of purposes, including weaving and smoking fish. For the first scene of the film, the Okani facilitators, with some suggestions from community members, had decided to show women building a *mongulu*. *Ngongo* stems are bent into ‘U’ shapes to serve as the skeleton of the structure. They are then covered with broad *ngongo* leaves to keep out the rain and weather. Almost immediately after the women had left the village, leaving behind the village men (though accompanied by myself and four male Okani facilitators) the dynamic changed. The women, who had participated little in the storyboarding, now began to talk animatedly among themselves and with the facilitators, offering suggestions as to what could be filmed.

We walked a little ways into the forest beyond the village and set up for the first scene, which would show a woman standing next to an *ngongo* plant, speaking about its uses. The other

women in the group were so engaged in the process that they began yelling out suggestions of other uses for the plant that she had omitted. The group of women then set impressively to work, cutting down plants, stripping leaves from the stems, planting the stems in the ground to form the structure of the *mongulu*, and covering it with leaves. The sense of pride and confidence was palpable as the women spoke animatedly with one another and the facilitators. On their own initiative, without prompting from the facilitators, they constructed additional things from the *ngongo*, including a stand from *ngongo* stems next to the *mongulu* which, one of the participants explained to me, was used to smoke fish.

Using PV facilitation techniques, Okani was thus successful in ensuring women's views and knowledge were included in the *ngongo* video. The inclusion of separate scenes of women and men's activities is, in fact, a staple of many of Okani's videos. This is not to say, however, that Okani's videos provide a perfect representation of a community. Other forms of inequality can linger below the surface. When divisions between men and women (or, for that matter, youth and elders, or other divisions) are shown, the groups are still portrayed as part of a cohesive, well-functioning whole. Indeed, when the inclusion of different subgroups within a video risked exposing fractures within the community, the Okani facilitators' inclination was to ignore, rather than emphasize this, privileging the portrayal of a cohesive "participatory process" and unitary "community." I discuss inequalities in PV in more detail in the conclusion.

11. Effects and Audiences of Indigenous Participatory Video

Depending on the political objective of an Indigenous participatory video, it will be intended for different audiences. There are four principle audiences for Indigenous PV:

1. The Indigenous subject community itself. This could be limited to one village, or extended to all members of the same Indigenous group. (A video made by a Baka community to be seen only by other Baka, for instance).

2. Other Indigenous communities (e.g. representatives from non-Baka Indigenous communities elsewhere in Africa or around the world who watch Baka films in a venue such as an Indigenous rights conference, or obtain them through an exchange program).
3. Specific decision-makers (e.g. local, national, and/or international government and NGO representatives).
4. The general public.

Of course these categorizations of audience are somewhat arbitrary. Most categories could be subdivided further and some bleed into one another. One could consider national-level decision makers and international decision-makers as separate audiences, for instance. In fact, you could probably have three levels here: local decision-makers, national decision-makers, and international decision-makers. You could make a similar split when talking about the “general public” (local vs. national vs. international). Similarly, you could make various decisions about how to subdivide Indigenous audiences: Other “Pygmies” in Cameroon, other Indigenous communities in Cameroon, other “Pygmies” in general, other Indigenous communities in Africa, other Indigenous communities globally. Nevertheless, the four categories above are the most analytically useful for my purposes.

There is an extensive literature in media studies and other disciplines that examines the ways in which audiences engage with film and video to produce meaning. Different audiences, and different individuals, may produce very different meanings when engaging with the same text. As Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin (2002) note, drawing on Appadurai’s (1996) aforementioned notion of the “mediascape,” “objects shift as they move through regimes and circuits of exchange...the meaning of texts or objects is enacted through practices of reception” (5-6). Ginsburg (1995) calls this divergence in audience interpretation the “parallax effect.” It is

thus important, as Salazar (2004) notes, to understand Indigenous media not “in a narrow, technical sense, but rather as a set of cultural practices in which media makers and audiences actively produce their own, often divergent, meanings” (95; see also Fiske 1987).

The remainder of this section examines the effects of Indigenous PV on different audiences, citing specific examples from Okani’s work. As we will see, the audience that a film targets is often an effect of strictures imposed by funding organizations. The way in which a film is shot, edited and distributed—including the narratives contained in the film—are also a function of intended audience. While some of Okani’s films are intended for one specific audience, the same video often performs multiple purposes. When I asked Romial who he envisioned as the audience for the films that he edited, for instance, he replied:

After I’ve done the translation and the editing and everything, it’s first of all the communities themselves that [must] look at what they have produced in terms of a video. And then the funders. The funders who have given the money must, in reality, follow the activities as well through participatory video. And maybe other people in the world. People who have an interest to watch them and see a bit the situation of the *peuples autochtones* through our participatory video. (personal communication; my translation)

Romial’s quote illustrates the multi-scaled way in which Okani’s videos often circulate: First they are shown back to the community, then to the funding organizations involved in the project (mostly to show that the project has produced a key deliverable), and then to various outside audiences. Romial’s conception of who precisely makes up these audiences, becomes less specific as he moves from the local to the global, such that we arrive at a rather nebulous ideal of “people who have an interest.”

1. The Baka Themselves

As discussed above, in participatory video, the participant community itself is considered the primary audience. While films may be intended to screen for outside audiences as well, the first people to watch the film are project participants and their fellow community members. Not

only does this help to ensure that community members consent to the film's content, the iterative process of screening and editing the film can help to build political solidarity and consensus among community members.

While the participant community is thus always one of the audiences for a participatory video, it is also possible to produce a video that is intended *only* to be shown in a participant community. One might construe "participant community" narrowly (a video made in a village intended only to be seen by people from that village) or more broadly (a video made by a Baka community intended only to be seen by other Baka).

I always concluded my initial interviews with Okani staff and Baka PV participants with the following question: "If you had unlimited funding to make a video about any topic for any audiences, what would it be?" Interestingly, the majority of interviewees envisaged videos intended primarily for a Baka audience. These imagined videos aimed at three overlapping purposes: cultural preservation, inter-community exchange, and building political solidarity. Some interviewees spoke about their desire to use video for archival purposes; to document the knowledge of community elders, or preserve rituals and traditions. Noël, for instance, answered the question about his ideal video as follows:

That is a very pertinent question! [...] There are so many issues, and so many projects that we need to do with participatory video. For example, in our villages today, and our communities, if we're talking about video, there is first of all the cultural life, that has a tendency to get lost, and that we really want to valorize. And that should stay like a library—the knowledge and experiences of the ancestors. And that requires a big undertaking. Because we need to do research, we need to do consult people, and we need to go even further and consult the elderly ancestors who are still keeping all these cultural values within themselves. That would be a very important video, which could comprise multiple parts. Because these days the culture of the Baka is showing a tendency to disappear. And, when people lose their culture, that means that they are in the process of losing their identity. [...] With globalization, young people have a tendency to lose all of this knowledge, which is very valuable. And it will require work from the women, from the old *mamans*, and from the old men, who still have mastery over that. [...] All those

videos could be for teaching, could be at school, in the future, for the children of the future. (personal communication; my translation)

In another interview, Noël spoke about using video for inter-community exchange, sharing the words of leaders from one community with another:

There are the words, the messages of certain people, who see a little bit more clearly, from other communities. And because there is not a possibility of having meetings, if we bring, for example, a video from the south, or if we bring a video from the east to the south [...] and show it two or three times, they start to understand the issues, and the commentaries. And the people start to imitate a little bit. Even if there aren't five or ten, even if it's two or three people, the others will see and follow along and it becomes something big. So it makes it such that participatory video also teaches... It teaches us to do as the other communities do. (personal communication, my translation)

Messe expressed a similar objective, mentioning the special quality of video to capture people's attention and convey messages between communities:

Well, inter-community exchanges, first of all, are to see good practices that are taking place in another community on a very specific subject, or maybe that affects the other community. And now, to see how the others are organized to resolve the problem, or to go beyond the problem, or to find solutions and everything. And that was important. (personal communication, my translation)

In discussing the exchange of video between Baka communities, Messe also mentioned a motivation that is discussed relatively little in the literature on Indigenous media: Video can be used as a way of gaining fame and prestige among other Baka. For instance, Messe related an experience where, after playing a film of musicians from another village for a group of Baka, a number of men spontaneously asked him to record them playing music as well:

M: I stopped in a village, Ngoyla Baka. And [...] I had another CD of traditional music. No, it was a film. [...] And inside there was someone who was playing guitar. And I just played this part in that community, and, all of a sudden, the young people went into the houses. And they said, "But we have seen you have something like a camera. Can you also record us? That way you can also show it in the other community, how we also play music." And there was an old man, he was called Alamba. He came out with a traditional instrument. [...] There was another young man who came with his guitar, and he started to play, and we recorded it.

N: Why do you think that they wanted to be recorded? Because it's not... Because often people say that video is a way of attracting resources to communities, and certainly it's that sometimes, but in this case it's not that they wanted something. They were trying to do something else. How do you see that mentality? That they're asking you to record them. What do you think the people want? Why do they want to do that?

M: That's really very important, because video, at the level of the communities, it's that people want to pass messages to others. And a young person who plays music, he knows that he will be seen by the young people in the other villages. And he really wants to be famous. He wants to show his talents. He wants to transmit messages. He wants even to transmit the way of doing it. (personal communication; my translation)

As Messe's explanation reveals, there is more at play here than a simple desire to become known in other villages. The Baka musicians whom Messe recorded were also trying to communicate with other villages and to preserve and pass on musical knowledge. Later in the interview, Messe also posited that they were seeking to demonstrate to other Baka that they had preserved Baka musical traditions.

Unfortunately, projects aimed primarily at cultural preservation and inter-community exchange are among the most difficult to realize. There are a number of obstacles that impeded Okani's ability to make the type of video for which Noël, for instance, advocated. First, there is a wariness among community members about documenting traditional knowledge. There is, of course, a long history of such knowledge being exploited by outsiders. The use of technology further complicates things. Many Baka community members, particularly older people, do not have a good understanding of how video works, and how images are stored, copied, etc. It is thus difficult for them to understand how a video archive might benefit their community. Some elderly community members also expressed a fear that allowing others to possess their images and words would make them vulnerable to witchcraft. In order to convince community members to participate in such a project, Okani would need to continue to build trust with Baka communities, as well as familiarity with video-making technology.

They would also, however, need to find a donor willing to fund such a project. Donor funds, however, are much more readily available for projects that produce a concrete “deliverable” in the form of a video that can be shown at a conference, or posted on a website. While funding for community video archive projects such as the one Noël envisions does exist, Okani most often received funding for videos intended for a specific outside venue—an exhibition on climate change, for instance, or a conference on education.

Donor funds, in other words, tend to be limited to Appadurai’s global “scapes.” Regimes of accountability and auditing require that the funds a donor lays out for PV and other development projects be converted into another resource that can also circulate, and be visible and quantifiable in the global sphere. As Berger (2017) explains, today “virtually all development agencies tend to prioritize the production of tangible (i.e. measurable) results,” often “over genuine impact on the ground” (217). As a result, development projects “generate a seemingly impressive array of discrete deliverables that can be readily photographed, counted, tracked, aggregated and compared” (Desai and Woolcock 2015, 163; cited in Berger 2017). If donor money is used to fund a video that will simply sit in a village archive, never to be seen by any outsider; or a video that circulates only in a few villages, serving to build political solidarity (which is difficult to measure); then it appears to the global regime of accountability as if that money has simply “vanished.” Indeed, when donors do fund this type of project, they mandate other, substitute products—written reports, photographs of the videomaking, testimonials—that can circulate in global regimes of accountability in place of the video.

In spite of these obstacles, Okani has managed to produce one video that was intended only for inter-community exchange between Baka villages. During a 2011 cholera outbreak, the organization received funding from a development organization for a video about hygiene, which

they then screened in other Baka villages. In addition to being in the Baka language (whereas educational posters and other materials about hygiene distributed by government and NGOs during the outbreak were in French), the screening of the video served as a community event, which helped ensure that people engaged with the material, and stimulated discussion afterwards. It is perhaps not surprising that the one video for an internal audience for which Okani was able to get funding was part of a specific, targeted health campaign. This is far more concrete than a broad project aimed at cultural preservation.

More often, Okani videos aimed at an internal audience are also aimed at an outside audience. These videos served a double purpose, fostering internal exchange and solidarity building while also being visible to donors and other outsiders to ensure accountability. Indeed, often an exchange of information between communities through video served as a precursor to political action. When I asked André about his ideal video, for instance, he mentioned the preservation and valorization of Baka culture and traditions through video as a way of rallying community members to political action:

A: What would be most important would be, first of all, to preserve Baka culture. That I have to put ahead of everything. And what would draw my attention a bit in terms of video would be, first of all, the activities being conducted in our forests. That I would have to bring out in my video. How we conduct our activities and how we can defend our rights at the national level. And how we ourselves can make a comparison between different traditions of ours. Because there are, in certain villages, certain cultures that are disappearing. But we still have to keep our traditions.

N: And who would watch that video then? Other villages?

A: It's other villages. To show them that we are still keeping our culture, and that you too should not lose that which is your right. (personal communication; my translation)

Video thus not only serves as a way of preserving traditions, but as a way of building political solidarity.

2. Other Indigenous Communities

Indigenous participatory video can be used to exchange information not only between different Baka communities, but between Baka and other Indigenous communities in Cameroon, in the Congo Basin, in Africa, and around the world. As with videos shared among Baka communities, videos shared with other Indigenous communities may serve a variety of purposes: from cultural exchange, to building political solidarity, to engendering Baka fame and pride.

One aspect of such exchanges is to allow communities to swap best practices. As Noël explains:

The films that we watched from the Congo, we draw lessons from them. And there are films that we make here that people in the Congo watch, that the Aka in the Central African Republic, and everyone else watch, and they draw lessons from them. So we can communicate with one another and teach one another through video. (personal communication; my translation).

Beyond sharing best practices, there is also a deeper connection—a building of solidarity and even common identity—that is possible through video. As I will discuss in more detail below, video has a special ability to build empathy across linguistic, geographic, and cultural barriers. Interviews with Baka mediamakers and audiences reveal this potential for video to engender empathy and identification with other communities. Messe described, for instance, his early screenings of *La silence de la forêt*, which shows Aka communities in the CAR, as fostering “a moment of total communion with the other community.”

I felt that when we projected that video... The construction of the huts was the same, the life in the forest, the game hunting. Really, it was characteristically the same thing. [...]

So intercommunity exchange allows, then, to take the voices of a community and bring them the other community. And through this [...] people can even sometimes dialogue.

So really it's... community exchange through participatory video—or, in fact, through video [in general]—it's a moment of communion that we can't measure. Because, through the image, people think. (personal communication; my translation).

This experience of inter-community “communion,” in turn, helped to stimulate a Baka interest in video-making:

In the morning, at a moment when I was still asleep... At that time we had tents. We were asleep in the tent and I could hear how almost every house was commenting about the film *Silence de la Forêt* on the life of the Baka, [or rather] the Aka in CAR. And then I explained to them, it's like... They are like you here. They live from the forest. They live in the forest. And here are the images that come from where they live. So someone said to me, "No, we have to also do something [like that] for us!" (personal communication; my translation)

These screenings of *La Silence de la Forêt* also helped motivate Baka efforts at cultural revival and preservation. The film depicted practices that were no longer prevalent in Baka communities, and Baka were inspired by the Aka's example.

In *La silence de la forêt*, there lots of illustrations that showed marriage from another era. How, in order to get married, there had to be a big celebration, and the young man had to trap the young girl with force and even take her into his house. And the Baka really liked that a lot. "Ah, over there it's still being practiced! You see! You can see how we got married back in the day in the forest. When there was a big celebration and the young man who had designs on a girl and really came and transported her with force, if he succeeded in bringing her and then...."

It was really like a moment of information for the young people who today don't get married in the same way. And we said to them, this is how it used to happen. And here is how you do it today. And the young people could understand how it happened in the good old days in terms of culture and.... In fact, it was like a reminder. A reminder for the young people of what was done before, and now a way for the adults to pass a message to the young generation, and to other communities of adults that weren't in their own. (V. Messe, personal communication; my translation).

Inter-community exchange could also serve to build political solidarity. For instance, towards the end of my research, Okani had begun a project aimed at improving the political representation of Baka and Bagyelí communities in local government bodies. This project included video training for community members, which aimed in part to facilitate the exchange of information and build solidarity between the two groups, which speak different languages (though most community members share French as a *lingua franca*), and have a history of inter-group suspicion and animosity. Noël described video as enabling the Baka and the Bagyelí to

build a common vision of the future, in order to deal with the problems that had come to both groups due to sedentarization:

[Video can help to] see the opinions of the communities on the way of living today on the roadsides. And to see a projection of their dreams of the future, in relation to the way of life of the Baka in general. So through these videos, which will not only be made by Okani, the Baka, Bagyeli, and Bedzang [another Cameroonian “Pygmy” group] communities, if we can all come together to see our vision. What dreams do we have for the years to come? We are here today, are we going to be able to evolve to be able to defend our interests and our rights. It’s in this manner that participatory video can help us. (personal communication; my translation)

It should be noted, however, that the potential of video to generate inter-group solidarity was more apparent when the community depicted on screen shared commonalities of environment, cultural practices, etc. with the audience. Baka felt a particular sense of kinship when viewing videos of other “Pygmy” communities. While video was thus often successful in building inter-group identification and solidarity between Baka and other “Pygmy” communities, this was less evident when it came to non-“Pygmy” Indigenous communities. While film can build empathy and identification across significant cultural barriers, there is no doubt that it is easier to identify with an individual that resembles oneself, or a community that resembles one’s own. In some cases (Messe’s aforementioned engagement with videos of the San, for instance), I witnessed this type of transcultural identification. The majority of Baka with whom I interacted, however, were relatively uninterested in films of other Indigenous cultures.

In Chapter Four, I discussed Okani’s work dubbing films from other Indigenous communities from East Africa, Latin America, and the Arctic, made as part of the *Conversations With the Earth* project into Baka, and screening these in Baka villages. I noted that many Baka did not seem to identify with the other communities depicted in these films. There were also technical reasons for the relative lack of audience engagement with the CWE films. For one thing, flaws in the dubbing process meant that translations was less impactful than it could have

been.⁹ The differing level of engagement of audiences with CWE videos and compared to *A Cry from the Rainforest*, or the Baka music videos, however, was also in part due to the fact that the CWE videos were of much lesser technical, narrative, and aesthetic quality.¹⁰ Here we see one of the drawbacks of a participatory video methodology. While enabling local community members with no technical experience or expertise to make films has many salutary effects in terms of empowerment, building solidarity, etc., the final products are not always as engaging as a professional documentary would be. Participatory videos are not designed to entertain; they are designed to be participatory. For instance, many of the CWE videos featured very long didactic speeches from community elders. One can completely imagine how these came to be included: In many communities, such speeches are commonplace and highly valued. Dynamics of power and respect might have dictated that the community members making the video wanted to include the full speech, without editing it or including cut-aways or other illustrations. And yet, these speeches (particularly when dubbed into relatively monotone Baka) were not terribly engaging to outside audiences.

In spite of this, however, some community members did benefit from the community screenings of the CWE videos, and came to see some commonalities between themselves and the other Indigenous communities. As Noël explained:

Others asked me questions afterwards. And they've made comments about the way of life of our brothers who are elsewhere. Is it exactly that way which they live? Or is it edited? I responded that it was the daily life that they live from day to day, and it's the same things from which we are suffering that they are experiencing.

So everything having to do with the environment concerns all of us. They understood and actually they're in the process of asking if we can do another screening of the series of films that we showed. (personal communication; my translation)

This is to say nothing of the connections that the CWE project built between the Indigenous facilitators who managed the project. As previously discussed, for instance, Messe

and Noël had the opportunity to travel to Copenhagen as part of the CWE project. There they met representatives from the other Indigenous communities that had participated in the CWE project. While this did not result in any concrete collaborations, it did build a sense of solidarity and identification.

3. Decision-Makers

Perhaps Okani's most effective use of video was to target specific government and development officials. The organization has made several videos highlighting social problems and/or deficiencies in government and NGO programs in Baka communities, which it has screened for relevant decision-makers. As Messe explained at a PV conference:

It is like a letter or a message, but it is visual message, with speech. Whereas someone else might write a book, the community will use a camera to document an event or explain their point of view, to share with the authorities, leading to a change in policy. (my translation)

While Okani has used video to engage in international advocacy (see below), making and circulating videos has proven to be a particularly effective means of lobbying government and NGO officials at the local level.

For instance, shortly before I began my field research, Okani made and screened a video about problems in Baka village schools. The video featured interviews with students, parents, and teachers, and discussed a number of issues, including teacher absenteeism, discrimination against Baka students by "Bantu" classmates and teachers, and poor infrastructure. Okani screened the video at a regional education conference, where attendees included school principals, NGO staff members, and a high-ranking delegate from the regional office of the Ministry of Education. According to Messe, the delegate from the Ministry began the meeting with a speech that focused on successes and did not address the pervasive problems in the village

schools. Later in the day, Okani showed the video to the attendees at the conference. Romial recounts what happened next:

I remember when we were screening the film about education [...] with the government officials working on basic education. The delegate from the Ministry of Basic Education was there. [In the video], a student from the school in Nomedjoh [village] made a denunciation that their principal never came to the school anymore. Maybe one time per week. And when we shot that video, with the kids themselves even, the principal wasn't there. And we invited all the principals [to the education conference] and he suddenly saw how his student was giving a declaration that the principal never comes to school. He decided to make a problem, saying that the people from Okani will not be allowed to go to his school anymore. But the delegate [from the Ministry of Education] said to him, "No! The video just said the reality, and the child only told the truth!" So I'm sure that in his monthly or quarterly reports, when he [the principal] writes his reports he says that he is at school every day! Whereas the video showed that this is not correct. (personal communication; my translation)

After the screening, the delegate gave a second speech in which he apologized for the problems and pledged that the regional Minister of Education would visit the schools personally to address the issues.

After another screening of the same video for a group of city councillors from the Haut-Nyong region, the councillors requested that the mayor explore the possibility of creating new schools in Baka villages in order to address the issue of discrimination and better adapt the school schedule and curriculum to Baka cultural and livelihood practices—issues that featured prominently in the video. As one of the councillors, Richard Ntough, explained,

In the case of my town, after the participatory video that we saw, at the session that followed the city councillors asked the mayor to create schools in the Baka *campements*. Because in our town the schools are in the Bantu villages and the Baka children come to the villages, and they are subject to stigmatization and segregation. And that makes it such that... It's one of the reasons—I'm not saying it's the only one, but it's one of the reasons—why Baka children leave school before the end of the year.

Through participatory video we have said to ourselves, "The Baka like this way of life." If we send them to school by taking them out of their environment, they will not accept it. But if we can bring a school to them, they will go to school and continue those same activities. The essential thing is that they go to school. Those who will detach themselves, who get their heads out of the sand, will be able to become elites, and little by little they

will abandon... not abandon, but reconcile the two things [tradition and modernity].
(personal communication; my translation)

M. Ntough also explained what he perceived to be the particular advantages of video in conveying messages from Baka students:

Videos have the advantage that they project the experiences of the Baka as it is presented. [...] And then he who wants to intervene with the Baka has a real idea of how they are in their daily life. Whereas, with a speech, you listen to it, and then it's done. With a report, you read it, and sometimes it's boring and we don't even have time to look at it. But video has the advantage that it can move us. There is emotion. That is to say, it can quickly provoke a reaction in you, so that you say, "No, in relation to what I am seeing here, I myself can do something." You see? So video speaks more than a report or a speech. That's why I found that it is a good method of intervention, or of research. It's a good method because it is the Baka themselves who are the subjects of the video.
(personal communication; my translation)

M. Ntough references two complementary aspects of video here: First, he argues that images are more interesting than spoken or written words. More specifically, he claims that they can "move" us by evoking emotion. (I will discuss the link between the affective quality of video and political effects in more detail below.) He also argues that video allows decision-makers to hear from the Baka more directly, rather than through the intermediary of, for instance, an NGO.

The video about problems with Baka schooling is not the only instance in which one of Okani's videos has stimulated government officials to action. One of the first videos that Okani made, which they began after the first InsightShare training and completed during the second, documented the destruction of Baka hunting grounds by logging companies. This video was shown to officials from the Cameroonian Ministère des Forêts et de La Faune (MINIFOF), as well as NGO representatives, including at a 2009 conference about proposed reforms to Cameroon's Forestry Law. (For more on the Forestry Law, see Chapter Four.)

Messe, Noel, Joachim, and André all brought this video up in my interviews with them. Through these interviews, it is possible to piece together a short oral history:

Messe: I remember a video that we made about forestry management, and that we projected at a meeting [...] with all the officials from MINIFOF who were there. [We chose] illegal logging because we already had a program with the embassy of Great Britain [...] where we had to watch [for] illegal [timber] exploitation in the villages. It came to pass, then, that Loussou, Mayos, Nkolbikon, the villages that we had chosen, were the villages that were really advanced in illegal exploitation of wood. And we went there as a function of this theme. We targeted these communities.

Noel: That video showed the use of our forests. How the logging companies were exploiting our forests. And what are the key issues. The dangers and the positive and negative aspects.

Messe: It's really pathetic to see that some people from MINIFOF are sitting in their offices, or just sitting at a roadblock, while the logging companies make a huge mess in the forest. And we went there with cameras: We filmed the new roads, the forest which was completely devastated, pieces of wood abandoned all over the place.

Noel: We showed [the video] at a conference in Douala, at a meeting about forests in Douala, that brought together the authorities, all the national authorities. Even people from the outside, they were there.

Joachim: The day of the meeting we screened that film. [...] And then there were big debates, with the white people who had come from Germany, from America, and from Chad—because there were really a lot of people. There were big debates.

Noel: And that really touched the authorities. And through that video, it linked to the Forestry Law reforms that they are in the process of doing. [...] They took note of it. And through this they found a means to revisit the Forestry Law. People definitely talked about it.

Messe: The people from MINIFOF said, “Ah, we have to do a mission there to see what this is about.” You see?

Joachim: They decided to immediately fix those problems. That it must not go on [that way]. That the Baka should no longer suffer as they had before. So there needs to be a change in life, and better behaviour between Bantu and Baka and the people from the government. It's because of this that, after this, we saw field missions by people from MINAS [*Ministère des Affaires Sociales*]... So MINAS came. The PNDP [*Programme Nationale de Développement Participatif*] came. There were other partner NGOs of the government, they came into the field to see the problems related to the lives of the Baka people, and *les peuples autochtones* in general. The Baka, the Mbororo, and others.

André: It really shook things up. And it really created relationships. They proposed other films that we could make, to produce, because of that first video that we had made.

As this example shows, Okani's videos not only target national decision-makers, but international decision-makers as well. For instance, as Joachim alludes to, attendees at the conference where Okani screened the video on illegal logging consisted not only of Cameroonian government officials, but also of representatives from international NGOs involved in the process of reforming Cameroon's Forestry Law. These officials, who represent organizations that provide development funding and technical support to the Cameroonian government, are well positioned to exert pressure on the government to address issues such as human rights violations. This video is thus an example both direct advocacy to local and national government officials, and of the aforementioned "boomerang effect."

Screening videos for outside decision-makers from NGOs, multilateral institutions, and foreign governments is not only effective as a means of engendering indirect political pressure. As André alludes to above, it can also serve to build new alliances and bring about new projects. For instance, the Baka videos that were screened online and in international exhibitions as part of the Conversations with the Earth project were not only seen by general audiences (see below). The screening venues for the CWE exhibition, such as the COP16 meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Cancun, meant that the videos helped the Baka in general, and Okani specifically, gain visibility with a specialized audience of NGO workers and development officials. This in turn may have helped the organization gain additional funding and status.

Like the city councillor M. Ntuh, Okani staff members often contrasted videos with written reports, which were the other primary tool used for alerting officials to problems in Baka communities. In so doing, they made two interrelated arguments. First, they argued that video was able to capture local voices and ideas more accurately than a written report. Given the low

levels of literacy and education in Baka communities, Baka are often reliant on NGOs and other allies to prepare reports and other documents when they are faced with problems that require attention from authorities. Outsiders, Okani staff members argued, had a tendency to portray the situation in Baka communities in a way that was advantageous to them. Indeed, in the case of the video about Baka schools, the representative from the Ministry explained that the school principals had been providing the Ministry with reports that did not reference the problems addressed in the video. As Romial explained:

For us it's first of all a tool for authentic advocacy. It really shows the real situation that the Baka are enduring without going astray. Because before people had reports and everything. Someone can just sit down and make a report to say, "Oh, everything is okay with the Baka in that zone that you are talking about." Whereas, with video, you go into the field and you really take... You make a film that shows the problem exactly. (personal communication; my translation)

Similarly, according to Noël:

People realized that there are reports that one does, narrative reports, that say things that are not real. But through participatory video, it's typically what comes out from local people, from the mouths of the people. And we see [the situation] so the facts are palpable. We're not imagining anything. We can't lie. It's someone [real] who's talking. And it's someone who can say and express freely everything that is in his head. [...] I can arrive in a village and take any old picture and put it in my report and send it. But with participatory video it gives exactly the work from the start. The progression of all that I did in the village. And the [organization funding the project] will see the people who contributed face-to-face. And that's why it is participatory. Everyone can contribute to that and everyone can see and have something to give to it. And that's why we think it's a good way to design things. Participatory video is welcome to us because we accept it. You can't lie. You also can't take the voice of a different person. It's each person who expresses what he has in his heart. (personal communication; my translation)

As Noël notes at the end of this quote, video, especially PV, is often able to more accurately capture local ideas and opinions. The use of a participatory methodology freed community members to express themselves in a way that they would not if speaking to a government or NGO official directly. As Noël explained:

We don't have a lot of courage, and we don't have enough means, and we are not equipped enough, and we are not... we don't have a very high level of learning. And there is a big frustration that seizes us: We cannot at all express ourselves when facing the big authorities, important people, and so on. But, we have agreed that through participatory video, it can be a link, a lane of transmission, for us to bring our voices to the higher authorities. (personal communication; my translation)

Messe summed up the utility of video for political advocacy as follows:

We can very well write reports; people won't read them. And this is also an important point, because of which we insist on using video. The communities can easily understand [a] problem through video, or write their own stories with video. While with reports, it's experts that write them. They write whatever they want, and what they think isn't good to put in the report, they take it out. But the communities, in a video, tell it to you in a raw way. (personal communication; my translation)

Of course, as I discuss in more detail below, while video provides a more direct form of communication between local communities and decision-makers than does a written report, this does not mean that videos are not shaped by intermediaries—in this case, Okani. Nevertheless, video in general, and participatory video in particular, can be representative in a way that a report is not.

4. *General Public*¹¹

In addition to addressing the aforementioned specialized audiences—other Baka, other Indigenous communities, and decision-makers—many of the videos that Okani has made are available to be seen by the general public. The videos made as part of the *Conversations with the Earth* project, for instance, are available on the public CWE website and have been screened as part of a travelling CWE exhibition. Videos made for the general public have a variety of intentions and effects. As noted in the earlier discussion of Indigenous media, these videos may seek to counter stereotypes and misrepresentations in order to change popular perceptions of a group or community. They may seek to attract resources in the form of charity or development engagement by highlighting social problems or engaging in various forms of strategic self-

representation, including “strategic traditionalism.” They may also serve as another way of generating a “boomerang effect.” International publics have influence over international NGOs, corporations, and governments. When the behaviour of these entities is at issue, a video addressed to an outside general public can encourage the withholding of charitable contributions, the boycotting of products, or support for a different political party. If this type of public action becomes widespread, or threatens to become widespread, it can serve as a powerful motivator for NGOs, corporations, or governments, to change their behaviour.

The videos that Okani made for the CWE exhibition were all targeted in part to a general public outside of Cameroon. I have already discussed the video about ecoguard abuse in Yenga extensively in Chapter Four. This is an example of a video with a targeted political message and objective.

Okani also contributed three other videos to the CWE exhibition. The first of these was the aforementioned film about the effects of illegal logging. This video thus served multiple purposes. In addition to being part of targeted political advocacy campaign addressing government and NGO officials in Cameroon and abroad, the video’s inclusion in the CWE exhibition also allowed it to have more diffuse effects. The video has two core messages, one of degradation and the other of empowerment. The first message is summed up in the video by a Baka community member, who explains:

Us the Baka, we cry for our forest. The forest is devastated. The wood is abandoned. They exploit the forest but the revenues don’t come back to us. The *moabi* [trees], which we used to use for oil, are all gone. We can no longer feed ourselves in the forest. We can no longer stay in the forest for long periods. This hurts us a lot. The government refuses to protect the rights of the villages. The forest belongs to the state and there’s nothing we can do about it. If you insist, they put you in prison. There is no longer the spirit to fight. The forest for us is finished.

Through exhibiting the film in large international fora, this message is passed on to external audiences. Not only, then, does the film raise awareness of illegal logging among targeted audiences who can directly address the situation (officials from the MINIFOF, for instance), it makes a general public outside of Cameroon aware of the situation, helping to build awareness, external pressure, and momentum to address the issue among external audiences. Though these audiences are less directly involved in the issue of logging, the venues in which the CWE exhibited its videos attracted development and government officials and members of the public sympathetic to environment and Indigenous rights issues. By addressing these audiences, the videos serve an agenda-setting function, gaining visibility for the Baka development issues rights in international fora.

The video also, however, carries a message of Baka empowerment. In addition to documenting illegal logging, the video devotes a good deal of time to showing how Baka community members are using GPS units to map their traditional territories. The video begins with a scene in which Noël is showing other community members how to use the GPS unit. The program that Okani is using employs pictograms: the person holding the GPS unit can click on an image of a hunter carrying a spear to mark an area as a hunting ground, for instance, or an image of a fish to mark an area where fishing takes place. As one community members explains in the film, “Without knowing how to read, I can work using the images. We are here to defend our rights to the forest.” Thus the video portrays the Baka as active agents seeking to remedy their own situation. Images of Baka using advanced technology can also help to counter and challenge primitivist stereotypes, showing outside audiences that technology use is not at odds with, but rather is complementary to, the preservation of traditional livelihoods. This too can help to attract resources and partnerships.

The second Baka video included in the CWE project was entitled “Facing Change in African Forests” (FCAF). This video was made during the initial training with InsightShare in April 2009. This video discusses the impact of climate change on Baka livelihoods. Community members from Mayos discuss a lack of moisture in the soil, which is causing fruit to fall from the trees too early, as well as the fact that streams are drying up, making fishing difficult. The seasons have changed, one community members explains, it has become more difficult to predict the timing and length of the rainy and dry seasons. While framed around the issue of climate change, the video also discusses other issues impacting Baka livelihoods, including illegal logging and non-subsistence hunting by “Bantu” involved in the bushmeat trade. The video also emphasizes the importance of the forest to the Baka, not only for livelihoods, but also for generational continuity and identity. “I walk behind the elders to learn what they do in the forest,” explains one young man interviewed in the film, “So that I can teach my own children tomorrow.” The video ends with an interview with Noël. “To lose the forest,” he explains in the final words of the film, “is to lose one’s identity.”

Unlike the logging video, which was targeted to multiple audiences, FCAF is primarily intended for an outside audience. In addition to its inclusion in the CWE website, YouTube channel, and exhibitions, FCAF was posted on the UNDP YouTube channel, where it has been viewed over 30,000 times. The video thus helped to raise awareness of problems related to Baka land rights and underdevelopment among a large international audience. Again, this plays an agenda-setting role.

As André says above with regard to the logging video, videos also have the potential to create new relationships. It is always possible that, in the large international fora where the videos were shown, an audience members may see the video and step forward to offer a

collaboration. Indeed, this is how I ended up conducting my research with Okani. The third Okani video included in the CWE exhibition was a video dictionary. This video was started during the first InsightShare training and finished during the second one. The video was posted on the CWE website and YouTube channel. It also played at a special screening for Indigenous filmmakers on the evening before the opening of the CWE exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American (NMAI) George Gustav Heye Centre in New York City in the September 2011. (Unfortunately, because of visa issues, none of the Okani filmmakers was able to attend.) As noted in the introduction to this chapter, before starting my doctoral studies, I had worked at NMAI. At the invitation of my former NMAI supervisor, I had travelled back to New York to assist with the exhibition.

Unlike the other two CWE videos, the video dictionary has a less overt political message. Ostensibly the film was made in order to teach some basic vocabulary to outsiders coming to work in Baka communities. At first the events in the film seem quite unremarkable: a group of men from Mayos give the Baka names of various hunting and gathering tools and techniques. As the video progresses, however, it becomes clear that there is also a narrative at work. We see the men light a fire, after which one straps into a harness, climbs a tree, and hacks at the trunk with a machete. Then the man reaches his hand into the hole he has created and pulls out a huge honeycomb. In the audience of Indigenous filmmakers at the CWE exhibition, there were audible gasps of wonder and spontaneous applause at this point in the film.

Honey collection is an integral part of Baka culture and a source of pride. The Baka community members who made this film had taken a formal template—the video dictionary—which they knew was destined for an outside audience, and used it not only to share their language, but to share an activity of which they were proud, thereby building external fame and

respect. The goal here was not to raise awareness of problems or build political alliances. It is possible, however, that by creating images of such an impressive practices, the Baka community members who made the film did succeed in generating political solidarity.

12. Advocacy and Affect

Film's ability to generate solidarity between disparate audiences is unique, and relatively undertheorized in the literature on Indigenous media. Indeed, the academic literature on media and rights advocacy often conceptualizes films and videos as containing merely "factual" or "discursive" information. Books and articles examine the ways in which outside audiences become aware of rights abuses through media and act on this knowledge, and the ways in which mediamaking and distribution can build professional and personal connections and networks through which communities can conduct advocacy.

Writings about Indigenous film festivals, and other venues where Indigenous media tends to be displayed, for instance, tend to assert that these events build connections between Indigenous mediamakers from different parts of the world, or between Indigenous mediamakers and non-Indigenous audiences, rather than explaining how such connections are formed. The underlying assumption is that interpersonal connections are formed in the same manner as they would be at any other meeting or conference: through conversation, exchange of information, etc. For instance, in her analysis of the Smithsonian's 2005 'First Nations/First Features' exhibition, Kristin Dowell (2006) emphasizes the "off-screen impact" of the event, explaining the ways in which the Indigenous mediamakers attending the festival "strengthened social networks and shared experience and expertise" through various panels, meetings, and informal discussions (376). Dowell does discuss the onscreen impact of the films shown at the exhibition, but this impact is framed quite literally. The films are envisaged as another type of "information" akin to what might be relayed by a speaker or a panel discussant.

While the spread of factual information about rights abuses and other issues is certainly an important aspect of transnational advocacy, however, it is also important to account for the *affective* dimension of the media, and the way that this may serve to engender solidarity and motivate advocacy. A purely instrumental or informational approach neglects the sensorial, emotional impact that Indigenous films can have on audiences. In addition to taking in factual information, audiences are also often touched by the people they see on screen; they form sensory and emotional connections with them. Recall, for instance, the city counsellor M. Ntough's observation that he was emotionally moved by the video about problems face by Baka students. These connections can help to motivate political action and create new alliances.

The affective potential of images, both still and moving, results from the fact that, unlike other "imitative arts" such as writing and drawing, they contain a "message without a code" (Barthes 1978, 17). Whereas text, for example, is simply a series of arbitrary symbols that represent a real object, person, event, etc., an image is inextricably linked to that which it represents: It contains the *trace* of a specific person, time, place, or event without which the image could not have been made (see Taussig 1993, 220). As Barthes (1978) puts it, an image, "establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its *having-been-there*" (44; Barthes' emphasis). John Berger (1982) explains this more succinctly: "Photographs do not translate from appearances. They quote from them" (95).

Moreover, the information contained in an image can never be fully encompassed by words. Images always contain certain "thick" aspects that resist semiotic reduction; a look in someone's eyes, for instance, that can never be fully conjured up with words. Poole (2005) refers to this information as "visual excess" (167). Barthes refers to it as "third meaning." Third

meaning “exceeds psychology, anecdote, function, exceeds meaning” (54). It strikes one not rationally or linguistically, but emotionally or sensorially, usually at the level of subconscious (59). Anyone who has felt themselves cringe in pain, for instance, when witnessing someone being injured on screen, or felt a pang of sadness at hearing and seeing someone grieving the loss of a loved one in a film, has experienced third meaning.

Laura Marks (2000) argues that images can touch viewers in this way, speaking not only from “mind to mind” but from “body to body,” because they evoke what she calls “sense memories.” Even though films only “directly engage two senses”—the auditory and the visual—they can “activate a memory that involves all the senses” (22). This is what Marks terms “haptic visuality”: “Film is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole” (145). Images are experienced through the lens of memory, “articulat[ing] a set of *correspondences* which provoke in the viewer a recognition of some past experience. This recognition may remain at the level of tacit agreement with memory, or it may become conscious” (Berger 1982, 122; Berger’s emphasis). Memory, in this conception, is not only mental, but also corporeal. As Marks (2000) explains, drawing on the work of Henri Bergson (1988), “memory is actualized in bodily sensations, and correspondingly is not simply a mental but an embodied process” (146). As MacDougall (1998) explains, the visual becomes “a pathway to nonvisual aspects of human experience” (64). “It...regenerates a form of thinking through the body, often affecting us most forcefully at those junctures of experience that lie between our accustomed categories of thought” (49).

MacDougall (1998) uses this insight regarding the ability of images to evoke fleeting non-linguistic sensations in developing his theory of transcultural cinema. According to MacDougall, when images invoke individual sense memories in the viewer, the viewer

interpolates those sense memories back onto the subject on screen. “We reach out to others with our senses as a sort of probe (in films through the extension of the camera) and make sense of them through what we contain in ourselves. Our knowledge is transposed, or displaced, toward them, so that it appears to be of them. We are using our bodies and cameras as kindred instruments (29). Take for example a scene in which a woman burns her hand on a hot stove. The viewer is not only jolted by the somewhat subconscious memory of how it feels to have one’s flesh burn, the viewer is also aware of the fact that she and the woman onscreen have shared this sensation. MacDougall understands such moments in film in relation to his concept of “the quick.” The quick is a brief moment in which a film evokes an instinctive sensory or emotional response in the viewer, as opposed to a rational, thought through, intellectual understanding, and is a product of the inextricable presence of both signal and noise in filmic images (49-50). It is not only a space within which a film or image evokes a sensory or emotional reaction in the viewer; it is also a *transcultural* space where viewer and viewed are briefly united through a posited common corporeal experience. As MacDougall explains, “our film experience relies upon our assuming the existence of a parallel sensory experience in others. If our attraction to the “quick” can be said to have a destination, it is the consciousness of others” (52). Barthes (1978) said it best: “Thanks to what, in the image, is purely image...we do without language yet never cease to understand one another” (61).

We should also note here video’s potential to convey Indigenous ways of seeing and thinking that are not amenable to formal, written, bureaucratic expressive forms. As Lauren Dyll-Myklebust (2014) explains in her study of development narratives in a San community in the Kalahari, “oral narratives—especially in an oral society which speaks in imagery—reflect the intangible, in this case the spiritual beliefs of the community” (522). In Indigenous communities,

spiritual beliefs, as well as cultural identity, are often “inextricably linked with land” (526). Certainly, as we have seen, this is the case with the Baka, where spiritual and community life revolves around the forest. As Dyll-Myklebust notes, “understanding the relationship Indigenous people have with the land on which [development] projects are implemented is vital, if local partners are to truly form part of a partnership where their development discourse and expectations are taken into consideration” (526).

Local beliefs about land and other factors, however, are not easily expressed in writing, and, even if they could be written down, do not adhere to the narrow, technical requirement of formal bureaucratic communication. Video provides a way of bringing local narratives into discussions around development projects and government initiatives. Take, for instance, Okani’s participatory video “Baka: Face to Face with Society.” This video (discussed in more detail in Chapter Four) addresses the consequences of new conservation areas in southeast Cameroon, which have restricted Baka access to traditional hunting grounds and other parts of the forest that are spiritually and economically important. The video features a number of interviews with community members, who speak about the importance of the forest and activities, such as hunting and fishing, which they conduct in this space. Not only are these activities described, however, as they would or could be in a report, the viewer also witnesses the skill with which Baka community members undertake these activities, hears the emotion with which they describe their connection to the practices, and is able to sense some of the pride and fulfillment that Baka feel in their connection to the natural world. By juxtaposing factual testimony about how the Baka use the forest and how access is being restricted with imagery of the forest and forest activities, the film is able to capture something of the deep and ineffable connection that most Baka feel to the forest. This connection is less easily captured in words, and yet it is vital to

understand this connection if one is to understand issues of access and conservation in southeast Cameroon.

Because of these unique qualities, Indigenous participatory video can play an important role in stimulating political action and solidarity. While not everyone has experienced land dispossession, for instance, everyone has experienced some form of pain and suffering (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 27). Distant audiences come to sympathize and identify with those whom they see on screen. This creates a powerful incentive for activism on the part of international publics and institutions. As Margaret McLagan (2005) explains: “While human rights discourse is legalistic, what propels its application around the world is solidarity or political identification with victims, which is produced through the circulation of testimony on film and video, on the Internet and in face-to-face encounters.... In this sense, testimony is a kind of intercultural technology, a mode of producing solidarity” (229). This solidarity, in turn, can produce alliances and stimulate action on the part of powerful actors, who may be able to influence government and other actors to uphold Indigenous rights (the aforementioned “boomerang effect”). As M. Ntough explained succinctly: “If you want to help someone, put yourself in their shoes. And with video you can do that” (personal communication; my translation).¹²

In addition to building a sensory/emotional connection between viewer and viewed, however, there are other, non-informational ways in which films can “touch” an audience. The Baka video dictionary, for instance, did not evoke a common sensory experience between audience and filmic subject so much as it elicited feelings of awe and wonder. This is not an example of MacDougall’s theory of “the quick,” but of a different type of connection.

Feelings of awe and respect can be politically effective. That is, like informational content or a genuine sensory connection, they can motivate outside audience members to

political action. Indeed, I saw this happen in the case of the Baka video dictionary, which motivated audience members at the NMAI screening (myself perhaps most of all!) to look for ways to work with Okani and Baka communities. What is going on here is not a straightforward “transcultural” connection as discussed by MacDougall, however, and there is also a risk that a feeling of awe or respect can be alienating.

I would suggest that some people, maybe most people, in the audience at the NMAI screening who gasped or cheered when the Baka man pulled the giant honeycomb out of a tree were not experiencing a moment of non-linguistic, transcultural connection. Instead, their spontaneous feelings of awe and incredulity were, I suspect, the product of two subconscious impulses that were much more self-centred.

First, feelings of awe are often evoked when one sees someone accomplish a task that one knows one could certainly not accomplish oneself. This is not in and of itself culturally alienating, (though it certainly doesn’t build a transcultural connection—I have this feeling every time I watch sports!) But in the case of an Indigenous media screening, the awe is often culturally situated. It is not just that the audience member feels that she could not climb a tree and pull out a honeycomb—she feels that no one in her culture could do this. Therefore, I think, part of the viewer’s positive feelings might result not from a transcendence of culture but, subconsciously, from a re-affirmation of cultural division.

Second, I think that the spontaneous cheers at the Baka screening were (again perhaps subconsciously) self-congratulatory on the part of the audience. In the Baka film, it is not at first clear what the men on screen are doing, nor why they have shared the Baka names of this particular array of objects with the viewer. Through the film the purpose of the objects is gradually revealed. Thus, there is a mental questioning taking place within the audience member

(What is he doing? Oh, *that's* what he's doing.) I wonder, then, if the audience members were reacting due to their relief or feeling of accomplishment at being able to make sense of the film, rather than because they have formed a connection with the person on screen.

None of this is to say, however, that films that evoke awe and wonder in an audience cannot be effective advocacy tools. Moreover, the desire to impress an outside audience is a very common motivation for self-representation. Indeed, this observation brings us full circle, back to the initial germ of the Okani video project, when Messe began recording Baka musicians on his small, hand-held camera, and playing the resulting videos in other villages. These musicians were seeking to build a connection, but they were also, as Messe put it, seeking fame. As Baka videomaking has expanded, and as the Baka have gained access to the global Indigenous 'mediascape,' the possibilities for individuals and communities to build connections, gain fame, and advance political and social agendas have expanded as well.

13. Video as Empowerment

While circulating participatory videos can thus be an effective means for marginalized communities to communicate with outside audiences, and to engage these audiences in dialogue and action, the *act* of videomaking can also serve as a form of community and personal empowerment. In addition to providing an occasion for community dialogue and consensus-building (see above), for many communities and individuals, the filmmaking process provides a way to approach more powerful actors, such as government officials, and ask them questions. This in turn leads to a sense of empowerment. As Roberts and Lunch (2015) explain,

New users of video often discover that one of the affordances of using a digital camera and tripod is that it provides them with an excuse and the sense of power to approach and question people that they would not otherwise feel was possible. They can also find that holding a digital camera, with the red recording light illuminated, elicits a considered and serious response, which they might not have been afforded in the absence of the camera. This experience of technology use and of being taken seriously often has the effect of raising users' self-esteem, confidence, and sense of personal power and agency. (4)

In the case of the Baka, the use of technology leads to empowerment not only because it affords a means of approaching and conversing with powerful actors, but because the visible use of video cameras and other technology helps to counter local stereotypes of Baka primitivism, underdevelopment, and degradation.¹³ Messe describes, for example, activities that Okani undertook at a parade celebrating Cameroon's *fête nationale* holiday, on May 20th, 2009, shortly after the first InsightShare participatory video training. The parade was held in Dimako, a town 30 kilometres south of Bertoua, and very close to the Baka villages where the training had taken place. Okani invited all of the training participants, as well as Baka community and women's associations, to attend the parade. The organization printed t-shirts with the words "*Okani - 20 mai 2009*" to be worn by the participants.

We were really a mob! We arrived in Dimako, [and] we settled in with all the other groups that were going to march [in the parade], but with the difference that we were armed with cameras, with a big tripod! [laughing] And people said, "Has the television [station] come to Dimako!?" And we said, "No, it's not a television.... It's the television of the Baka!" [...]

We had almost all the equipment. We had the microphones, we had long cables. And we could go into the crowd, [and] do interviews without the cameraman being obliged to be next [to the interviewer].

And it was really impressive. It was impressive. It was from that moment that, even the mayor of the town, and the *sous-préfet*, they said, "We must meet Okani so that we can work together." While that wasn't the case before. So we see that participatory video, when it is also used for.... Because people really saw the Baka from that locality very well motivated, and well integrated in the parade, not like the years before. Yes.

So if we could multiply examples like that, it develops self-confidence in the Baka, and also respect on the part of others, who will maybe see.... A Bantu who has never touched a camera or a microphone but who sees that it's a Baka who is doing it, a Baka girl or boy. And it was quite sensational. (personal communication; my translation)

Messe emphasized in particular the important role that Baka women played in filming the parade. The sight of Baka *women* holding video cameras was thus doubly shocking. Messe spoke

with pride and admiration about Cécile, a young Baka woman who participated in filming the parade: “It was her who was really [...] very very visible,” he explained. “Because everyone was astonished to see a Baka woman, a young Baka girl, with headphones on her head like a journalist. A camerawoman, with a camera in hand, making images. And that helped us to revolutionize the image that people had of the Baka in that zone” (personal communication; my translation.)

Messe’s description of Baka filming the *fête nationale* parade recalls Terence Turner’s pioneering work on mediamaking among the Kayapó in Brazil. Turner (1992) describes how, among other purposes, the Kayapó “ostentatiously” used video cameras to record public events that were also “being filmed by representatives of the national and international media” (7). Well aware that “the sight of a ‘primitive’ Indian, bedecked in paint and feathers yet wielding a highly sophisticated example of late twentieth century technology, would create an arresting image” (Banks 2001, 38), the Kayapó self-consciously made “their camerapersons...one of the main attractions to be filmed by the other crews” (Turner 1992, 7). As Turner (1991a) notes, “the role of Kayapó camerapersons” at public events, “is not only to make an independent Kayapó documentary record of the event itself, but also to be seen and represented in the act of doing so by the non-Kayapó media” (306). “Audio and...visual media thus become, not merely *means* of representing culture, actions, or events...but themselves the *ends* of social action” (307).

Not only did the novelty of the Kayapó’s self-conscious performance of their technological capacity help to attract outside attention to their political agenda, it also helped to counter primitivist stereotypes that served to underwrite the Kayapó’s political marginalization. Moreover, it helped build Kayapó self-confidence, and demonstrate to outsiders that Kayapó could assert control over their own image:

The power of representation through...media...became associated with the power of conferring value and meaning on themselves in the eyes of the outside world, and reflexively, in new ways, in their own eyes as well. The technology of representation thereby assumed the character of a power to control the terms of this meaning- and value-imbuing process. The acquisition of this technology, of both hardware and operating skills, thus became an important part of the Kayapo struggle for self-empowerment in the situation of inter-ethnic contact. Control over the power and technology of representation, even more than over the image per se, became a symbolic benchmark of cultural parity. (Turner 1991a, 307)

As we have seen, like the Kayapó and other Indigenous communities around the world, the historical marginalization and domination of the Baka has been grounded in no small part on the circulation of primitivist stereotypes and degradation narratives. By not only creating their own representations of themselves, but by visibly displaying their capacity for self-representation to outside audiences, the Baka are thus making a powerful statement: We will no longer allow you to control our image and we will no longer allow you to control us. The choice of the *fête nationale* parade as one of the first events that Okani filmed is revealing. This is a high visibility event attended by important government officials and NGO representatives. Moreover, the purpose of the event is to celebrate and reaffirm Cameroonian pride and unity. As Messe explained, Baka had historically not participated in this event to a great extent. Moreover, when Baka do participate in large-scale national events such as a *fête nationale* parade, they have traditionally been relegated to playing primitivist stereotypes, representing the “cultural diversity” of Cameroon, or serving as a curiosity for onlookers. By filming themselves participating in the parade on their own terms, wearing t-shirts instead of “traditional” outfits, the Baka were not only challenging these stereotypes, they were demonstrating their political control over their image.

In addition to public performances of Baka technological capacity, such as the one described above, representations of Baka technology use are prominent in Okani’s videos

themselves. Unlike traditional documentaries of Indigenous communities, in which technology is often deemphasized or excluded from the frame, the videos that Okani produces proudly feature images and scenes of community members confidently and capably using cameras and other “modern” technology. The videos show community members as active agents, engaged in a process of self-representation, using both “modern” technologies and traditional practices in order to accomplish community goals. Far from being represented by outsiders as “‘traditionalist’ hunter-gatherers, unfamiliar with the ways of the modern world” (Solway 2009, 340), Baka who engage in participatory video represent *themselves* as empowered users of technology who are fully part of contemporary discourses regarding rights and development. The desire to maintain some “traditional” rights and practices does not imply a desire to return to the past, but rather a call for the autonomy to negotiate modernity on one’s own terms.¹⁴

Several Okani staff members spoke about the empowerment that they and other Baka project participants felt in demonstrating their skill with videomaking technology. Moreover, in addition to showing Baka technological skill, video can be a means of transmitting other positive examples of Baka empowerment and leadership, which can lead to a domino effect in other Baka communities. Noël, for instance, explained to me that, in addition to the process of video-making itself, the ability for community members “to see themselves and hear themselves expressing themselves in video...gave them a feeling of value” (personal communication; my translation). As this quote illustrates, videomaking is empowering not only to those community members who participate in the process, but to other Baka as well, who are inspired by the work of their compatriots. As Messe explained in a presentation to participatory video practitioners:

We have filmed people who have been successful in getting the argument across, in galvanizing local support and mobilizing people, so when we arrive to do the same process in a new village we show video of these people in action and this inspires

confidence in others. They will ask themselves “if another Baka can speak like that then why can’t I do the same? (2014)

Empowerment through video had tangible political consequences for Baka communities. Messe and Noel both credited Baka videomaking for the fact that, during the 2013 municipal election, more than ten Baka were elected as city councillors, a dramatic increase from the previous term. Noel credits participatory video with raising awareness about the importance of Baka representation among the high-ranking political officials, causing them to recruit Baka to be among their party’s slate of candidates for the election:

There were not, for example, any Baka counsellors in Haut Nyong [region]. It was through raising awareness, which we did with video—we made the mayors, the counsellors, and everyone aware—that we came to have a counsellor, one or two counsellors, in our *communes*. Before there were none. So it is through participatory video—the act of raising the awareness of the mayors and the counsellors in the various communes where we were working through video—that permitted people... We were at nothing and now we are starting to have one [Baka counsellor], and maybe in five years we will have three or four! (personal communication)

Relatedly, Messe credited video with giving Baka community members the confidence to participate in the political process. At an Okani staff meeting he explained, ‘People saw the videos we made with Plan [Cameroon]. They saw [Baka] people who were discussing issues in front of others and it gave them courage [to stand for election.]’

Scholars of Indigenous media have tended to pay less attention to individual impacts, focusing instead on how videomaking can affect an entire group or community (Graham 2016b). In addition to empowering Baka and Baka communities in general, however, videomaking has also been empowering to specific individuals. Romial, for instance, who is the most technologically skilled of the Okani staff members, has been able to parlay his video skills into a side business making videos in and around his home village of Andom:

Aside from the project I’ve made several videos for weddings, for funerals. And for me, it was a way of becoming capable. I can’t say that I’ve made money doing that. For me it

was a pleasure to film and to occupy myself a bit, and to practice my editing. And I say to myself that it is making me a bit capable. [...] So, like, in August, there is a gentleman who is getting married in the village, and he said to me, “Romial, don’t you know that you are going to film my wedding and make a DVD like you did [for other people]?” Well, for me, it’s also a bit of a glory for me, when people know that I can make a video and people will watch it. (personal communication; my translation)

Videomaking also provides Romial, Messe, Noël, and other Okani staff members with opportunities to travel, accompanying their films through the international Indigenous “mediascape.” In addition to the pleasure of experiencing new places, travel provides an opportunity to network with other Indigenous mediamakers, development workers, government officials, and members of the public. These connections can be a valuable source of political power, prestige, and financial resources for individuals, Okani, and Baka communities in general. Of course, as we will see, these benefits are not distributed evenly, which may call into question some of the more utopian narratives of the power of “participatory” self-representation.

14. Conclusion

I began this chapter with an anecdote that illustrated the marginal place that Africans have historically occupied in the international Indigenous “mediascape.” This, however, is starting to change. The Baka are far from the only African group making their own films and videos, and works by African communities are increasingly visible in Indigenous film festivals, conferences, websites and other venues for Indigenous media. Indeed, it is ironic that it was at the National Museum of the American Indian—the same place where I met the French festival director who told me “*Il n’y a rien!*”—that I first encountered Okani’s work.

As we saw in Chapter Four, African groups are increasingly recognized as legitimate members of an international community of Indigenous peoples. Groups such as the Baka face similar imperatives to Indigenous groups from other parts of the world—a fear of cultural degradation, a desire for self-determination, the impetus toward building solidarity with similarly

positioned communities—and these commonalities are reflected in African Indigenous media projects.

African Indigenous communities have seized upon a powerful tool. Mediamaking is uniquely suited to Indigenous advocacy. No matter what audience an Indigenous video addresses—be it members of other Indigenous communities, government and development officials, or the general public—direct images and testimony can show what words can only describe, speaking to a viewer's senses and emotions. This can help to motivate solidarity and political action. As we have seen, video often lays the groundwork for political action. Video—and participatory video in particular—can bring community members and sympathetic outsiders together around a common objective. A participatory video process allows community members to identify problems, develop a common narrative, and agree on shared objectives. This is an important precursor to engagement with outside politicians or development officials, whether this engagement itself is mediated by video or by more “traditional” methods such as formal reports or face-to-face meetings. By speaking to the emotions and senses of outside officials, video sometimes motivates immediate political action. In other cases, video can build public sympathy which, in turn, creates political pressure that forces officials to be more receptive to community complaints and demands.

Moreover, for many Indigenous community members, video is an easier medium to use than the written word. Indeed, we have already discussed the advantages of videos over written reports. As John Nelson from FPP explained to me, not only does video travel well, in communities with high rates of illiteracy, it “matches the skill sets of lots of people.”

When I got to FPP we had this library, it was all filled with all these incredibly great and interesting books, with tons of information, you know, incredible scholarship but nobody ever reads the damn things. And so the internal struggle in FPP is coming up with forms of, you know, publication which are appropriate both to communities, but also to the

outside world. And so I think when you get into the multimedia experience, there you go. That's your medium to use. Because everyone understands that. (personal communication)

John's description here harkens back to the vignette from the beginning of Chapter One—Messe in Japan, standing in a room full of books about Pygmies, written in foreign characters. Video can provide a partial solution to communities' inability to access and contribute to the archives of information produced about them.

Due to their remote location, cultural distinctiveness, political marginalization, and high rates of illiteracy, among other factors, the Baka have historically had difficulty influencing government and other officials. Baka access to media, however, allows them to participate alongside other political actors in what has become a dominant form of political communication. Of course we should not be so naive as to think that mediamaking—or participatory video in particular—represents some sort of panacea. Indigenous communities that make films and videos are still doing so within a context of political marginalization, and in dialogue with a long history of outside tropes and discourses with which they must contend. Indigenous communities are also often still reliant on outside individuals and groups for funding and technical support. Successful Indigenous participatory video projects require collaboration between different proponents—namely, outside funders, development organizations, and, most importantly, a local community. Each of these groups must provide something to the project in order for it to be successful. Funders provide money. Development organizations provide facilitation and logistical support. Local communities provide their participation and insight. In order to be motivated to make these contributions, each of these groups must also see something to be gained from the project. This can create challenging power dynamics that can risk overwhelming the democratizing potential of Indigenous participatory video and other Indigenous media projects.

Rather than viewing Indigenous self-representation as authored “from above” by NGOs and funders, or “from below” by local communities, then, we must view it as a complex and dialogical process, involving a host of different actors with different interests, assets, and objectives. There are certainly inequalities between the local, national, and international organizations and actors that influence this process. This is to say nothing of the *internal* differences within participant communities, such as the differences between men and women. Moreover, the relationship between these actors does not exist in a vacuum. A host of institutions, relationships and discourses, including a discourse of Indigenous rights, condition and constrain videomaking in Indigenous communities. The use of methodologies such as participatory video, which explicitly seek ways to empower community members to determine the message, content, and audience for external representations their culture and identity, can be enhance local agency and authorship. Local agency and authorship involves both the strategic deployment of external narratives and tropes and the expression of a genuine concern about marginalization and a real attachment to traditional practices and livelihood strategies. This is not to say, however, that outsiders, or local elites, do not ever exert undue influence over Indigenous self-representation.¹⁵

Conclusion

Participation as Discourse

No act of self-representation occurs in a vacuum. Indigenous media enters a global “mediascape” (Appadurai 1996) that is already replete with other works, images, and ideas. These include an extensive archive of representations of Indigenous groups. This archive was mostly constructed by outsiders, and involves varying degrees of accuracy, exaggeration, and outright fabrication. Whether intentionally or not, Indigenous self-representations are in dialogue with previous narratives, tropes, and stereotypes from this archive. The people who make Indigenous films and videos, and the audiences that consume them, contextualize what appears on screen with what they have seen, heard, and read before. This provides both a constraint, and an opportunity. Indigenous mediamakers can make use of previous traditions of representation to accomplish local goals—performing certain markers of “indigeneity,” for instance, in order to attract support from sympathetic outsiders and claim rights to land and other resources. Such an exercise, however, can be perilous. As we have seen, outside representations have had all sorts of negative impacts on Indigenous and marginalized communities, and there is always a risk that in making use of these traditions, one will reinforce them and, in so doing, exacerbate their negative impacts.

Given the risks, it is not surprising that Indigenous community members do not always agree on difficult decisions regarding self-representation. Often, when people speak of Indigenous groups such as “the Baka,” they speak about the group as a whole, but of course there are myriad internal differences within this category. The cosmopolitan spokespeople who often represent an Indigenous group internationally, for instance, may have very different backgrounds than other community members, and thus very different opinions about how their communities

should be portrayed. The use of video—and participatory video in particular—can help to account for these internal differences and inequalities, allowing a wider group of community members to have their views reflected in external representations, but every act of self-representation will still contain biases and omissions.

I began this dissertation by applying Foucault’s genealogical approach to outside representation of “Pygmies.” I showed how, over centuries, Western and other outside representations built on one another to create a “Pygmy Paradigm” that still lingers on in contemporary accounts, and powerfully shapes the ways in which communities such as the Baka are treated today. In the first three chapters, I showed how the Pygmy Paradigm informed various outside interventions and perspectives, including sedentarization initiatives, development projects, primitivist stereotypes, and degradation narratives. Outside interventions, and the understandings underlying them, have helped to exacerbate a situation of marginalization, characterized by inequality between “Pygmy” and “Bantu” communities.

“Pygmies,” however, are not passive victims. In the last three chapters, I showed how Baka and other “Pygmy” communities were responding to and influencing the Pygmy Paradigm, turning outside conceptions of their communities and cultures into a resources for pursuing their own social, political, and economic goals. By mobilizing their symbolic autochthony, including tropes of “Pygmies” as “guardians of the forest,” for instance, the Baka and other communities have been able to create alliances with outside NGOs and institutions to claim Indigenous rights and advance local claims to development and land. They have also sought to challenge and reshape the Pygmy Paradigm itself, putting forward a values-based approach that views Baka culture not as static and unchanging, but instead recognizes the autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and creativity of Baka individuals in shaping their own futures and self-conceptions. The final

chapter of the dissertation, through a case study of participatory video, offered an example of how Baka are both responding to and reshaping outside representations using technology. I stated at the beginning of Chapter One that the insidious thing about the Pygmy Paradigm is that, for many centuries, it built up almost entirely independently of the communities that would come to bear its burden. This is no longer the case.

Of course, though, things cannot be wrapped up quite so neatly. Crucially, at the end of the day, it is not “the Baka” as a whole who are conducting self-representation; rather, Baka “self” representations are authored by specific individuals with varying degrees of power and differing opinions about how this activity should be conducted. Cosmopolitan spokespeople like Messe, as well as non-Baka development funders, have a far greater ability to influence the content of Baka self-representation than does the “average” Baka community member. While Baka mediamaking, and Baka self-representation more generally, has had many salutary impacts, then, it is important to look critically at who specifically is benefitting, and who may be left out or disadvantaged.

In its work, Okani has sought to account for inequalities in representational power through the use of a participatory video (PV) methodology. This approach, however, is not a panacea. For one thing, as we saw in the previous chapter, the ways in which Okani’s projects played out “on the ground” was often much messier and more fraught than the ideal-type process described in PV training manuals and workshops. Unsympathetic donors, insufficient funding, and technological challenges meant that projects did not always achieve the level of in-depth participation and consultation that organizers and community members might have wished. Such problems appear easy enough to resolve through technical improvements.

There is, however, also a deeper critique that can be levelled at PV and other participatory development projects: Namely, that the label “participatory” functions as a sort of masking discourse, obscuring power inequalities between development organizations and local communities, and within these communities themselves. It is particularly problematic when an initiative with very little community buy-in is labelled “participatory.” No matter how well-run a project is, however, or how closely it hews to an ideal-type model of “participatory development,” it will never achieve perfect participation. Some groups and individuals will always be excluded or marginalized; and these exclusions are often obscured when a project is labelled “participatory.” In this sense, “participation” itself comes to function as a discourse.

A genealogical approach does not offer any convenient exits or satisfying conclusions. A former professor of mine compared this approach to a set of Russian nesting dolls. Once you have provided a second order description of one set of representational practices, you can simply move up and apply a third order critique to your second order critique, and so on. In concluding, then, I apply a critical lens to the Baka participatory video project itself, analyzing how the logic of participatory development influences, constrains, and misrepresents Baka “self”-representation.

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Since participatory approaches reached the mainstream of development in the 1980s and 90s, they have come under attack on a number of fronts. Some of these critiques point to the embrace of participatory development by large funders, most importantly the World Bank, arguing that these organizations have co-opted these approaches and moved them away from their radical, Friere-ian roots (see Chapter Six). Instead of focusing on substantively redistributing power and increasing local control of social, political, and economic resources, participatory

development has been placed in service of more conventional development objectives that are less threatening to the *status quo*. A 1994 World Bank definition, for instance, states that participatory development is a “process through which stakeholders influence and *share* control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them” (Cornwall 2000, 8; my emphasis). This is quite different from a situation in which a local community has full control.

According to Roberts and Lunch (2015), as large development funders began to make “participation” a requirement for their financial support of development projects, they also created a “tyranny” of “top-down “compulsory participation”” that “forced development actors to claim that their initiatives were “participatory” (2). With regard to PV projects specifically, they write:

This resulted in a proliferation of sham and tokenistic “participation” claims in project plans and funding bids in order to conform to funder dictates. The effect of this “compulsory participation” on practice included some cases of the use of so-called participatory video that were devoid of transformative intent as well as the commissioning of “participatory video” in order to legitimize top-down process. (Roberts and Chris Lunch 2015, 2)

Similarly, Namara (2010) argues that “the word ‘participation’ has been highly instrumentalized by NGOs to secure donor funding without any effective participation on the part of a project’s beneficiaries” (Lueong 2016).

As Akerkar (2001) notes, as participatory development techniques became more widely used, “participation” took on increasingly broad meaning in development circles. “While it can refer to genuine intent to hand over the power to interpret, analyze and come up with solutions, in some cases, imposition of donor agendas has been justified by cursory consultation processes which are then referred to as participatory” (2). While there are certainly still development projects that are “genuinely” participatory, many projects that are labeled as such do not involve

substantive community input. According to Agarwal (2001), there is a spectrum of how the term participation is used today by development organizations and practitioners, from “nominal participation” characterized merely by the presence of members of a particular group during an activity, to “interactive” or “empowering” participation, in which everyone has “voice and influence in the group’s decisions” (1624). Such distinctions, however, are rarely reflected in external accounts of participatory development projects. Rather, exclusions and inequalities—both within communities and between communities and development organizations—are glossed over with a simplistic application of the label “participatory.”

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Participatory video is particularly effective at obscuring local inequalities from outside scrutiny, and can be used to advance a narrative that characterizes projects that have little community involvement as “participatory.” As we have seen, videomaking always involves a certain amount of “framing,” as those filming and editing videos emphasize and de-emphasize various issues and characteristics to produce narratives and arguments that are “comprehensible and useful” to the “geographically and/or socially distant” publics that they envision as the film’s audience (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Snow and Benford 1992). Because target audiences may have little in-depth knowledge of the local situation, PV and other video advocacy projects call upon various “symbols, actions, or stories” that will make complex issues “resonate” with the audience’s values and experience (Snow and Benford 1988). This includes the framing of videos as “participatory.”

In theory, PV—and participatory development more broadly—is supposed to help address the power imbalance between outside organizations and local communities, and make it easier for communities to “speak for themselves.” Such projects, however, require collaboration

between various *proponents*, which must work together to make a project possible. In the case of Okani's video projects (and many other Indigenous PV initiatives) proponents consist of outside funders, a local development organization (i.e. Okani), and, of course, Baka and other "Pygmy" communities themselves.¹ Each of these groups has different motivations for pursuing PV projects. Funders can use a narrative of participatory development to burnish their reputations, using PV to provide "proof" of their good works and of community support for their programs. Similarly, local development organizations such as Okani use PV to gain international prestige and demonstrate local support for their activities. This helps make and deepen connections with funders.

For local Baka and other "Pygmy" communities, on the other hand, motivations for participating in PV can be more complex. Some community members are attracted by the ability to interact with a new, unfamiliar technology, seeing a chance to gain new skills and experiences. Others are interested in the potential for inter-community communication, particularly with other "Pygmy" groups. As we saw in the previous chapter, some community members also saw video as a means to "get the word out" regarding problems and abuses taking place in their communities, in the hopes of bringing about outside intervention. Still other community members are interested in videomaking insofar as it serves to attract concrete development projects and other resources to their communities.

For a PV project to get off the ground it must satisfy the objectives of all these proponent groups. This is not always easy, particularly when there is a lack of time and money. Limited funding and stringent donor requirements can significantly limit the scope for community expression and agency. As Kothari (2001) notes, "the tools provided can limit the performance

so that the performers are unable to convey what they want to; the stage has been set by others and the form of the performance similarly guided by them” (149).

When the interests of all proponents cannot be realized through a project, the project sometimes collapses. Other times, however, more powerful actors may seek to continue the project in order to realize *their* interests, even while the interests of the local community go unfulfilled. They do this in a number of ways: Offering incentives (e.g. money or gifts) to community members to continue participating; using political power and social influence; and/or taking shortcuts in PV methodology to produce a video that *appears* to be authored by the community, but, in fact, is not.

Framing videos as “participatory” conveys a particular message to the audience: Namely, that the video was produced with meaningful community involvement and was, in a sense, authored by the community. Very rarely, however, is the framing of a video or project as “participatory” determined by the community depicted in the film. Indeed, most communities that undertake PV are not aware of the term or technique. Instead, the term “participatory” is almost always applied by donors and development agencies before a project even begins. It is rare that, when faced with technical difficulties, limited community participation, or other obstacles, a donor or development agency will drop the label “participatory video” and re-name the project. Usually, the label persists even when the project fails to meet all but the most minimal criteria for fostering participation.

As we saw in the previous chapter, owing to constraints of funding and other factors, Okani was not always able to undertake a fulsome, participatory process for its videos. Deviations from an ideal type PV methodology are not a problem *per se*. The problem comes with the fact that videos that are not made in a participatory manner are often labeled

“participatory video.” This has the effect of attributing authorship of a video to a local community, when in fact it is a product of outside imperatives and ideas. In such cases, the use of the label ‘participatory video’ becomes a sort of masking discourse, obscuring power inequalities between funders, development organizations, and communities.

Okani’s framing of videos made with limited community involvement as “participatory” is not done maliciously. In part, this was simply the result of insufficient training on the philosophy of PV. This was compounded by the need to please funders who requested participatory videos but did not provide sufficient resources to enable a truly participatory process. Given the slippery definition of participation in development circles, however, there is also a strong temptation for small organizations such as Okani to opt for less fulsome participation in their work. The reason for this is simple: Genuine participation takes time and money, both of which are often in short supply.

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In addition to obscuring the degree to which development organizations and funders influence the content of “self”-representation, PV projects also often underplay *internal* inequalities. These projects usually characterize the authors of a video not only as a group of individuals, but as representatives of a “collectivity, such as a village or community” (Agarwal 2001, 1623). Communities, as Akerkar (2001) points out, “are not homogenous entities with monolithic interests; however, participatory approaches often “treat the ‘local’ and ‘community’ as self-evident and unproblematic social categories” (Hickey and Mohan 2004a, 17), taking “a unitary view of interests which underplay difference” (Mosse 1994, 510), and obscuring internal inequalities of class, caste, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, and other categories. As Mosse (1994) argues, the very structure of participatory development activities, beginning with group

discussions and culminating in an end product (whether it is a presentation, report, or, in our case, video) “assumes and encourages the expression of consensus” (510). While consensus is, in many ways, a good thing, a focus on putting forward “the view” (singular) of “the community” (also singular) has the potential to subsume, or even erase, dissenting voices.

As we have seen, Okani often made efforts to address local inequalities and include diverse voices within their films. As discussed in the previous chapter, for instance, Okani facilitators made particular efforts to account for gender and to ensure that women’s voices and perspectives were included. The organization was much more able successful in fostering genuine participation, however, when provided with sufficient funding, reasonable deadlines, and a good deal of autonomy, which allowed for a slower-paced, more inclusive process.

Moreover, some have argued that the incorporation of diverse community members from different genders, generations, etc. within a project can actually have an insidious effect, portraying an egalitarian, cohesive community, even if this does not correspond to the reality that exists on the ground when the development workers leave and the cameras stop rolling. Including *some* representation of diversity can, paradoxically, serve to further conceal differences and disagreements that occur outside the film’s frame. Community members who are opposed to a project and/or refuse to participate, for instance, are excluded from the representation of the community that appears on film.²

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This ties into a broader critique, which is less easy to address through simple improvements in funding and methodology. This critique takes a Foucauldian view, arguing that “participatory development” serves as a discourse that masks and reinforces unequal power relations, both within communities and between communities and external actors, such as

governments and development organizations (Mosse 1994). According to this argument, the discourse of community and local “participation” is simply a means to mask “continued centralization in the name of decentralization” (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 6-7).

In a 2001 book entitled *Participation: The New Tyranny?* Cooke and Kothari (2001), for instance, argue that “participatory development...leads to practices based in conventional stratifications of power. These serve both to conceal daily oppressions in people’s lives that run through every aspect of everyday life and to ensure that participants remain the subject of development surveillance” (11). According to these authors, participatory development obscures the way in which the enterprise of development itself reproduces marginalization. “Participatory methodologies,” they argue, “require[] the formulation and adoption of a framework in which the micro is set against the macro, the margins against the centre, the local against the elite, and the powerless against the powerful.” This “has reproduced the simplistic notion that the sites of social power and control are to be found solely at macro- and central levels (140).

Participatory development projects designs and methodologies, in other words, often evince a structuralist conception of power. According to this conception, power is something possessed by powerful actors—the state, multinational corporations, development organizations—and absent (or severely limited) in local communities. While, as we have seen, it is important not to underestimate the real structural inequalities that affect Baka communities, the logic of participatory development often fails to account for the ways in which power circulates through discursive practices—ways of thinking and speaking—that reproduce themselves and advantage some while disadvantaging others. As Foucault (1980) states, power does not sit in central places or actors, but rather “circulates.” Power “is never localized here or there,” but rather “is employed and exercised through a net-like organization” (98; quoted in

Kothari 2001, 141). Many participatory development projects ignore this function of power in favour of simplistic objectives that seek to gain (literal and figurative) admittance for the marginalized to the halls of power.

Participatory development can thus be viewed as an example of what James Ferguson (1990) has termed “development discourse.” In his seminal 1990 book, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, Ferguson shows how the development “experts” that administer projects have developed a common way of defining, speaking about, and addressing development “problems.” Development involves “a distinctive style of reasoning backward from the necessary conclusions—more “development” projects are needed—to the premises required to generate those conclusions” (259-60). According to this logic, any failure of a development project simply means more, better development is needed. Development thus becomes a self-reinforcing process. A similar logic can be found at work in discussions of *participation* in participatory development projects: When a project is revealed not to have achieved sufficient participation from local people, the solution that is often posited is more, better, participation, rather than a questioning of the underlying objectives and motives of the project itself.

According to Kothari (2001), the misunderstanding of power that lies at the heart of participatory development means that projects aimed at “empowering” marginalized communities often have precisely the opposite effect. While a project may seek to provide people with the tools to influence powerful institutions, in actuality participatory development projects have the effect of spreading a discourse of development such that local people become parties to their own oppression. Participatory development, especially in its contemporary, liberal iteration, can undermine projects for radical societal transformation because it “reduces spaces of conflict” to ones that are “relatively benign and liberal” (142-3). As David Mosse (2001) argues,

“‘local knowledge’ far from determining planning processes and outcomes is often structured by them.” Beliefs and desires that are surfaced during a participatory process, and framed as belonging to a community, are in fact limited expressions, determined by local understandings of what a particular development project or organization “could legitimately and realistically be expected to deliver” (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 8). The end result is that projects using participatory techniques are “carried out to give the appearance of participatory development but...the ‘local knowledge’ shared in the process invariably justifies or legitimizes the pre-determined project agenda rather than reshaping or influencing the project objectives or priorities” (Kothari 2001, 149).

Again, this is similar to the argument that Ferguson makes in *The Anti-Politics Machine*, where he notes that development discourse can “repose political questions...as technical ‘problems’ responsive to technical ‘development’ intervention,” and thus “can end up performing extremely sensitive political operations involving the entrenchment and expansion of institutional...power almost invisibly, under cover of a neutral, technical mission to which not one can object” (256). In participatory development, then, the “people who have the greatest reason to challenge and confront power relations and structures are brought, or even bought, through the promise of development assistance, into the development process in ways that disempower them to challenge the prevailing hierarchies and inequalities in society” (Kothari 2001, 142-3). Local people “come to govern themselves in line with designs shaped by expert conceptions of society that allow economic and political structures to remain unaltered” (Mosse 2011, 5; see Li 2007; Agrawal 2005). This leads to the ironic outcome that, as Woodhouse (1998) argues, “The more ‘participatory’ [an] enquiry, the more its outcome will mask the power structure of the community” (144).

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Critiques of participatory development, such as those enumerated here, pose difficult questions for initiatives such as the Okani PV project that seek to empower Indigenous and other marginalized communities. At a surface level, the solution seems relatively straightforward: More time, more money, more autonomy for local organizations and communities, better training, and better equipment would allow organizations like Okani to conduct more genuinely participatory processes, and ensure that videos more thoroughly reflect the diversity of views within Baka and other “Pygmy” communities. Participation is not a zero sum game; some projects are more participatory than others. Increasing the degree of participation continues to be a worthy goal.

Implementing such a solution would still, however, involve surmounting major logistical hurdles. Moreover, it does not address the deeper critique of participatory development laid out above. Indeed, according to some versions of this critique, improving the quality of Okani’s PV activities may actually do harm, drawing more people into a destructive logic of “development” and thereby making them parties to their own oppression.

So, what can organizations like Okani do? Simply abandoning the enterprise of participatory development altogether is not a particularly attractive solution. For one thing, it is unlikely that this would be feasible. There are myriad different development projects in different “Pygmy” communities in Cameroon, run by different organizations. If Okani ceases its activities, the space will simply be filled by another organizations; quite possibly one that is not run by Baka and which does not necessarily share Okani’s values and ethics.

Moreover, we have seen that many Baka support and want development in their communities. Certainly, one could argue that this is simply because they have been taken in by

the logic of development; but this argument makes me deeply uncomfortable, as it underplays the agency and self-awareness of local people. It is true that, in entering the process of development, individuals are in some sense “colonized” by the logic of development. But this colonization is not total. Local people can think critically about development projects, even while participating in them. Even in situations where there is a power imbalance between a local community and the organizations conducting “participatory” development, and even though participating in a “participatory development” requires buying into the logic of development to some extent, we should not underestimate the ability of local people to exercise agency.

The solution to the deeper critique of participatory development, then, is not to end projects or abandon this approach, but to embed a critical approach within development narratives, puncturing simplistic notions of community cohesion and “participation” with more complicated stories that embrace the complexities of local lives and circumstances. Participatory self-representation much be attenuated not only to structural differences in power (between a local community and the government, for instance) but also explicitly reckon with the ways in which certain discourses, including the discourse of participatory development, serve to reproduce inequality and marginalization. Indeed, this is the approach that I have sought to take in this dissertation.

The problem with the increasingly broad use of the term “participation,” is that it makes it extremely difficult for outside audiences to differentiate between projects where a community was involved superficially, and projects which are genuinely community driven and authored. Increased transparency about the degree of participation, as well as the shortcomings of participatory development itself, can help harness the positive aspects of participation while minimizing the negative impacts of this methodology. As Roberts and Lunch (2015) explain, one

cannot “deny that fake participation was—and continues to be—used to cloak much poor and counter-productive practice.” This does not, however, entail that “the existence of any fake participation negates the value of authentic participation or diminishes its emancipatory potential when in the hands of grassroots... organizations” (2).

It is true that even the most participatory development projects continue a self-perpetuating cycle, where the response to failed development is more development, and (to add to Ferguson’s insight) the response to failed participation is more participation. The discourse of participation and the discourse of development are not the same, however. The discourse of development simply builds on itself, generating more and more development while further entrenching state and corporate power. The discourse of participation, on the other hand, by generating more and more participation does not simply reinforce itself, it also may contain the seeds of its own destruction. As more voices enter the process, there are more potential opponents to challenge prevailing logics and discourses.

Critiques of participatory development, and of development discourse more generally, often overstate their case, portraying local people as mere dupes and pawns, operating in accordance with logics over which they have no control. Yet, even Foucault (1980) noted the ability of people to “carve out spaces of control with respect to the (re)presentation of their day-to-day lives” (cited in Kothari 2001, 150). As I noted at the outset of this dissertation, for Foucault (1984) history involves “the hazardous play of dominations” (83) in which some individuals and groups are disadvantaged, but where there is always the potential for “the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it,” even if it is difficult to predict how or when such a change will occur (88). Thus, while “control by dominating agents may seem complete, there is

always the possibility of subversion” (Sibley 1995, 76). This subversion can come in multiple forms. Participants can choose to perform their lives in certain ways, even within constraints imposed by technologies, donors, and facilitators. They can select, “the information they conceal or choose to disclose” (Kothari 2001, 142). More extremely, they might use the tools of participatory development to challenge the enterprise of development itself.

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Rather than viewing Baka self-representation as authored “from above,” by NGOs or “from below,” by local communities, we must view it as a complex and dialogical process, involving a host of different actors with different interests, assets, and objectives. There are certainly inequalities between the local, national, and international organizations and actors that influence this process. Moreover, the relationship between these actors does not exist in a vacuum. A host of institutions, relationships, and discourses condition and constrain videomaking in “Pygmy” communities. The use of methodologies such as PV, which explicitly seek ways to empower community members to determine the message, content, and audience for external representations their culture and identity, can enhance local agency and authorship. Local agency and authorship involves both the strategic deployment of external narratives and tropes, as well as the expression of a genuine concern about marginalization and a real attachment to traditional practices and livelihood strategies. The label “participatory,” however, must be used with caution. PV practitioners must be aware of, and transparent about, where their methodology falls short and what views may be excluded from their works. At the same time, continued work is needed to unsettle and flatten power dynamics between funders, local organizations like Okani, and the communities with which they work.

Indeed, Okani is increasingly thinking about how to hand over the tools of videomaking to local communities, eliminating the active role of the Okani facilitators. As Romial explained to me,

We have often thought [...] that we need to transmit the knowledge. We can't be there tomorrow. But maybe someone in the community who knows how to hold a camera and film can film an abuse, maybe, in the village. Or there is a problem in the village and he can show that issues. Well, it's true that when it's the communities themselves—the people from the communities themselves—who film, the quality of the image is not very good. But we still get the message. (personal communication; my translation).

Scaling back the role of Okani's comparatively well-off, male, facilitators, could help to attenuate some of the power imbalances inherent in the Okani PV project. Messe envisions the future of Okani's PV work as follows:

We really need to renew our tools. [...] And it would actually be quite interesting because, as we are in the process of spreading out [to work in new communities], that there is at least a camera in those communities there. That we can train people to make images, to discuss about their own videos in the village, to see what the village is in the process of experiencing, and then organize the decisions to make about it. (personal communication; my translation)

I began the first chapter of this dissertation with a story about one of Messe's first times traveling abroad, to Japan, in his role as a Baka spokesperson. I described him standing in a room at a university research centre devoted to the study of "Pygmies," surrounded by books written by foreign authors. Their titles, in English and Japanese, impossible to understand. Here was a prominent Baka, literally surrounded by an archive about his people, and he could not understand it, had not contributed to it, and was certain that none of his fellow Baka would understand either; or, indeed, even knew of its existence.

The last time I interviewed Messe in person, we sat at his desk in the Okani offices. Behind him, on bare wooded shelves, along with stacks of reports produced by and for development agencies, and a few books, were dozens and dozens of miniDV tapes and DVDs,

along with cameras, microphones, and other videomaking equipment. Participatory video projects have the unique ability to meet power where it lies: in the field of discourse. By producing and circulating their own narratives and images, communities such as the Baka villages where Okani works gradually shift and morph the discourse about what it means to be Baka and the Baka's place in society. For nearly a decade now, Messe and Okani have been making their own archive. It is an archive made in collaboration with other Baka, in which the Baka represent themselves. And it is an archive that any Baka can understand.

Notes

Introduction

¹ Messe's first name is Venant. Messe (*MEH-say*) is his last name. As is common in much of francophone Africa, however, people often refer to him by putting his last name first. (Thus the great Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène is often referred to as Sembène Ousmane.) In practice, his two names are used interchangeably. Some people call him 'Venant'; some (including his wife) call him 'Messe.' He introduced himself to me as 'Messe' and this is how I have always referred to him.

Chapter One

¹ The cartoon may have been drawing on the Greek philosopher Philostratus' tale of Hercules among the Pygmies. In this story Hercules "is attacked in his sleep by Pygmies, who are depicted as an "army" of black ants." This story is described in detail in the opening chapter of V.Y. Mudimbe's seminal (1994) *The Idea of Africa*, where he uses it as an example of the construction of the African as a figure of extreme alterity in Western thought.

² See *Iliad* III:1-6:

*So when inclement winters vex the plain
With piercing frosts, or thick-descending rain,
To warmer seas the cranes embodied fly,
With noise, and order, through the midway sky;
To pigmy nations wounds and death they bring...*

³ Somewhat complicating this description is the fact that Aristotle believed that unborn humans resembled Pygmies *in utero*. In *History of Animals* Aristotle writes of a progression "from sperm, to a fungus-like shape, to that of an unshaped animal, to the shape of an ape, and finally—one stage before the fully human configuration of the fetus—to the shape of a Pygmy" (cited in Friedman 1981, 191).

⁴ An early example of this type of narrative comes from the Greek sophist Philostratus (170-247 AD), who, in his account of Hercules' being attacked by "Pygmies" during his travels in Libya, describes "Pygmies" as "aberrant, morally sick little "things," springing from the soil like ants" (Mudimbe 1994, 2). (We should keep in mind here that "Libya in ancient Greek geography designates the African continent" as a whole (Mudimbe 1994, 1).)

⁵ Importantly, humans were not included in this taxonomy; they were not considered to be part of the "natural world," but were rather separate and superior. Natural classification was thought to be God-given and immutable. A rock, self-evidently, could not become a plant.

⁶ Moreover, the specimen that Tyson dissected was a juvenile, meaning that "it would not have developed the sloping forehead, brow ridges, and protruding jaws that would have made it look more chimpanzeelike than human" (Schwartz 2005, 18).

⁷ There exist a number of differences between the theories of race elaborated by Blumenbach, Buffon, and Linnaeus, which lie beyond the scope of this chapter. Buffon, for instance, believed that humankind had a common origin in Europe, and that non-European races had degenerated to their current states. Blumenbach, for his part, prefiguring anthropological theories of diffusionism, "privilege[d] explanations grounded in climatic and environmental differences" (Bancel, David, and Dominic Thomas 2014, 4). Indeed, it is important to note that, throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, there were distinct national philosophical and scientific traditions. While writers from different countries were certainly influenced by one another, and while we can thus identify broad trends in European thought during these time periods, writers were also responding to national level debates, concerns, and developments that lie beyond the scope of this chapter.

⁸ Linnaeus published twelve editions of the *Systema Naturae* between 1735 and 1768, with subsequent editions often varying greatly from previous ones due to changes in Linnaeus' thinking (Hoquet 2014, 25). The tenth edition represented a pivotal transformation, introducing zoological nomenclature for classifying animals, including humans. It is the edition most commonly cited in writings about "Pygmies".

⁹ St. Vincent, for instance, identified fifteen species of man, which, he argued, could be ranked in linear order, with the highest being the "Japetic" species, comprising European races including the Germans, and the lowest being the southern African "Hottentot," which he "considered to be the link between humans and the Oran Outang" (Schwartz 2005, 19). St. Vincent was referring here to the "San" of the Kalahari. "Pygmies" did not figure in St. Vincent's taxonomy, being more associated with *homo sylvestris* than *homo sapiens*.

¹⁰ More specifically, Spencer "emphasized three developmental tendencies shared by societies and organisms: (1) growth in size, (2) increasing complexity of structure, and (3) differentiation of function" (Graber 2010a, 577).

- ¹¹ In 1870, Darwin went so far as to predict that Spencer would come to be regarded “as by far the greatest living philosopher in England, perhaps equal to any that have lived” (quoted in Rogers 2000, 160).
- ¹² At the same time as Tylor and Morgan were laying the groundwork for social anthropology, polygenic views found home in the emergent subfield of physical, or biological anthropology, as articulated by theorists such as Paul Broca (1824-1880). As Stocking (1968) notes, “the two sides of the unity controversy corresponded to two basic approaches to the study of man, the monogenists representing cultural and the polygenists physical anthropology” (55).
- ¹³ Lest anyone think that such exhibitions belong to a bygone era, we might cite the case of 10 Baka who, in 2002, “were exhibited at the Oasis Nature Park” in Yvoir, Belgium. As Chris Kidd (2008) relates in his doctoral thesis: “The Baka sat among recreated huts in the butterfly house as tourists listened to their music and watched their ‘traditional culture’. The information advised visitors to “Discover black Africa and the pygmies” and to “Help these people who live at the start of the third millennium as we did 2000 years ago”” (88).
- ¹⁴ Remarkably, theories of a “global Pygmy race” remained common until the 1960s, when W.C. Boyd “used blood group studies to illustrate that the Pygmies of various regions more closely resembled their neighbours than they did each other” (Klieman 2003, 15).
- ¹⁵ Interestingly, ancient and medieval accounts of “Pygmies” did not often portray them as hunters. Hécate de Milet, writing in the sixth century, described “Pygmies” as farmers who “harvest with axes wheat stalks which for them are as big as tree trunks” (quoted in Bahuchet 1993a, 153). Writing almost a millennium later, in 1314, Oderic claimed that “Pygmies” “don’t farm but weave cotton” (quoted in Bahuchet 1993a, 159). It should be noted, however, that, while he wasn’t speaking about “Pygmies” specifically, St. Augustine (circa 400 CE) did associate the “Wild Man”—a trope, which, as we have seen, importantly influenced Western understandings of “Pygmies”—with “the wandering (undesirable) life of the hunter” (Klieman 2003, 10).
- ¹⁶ For this reason some authors (e.g. Seitz 1993; Thomas and Bahuchet 1991) prefer to use the term “Grands Noirs” to encompass non-“Pygmy” agriculturalists who speak Bantu and Oubangian languages, and who engage in relations with “Pygmy” communities. “Grands Noirs,” however, is used primarily by academics, and is not employed in local parlance. Rather, in my experience, both Baka and non-Baka in southeast Cameroon often use the term “Bantu,” even for groups such as the Bangando (though they more commonly refer to “Bantu” groups by their specific ethnonyms.)
- ¹⁷ Like “Pygmy,” San is an externally ascribed term that is often regarded as derogatory. Also like “Pygmy,” the term San is sometimes used by San peoples for political purposes. Indeed, unlike “Pygmy,” use of the term San seems to be increasing, as local people “embrace and thus...destigmatize” it (Solway 2011).
- ¹⁸ Interestingly, by 2015 it appeared as though the traditionalists had re-gained the upper hand. The eight and ninth editions of the Conference on Hunting and Gathering societies, held in Liverpool in 2013 and in Vienna in 2015 respectively, were dominated by papers of the traditionalist school, with few revisionists to be seen. Indeed, the back cover of the program for the 2015 edition of the Conference even poked fun at the supposed irrelevance of the revisionists. The cover featured a list of humorous, fictional quotes about the conference. Among these was the quote, “came to protest, stayed for the fun,” which was attributed to the “Society for Endangered Revisionists.”
- ¹⁹ I should note here, a second possibility that rises to mind in examining this debate. Namely, that the two sides’ expressed concern for the rights and well-being of “hunter-gatherers” may be, at least in part, a sort of misdirection. Indeed, the vitriolic and personal nature of the “Great Kalahari debate” causes me to wonder if the warring parties are truly interested in the “hunter-gatherers” about whom they write, or are rather more interested in defending the anthropological models and understandings upon which they have built their academic careers. One would think that, if the genuine crux of the debate was to ensure the well-being of “hunter-gatherers” we might have heard from them at some point. For all the ink spilled in the argument between traditionalists and revisionists, there seems to have been very little attempt to ascertain what “hunter-gatherers” themselves feel to be the consequences of how they are conceived and portrayed.

Chapter Two

- ¹ Two brief examples will help to illustrate this: During a brief break from my research with Okani, my wife and I went to stay at a beachside hotel near the town of Kribi. On our first night there, two local guides approached us on the beach. They offered to take us the following day on a *pirogue* trip up a nearby river where, they told us, we could see “monkeys, alligators, and Pygmies.” On another occasion, outside the town of Bipindi, I saw a sign advertising an ecotourism lodge. It read, “Grand Zambé ecotourism: *pygmées authentiques*.”
- ² Bantu is not in quotation marks here because I am referring to Bantu languages, not to a group of people called “Bantu.”

- ³ Indeed, Leclerc goes on to cite a colonial administrator, who found that “the authors of reports concerning the Baka” had never travelled to Baka communities, but rather had only seen Baka that they had “summoned from very far away in order to observe and photograph them” (Bertaut 1943:73; cited in Leclerc 2012:84; my translation).
- ⁴ As Vansina (1990) points out, “Bantu” would have encountered a variety of autochthons, not all of who were “Pygmies” (“fisherfolk,” for example) (57).
- ⁵ During my research, an informant spoke of a second language, which he called “*ancien Baka*.” It was known only by elders and spoken only in the forest, away from “Bantu” and other outsiders, he explained. I was unable to learn more about “*ancien Baka*,” or to find any literature attesting to its existence. While my informant’s story may thus have been apocryphal, it is tempting to believe that he was pointing to the persistence of a pre-“Bantu” expansion “Pygmy” language, carefully protected by Baka elders and used to communicate specialized knowledge and/or to ensure unintelligibility by outsiders.
- ⁶ This account of “Bantu” political history is necessarily very abbreviated and oversimplified. A fulsome account of “Bantu” political traditions in southeast Cameroon would require an entirely different research project. Vansina’s (1990) *Paths in the Rainforest* is a useful primer on “Bantu” political history. This work is commendable for its argument that the “Bantu” political “equatorial tradition” represents “a political tradition of grand scale on a par with other traditions in world history” (Moise 2014, 85).
- ⁷ Lee and Hitchcock (2001) identify a similar relationship between hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari and their pastoralist neighbours: “While according [the former] an inferior social position,” the former, “nevertheless regarded them with a mixture of paternalism and condescension, fear and respect” (259).
- ⁸ For a detailed history of Bagyeli history and migration, which falls outside the scope of this project, see Bahuchet (1993b, 75).
- ⁹ In discussing Baka legends and stories, we must be conscious of the ways in which these have been reshaped over time. The role of Christian missionaries is particularly important here. Indeed, the most important collection of Baka myths, Robert Brisson’s two volume *Mythologie des Pygmées Baka* (1999) explicitly discusses how knowledge of these myths can aid the process of evangelization. For this reason, it is not a stretch to presume that the similarity between the Baka creator/god Komba and a Christian God, for instance, may be overstated. This is to say nothing about the ways in which legends and spiritual beliefs have been birthed and reshaped by other historical forces.
- ¹⁰ Other Baka legends attribute their presence in the forest before the arrival of the “Bantu” as a result of having “followed honey.” I have already mentioned the centrality of honey to the Baka. As one Baka informant explains:
Everyone stopped behind, but the Baka continued to walk to the point where we heard the bees. We followed the echo of bees. Following the echo, we went into the forest and saw the honey. Then we just contented ourselves with the honey. The others [“Bantu”] remained in the village and we left for the forest. This is why we say that the Baka are in the forest. This is because from the beginning, it is the echo of the bee that makes the Baka be in the forest. We did not see what was in the village. When we continued into the forest and we saw the tree where there was honey, that’s where we said, “that which we followed here, this is it.” We began to gather honey. This is why the Baka stayed in the forest, because of the honey. (quoted in Weig 2013, 65)
- ¹¹ The Nzime, for instance, a Bantu-speaking group that had migrated from the Atlantic coast to the Western part of the rainforest, allied with the Portuguese (and later the Germans). Armed with European-supplied firearms, they conducted “formidable slave raids” against the more “itinerant” “Bantu” groups who had recently entered the area. These itinerant “Bantu” had been pushed to the region by other forces, including Muslim slave traders and their allies operating in the north (Joiris 1998, 25). As Köhler (2000) notes, this inter-“Bantu” warfare also produced “another kind of slave.” These were not traded with Europeans for export, but rather, “forcefully integrated into the social system of the victorious group, initially as members of an inferior status—women usually through marriage, and men and children through adoption” (66).
- ¹² Leclerc (2012) speculates that some Baka may have played a role in abetting Nzimo slave raiders, guiding “the Nzimo in the forest during their raids” and, ironically, “bringing them into contact with another [“Bantu”] population that itself was being guided by other Baka.
- ¹³ The expansion of commercial agriculture under colonialism also had an important effect on population patterns in southeast Cameroon. As Leclerc (2012, 35) notes, “the colonial period and its political and commercial context determined the spatial distribution of linguistic communities at a regional scale in East Cameroon” (35; my translation). The construction of road networks was particularly important here. Colonists sought to compel or entice local populations to settle near newly-constructed road aimed to facilitate resource extraction (Leclerc 2012, 78). When the French took over from the Germans, they established an entirely different road network, compelling populations to relocate.

- ¹⁴ While the French had originally favoured a policy of assimilation for “native” populations in their colonies, the direct political control required by such a policy soon proved untenable. After the First World War, the French moved toward a policy of association, which resembled the British policy of indirect rule, seeking “traditional...institutions through which to mediate colonial control” (Mamdani 1996, 83; see also Collins 2007, 101-5; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 198-205; Young 2001, 235-4).
- ¹⁵ Tensions between anglophone and francophone Cameroonians persist today. Beginning in October 2016, the so-called “anglophone crisis” in the North West and South West regions has seen English-speaking citizens and armed groups facing off against the (predominantly) French speaking government and military. Some English speaking groups seek the establishment of an independent republic—Ambazonia.
- ¹⁶ The Cameroonian government’s sedentarization program had much in common with programs implemented around the same time in relation to other African communities now also considered to be “indigenous peoples.” These include the San in Botswana (Sapignoli 2015) and the Maasai in Tanzania (Hodgson 2011). In all three of these cases, governments brought about sedentarization using a “carrot and stick” method, promising social services such as schools and health clinics to those who resettled, but often failing to deliver on these promises.
- ¹⁷ Of course it is important to note here that “Baka in different regions or groups [were] influenced in varying ways and degrees” (Takeuchi 2014, 307).
- ¹⁸ More than 50 years later, one still notices the effects of this discourse among Cameroonians. A Cameroonian NGO official, for instance, told me that whenever he flew to conferences outside of Cameroon, he could tell when he had crossed the national border just by looking out the window of the plane. Everything in Cameroon was green, he explained, whereas in Chad, or the Central African Republic, the ground was brown. That was because every Cameroonian, no matter how small their plot of land, planted and tended crops. He attributed this to Ahidjo, arguing that President had been responsible for a Cameroonian “Green Revolution.” In addition to stimulating national pride, he explained, there was also a pragmatic effect here in terms of food security.
- ¹⁹ Some parts of this section are adapted from a previously-published book chapter: Belobo Belibi, M, J. van Eijnatten, and N. Barber. 2015. “Cameroon’s Community Forests Program and Women’s Income Generation from Non-Timber Forest Products.” In *Global Trends in Land Tenure Reform*, edited by C. Archambault and A. Zoomers, 74-92. New York: Routledge. All material used here is drawn from sections of the co-authored chapter researched and written entirely by myself.
- ²⁰ This process was accelerated by the economic crisis of the time, which had stimulated “reverse migration to rural areas” as “people resorted to multiplex livelihoods” to survive (Jua 2005, 108).

Chapter Three

- ¹ The previous paragraph is adapted from a previously-published book chapter: Barber, N. 2017. “Agentività e autenticità nel videomaking indigeno africano.” In *La Questione Indigena in Africa*, edited by Maria Sapignoli, Robert K. Hitchcock, and Gaetano Mangiameli. Milan: UNICOPLI. This material has never been published in English.
- ² Frankland provides the following early example of such a narrative from Elspeth Huxley’s 1948 account of the Sua in Uganda: “They have become very commercialized,” Huxley writes, “they’ll crowd around the car demanding ‘cents’ and with the money they’ll buy *bhang* [cannabis]” (Huxley 1948, 228; quoted in Frankland 1999). The problem here, as Frankland points out, is that the historical record indicates that *bhang* smoking, as well as trading with outsiders (even if it did not always involve the use of cash) has been part of Sua culture at least since the point of first ethnographic contact.
- ³ In the case of the missionaries, they also wanted them to adopt Christian religious beliefs. Sedentarization facilitated access for priests, who could spread the gospel and win converts (Taloussock 2011, 42).
- ⁴ The Catholic Organization for Relief and Development Aid defines Baka as “Most Marginalized Citizens”: “We are talking about a group of poor who are socially marginalized, economically deprived, denied in their rights and excluded from development and decision making processes. Or, in short, they are excluded and discriminated [against]” (cited in Abega 2006, 24). This definition comprises a number of elements beyond simply ranking groups according to particular development indicators. In considering the relative “development” of different groups and communities, one must also consider the groups’ access to legal rights, capability to achieve its own definition of the “good life” (Sen 1999), and other, less quantitative, indicators. On these measures, Baka often find themselves more disadvantaged than other groups.
- ⁵ There was a certain amount of continuity between the new development organizations and projects that emerged in the 1990s and the old missionary-led network. RACOPY was originally established by a Dutch development worker stationed with INADES, and INADES continues to administer the network.

⁶ Similarly, in a study of a San community, Sylvain (2006) argues that, in some cases drinking “inspires hope and fosters solidarity in a drastically changing socioeconomic environment” (144).

Chapter Four

¹ Name changed.

² While it may seem odd for the ILO to be the first multilateral organization to make provision for indigenous rights, as Zips-Mairitsch (2013) points out, the ILO is “the oldest special agency of the United Nations” and “is also regarded as the most important human rights organization in the field of economic and social rights. Indeed, the ILO has frequently passed conventions that have “created additional minimum standards of international law” (43).

³ A Meeting of Experts “was unanimous in concluding that the integrationist language of Convention 107 [was] outdated, and...the applicability of this principle is destructive in the modern world” (quoted in Zips-Mairitsch 2013:43) due to the fact that it spoke of indigenous groups as “temporary demographic phenomena whose integration had to be supported due to their backward development” (Zips-Mairitsch 2013:43).

⁴ While some African indigenous groups, such as the Maasai (see Hodgson 2011; 2009; 2002), were quick to seize the opportunity to participate in international indigenism, others, including the Baka, took longer to being representing themselves. According to Espen Wæhle (1999), owing to the dominant Western association of African nature with savannah and desert landscapes, “groups like the Bushmen [sic] or the Maasai seem to be better explored” initially within the context of international indigenism “than those from the African rain forests” (5). This began to change, however, with the rise of “Green politics” in the early 1990s (see Lee and Hitchcock 2001, 259). Beginning with the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, conservation groups and international institutions become increasingly concerned with the preservation of tropical rainforests and biodiversity. This opened a space for rainforest populations to gain political visibility (Ichikawa 2014, 321).

⁵ Also, while the only official requirement for a group to participate in the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is that the group self-identify as indigenous, other organizations and institutions apply more stringent rules. For instance, Pelican (2009) provides the example of the Moko’oh of Cameroon, who had their application for recognition denied by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) “on the basis of insufficient cultural distinctiveness from the dominant society” (58).

⁶ Ronald Niezen (2003) relates an anecdote in which a member of the Rehoboth Baster Community in Namibia attempted to address a meeting of the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations. The Rehoboth are descendants of Afrikaans settlers and had been forced off their land after Namibian independence. Most of the other delegates thus viewed the Rehoboth representative’s identification as indigenous as illegitimate. Rather than loudly protesting or forcibly removing the Rehoboth representative from the meeting, delegates simply left the room during his address and returned when it was concluded.

⁷ Some parts of this section are adapted from a previously-published book chapter: Belobo Belibi, M, J. van Eijnatten, and N. Barber. 2015. “Cameroon’s Community Forests Program and Women’s Income Generation from Non-Timber Forest Products.” In *Global Trends in Land Tenure Reform*, edited by C. Archambault and A. Zoomers, 74-92. New York: Routledge. All material used here is drawn from sections of the co-authored chapter researched and written entirely by myself.

⁸ Notably, a process for reforming the 1994 Forestry Law is currently underway. While the revised law has yet to be formalized, draft versions indicate some progress toward enabling local communities to benefit more from NTFP commercialization. Drafts of the law do not, however, go so far as to accept civil society recommendations (e.g. Nguiffo et al. 2012) to return property rights over forest areas to local communities, or to turn over management of community forests to local, democratically-elected village government, as opposed to unelected GICs.

⁹ Little (1995) dates this shift to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, which, he argues, represented the “first step in the official incorporation of NGOs into the regular functioning” of large international forums and conferences (282).

¹⁰ Some parts of this section are adapted from a previously-published book chapter: Barber, N. 2017. “Agentività e autenticità nel videomaking indigeno africano.” In *La Questione Indigena in Africa*, edited by Maria Sapignoli, Robert K. Hitchcock, and Gaetano Mangiameli. Milan: UNICOPLI. This material has never been published in English.

¹¹ While Cameroon’s foray into conservation was in part a response to international conservation organizations, the designation of protected areas also had the convenient effect of sanitizing Cameroon’s international reputation at a time when the government was profiting from rapacious logging and mining operations taking place in the large swaths of the forest that remained unprotected.

- ¹² Some parts of the following three paragraphs are adapted from a previously-published book chapter: Barber, N. 2017. “Agentività e autenticità nel videomaking indigeno africano.” In *La Questione Indigena in Africa*, edited by Maria Sapignoli, Robert K. Hitchcock, and Gaetano Mangiameli. Milan: UNICOPLI. This material has never been published in English.
- ¹³ In other contexts (particularly its advocacy efforts for indigenous land rights in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana), critics have accused Survival of trafficking in essentialist stereotypes (e.g. Solway 2011). While such stereotypes are certainly not absent from the Parks Need Peoples campaign, however, representations of the Baka in campaign materials are relatively nuanced and reflective of local narratives. This inclusion of local understandings is facilitated in part through Survival’s use of video, which allows Baka community members to have a direct voice in discussions regarding their rights and development.
- ¹⁴ They also hoped the visibility provided by the video could put the issue of ecoguard abuse on the radar of international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. These institutions could use their political and economic clout to amplify local concerns and ratchet up the pressure on the WWF and Government of Cameroon.
- ¹⁵ The question of whether the term *dobi* refers to the WWF or not is a bit complicated. It is true that, in my experience, Baka, Bantu, and other community members in the villages surrounding Cameroon’s national parks use the term *dobi dobi* indiscriminately to refer to all anti-poaching and conservation officials. In a sense, then, the WWF official who objected to the Yenga video was correct to point out that the term has been mistranslated. His critique of the film, however, completely ignores and abdicates the WWF’s responsibility in bringing about a situation in which the *dobi dobi*—whether the term refers to individuals and organizations formally affiliated with the WWF or not—are oppressing, torturing, and killing Baka hunters. As Martin Cradick, who founded One Heart Global Music Exchange, and has worked in the area for more than 20 years puts it: “My take on this is that [the WWF] are morally responsible. The reason that the Baka blame *dobi dobi* is because this abuse started in their name. WWF found that they couldn’t control their local workers, and pulled out, but left the setup they had created in place” (quoted in Newsome 2015).
- ¹⁶ In March 2014, for instance, I held two focus groups in the Baka villages of Yenga Document and Ngoumbila. In both focus groups, there was near universal consensus among community members that the most serious issue they faced was the restriction of their access to the forest and abuse by ecoguards. In both cases, community members used the term *dobi dobi* to refer to the ecoguards specifically and to conservation officials in general.
- ¹⁷ Some parts of this paragraph are adapted from a previously-published book chapter: Barber, N. 2017. “Agentività e autenticità nel videomaking indigeno africano.” In *La Questione Indigena in Africa*, edited by Maria Sapignoli, Robert K. Hitchcock, and Gaetano Mangiameli. Milan: UNICOPLI. This material has never been published in English.
- ¹⁸ Some parts of this section are adapted from a previously-published book chapter: Barber, N. 2017. “Agentività e autenticità nel videomaking indigeno africano.” In *La Questione Indigena in Africa*, edited by Maria Sapignoli, Robert K. Hitchcock, and Gaetano Mangiameli. Milan: UNICOPLI. This material has never been published in English.
- ¹⁹ Anthropologists have made similar arguments about the category of “Pygmies,” more generally. As part of his assertion that “Pygmies” are an “ethnographic fiction,” for instance, Blench (1999) notes that “compared with other hunter-gatherer populations...pygmies have been the recipient of considerable attention from development agencies and human rights monitors,” and argues that “justice and human rights...should not be based on an ephemeral conception of an essentially mythic historical identity” (60).

Chapter Five

- ¹ I would also be remiss if I did not note the role of anthropologists here. Like missionaries, anthropologists also served as spokespeople and advocates for the “Pygmy” communities in which they worked. At the same time, many Baka, and Cameroonians who work with Baka communities, are critical of the perceived paternalism and inequality inherent in the activities of these anthropologists. Indeed, during my time in Cameroon I found that local people often employed the French term *pygmologue*, historically used in academic discourse to designate an expert in “Pygmy” culture, as a pejorative, in order to signify someone who had made a lucrative career from studying and speaking about impoverished “Pygmy” communities.
- ² Historical evidence would suggest that, prior to the twentieth century, intermarriage between “Pygmies” and “Bantu” was much more common. This is certainly true of the period before 1600 or so, when communities were less differentiated (see Chapter Two). We can also, however, find evidence of intermarriage in the more recent past. Köhler (2000), for instance, notes that, in the early years of colonial rule, skilled Baka elephant hunters were

sometimes given “Bantu” wives as recompense for providing ivory to “Bantu” chiefs, who could then exchange this valuable commodity through regional trading networks (61).

³ As Igoe (2003) notes, community representatives are often “torn between the often-unrealistic expectations of their local constituents and the often-unrealistic demands of their western donors” (868). Several times during my research, I witnessed this sort of conflict here between the demands of the local community, who wanted resources distributed equally and spent immediately, and those of Okani’s funders, whose requirements demanded accountability and overhead.

⁴ Cepek (2014) calls Borman the Cofán’s “most important political representative” (82). Similarly, Sarno serves as a spokesperson for the Ba’aka, negotiating compromises with government officials and other outsiders. According to a *Newsweek* profile, “one of Sarno’s friends in London jokingly refers to him as the “Ba’aka foreign minister”” (Swains 2015).

⁵ Again, there is a strong parallel here with Randy Borman. According to Cepek (2012), “Borman describes his “biculturality” as having his “feet in two cultures,” being “in a unique position between two cultures,” possessing different “hats” that he can wear in different contexts (thereby acting as a “chameleon”), and having a Cofán “half” and an “American” or “Western” half” (41-2). Cepek further notes that Borman’s “multicontextual sense of identity is particularly useful for negotiating relations with social others.... He is a master at framing his arguments with the linguistic and cultural signs that make the most strategic sense at any one moment, in any one context” (120).

⁶ Similarly, Turnbull (1964) describes a “fluid and circumstantial” tradition of leadership among the Mbuti (41).

⁷ The irony here, of course, is that I imagine there were others who would have levelled a similar accusation at Messe. Messe sought to ward off these types of accusations in a number of ways; for instance, by emphasizing the hardships he experienced during Okani’s early years (see above). Also, when Messe spoke of his international travel he framed this as a hardship that he had to endure in order to benefit local communities, not as something that he enjoyed or benefitted from.

⁸ While not addressed in detail here, I should note that outside audiences need not be Western audiences. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Four, representatives from other indigenous communities play an important role in determining which groups are recognized as “indigenous peoples” and which spokespeople may speak on behalf of these groups in international indigenous institutions such as the U.N. Permanent Forum.

⁹ When addressing expert outside audiences, strategic traditionalism (or “shallow actionism”) is most important for indigenous spokespeople who have not already established their legitimacy. For a new attendee at the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, for instance, a surface level performance is a more convenient way to objectify one’s indigeneity than to provide a detailed narrative of one’s background. Once one has been around such forums for long enough, however, one’s legitimacy can be verified through associated social networks. In such cases one could choose to cease explicitly “performing” one’s identity and nevertheless continue to be recognized.

¹⁰ There are uncomfortable historical echoes here. Indeed, Klieman (2003) finds evidence that, even in the pre-colonial era, with the rise of Bantu territorial chiefdoms, Bantu often “assert[ed] Batwa ancestry to legitimize their authority as owners of the land” (162).

¹¹ We must distinguish here between perceived and actual legitimacy. The videos that Okani circulated portrayed a rather one dimensional image of the organization. While the organization, and Messe were, by and large, accepted by the communities, in which they worked, things on the ground were considerably more complicated, and fraught, than the videos made them out to be. Nonetheless, it would have been difficult to produce a video showing local support, and to convince the outsiders who frequently visited the villages where Okani worked (including myself) of the organization’s local legitimacy if it did not, in fact, enjoy overall local support.

Chapter Six

¹ Sol Worth and John Adair’s work teaching filmmaking to Navajo students in New Mexico, is another important early example of “participatory cinema”. The Navajo students were provided with cameras, but Worth and Adair gave no direction regarding “what the films should be about or how they should look.” The goal was “to discover if the Navajo would create films unique to their view of the world” (Ruby 2000, 215). The project resulted in seven short “informant-made” documentary films titled *The Navajo Film Themselves*. Worth and Adair described and analyzed this project in their 1972 book *Through Navajo Eyes* (Salazar 2004, 63-4). The project has been criticized, however, as unsustainable. Faye Ginsburg describes it as “a somewhat sterile and patronizing experiment” (Ginsburg 1991, 96).

- ² There is now also an entire body of academic literature devoted to “indigenous media” in anthropology and related disciplines. Important works on this topic include the writings of Faye Ginsburg (2008; 2002; 1999; 1998; 1997; 1995; 1994; 1991), Terence Turner (2002; 1995; 1993; 1992; 1991a; 1991b; 1990), and Eric Michaels (1994; 1991).
- ³ Compared to some other African indigenous communities, there are actually relatively few ethnographic films about “Pygmies.” This is surprising, given their status as anthropological subjects *par excellence*. Among other causes, there is perhaps an issue of geography at play here. The expansive landscapes of the East African savannah or of the Kalahari are ideal for filmmaking, providing rich natural light and ample opportunity for a diversity of shot lengths and compositions. The dense vegetation of the Congo Basin Rainforest, on the other hand, greatly limits the shot compositions available to a filmmaker. At the same time, the humidity and frequent rain can be disastrous for keeping expensive video and sound recording equipment intact.
- ⁴ Interestingly, and perhaps illustrative of Agland’s willingness to use fictionalization, Messe once told me that the filmmaker had approached him to participate in *People of the Rainforest*. Messe explained that he had declined because Agland had requested that Messe dress more “traditionally” and engage in activities such as climbing trees in search of honey that Messe did not know how to do.
- ⁵ Perhaps not surprisingly, two of the most popular contemporary films about “Pygmies” feature a European protagonist; namely, Louis Sarno, an American who has chose to live in a Ba’aka community in the Central African Republic (see Chapter Five). These include the documentary *Song from the Forest* (2013) and the narrative film *Oka!* (2011).
- ⁶ On the other hand, Messe cites Agland’s films as part of his inspiration for beginning to shoot videos himself, as he wished to more accurately illustrate day-to-day realities in Baka communities (personal communication).
- ⁷ In addition to the cited written materials, this section draws on my experience participating in a week long participatory video facilitation workshop, hosted by InsightShare, in Oxford, UK, in October, 2013.
- ⁸ For instance, participants could use “heat mapping.” In this method, each topic is listed on a separate piece of paper (for communities with low literacy levels, a drawing representing the topic is used). Participants are each given a set number of stickers, rocks, pine cones, and place as many of them on a topic as they would like. Once voting is completed, it is usually clear which topic is of the most interest to participants. There can be further discussion and voting as necessary until everyone agrees on a topic or topics.
- ⁹ Indeed, the very concept of dubbing also proved to be an obstacle to engagement. During the first CWE screening in Mayos, audience members expressed confusion about what they were seeing. Some did not understand that the dubbed recordings were a translation of the original audio from the film, and thought that a technical glitch was causing Okani to be play the wrong audio. The recording was in Baka but the people on screen were not Baka. Speakers’ lips were not synced with the sound. In future screenings, Messe began the event by explaining the concept and process of dubbing in order to avoid this type of confusion.
- ¹⁰ There were also technical difficulties that impacted Baka community members’ ability to engage with the CWE films. The need to use a noisy generator in villages that had no or limited power supply often made the films difficult to hear. In the case of one screening, an unstable village power supply and a malfunctioning electricity regulator caused a short circuit in Okani’s speaker. The speaker stopped working and began to crackle and smoke. The screening had to be stopped and the speaker was broken beyond repair.
- ¹¹ Parts of this section are adapted from a book chapter: Barber, N. 2017. “Agentività e autenticità nel videomaking indigeno africano.” In *La Questione Indigena in Africa*, edited by Maria Sapignoli, Robert K. Hitchcock, and Gaetano Mangiameli. Milan: UNICOPLI. This material has never been published in English.
- ¹² Part of this paragraph is adapted from a book chapter, Barber, N. 2017. “Agentività e autenticità nel videomaking indigeno africano.” In *La Questione Indigena in Africa*, edited by Maria Sapignoli, Robert K. Hitchcock, and Gaetano Mangiameli. Milan: UNICOPLI. This material has never been published in English.
- ¹³ Baka use of “modern” tools and technologies is still considered surprising and out of the ordinary for many Cameroonians. I recall, for instance, being on a small bus travelling along a small, dusty highway towards a Baka community during my fieldwork. At one point, the bus passed two men on a motorcycle. I did not take note of the appearance of the driver, but evidently he appeared to be Baka, because the passenger beside me exclaimed incredulously, while pointing out the window, “There is a *Baka* driving a *moto!*” The other passengers all craned their heads to try to catch a glimpse of this unusual sight.
- ¹⁴ Part of this paragraph is adapted from a book chapter, Barber, N. 2017. “Agentività e autenticità nel videomaking indigeno africano.” In *La Questione Indigena in Africa*, edited by Maria Sapignoli, Robert K. Hitchcock, and Gaetano Mangiameli. Milan: UNICOPLI. This material has never been published in English.

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Conclusion

¹ Of course this typology is an oversimplification. Most development projects, including Okani’s PV project, involve multilevel relationships between a number of organizations. For instance, as discussed in the previous chapter, Okani’s initial PV workshops involved four different organizations: Okani (which served as the “local development organization”) and GEF (which was the original source of the funding grant), but also FPP, which brokered and managed the funding, and InsightShare, which received part of the funding and provided training and logistical support to Okani. The motivations of these latter two outside development organizations fall mostly outside the scope of this chapter. Very broadly, though, we might say that the motivations of these organizations, and the individuals working for them, are some combination of those of the funders and local development organizations.

² As Milne (2012) notes, in many cases, non-participation in PV can be considered “an active form of participation.” Nonparticipation can be “a means of protection, a way of overcoming powerlessness and, perhaps most importantly, an opportunity to subvert funders’ agendas and objectification by external audiences” (258).

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