

## 17. BAYAKA ELEPHANT HUNTING IN CONGO: THE IMPORTANCE OF RITUAL AND TECHNIQUE

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.15496/publikation-55582>

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**KEYWORDS** | Congo elephant hunters; spear hunting techniques; gender relations ritual; economics; politics

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter offers preliminary observations of Mbendjele BaYaka hunter-gatherer elephant hunting in the Republic of Congo. Elephant hunting has a long history in this region and the BaYaka tradition described here appears to be part of this. Elephants pose real danger to humans and killing one with a spear is daunting. Hunters take significant risks to approach and kill these huge animals, and this may partially account for the importance of rituals associated with elephant hunting. The success of elephant hunting crucially depends on women's ritual work in catching the elephant first and pressurizing the men to go out for it. The women's rituals also remove the potential for status accumulation by elephant hunters by attributing their success to women. Traditional techniques for killing elephants and how they are learned through games and multimodal storytelling styles are described. The role of a ritual association for elephant hunters to learn to read elephant behavior and to

share mystical and practical techniques for hunting elephants is presented. In the context of spearing elephants, daring to try may be as important as knowing how.

### 17.1 INTRODUCTION

*“Lovango, useth to vent yearly a great abundance of Ivory; but every year the quantity decreases, because the Blacks fetch it so far out of the Countrey, and carry it upon their heads. The chiefest place where the Staple for this Commodity remains, is call'd Bakkamele, about three hundred miles up into the Countrey.”*  
(Ogilby, 1670: p. 502).

The Portuguese developed the early Atlantic trade with Central Africa from the 15th century to obtain ivory and copper. The coastal Central African Kingdoms of Loango and Vili (Luanda) with whom they traded had links up river to the kingdoms of the Teke from where they obtained ivory (Atmore



and Oliver, 2001: p. 165). Before the King's Cloth sit some Dwarfs, with their backs towards him: Pigmies indeed in Stature ...they wear the skin of some beast tied around them. The *Blacks* say there is a Wilderness, where reside none but men of such Stature, who shoot those Gigantick Creatures the Elephants". The common name of these dwarves is *Bakke Bakke'* (Ogilby, 1670: p. 508). Bahuchet adds that these dwarves knew how to become invisible when hunting elephant. They ate the flesh and traded the ivory with the "Jagos", clients of the Loango kings. The Jagos called these small men the "Mimos and Bakke-Bakke" (Dapper, 1686: p. 358, quoted in Bahuchet, 1993: p. 162).

By the 19th century the coastal kingdoms had developed trading relations with the Bobangi "people of the River", who became the key suppliers of ivory and other forest produce coming from the interior basin of the River Congo and its Ubangi tributary—the BaYaka<sup>1</sup> region today. The Bobangi language became the trade language of the basin, now known as Lingala and remains the lingua franca. The shared words for many forest animals between BaYaka and Lingala suggest that Lingala emerged from Bobangi traders' need to obtain goods from BaYaka.

Ivory carvers across the ages value African forest elephant tusks for the fine crosshatched microstructure of its grain. Forest ivory can be chiseled from almost any angle with comparatively little weakening or splintering allowing the finest detailing. The gel emitted from its pores eases cutting and produces a characteristic mellow sheen once polished. Such qualities make forest ivory the most sought after ivory.

The BaYaka value elephants (the African forest elephant *Loxodonta cyclotis*) for the fat and meat they provide, rather than the ivory. The BaYaka with whom I stayed have over 20 names for different types of elephants. These include *njoku* - elephant; *ango* - unidentified large adult; *kam-*

*ba* - dominant male; *dilomi* - second male; *epombi* - rogue/lone male; *etina* - adult female; *mbutu* - elephant without tusks, and others that refer to different juvenile states, whether a cow is gestating or nursing, and names for different family group configurations, and even a mystical elephant with six tusks called *eyiti naba njoku*. This developed vocabulary for elephants reflects the importance they play in BaYaka life. Though meat and fat are what matters most, ivory gave BaYaka access to goods from outside the forest through the Atlantic Trade, which they have probably been supplying ivory to for around 500 years.

In recent decades, numerous professional non-BaYaka teams working with high-powered rifles have contributed to supply a renewed demand for ivory from Asia. From the Millennium to 2013, Congo Basin elephant populations declined by two thirds (Maisels et al., 2013) as expanding road networks into remote forest areas facilitated such teams access to remote populations (Lewis, 2020). These commercial forces and the militaristic response from conservation organizations have created the conditions for BaYaka elephant hunting to be almost non-existent today.

## 17.2 ELEPHANTS ARE SCARY

Although I have never witnessed an elephant being killed, while we were in the forest three elephants were killed and we joined the feasting. I once participated in an unsuccessful elephant hunt when we moved camp in deep forest and encountered a large male by chance. I was walking with Phata, an elderly *tuma* (elephant hunter), and he took up the chase and I followed. Phata was one of the most accomplished *tuma* in my research area and my key informant on elephant hunting techniques. He had killed seven with a spear, and many more with rifles and shotguns. His father Mosanya was said to be able to tickle elephants, once famously returning with an elephant's tail hairs to show the other men that the elephant was too small.

The Congo Basin's forest is particularly dense

1 BaYaka refers to Pygmy groups in the Western Congo Basin; other names such as Mbendjele, Mikaya, Luma, Ngombe, Baka, etc. are self-ascribed ethnonyms used to distinguish between Pygmy groups who each occupy different territories.

with undergrowth making it hard to see much around you, so hearing is central to informing you of what is nearby. As I chased Phata through the dense undergrowth the noise I made brushing past the leaves was so loud I could no longer follow the sounds of the elephant. I stopped the chase, Phata continued. One tactic elephants have for defending themselves is to flee, but then stop suddenly, hiding themselves so that they can attack who ever (leopard or person) is chasing them. If caught, the attacker is picked up by the trunk and violently shaken from side to side to break their spine. The attacker-now-victim is then thrown to the ground, trampled and tusked before being left for dead. I have witnessed the aftermath of several elephant attacks on people, in the three cases where I could interview witnesses and victims the injuries sustained were life changing, and in one case deadly. I provide brief details of these attacks as they provide context for my overall argument concerning the importance of cultural institutions and women's strategies to pressure men to take the huge risk of hunting elephants despite not accruing special status or wealth as a result of so doing.

In two attacks the elephants were young males, and in the third a mother attacked a boy who inadvertently walked between her and her calf. Both young males attacked conservationists studying them. In the first case, the conservationist returned from vacation in US to notice that a young male had joined the group he was studying. Unbeknownst to him, the young male stalked up behind him, grabbed him around the waist with his trunk, and shook him violently before hurling him to the ground and piercing his chest and thigh each with a tusk. The elephant returned to the herd leaving him for dead. Had he not been an American with full health insurance he surely would have died. However, he was helicoptered out and spent the best part of a year in hospital having his bones and chest put back together. He returned to his conservation work as soon as he was well. Three years later, the hole in his thigh was still big enough for me to place a clenched fist in the aperture.

The second conservationist did not survive.

Walking back from her observation post along a wooden raised pathway to cross a marsh she suddenly found herself being chased by a young male known to be unpredictable. Rather than doing what BaYaka recommend—to use rapid just-in-time direction changes to exploit human turning speed against the elephant's weighty momentum—she ran in a straight line along the raised pathway. The doctor who did the autopsy explained to me that the elephant had borne down on her and hooked her with his tusk. The tusk entered her anus and lacerated her internal organs including her heart and lungs, quickly killing her. The doctor had never witnessed such severe internal damage.

In the third case, a group of BaYaka left our camp on a mixed gathering trip. A boy walking in dense forest accidentally found himself between a resting mother and her calf. Before he knew what was happening, the mother had charged, knocking him over and began trampling him on the ground. A quick thinking *tuma* called Suke ran between the forelegs of the mother as she tried to tusk the boy, tossed the boy over his shoulder and fled the scene. Suke received a fierce tusk blow to the top of his head, lifting a significant piece of bone from his skull. Although the boy was saved, his legs were so badly broken in multiple places that he never walked again.

BaYaka are acutely aware of the great risk men take when hunting elephants and readily admit that although all men hunt other game, not everyone has what it takes to be a *tuma*. When I asked a close friend if he was a *tuma* he replied that he did not have enough courage (*nguli*). BaYaka men admit that hunting can be very scary. They sing a song when faced with a daunting opponent in the forest: *longokodi kaba me nguli* (chameleon give me courage). The fearful hunter chants this refrain while raising his chest and arms rhythmically until he feels he is ready to strike with the precision and force of the chameleon's tongue. Large game are dangerous opponents and hunting them is indeed a deadly combat. Hewlett et al. (1986: p. 60) stated that of the 11 individuals reported to have died in hunting and gathering accidents among Aka

(BaYaka) in Central African Republic, elephants killed three men in separate incidents. It is easy for those who have not witnessed such events to forget just how challenging hunting can be.

Despite these risks, a significant number of men in communities living in areas with substantial elephant populations are *tuma*. In one Mbendjele BaYaka community I know well almost half of all households had at least one *tuma*. When I surveyed their permanent campsite on the Sangha River in 1996, of 181 Mbendjele living in 46 individual huts, 20 huts were occupied by one or more *tuma* (Lewis, 1997: maps 99.1-4). Those households with more than one *tuma* were composed of father and grown son or sons living together.

### 17.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING

During the 1990s we made journeys of many months (*molongo*) moving through the forest with our BaYaka hosts. When moving camp, some hunters always leave well ahead of the noisy women, children and others to scout the area we are entering, and hopefully surprise some animals along the way. After a few hours walking, we would set up camp to spend some days or weeks exploring that area of forest. Leaf and liana igloo shaped huts are arranged in a circle in a cleared space around a central men's seating area called the *mbandjo*. Typically, when in camp women sit in front of their huts, or that of a friend, chatting in a distinctive melodic style while preparing or cooking food, doing craftwork or just passing time. Following the BaYaka's egalitarian principles, all produce taken from the forest in sufficient quantity is shared equally among all present. When much meat is killed, after sharing each hut erects a smoking table (*mutulaka*) to dry the meat to prevent it rotting before it can be eaten.

Sharing meat is crucial to a hunter's future success and is governed by a range of rules called *ekila* (Lewis, 2008). These rules concern many related aspects —such as not laughing at a carcass, or not boasting about hunting success, or not sleeping

around. Among BaYaka, contrary to costly signaling models of hunting success, a good hunter must not sleep with women other than his wife. *Ekila* rules oblige the hunter to bring meat back to camp so that the men can eat the men's meat (*piko*) and so maintain the hunter's luck. Here, the hunter will receive a share of the meat as will anyone else, in contrast to the own-kill taboos among the Baka (Yasuoka, this volume). These rules are crucial for ensuring that hunters inform the camp of the kill — otherwise they might be tempted to simply eat their fill and abandon the corpse in the forest. If an elephant's *piko* meat is not shared with all men present, it will ruin the hunter's luck (his *ekila*) in future so that he will not meet game, will miss, or may be attacked by dangerous animals when next out hunting.

Benasongo was the most famous elephant hunter in the region I know well. In the 1980s he killed an elephant that had the biggest tusks seen in living memory. The villager whose gun and bullets he used took him to Brazzaville to parade along with the enormous tusks. This experience affected Benasongo profoundly and led to him being the only Mbendjele hunter I know that openly boasted about his hunting prowess “Now killing elephants, that I know well ... I am very good at hunting animals. So good that my friends are angry with me” he told me in an interview in 1997<sup>2</sup>. Benasongo hunted so much that he would end up with piles of meat on his smoking table. When people saw this, they were appalled. “Pygmies don't hunt like that!” they would comment, implying that his *ekila* must be ruined from not sharing. But Benasongo so enjoyed hunting that he would continue regardless. He suspected that other men became so jealous and resentful of his success that they cursed him to meet gorillas when out hunting, or as Benasongo put it “I don't know what to think anymore, my life has been tied up by gorilla after gorilla!” I never met anyone who was so often charged by silverbacks.

Under pressure from his wife's father, Benaso-

<sup>2</sup> The full interview can be watched at <https://elearning.lse.ac.uk/dart/wgo/wgoLevel3.html>

ngo opportunistically shot an elephant in a forest clearing in the early 1990s. While he butchered, others went to fetch the camp to come for the meat. They never returned: “Anger had entered the women” he told me. They had refused his meat. In addition to hunting too much and not sharing properly, he had not followed the protocol that requires women to sing *Yele* to first “catch” the elephant that a *tuma* shoots. If he was not reliant on their mystical prowess, he must be employing his own. This makes the meat he has killed tainted by illegitimate mystical forces and dangerous, so the women refused it. There was a huge row when he returned to camp having abandoned the meat where it was. Enraged, Benasongo left the area, effectively exiled by the women’s collective refusal to cook his meat. He moved to live amongst a neighboring group of BaYaka Pygmies called the Baluma. In 2012, I met him again in a Mikaya Pygmy community. He may have been exiled again. Benasongo’s boasting and over enthusiasm in using his exceptional skill as a hunter has been his nemesis, contrary to the assumptions of those evolutionary anthropologists projecting male costly signaling theories onto hunting success.

#### 17.4 A WOMAN’S HUNT

Fat and meat for feasting is the principle objective of elephant hunting. Ivory is a bonus. Fatty meat is the most sought after meat by BaYaka—the arrival of a fat animal into camp provokes celebratory calls and hoots by children and adults alike. Of all game animals, elephants provide the greatest amounts of fat. This makes them extremely desirable. Given the risks associated with elephant hunting but its production of a huge amount of desirable fatty meat from the efforts of just a few men a complex of ritual practices surround the hunt that serve to incite men to go hunting, ensure that they share their production and prevent them from claiming special status. Ritual precedes the hunt, continues during it and erupts into boisterous feasting and raucous singing and dancing

called “spirit play” (*mokondi massana*) that continue until the elephant is largely consumed. Feasting on an elephant can fuel weeks of music-making and dancing with forest spirits. It provides food to support some of the most important ritual events of the BaYaka. Given this, it is counter-intuitive to many non-BaYaka that a man, such as Benasongo, who excels at making this possible should be exiled and his meat rejected, rather than being celebrated and sought-after. To understand why, I shall outline the principle ways that elephants are hunted.

An elephant hunt is called “*mwaka ya baito*” (a women’s hunt), even though no women accompany the hunters. Elephants may be encountered accidentally, and opportunistically hunted if a *tuma* is present, as Benasongo and Phata did above. But, upon entering an area of forest popular with elephants, or when commissioned by a villager supplying weapons and other goods, elephant hunting may be planned. In such cases, it is embedded in a ritual process that attributes responsibility for the success of the hunt to women’s ritual work, and the couple’s proper sharing of their respective production (Lewis, 2008).

This understanding of hunting success as based on the sharing relations and ritual activities of the hunter’s spouse structurally resembles Bodenhorn’s (1990) observations of Inupiaq whale hunting. Here it is a wife’s ritual and moral behaviour that attracts whales to her husband to be killed: “I’m not the great hunter; my wife is” men explained to Bodenhorn. For Inupiaq, hunting is not understood as simply men seeking and killing animals, but rather as a conjugal activity emphasizing the co-dependence between men and women in producing the right ritual, moral and economic conditions for big game hunting to be a success. This is also the case in Congo; women’s ritual activities around hunting and overseeing proper sharing are what ensure hunting success, and are intensified around elephants to prevent elephant hunters from claiming status or prestige because their success is attributed to the activities of their wives.



**Figure 17.1:** Elephant hunting spears (*ngongo*) from the southern BaYaka region. Note that as they are used they diminish from sharpening until they become spears for smaller game, such as pigs and antelopes (top right). Photo by Jerome Lewis

Once established in a propitious place, the camp prepares for an elephant hunt. Men prepare their spears (*ngongo*) by meticulously sharpening them until they have a razor edge, and cutting fresh shafts where needed. A long iron blade reinforced by a thick central spine to provide extra strength distinguishes elephant spears (see Fig. 17.1 and Bahuchet, 1985: p. 240 for examples from the northern BaYaka area). Before men embark on the hunt women first ritually “spear” the elephant by singing *Yele* long into the night. Drinking a special herbal potion women sing together to support some of them to enter trance. These women say that they fly over the forest seeking to locate and “tie up” an elephant with their mystical power (*gundu*).

When women “tie up” an elephant in this way they are said to *mo.kobie* the elephant. When spear hunting game, the hunter that first strikes the animal (*a mu kobia niama*) is considered the “hunter” of the animal. Others who strike afterwards to make the kill are said to *mo.koba*. When women drink their potion and sing *Yele* they are thrusting in the first spear. So when *tuma* leave to hunt they are going on a “women’s hunt” (*mwaka ya baito*) to *mo.koba* the elephant. In general, the “hunter” is only named so as to ensure that he eats the hunt-

er’s *ekila* meat (often including the heart but varies with species and hunting method), which guarantees his future success. Those who *koba* another’s animal also get specific cuts of meat: for an elephant the *koba* gets a forearm, with pigs the *koba* get the sternum and ribs, and so on. However, in the case of women they do not get the hunter’s *ekila* meat. At this level the women’s role is implicitly seen as symbolic.

To begin *Yele*, women decorate themselves with flowers and sit closely together to establish a strong singing group in camp. From time to time they stand up to dance up and down the central space. At certain points, elder women will cleanse bad luck from the camp, the hunters and their weapons by whipping them with leafy branches. The collective women do it to themselves too as they dance up and down. Women whose mother’s have died whip both legs others whip one leg. Singing will go on for many hours. As women enter trance they adopt a characteristic pose with one arm raised above the head, forearm folded to rest across their foreheads as they rock back and forth while singing. Once the whole camp has been cleansed and one of the women says she has found an elephant they mark the success of the ritual by

collecting together all the leafy branches used and collectively place them above the doorway of the *tuma*'s hut that they say will make the kill. The *tuma* is now under clear orders to leave in the direction they indicate to *mo.koba* the elephant that they have already caught.

*Yele* enables women to exert huge social pressure on men to go elephant hunting. Given the risks involved, it may be important to have such social mechanisms to prompt otherwise possibly reluctant men to go. Women continue singing *Yele* once the men have left. As many hours may pass, they stop and start, attending to domestic needs as required, but a core of women maintain the song throughout as they wait for the forest spirit *Moshunde* to arrive in camp to tell them that elephant is dead. With the arrival of *Moshunde* all present leave to the site of the kill to collect the meat. This is a moment of great joy and women and children sing loudly as they walk to the kill site.

On arrival, the men have normally made good progress in butchering the huge carcass and there are piles of meat waiting to be transported away. The most appreciated portions are those with the most fat, and those arriving first will take these. Most cherished are the fatty belly and chest meat, the fat around internal organs and the dense fatty pads in the elephant's feet that cushion its step. Large slabs have a head-hole sliced in the middle of them and are hung over small children's heads to wear as bloody tunics to carry back to camp. Women pack other cuts, especially the fatty ones, into their baskets, or bundle them together in leaf parcels to hang on their foreheads. If camp is too far away a new camp is built nearer to the kill site. It is important to make this some distance away—generally a kilometer or so, because the carcass may attract leopards during the night, and to avoid the inevitable stink that develops as the days pass.

Once meat is in the camp, while erecting huts and smoking tables, the children's forest spirit *Malimbe* journeys from hut to hut demanding the fattest cuts of meat, especially from the *tuma*'s

wife. This musical and often comical animation is punctuated by meat sharing as more and more returns to camp and individuals send children with parcels of meat to other households. Fires everywhere are roasting select pieces, pots are beginning to stew, and conversations are lively. When all the men eventually return to camp with the last of the meat, adult spirit play begins. Often this begins with mischievous *Eya* forest spirits calling out raunchy, sexually provocative comments aimed at the women. Women respond back with humor, teasing and rebuttal. As food begins to appear, men sit in the central *mbandjo* area sharing dishes sent by the women, and women and children sit in front of their huts passing leaf plates to each other to share the different dishes. The elephant's feet are placed in the fire's embers to roast for many hours until the fat pads are liquefied and enthusiastically drunk direct from the huge foot. During feasting the melodious *Yolo* forest spirit is sung to celebrate the abundance of meat. A range of spirit plays, especially *Niabula* or *Bula*, may be performed late into the night.

In addition to whatever drum-like items can be found, from time-to-time men will beat the buttress roots of large trees to provide the percussive rhythm for the spirit play. This drumming carries far at night, alerting nearby camps that an elephant has been killed and that they are welcome. During daytime, signs made of a hooped liana the size of an elephant's footprint are left at key junctions on forest paths to tell others where to go. People often come from other camps to join the feasting. If enough people are present *Ejengi* is the spirit play of choice. As the forest spirit given by the women to the men to found BaYaka society in mythical times dancing *Ejengi* today is explicitly a celebration of abundance. Feasting, play with forest spirits, storytelling and romance continues until the elephant meat is consumed. We once spent two weeks doing so. How long depends on the size of the camp. Feasting on an elephant is one of the most cherished cultural events of the year and each feast is remembered so well that they become markers for how people discuss the past.



**Figure 17.2:** Charms and medicines key to elephant hunting success. Photo by Jerome Lewis

### 17.5 BULA

Of particular importance in this context is the forest spirit association called *Bula*, or *Niabula*; the elephant hunters' forest spirit. Often taken up by the initiated men once other spirit plays are over, they retire to their sacred path (*njanga*) some distance from camp to call *Bula* into their midst to dance. *Bula* is said to resemble an elephant, and in communing with it on the sacred path, men learn about the characteristics of elephant minds. *Bula* is one of the most secret of the men's forest spirits. It never dances in public, though its songs may occasionally be heard. Becoming an initiate and dancing with *Bula* gives men special powers and knowledge crucial for successful elephant hunting. Women must remain ignorant of men's tricks and techniques for catching wild animals and finding honey so that they depend on men for access to these valued items.

On *Bula's* sacred path, in addition to dancing with *Bula*, men share specific hunting medicines and techniques for killing elephants. Practical lessons are provided by *tuma* theatrically re-enacting previous hunts with careful attention to

the exact mimicry of the acoustics of the encounters, of characteristic postures, behaviors, actions and intentions of the hunter and the prey. These pantomime story-telling styles called *moadjo* (pantomime) used during *besime* (recounting lived experience) are typical of hunting stories, priming watchers with knowledge of key sounds to listen for, and postures or behavior patterns to look out for in their future encounters with prey, and their options for responding. It is an education of attention without the danger of being in the presence of dangerous game such as elephants. *Moadjo* is the expected story-telling style when recounting witnessed events. Men's *besime* tends to specialize on human-animal relations, women's *besime* on human behavior (Lewis, 2014: p. 230).

In addition to this practical knowledge, men place great emphasis on the mystical knowledge that is required to safely kill elephants. While there are a great number of leaves, lianas and barks that provide important medicine to help hunters—by helping them see tracks, run fast, aim right, etc.—this knowledge is held by individuals and given on an individual basis, often when out hunting. Elements of this lore specifically for elephant hunting are secret knowledge. However, there are certain core charms and medicines whose existence is widely known, though their ingredients and fabrication procedures are not. I can share something about these items, illustrated in Figure 17.2.

A certain fibre string (*mokodi*) is tied around the forehead of the *tuma* to guide his senses and improve his awareness. *Moombi* paste, kept inside a horn, is smeared on the crown, forehead, chest and calves to make the *tuma* invisible to the elephant, keep him safe and on full power. The black rope called *ekoonga* is worn around the waist or over head and shoulder and is said to be a medicine from the creator *Komba* that gives *tuma* the ability to kill elephants and protection when doing so, especially if forced to flee an angry elephant. The *esongo* necklace keeps the wearer safe by providing foresight to anticipate accurately what will next happen. The *mondaanga* bracelet is worn on the wrist. According to Phata, it is like a remote



control that allows the *tuma* to adjust the position of the elephant, turning its body as the *tuma* turns the bracelet on his wrist, to get it to stand in the safest position for the *tuma* to approach. It is this combination of practical skills, advanced knowledge of elephant behavior, and the personal support of special charms and medicines that ensure elephant hunters have the practical knowledge and confidence to approach such intimidating prey.

## 17.6 LEARNING HOW TO KILL ELEPHANTS

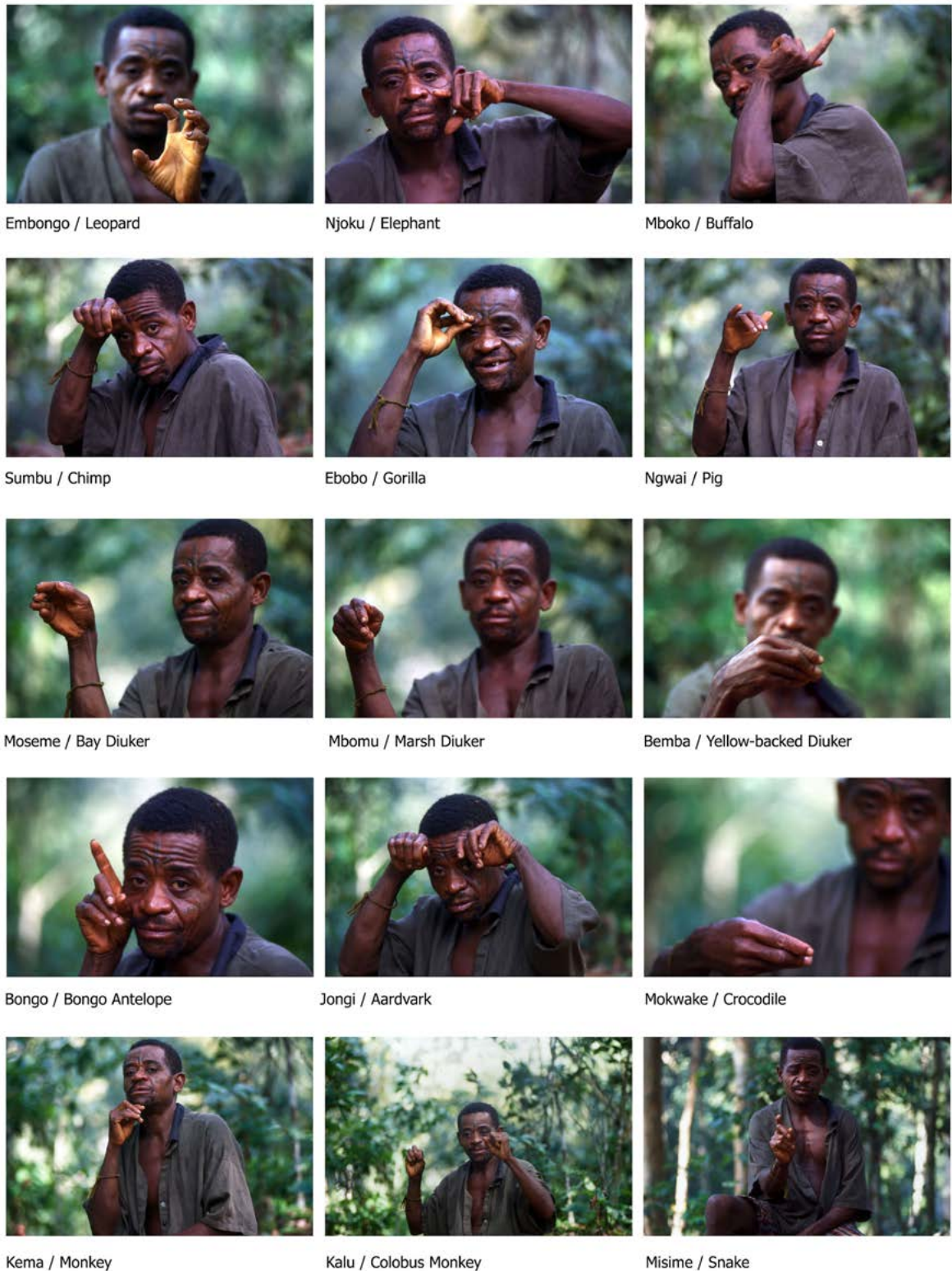
I now turn to the more obviously practical skills needed by *tuma*. In contrast to many American hunters (see for example Tanner, this volume), BaYaka do not perceive of prey animals as giving themselves up. To the contrary, they emphasize that prey must be tricked and deceived, that hunters must use stealth and knowledge of the prey's habits and intelligence to succeed. For instance, when starting out to find an elephant men take off their clothes and their shoes. While it is the scent of fire smoke or soap on their clothes may alert the animal to the hunters' presence, they take off their shoes to be able to "hear" the elephants. Elephants communicate with low frequency rumblings that are difficult to hear, but can be felt as they vibrate through the ground alerting the hunters to their presence nearby. If fresh tracks of an elephant are spotted and a pursuit begins, as soon as the hunters come across the fresh excrement of the elephant they rub it over their whole body so as to give them the elephant's own smell. Men have developed disguised modes of communication for themselves, using bird whistles or sign language (see Fig. 15.3 for some examples) when near to prey to coordinate their actions without the prey realizing that they are there. But even with these precautions, *tuma* emphasize that it is vital to have the wind in your face and the sun behind you to approach close enough to spear.

My informants were skeptical that it was possible to kill an elephant safely by throwing spears at it. Such behavior would simply enrage the ele-

phant and endanger the *tuma* and possibly others. Unlike throwing, their spearing technique uses the thrust of an outstretched right arm, with right hand grasping the back of the spear, while the left hand stretches forwards to guide the shaft to keep it on target. It resembles a guided thrust more than a throw. Accuracy and power are of the essence. Learning how to do this is an apprenticeship that begins in childhood.

Accuracy is honed through many hours of playing *ndaannga ya soongo* as growing boys. In this game, the soft inner section of a plant, such as a banana tree, is turned into a rolling target thrown along the ground which boys spear using light, sharpened poles. Assisting in the butchery of elephants as adolescents is crucial for learning the intimate anatomical knowledge required to get a spear into an elephant's vital organs without getting blocked by its large bones. Once skill and accuracy in spearing large game such as wild boar or buffalo is achieved, and knowledge of where to strike an elephant has been learned a young man may, if he has the courage, be in a position to join a hunt.

When accompanying experienced *tuma*, such young men learn the art of tracking elephants by following the discussions of the *tuma*. They will not strike the animal, but will climb trees to watch in safety when the *tuma* prepares to strike. Occasionally when an elephant is found in a heavy downpour, a *tuma* may lead a small group of young men to the animal. When the rain is very heavy, elephants often seek shelter by poking their heads into dense undergrowth to keep the rain out of their eyes. According to my informants, the rain diminishes the acuity of their sense of smell and their hearing. This provides unique advantages that allow younger men, who are not yet *tuma*, to practice under the guidance of more experienced men. The more experienced men take up position near the elephant, often by climbing trees, from where they direct the youth who now try to put into practice their knowledge of approaching and spearing the elephant. Commentaries are offered to guide the youth. If a young man succeeds in



**Figure 17.3:** Sandima demonstrates some of the sign language used by hunters when in the presence of prey. Photo by Nico Lewis.

killing an elephant, the kill is attributed to a *tuma*, only after several successes will a man be recognized publically as a *tuma*.

### 17.7 TO KILL WITH A SPEAR

My principal informants on elephant hunting techniques shared similar techniques to explain how they succeeded in killing several elephants with spears. I will begin by describing what my informants consider the most accomplished method, what I call the “under-belly technique”, then the “anus technique” and finally the “Achilles tendon technique” —before briefly mentioning some other methods reported to me by others, or found in ethnographies of BaYaka. Stones are rare in the BaYaka region, prompting me to ask what people did before they had metal. My elder informants told me that their ancestors used smashed tusk shards as blades for both hunting and honey collecting.

All the key techniques require the *tuma* to approach so close that they can directly thrust their spear into the elephant. The technique considered the quickest and most elegant method is the “under-belly technique”. To accomplish this requires a *tuma* to be highly skilled in magical and practical techniques. Once close to the elephant, with wind in his face and sun behind him, the *tuma* uses his *mondaanga* bracelet to shift the animal into a suitable position that provides access to the flanks on both sides. Confident that his *moombi* paste makes him invisible, that the elephant dung masks his smell, his main concern is to be silent as he approaches. Ideally the elephant is resting or eating as he moves. Coming up beside it just in front of the hind leg, the *tuma* powerfully thrusts the spear into the abdomen, seeking to force it up behind the rib cage towards the heart and other vital organs. Pushing the spear as deep as possible, the *tuma* ducks under the elephant’s belly to escape on the other side and run into the undergrowth. The elephant on feeling the spear penetrate, turns its head to see what has caused such pain, using its trunk it finds the protruding spear shaft and seeks

to extract it. This distraction provides the *tuma* with time to safely escape on the other side. The spear’s angle is awkward for the trunk to grasp and pull out. If the spear is well placed the elephant in effect kills itself by lacerating its internal organs in its efforts to remove the spear. The *tuma* waits quietly nearby for the elephant to collapse.

The anus technique is used when it is not possible to safely run under the belly. This is often due to the elephant being encountered in deep mud, or in an open space without cover such as a salt lick, or conversely in thick undergrowth, or when the configuration of undergrowth and trees around the elephant block access to its underside. Again wind in the face and sun behind, but now the *tuma* need not risk getting close to the head and trunk, but rather approaches from the rear. If necessary, he uses the *mondaanga* bracelet to move the elephant. The key is to have a clear approach to the anus and an escape route on the opposing side. The *tuma* gets up next to the elephant’s backside and thrusts his spear deep inside the elephant using the soft tissue around the anus as his path into the abdomen. If possible he ends with a sideways motion that seeks to do as much internal damage as possible. He then flees to avoid the wrath of the wounded elephant. The internal bleeding will take some time to kill the elephant so the *tuma* and other hunters track the elephant secretly from a distance. It is important not to be noticed by the elephant or it may flee with greater speed and move further. When done correctly the elephant dies quickly.

The Achilles tendon technique may be used in conjunction with the above techniques or as the principle technique. It involves slicing the Achilles tendon to immobilize the elephant so that it can be speared until killed. While this is easier in the first stage —slicing the tendon— killing the elephant afterwards is a very dangerous procedure. An immobile wounded elephant is a formidable opponent and the *tuma* will call others to come and help. Elder men build fires and bring their small metal mushroom-shaped anvils, younger men encircle the elephant, confusing it with mock charges so that it reaches to one side so that those on the

opposing side can quickly charge in to thrust their spear. The elephant responds with increasing fury and pulls out the spears. Due to the damage the spears receive —often being twisted by bones or during withdrawal, the elder men heat them in the fire and rework them to straighten the blade again. As they are fixed, younger men take them to launch further attacks. The one account of such a hunt I was told emphasized the role of a man considered mad (*djomwa*), who had violent tendencies when suffering a mental crisis. I had often puzzled that he was not ostracized following some of his more notorious episodes. But it became clear to me, as this story was told, that his psychopathic tendencies were welcome and of great value to the group at such times. When the immobilized elephant was at its most furious and dangerous, it was this man that continued thrusting in the spears with fury and efficacy to finally kill it.

While the above techniques are those I was told about by my informants, Bahuchet describes a technique involving slicing the femoral artery in the hind leg to cause massive hemorrhaging. My informants considered this a clever technique. Bahuchet (1985: p. 242) also includes descriptions of a technique based on pushing the base of the spear into the ground when faced with a charging elephant so that it impales itself. My informants were skeptical of this method. They knew the technique as effective when being charged by a gorilla, but the weight, momentum and reach of an elephant's trunk made this technique seem implausibly risky. Likewise, Bahuchet's (1985: p. 243) report that it is easy to spear a standing elephant was perplexing.

## 17.8 CONCLUSIONS

The similarities between the BaYaka and Mbuti techniques for hunting forest elephants as described by Ichikawa (this volume) are striking. Elephant hunters are called “*tuma*” among Mbuti (Bantu language speakers), Baka (Ubangian language speakers) and BaYaka (Bantu language speakers). Mbuti and BaYaka share similar spear hunting

techniques —the abdominal thrusting technique and the tendon technique. Echoing the historical reports of invisibility quoted in opening the chapter, both use versions of what BaYaka call *moombi* paste to become invisible. Both use the occasion of feasting on elephant for festive celebration and consume all parts of the animal aside from bone and stomach contents. Additionally, Ichikawa's (this volume) and Yasuoka's (this volume) observations on the frequency of elephant hunting among Mbuti and Baka, of an average of about one every six months, is likely similar to rates in Northern Congo before protected area conservation. Conservation efforts to control elephant hunting began in early 1990s. During my fieldwork between 1994 and 1997 three elephants (average of one per year) were killed near where we camped.

Although sharing a similar forest habitat, BaYaka and Mbuti live over 1000 kilometers apart, speak different languages, and according to genetic studies last lived together over 25,000 years ago (Verdu et al., 2009). Their similar adaptations to forest living are demonstrated by elements of shared material culture —the form and materials used for forest huts, or honey collecting, for instance; and in ritual their shared distinctive polyphonic singing style used to play with forest spirits. These are likely to be optimum adaptations to this forest environment (Lewis, 2016). Are their similar elephant hunting practices and shared label of *tuma* part of this ancient complex of optimum adaptations to hunting and gathering in the Congo Basin? Or are these similarities in elephant hunting the product of diffusion as early traders sought ivory in new places during the Atlantic Trade or colonial period and used the vocabulary they were familiar with, or shared hunting techniques they knew from elsewhere when encountering new groups in other parts of the forest?<sup>3</sup>

3 The Hadza, savannah hunter-gatherers of Tanzania, say they have never hunted elephant (James Woodburn, pers. comm., 2010), explaining that the herds are so large and that they are too difficult to approach safely. Forest elephants tend to live in small herds, and the cover provided by trees and undergrowth may partially account for the greater ease and safety when hunting forest elephants.

An elderly Mbuti *tuma* said to Ichikawa that they did not hunt elephant often in the past, but once ivory traders came they began hunting them more (Ichikawa, this volume). It is certainly true that since world markets became interested in forest products, ivory has been of special importance, and as mentioned in the introduction, BaYaka people appear to have been key providers of ivory since the beginning. But is this what pushed Pygmies to hunt elephant? My Mbendjele BaYaka informants were clear that men have always hunted elephant. In their origin myth, when men and women lived apart, men hunted elephants, and in some male versions of the myth, it is when an elder man decided to go elephant hunting alone that men first discovered the women, and the events that lead to the establishment of contemporary society, such as women's gift of *Ejengi* to the men, occurred.

The cultural centrality of elephant hunting for BaYaka gender relations, myth, religion, ritual and feasting is striking. In particular, the recognition of the importance of women in *Yele* promoting "a woman's hunt", by finding the elephant, thrusting in the first "spear", then inciting the men to go on such hunts, maintaining sufficient social pressure on the men to complete the process, and as seen in Benasongo's exile – to punish men that do not follow the rules. The ritual complex in which elephant hunting is embedded divides responsibility for success, and the opportunity for men to use killing elephants to claim prestige or status, since it is women who are ultimately responsible for the elephant's death. As Benasongo's case illustrates, men who ignore the importance of women's role, and hunt or boast too much can be ostracized by the women refusing to collect, share and even cook that hunter's meat. Given the importance of elephant fats in supporting increasing encephalization among our ancestors (Agam and Barkai, 2018), could these be modern instantiations of the kinds of tactics employed by women in the deep past to address the reproductive burdens of birthing progressively immature babies by securing male hunting labor?

A further element potentially of interest in hypothesizing about the past is the importance of *moadjo* in representing and sharing knowledge about animal minds to other people. The information communicated concerning the prey's motives and intentions during these pantomimes is complex and substantial, and depends on anthropomorphizing animals. As *tuma* reenact past hunts during *Bula*, they also offer explanations of elephant behavior often expressed in terms of human emotions and reasoning ("he was angry because he could smell me but not see me"). While such anthropomorphisation of animal intentions is often dismissed as projection rather than insight into animal minds, when *tuma* do so they are remarkably accurate in predicting the animal's behavior. With intimate and detailed knowledge of an animal's behavioral ecology, their musing concerning motivations, emotions or intentions are often accurate. In the case of elephant hunters, their lives depend on it.

BaYaka have made such storytelling an art they call *gano*. This distinctive multimodal style of telling sung fables (*gano*) engages the whole community in reenacting events. Participants transform themselves into mythical animal and human characters to relive for themselves the events recounted. In *gano*, animals are personified with distinctive character traits that BaYaka attribute to those animals as a species. In Knight and Lewis (2017) we argue that hunters' storytelling needs are likely to have been an important stimulus for the evolution of language. The pantomimic style and acoustic mimicry of events shared between *gano*, *besime* and *moadjo* is indicative of what such early multi-modal communication could have been like, and how much more informative they are than plain speech.

While such knowledge of elephants and other animals is important, having the courage to go out and take one of these fearsome creatures on in a fight to the death is vital. This accounts for the substantial time and energy spent on ritualizing the hunt and for the sophistication of magical objects seen as a key part of the *tuma*'s hunting kit. It seems that the belief that one can escape, can

move the elephant into a better position, can become invisible and so on, are what it takes for men to have the courage to get so close to the elephant that they can touch it. Together, these elements of ritual and practical knowledge are what give men the confidence to take on the formidable and dangerous elephant as prey. Daring to try may be as important as knowing how.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is only due to the warm and generous companionship of those BaYaka that I have lived with over almost three decades that this work was possible. PhD research (1994–1997) on which most of the material collected here is based was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, an Emslie Horniman Scholarship, and the Swan Fund. I return regularly to the BaYaka area. I am very grateful to R. Barkai, N. Bird-David and G. Konidaris for extremely helpful comments on this paper that have substantially improved it.

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