



**HAL**  
open science

## Women'hunting in Gbaya land

Paulette Roulon-Doko

► **To cite this version:**

Paulette Roulon-Doko. Women'hunting in Gbaya land. Armin Prinz. Hunting food and drinking wine, Lit, pp.155-163, 2006, Wiener Ethnomedizinische Reihe. hal-00511947

**HAL Id: hal-00511947**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00511947>**

Submitted on 26 Aug 2010

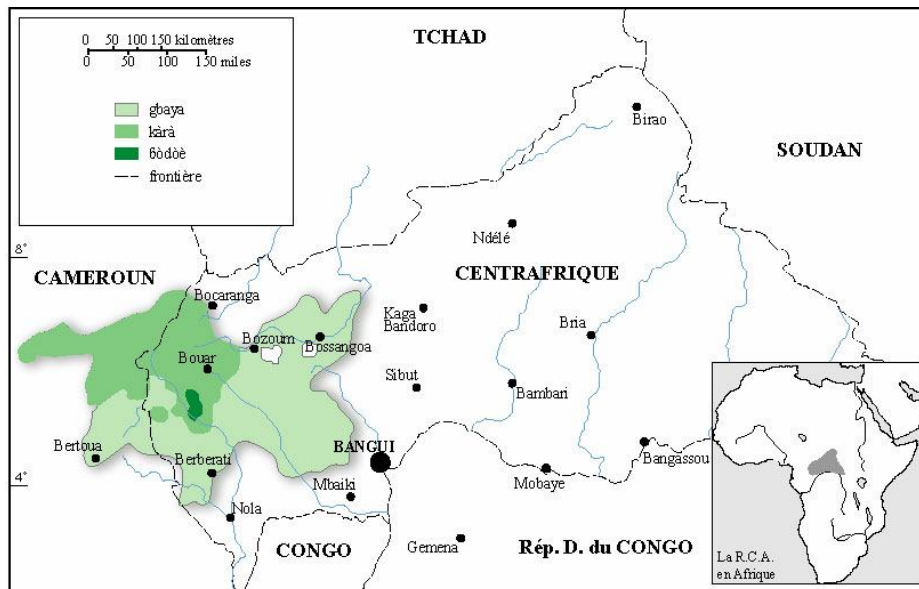
**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# WOMEN'HUNTING IN GBAYA LAND

Paulette Roulon-Doko  
Directeur de recherches au CNRS - LLACAN

The Gbaya people are hunters, gatherers and cultivators who live in the West part of the Central African Republic.



They have a wide land divided into 11 territories which represents about 300 km<sup>2</sup> staying under the protection of their ancestors.

The “dry season” *bèè'* which lasts for 4 months from november to february is commonly named the “ hunting period ” *sìhì gíà* (season+of/hunting) as hunting is then the principal activity. These 4 months have each a name that refers to hunting :

<sup>1</sup> The abreviations used are : > "to relate to"; Pl. "plural "; n.d. "no scientific determination".



## WOMEN'S HUNTING

After the burning, women search the holes for the animals they capture and kill. It is said “women go on burnt ground” *ʔó wíkòò né kàr-bèè* (Pl/woman/inac+to go/neck+of+bare ground). This activity can also take place on the same day that the men hunt with fires in the small territories near the village.

The way of naming “women’s hunting” *kàr-bèè* is specific. When men do the same hunting, it is said “men go on burnt ground” *ʔó wéwéì né kór-pùdú* (Pl/man//inac+to go/neck+of+flying ashes); using the phrase “neck of flying ashes” *kór-pùdú* and not the phrase “neck of bare ground” *kàr-bèè*.

### The tools they use

For this type of hunting, women use a special tool called a “hoe-spade” *wàrà* of which the iron part can be specified as “hoe iron” *gbàṅá wàrà* (hard part+of/hoe). There is two types of hoe iron, a small one *kérngédéà* (turtledove+of+it) weighting about 400lbs. that is used by everebody for ploughing, and a big wan *hìlénà* (big and heavy+of+it) weighting about 800 lbs. which is used only by women.

They put on it a “handle” *té wàrà* (wood+of/hoe) made of hard wood such as *mátá-gùṅá Olax cf. subscorpioidea* OLACACEAE or *gbàṅàk* (no determination). A hoe handle weighs about 1800 lbs. The hoe-spade is a feminine tool for digging and hitting animals.

At the beginning of the dry season, the blacksmiths make a lot of spears iron and heavy hoe iron, the first one for “masculine hunting” *gíà* and the second for “female hunting” *kàr-bèè*. Then they make small hoe irons that every body will use when ploughing<sup>5</sup> a new field.

### The game hunted

The women check to see if an animal occupies the hole and then they try to identify what sort of animal it is. Some rats fill any hole they find and, in this case, it is only their “trail” *dòè* that has to be observed. This is the case for the “Striped grass rat” *gòdá* and the “Nile grass rat” *gbàngèrè*. Others like the “Ethiopian rat” *gbàgàṅá* fill any termite hole. Still others dig their own hole. It can be a simple one as the *Mastomys nàá-ndùì* digs, or dig a more complex one with a lot of “secondary exits” *nú-gú*. These exists include, more or less further from the principal exit, a “barrier” these rats rebuild every time they

---

<sup>5</sup> This tool is named “curved hoe” *ngómbá*.

enter the hole. The “ Giant rat ” *kpàn*, the *Tatera sàì*, *kpàlân* (n.d.) and the “ Ground squirrel ” *kóé* build therebarriers and try, when they are in it, to run away and escape. The “ Fat mouse ” *ngbàà*, which is very slow, cannot do so. Looking at the materials the rat has brought to build its barrier and its position in the tunnel, women can identify which rat lives in each hole. There are different names for this barrier :

barrier name	piling up with	animal builder
kpéà “ the closing ” (> kpe “ to closer ”)	fruit stones, seeds, stones in the tunnel	Giant rat
súyáà “ the clod ” (> sui “ to swell ”)	earth piled up, in the tunnel	Ground squirrel , <i>Tatera</i> , Fat mouse
bðráà “ the filling ” (> bðr “ to close up ”)	earth piled up, before the opening	kpàlân

Another way to identify which rat lives in a hole, is to observe if there is “ dug dirt ” *dùk* before the opening. While the Ground squirrel and the *Tatera* pile up a lot of earth, the Giant rat cleans it well. Sometimes animal hair that they can identify is present.

Depending on the type of rat, a hole can be filled with a varying number of individuals. Some live in small groups (1 to 4), such as the Striped grass rat, the *kpàlân*, the Fat mouse, the Ethiopian rat and the Giant rat. The Nile grass rat lives in a group of 8 to 10. The other species such as the *Tatera* and the *Mastomys* live with more than 20, sometimes 30 in the same hole. This is also the case for the carnivore “ banded mongoose ” *mùtùí*, *Mungos mungo*.

## Hunting techniques

There are three hunting techniques I shall present now.

### *To dig a hole*

“ Digging a hole ” *zág kè* ou *ndù* (to dig/hole or rat ) is the most frequent way to catch these animals, called generically “ hole games ” *sàdì kó kè* (animal/of/hole). Women first dig the opening, then beat and kill the animals when they are running out.

For those who have a complex hole, women gather around. While one is digging the opening, the others stay around and wait for the animals with “ switches ” *nàsà* in their hands.

For the Giant rat, the Ground squirrel or the *Tatera*, a woman digs slowly up to the barrier but she doesn’t touch. She puts a big stone on it to block this exit and then beats the ground all around to destroy the secondary exits. Finally, she digs the hole.

For the kpàlâṅ, whose hole has a lot of secondary exits allowing the animal to run away at any noise, women gather around. They find it most often in the old fields, near the village.

*To fill a hole with smoke*

“ Filling a hole with smoke ” ʔáá wèè nú kḽ (put/fire/opening+of/hole) is a practice used only for some of these animals. There are two methods of hunting in this way.

*“ To fan with leafy branches ” ʔúfá wèè (to stir up/fire)*

For the Giant rat and the Ground squirrel a woman fans a pack of burning dry grasses placed in the opening of the hole with leafy branches while the others beat the ground to scare the animals.

This is not necessary for the Giant rat that lives in the savannah, but it is used to catch the species that lives in the forest. In this particular case, the woman cuts a branch of *Palisota hirsuta* and *Palisota mannii* COMMENILACEAE zḽḽ. She sets it on fire and puts it into the hole. As it burns, this branch smells unpleasant to the Giant rat and makes it run away more rapidly.

*“ To blow on with the mouth ” ʔúfáà (to blow)*

For the *Tatera* which are very numerous, women often prefer to blow into the hole. They cut a dome of termite cement and dig a hole in it. Then they pick some flowers of zùmbúí *Vernonia*<sup>6</sup> COMPOSITAE or dry fruits of dómà *Piliostigma thonningii* CAESALPINIACEAE, and they crush them in their hands before setting them on fire. The burning flowers are put into the hole of the termite cement. Finally they place it on top of the hole and blow into it. A thick smoke acts quickly to paralyse the inhabitants of the hole.

When a Giant rat has dug its hole into very soft soil, they use the same technique because its hole is widely spread out. It is said : “ they blow a Giant rat ” ʔéí ʔúfí kpàn (they/inac+blow/Giant rat). This practice is more efficient than fanning.

During their hunting, women also search all of the large termite holes they can find ; fanning them when they have discovered that a Giant rat or a Banded mongoose lives in it. This hunting takes place next to the village, on the same day that the men go hunting with fires. The women often find Cane rat and Brush-tailed porcupines that have tried to escape the fire.

---

<sup>6</sup> This name is used for these three species of *Vernonia*, *rendulata*, *guineense* et *baoulensis*.

## RITUAL PRACTICES FOR GAME

Concerning the hunting of “meat” *sàdí*<sup>7</sup>, nothing is left to chance. The Gbaya consider that every hunter must kill game, every trap must catch animals and in the same way, every woman must give birth to children. So to keep this capacity to produce that they were born with, they have observed several rituals to determine their place in the group. All of these rituals are referred as rituals of “fertility” *kóyó* and are divided into “hand fertility” *kóyó ʔér* (fertility+of/hand) and “body fertility” *kóyó tè* (fertility+of/body). The first one concerns the techniques of game acquisition and iron tools making (blacksmith); the second concerns children and women. Here I shall only present the first one.

### Hand fertility

It has to do not only with hunting with fires, but with all the techniques used to kill animals with tools. There are fertility rituals for the tools of masculine hunting: “spear” *kóyó sèè* (~spear), “hunting net” *kóyó yàk* (~hunting net), “rat trap” *kóyó pér* (~rat-trap), “knocking-out trap” *kóyó sàk* (~knocking-out trap), “pit” *kóyó sùḡ* (~pit), “crowbow” *kóyó mbàndò* (~arbalète), “fish trap” *kóyó gèn* (~fish trap); as well as for the feminine hunting: “hoe-spade” *kóyó té wàrà* (~handle+of/hoe-spade).

Fertility being the capacity to produce, for instance game, in the case of small game<sup>8</sup> all the animals caught by the tool whether there is only one animal or more represent it. It is this way for the young boys’ rat traps as well as for women’s hunting and for the men’s fish-traps.

At the beginning of each period of feminine hunting, the first time a woman kills animals, all of them represent the “fertility of hoe-spade handle” *kóyó té wàrà* that will be eaten ritually. After this first consumption, all the animals killed are eaten by everybody without any restriction. For any new tool men use (trap, pit, etc.) there is a ritual of fertility; while for women the hoe-spade is the only tool used and the ritual of fertility takes place at the beginning of a new period of hunting.

Although the amount of game necessary is not specified, it does need to be of some importance (3 or 4 animals) to represent the fertility of hoe-spade

---

<sup>7</sup> This term refers to “game” and to “meat” in general, the principal meat in Gbaya land is game meat.

<sup>8</sup> For the big game, they share out between “the first time” *sùkí* and all the animals that will follow that have, each one have a “true fertility” *ngbák kóyó*, cf. Roulon-Doko, 1998, pp. 203-214.

handle. A small rat will be eaten by the husband, the ritual waiting for more important game.

### Hand fertility consumption rules

The hunter himself cannot eat the game. It is a group of individuals who, by eating it, will strengthen the hunter fertility and then give him back something that represents his fertility. These people stand for the ancestors who no longer eat but who are keepers of all animals that live in the savannah, considered as their own village.

For a young girl, it is her “ fathers ” *dáà* and her “ paternal aunts ” *báà* who are her considered as men, that constitute the group. For a married women, it is her “ husband ” *wéì* and her “ brothers-in-law ” called “ husband ” too, and also her “ sisters-in-law ” *síà*. All of them, except her husband can be called “ - in-laws ” *nàná*<sup>9</sup>. The sister-in-law has the same role as the paternal aunt.

Men and women who represent masculine familial group are those who must eat the first game of a woman at the beginning of the women’s hunting period. They give her back a piece of charcoal they have hold in their hands after eating, without washing them. They mark the handle of her hoe-spade. Then they have streigthened her fertility for a year.

Handle of hoe-spade	young girl	Fathers and paternal aunts	piece of charcoal	Every year
	married woman	The husband, his brothers and sisters		

In general, the small game is shared between members of the nuclear family ; and it is only the big game that is shared between all members of the group, each woman receiving their family portion.

### CONCLUSION

“ Spear ” for men and “ hoe-spade ” for women are tools which symbolize them. Thus, when a person dies, those tools can be burried with the body : a “ spear ” for a man, a “ hoe-spade ” for a woman. Both respect the rituals of fertility in order to strengthen it and to keep the vigilance of the ancestors on them.

---

<sup>9</sup> For a man this term *nàná* refers of his wife’s sisters, his brothers’wives and the wives of his wife’s brothers. That is always a woman. Symetrically, for a woman, it refers to the brothers of her husband, her sisters’ husbands, and the husbands of her husband’s sisters. That is always a man.



In this culture, men and women have, all throughout their lives, an equal social value for hunting which is regarded as the most important activity.

#### REFERENCES

Roulon-Doko, P. (1996) *Conception de l'espace et du temps chez les Gbaya de Centrafrique*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 256 p., 44 figures, 4 planches et 11 cartes.

Roulon-Doko, P. (1998) *Chasse, cueillette et cultures chez les Gbaya de Centrafrique*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 540 p., 189 figures, 39 photos et 10 cartes.

Testart, A., (1987) 'La femme et la chasse', *La Recherche*, 181, pp. 1194-1201.

Photo pour illustrer l'article



Femme portant une houe-bêche.