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86th Congress of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago  
Session "Pygmies of the Western Congo Basin", november 19, 1987

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE AKA AND BAKA PYGMIES IN THE WESTERN CONGO BASIN

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Several ethnological descriptions of some Pygmy groups in central Africa are published; some works try to compare the different groups, other try to understand the ecological basis of the life in forest, and to discover their roots and antiquity, but very few studies pay attention to the linguistic status of the various groups. The usual opinion is that Pygmies do speak the same language as the neighbouring villagers .

We found something very different, working firstly among the Aka during more than 12 years, and recently among the Baka. Each of these groups has **his own language**, each of them is easy to classify among the African languages, but fully isolated and recognizable. The question is then, how in the past, these groups borrowed their language ?

The second question is what kind of relationship exists between the various Pygmy groups in Africa, and particularly between Aka and Baka ?

In this paper I will show how much rich are the informations on historical nature that give to us the lexical and semantical studies of the Pygmy languages.

### 1. SITUATION

Aka Pygmies are bantu speaking people, in the category C 10 like the Ngando, Mbatu and Pande in Central African Republic, and Bongili, Bondongo and Mbomotaba in Congo. The area of the Aka is very large, covering nearly 100.000 km<sup>2</sup> between the Lobaye in the north, the Oubangui at the east and the Sangha, west. In this very large region, different aka groups are in contact with some 20 ethnic and linguistic groups, bantu and oubanguian.

Baka Pygmies are oubanguian speaking people, living in south-east Cameroon and north-east Gabon. The related languages are Ngbaka-mabo, Monzombo, living in CAR in the Lobaye region, the Gbandili who live more east on the Oubangui, the Mundu in eastern Zaïre and two little groups, Bomasa and Ngundi, located each of them in a village on the Sangha. Distances between all of these groups are extreme : more than 600 km between Baka and Ngbaka-mabo, others 300 km between Ngbaka-mabo and Gbandili, and some 1.500 km between Baka and Mundu ! In the baka region there are more than 15 different languages in contact, only two of them being of the oubanguian family but not directly related to the baka.

In addition to the languages, there are many cultural differences between the Aka and the Baka Pygmies. The most obvious are the absence of net-hunting among the Baka, which is a major activity for the Aka, and the importance of fishing by bailing

for the Baka. In the religious life, Baka practice a formal initiation for the young men, preceding their inclusion in a men's society, which does not exist in the aka group; there is an important collective ritual at the beginning of the honey season among the Aka and no honey ritual for the Baka; on the reverse there is an important collective ritual done by the women before the elephant hunting, among the Baka, and not among the Aka.

As far as the minor differences are concerned, they are innumerable. I insist on the fact that the aka and baka languages are different and without mutual understanding.

## 2. METHODS

The methods are very simple, and based upon a few principles issued from the french ethnological school of Marcel Mauss, through the teaching of the linguist André Haudricourt.

In any society the language has the function of communication, it has a social nature and, in every society, technology, institutions and language are interdependant. Evolution of one of those influences all the others.

The comparative method consists in the study of sets of phenomenon which are without signification if isolated, in order to understand the historical evolution and the contacts of civilisation. Therefore it is necessary to link together ethnological observations, technological terminologies and linguistical datas.

in the precise case of the Pygmies, I allways compare the lexical datas with the mother tongues of the related villagers, ngando and mbati related to the Aka, and ngbaka-mabo and monzombo related to the Baka.

It is also very important to take into account the regional variations, between sub-groups or dialects of Aka and Baka. Thirdly it is necessary to allways think to the possible loss of precision, or slip, or wear of the meanings of terms, which are accelerating since 20 or 30 years; this phenomenon is very well documented for the Ngbaka-mabo with the works of Jacqueline Thomas, starting in 1956. The traditionnal life and institutions of all of these groups was very changed by the strong impact of the french colonization, even though it is quite recent (last years of the XIXth century).

## 3. MATERIAL

Thirty years of collective fieldworks in Central African Republic, more than 12 among the Aka Pygmies, produce a very large set of lexical and ethnological datas, in our Laboratory in Paris. We gathered large dictionnaires, in files of more than 6.000 words for the ngando, mbati, monzombo and gbandili, and more than 10.000 words for the aka and ngbaka-mabo, covering all cultural spheres, including natural history.

Recently we had the opportunity to get a good baka dictionnaire, published by ROBERT DRISSON, a catholic friar in Cameroon, with nearly 3.000 words, and I made a short field survey to go deeper in the technical vocabulary.

Every word was precisely explained and translated, compared with roots in other languages, and many were mapped.

These materials give us two types of informations :

- linguistical relationship and the vocabulary as a whole, teache the global situation of the pygmy groups in relation to the non-pygmy ethnic groups, at the socio-linguistical and even economical point of view;
- detailed semantic analyses, theme by theme, allow us to understand technical and social influences between the Pygmies and other peoples.

That permits the reconstruction of different stages of the history of this set of little societies in the rain forest of central Africa.

It is impossible in a few minutes to discuss, demonstrate and present the full results of my study - which incidentally is not absolutely finished ! That is why I choose some of the major results, which I will present without demonstration, and possibly I can give more details during the general discussion.

#### 4. CORPUS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

I compare a general vocabulary of 3.000 words in baka with the aka, and found **22 %** of common words (643). Since the two groups are not in contact, except on a very narrow border on the Sangha river, and according to the very large amount of comon vocabulary not found in other languages, the hypothesis of lexical borrowing is excluded, and the only possibility is that of **a common origin of the two Pygmy groups, Aka and Baka.**

How is this common vocabulary distributed ? Does it reflect the pattern of the vocabulary of both languages ? The answer is no. If we count the words by large themes, we find that in baka, for instance, the specialized vocabulary (forest, natural history, technics, objects, even sociology) represents 53 % of the total (Table I); conversely the specialized words represent **88 %** of the common vocabulary, aka and baka together. The larger set of common words is for natural history (animals, plants and forest elements), with 58 % of the total, and the Pygmy technics, tools and objects (16%). Even considering theme by theme, the ratio aka/baka gives 40 % for the specialized vocabulary, against only 6 % for the general vocabulary, non specialized.

Obviously, **the vocabulary for the forest and the forest life is mainly in common for the Aka and Baka Pygmies.**

TABLE I : THE CORPUS

LEXICAL THEMES	BAKA CORPUS		COMMUN WORDS AKA / BAKA		
	number	%	number	%	% aka/baka
<b>TOTAL NUMBER</b>	<b>2924</b>	<b>(100)</b>	<b>643</b>	<b>(100)</b>	<b>22</b>
NATURAL HISTORY	970	32,2	376	58,5	38,8
of whom mammals	51	--	36	--	70,6
trees	202	--	119	--	58,9
PYGMY TECHNICS AND TOOLS	236	8,1	100	15,5	42,4
SOCIETY	257	8,8	75	11,7	29,2
VILLAGE ITEMS	97	3,3	13	2	13,4
VARIA	1364	46,6	79	12,3	5,8

Natural history : animals, plants, forest elements, anatomy, etc.

Society : kinship, sociology, religion, music, rituals, etc.

Village item : agriculture, forge, village, non-pygmy tools, etc.

Varia : non specialized vocabulary, non technical verbs, adjectives, etc.

Linguistic history of the Aka and Baka Pygmies can thus be summarized in the following way :

- 1) a single Pygmy population (we can name it \*bàákáà) with the same language;
- 2) meeting with newcomers, some are Bantu C 10 speakers, others are Oubanguian (ngbaka-gbandili) speaking people; beginning of a common life;
- 3) increasing common life with the villagers causing the division of the \*Baakaa and the borrowing of the villagers languages, bantu speaking Pygmies in one hand, oubanguian speaking Pygmies on the other hand;
- 4) after some (or many) time, the bantu populations (including their Pygmies) began to divide and their common language evaluate in dialects first, and then in full languages; the same pattern occurred for the oubanguian group with their Pygmies; Aka and Baka languages were born at this stage;
- 5) Baka were separated from their linguistically-related villagers, they migrate, and met new non-pygmy populations, beginning economic relationship without a

borrowing of language : these are the villagers with whom they live nowadays ; the same story occurred for the Aka (evolution of the bantu common language to several individualized languages) but with a minor migration only.

The reports of the meeting of the Pygmies by many ethnic groups in Cameroon and CAR, groups who are not linguistically related to the Aka nor to the Baka (for instance in Demesse 1976) correspond to this last phase of the history of our Pygmies.

## 5. PYGMY WAY OF LIFE

Some sets of activities are particularly interesting, with a very coherent common vocabulary : for instance the gathering, with the same names for the edible nuts and many mushrooms. For the yams, though there are only 2 identical species names among 7, there are many identical words concerning details of the stages of the growth of tubers and stems, seeds and even the yam-beetle.

The honey-gathering presents similar pattern : most of the bees don't have identical names, but the ethnobiological characteristics are the same (names of honey-combs, of noises and hours of outings of the workers) as are all the specific tools.

Again about the collecting of yams, both Aka and Baka use a very peculiar digging stick, a drill, for the same species (*ès ùmà*, *Dioscorea semperflorans*) who grows very deeply in the sandy soils. The name of this tool is quite similar : the baka name of the drill corresponds to the aka name for the tack of the normal digging stick.

I stop there those examples, which confirm that **Aka and Baka Pygmies are parents, coming from the same ancestral ethnic group**. This ancestral group, the **\*bàákáà**, was living with a **forest technology and a hunting and gathering economy**. Many cultural features subsist in the actual aka and baka groups, as a substratum.

I will now discuss about two points, the history of hunting, and the religious life.

### **The history of hunting**

Comparison of set of vocabulary, as well as details of the hunting technics, permit us to separate between old pygmy technics, and more recent technics introduced by the villagers.

Common vocabulary indicates that the two groups practiced, before their separation, **4 types of hunting** :

- a - a little hunt of giant rodents, mixed with gathering, done by husband and wife;
- b - a little hunt with spears, for duikers and hogs, by a few men;
- c - an individual hunt with bow, for the monkeys, with poisoned woody arrows, this hunt is complementary to the others;
- d - the most important, prestigious collective hunting of elephant with spears, this hunt is directed by a specialist, the **túmá** (notice that the common vocabulary for the elephant is very developed, with some 14 names for the age and sexe differences).

We can observe that three of those technics (b, c, d) are also described among all of the Mbuti groups in Ituri, and that the **tuma** is also present in this region during the elephant spear hunting. Thus it is possible to consider those technics as a basis, a common pygmy strategy, to which other technics were added as a function of regional contacts with various non-pygmy populations :

- the net-hunting is obviously of bantu C and/or D origin (vocabulary), and Aka got this at the same time that their language;
- cross-bow was introduced by bantu people from Atlantic coast, Aka and Baka learned separately to use and make it;
- Baka, living closer to the coast, got earlier the gun, and adapted to it spears for killing elephant;
- in the Ituri region, it is evident that net-hunting was from bantu C or D origin, but possibly also the collective bow hunting with iron-tipped arrows (the name of this hunt is bantu, even among the Efe, soudanic-speaking Pygmies).

Anyhow, it seems that the problem of ecological adaptation of hunting in Ituri, as formulated by various authors (for instance Harako 1976), is a false one, posed in the wrong way : it is not true that all the Mbuti were once archers, and that some of them then became net-hunters, under influence of villagers. The collective bow-hunting is a new technic, like the net-hunting; it is also the consequence of contacts, and the fact that apparently the only archers are the soudanic-speaking Mbuti (mainly the Efe living with the Lese) seems to have been neglected.

### Religion

Coming back to our Aka and Baka Pygmies, I found that their religious conceptions are largely similar, and it is possible to reconstruct a common religious system.

Three people divided among them the responsibility of rituals, according to their function :

- the **tuma**, leader of the spear-hunting, was in charge of all rituals preceding and following the killing of an elephant ; these rituals were directed towards the animal's spirits;
- the diviner-healer was the specialist for the communication with the ghosts; he was concerned by every kind of rituals necessary to the well-being of the **individuals** (curing and prediction);
- the elder, leader of the community, had the responsibility of all collective ceremonies, devoted to the major forest spirit, **èzèngì**, large festivals conditioning the survival and the reproduction of the community itself.

## 6. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE VILLAGERS

We can now turn towards the former relationship between Pygmies and villagers.

### Linguistic evidence

Although Aka speak a bantu language and Baka an oubanguian one, we found a large proportion of common specialized vocabulary, substratum of a former Pygmy language. Both closest languages, ngando for the aka, and ngbaka-mabo for the baka, use some

specialized terms from **\*baakaa** origin, but in a more limited range, and without the coherence I mentioned before about aka and baka. Usually these words name major game, trees used for their wood or fruits, and a few technics and hunting details.

Considering the very poor cultural influence of the villagers on the Pygmies (less perceptible than the linguistic influence), and at the reverse the loaning by these villagers, of part of pygmy specialized terminology, we find there the proofs of an initial technical and social difference between the two kinds of populations, Pygmy hunters and villagers. At this first meeting Pygmies were considered by the villagers, as **specialists with a technical superiority**. In the opposite case specialized pygmy terminology would not have persisted. That also proves that these populations were not accustomed to living in forest ecosystem for their own, prior to the contact with the Pygmies.

Thematical analyses of vocabulary common to aka, baka and villagers languages point out that :

- **\*Baakaa** Pygmies were suppliers of meat and raw material;
- they received iron-blades but they put their own types of handle on them; they received also palm-oil and salt;
- **\*Baakaa** used very early corn (firstly sorgho, and maize after 1600) but obtained by theft, not by exchange (the name is a secret one, not from villagers' origin);
- from the villagers they received also prepared food, considered as precious and prestigious;
- plantain was also used very early, supplied by the villagers, possibly after the separation of Aka and Baka (but the baka name is not an oubanguian root);
- the oubanguian and bantu villagers were the middlemen between Aka and Baka and the traders, for the historical ivory trade before the colonial era;
- **\*Baakaa** and their villagers shared their settlement, possibly seasonally.

This feature is not so different from the recent way of relationship between Pygmies and villagers; what is changing is the strong evidence of the prehistoric existence of those relations, and the inversion of roles : villagers were those who required, and the Pygmies were the specialists needed.

### **Social evidences**

This quite familiar situation will be changed by the analysis of oral litterature and religion of the villagers, and of the common vocabulary for social relations in aka, baka and villagers languages.

Examining the tales, songs and myths of villagers, particularly the well known Ngbaka-mabo, we find some Characters of lower status, elephant hunter, living outside the village and paradoxically masters of the forest. It is easy to recognize the Pygmies in these characters, even if they never are named.

In the ngbaka-mabo religion, there are individual protective spirits, the **I è-vō**, which are described like tiny pygmy humanoids. These spirits are fearsome, and people

have to mollify them with offerings, before they became protective. Obviously these **lè-vō** (which means "little human being") represent the transposition in the supernatural world, of the very first Pygmies seen by the ancestors of the Ngbaka-mabo. These people were considered as human beings, and not yet as **bàmbèngà**, "Pygmies" of a different nature, and they were dreaded.

The Ngbaka-mabo had an important institution, the **yélè**, which consisted in a voluntary association of friendship, protection and mutual aid, between men without kin relationship and living in different villages. This association was based upon visits and exchanges of gifts; once established it was impossible to break off. The same term **yele** is recorded in baka, with the signification of "long term visit", which are allways strengthened with gifts.

Evidently ancestors of Ngbaka-mabo practiced the **yele** association with ancestors of Baka. When we remember that the first Pygmies looked worrying, even dangerous to the Ngbaka (as indicated by the **lè-vō** spirits), we can conclude that the Ngbaka ancestors became allied to these potential enemies, in the same way they do inside their own society.

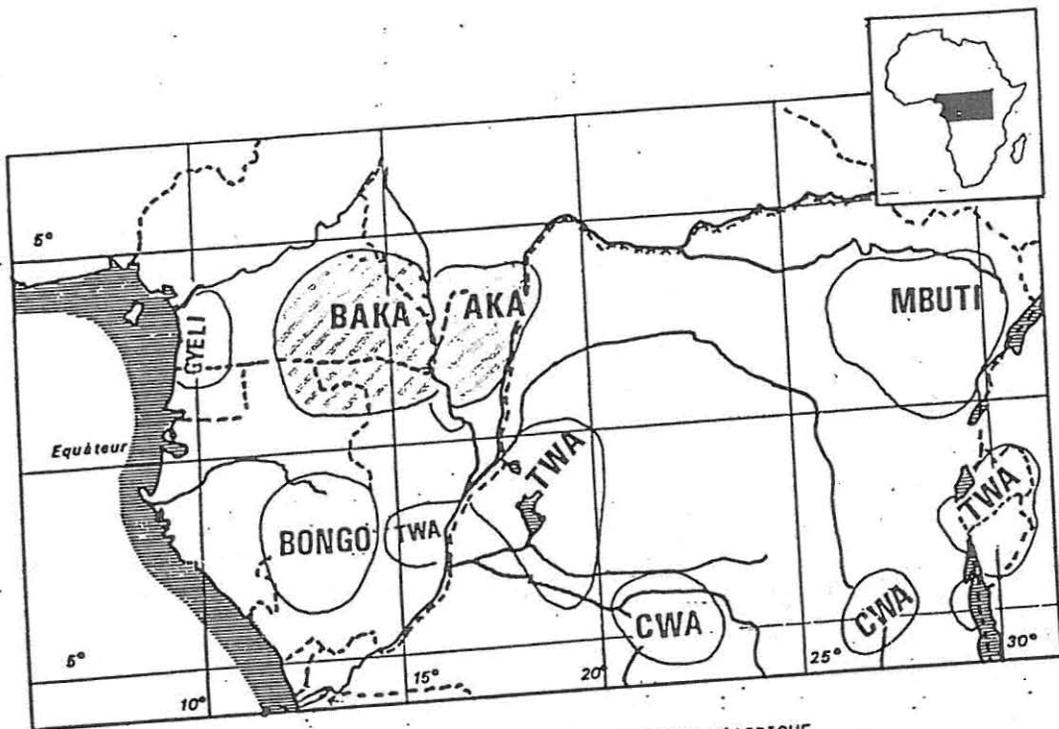
Here again, villagers appear as those who required protection and kindness from the Pygmies : it was not the superiority of villagers, the social domination nor the pursuit of benefit which were at the origin of association with **\*Baakaa** Pygmies.

The last document I will discuss is a set of 6 terms about marriage, which are used in aka, baka, and their villagers languages, ngando and Ngbaka-mabo. These terms are :

- **bende**, "brother of the wife", or "sister of the husband",
- **kombé**, "men married with two sisters" and also "love jealousy",
- **kope**, the "courtship" or engagement, with pre-marital residence in the wife's family,
- **sele**, a verb meaning "to endow; and to pay for an offence",
- **bila**, "the female kinship", all the lineages related through the women,
- **ndenga**, "bachelor".

Let us emphasize that no other words of social relationship, nor kinship, are shared by these four languages.

This striking set can be understood if we postulate that **villagers took wives among the \*Baakaa Pygmies**. This kind of explanation, which seems to fit well with genetical hypothesis, has the advantage to give a plausible context for the borrowing of languages by the Aka and the Baka : a partial intimacy without confusion of the two societies, villagers and Pygmies.



PRINCIPAUX GROUPES PYGMEES D'AFRIQUE

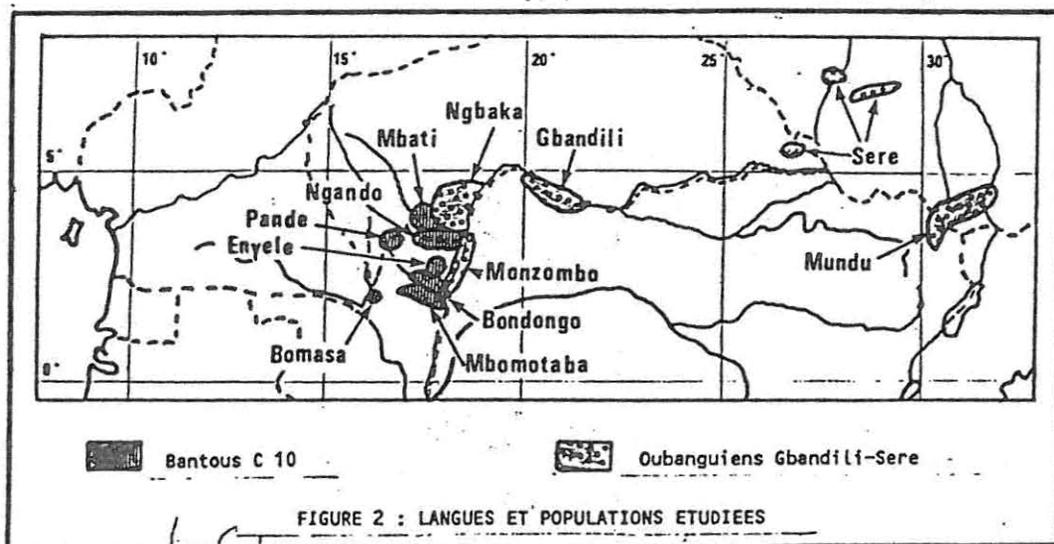
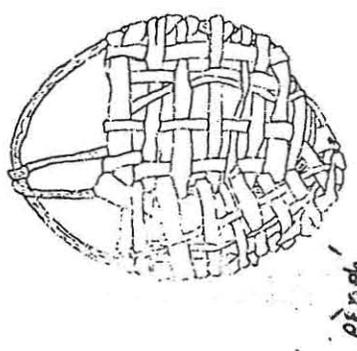
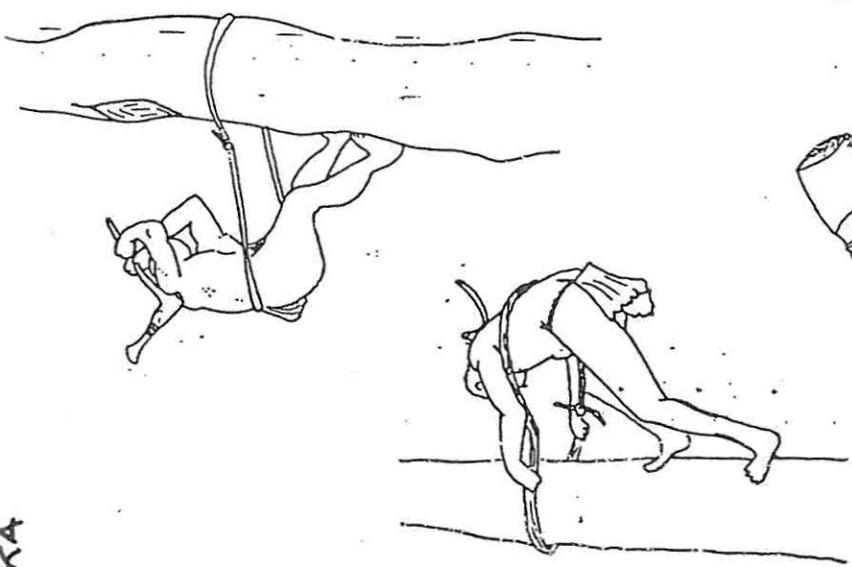


FIGURE 2 : LANGUES ET POPULATIONS ETUDIEES

AKA

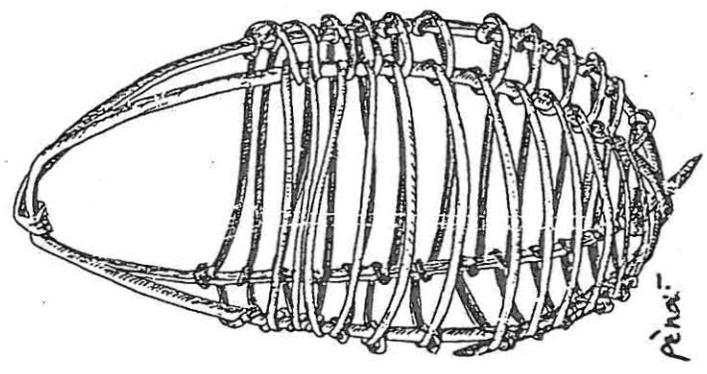


pèndi

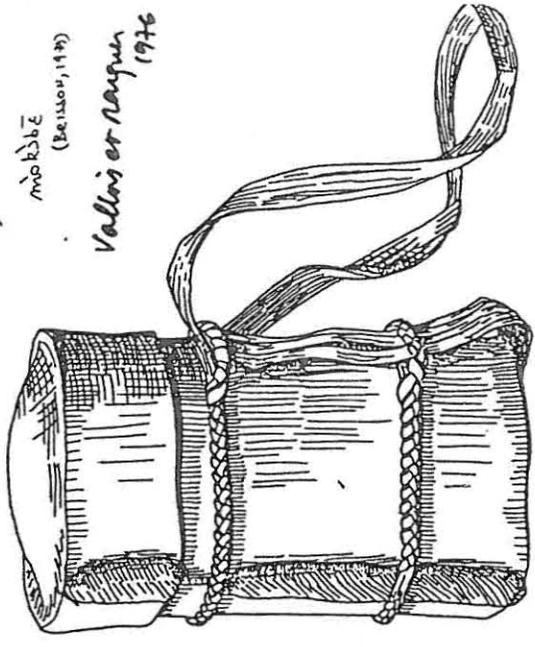


mò-kòbè

BAKA



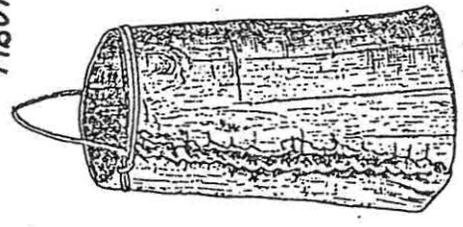
pèndi



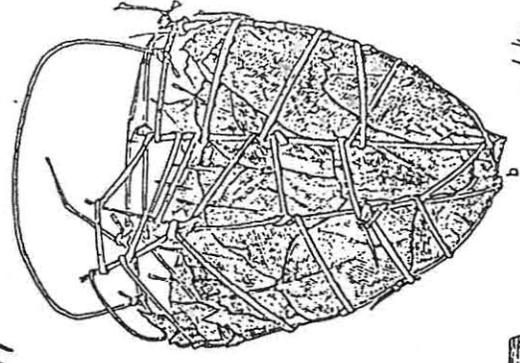
mò-kòbè  
(Beissler, 1977)  
Vallières 1976

Fig. 63. - Sacs en fibres destinés à conserver le miel (Sud d'Abong-M'bang).

MBUTI



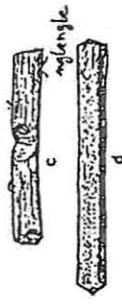
a e bimba



apagobai

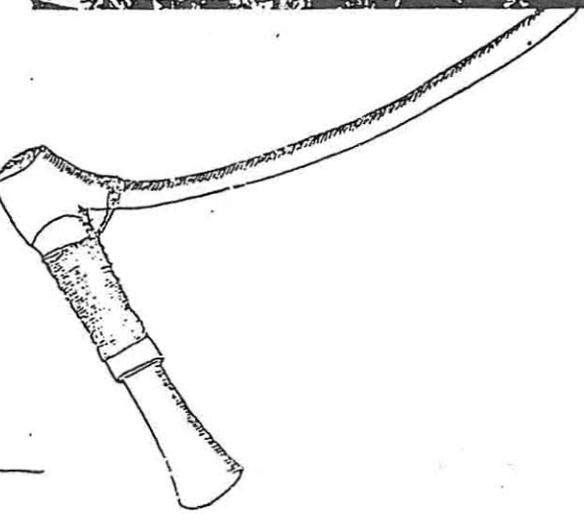
cm 100

ambai (Tanus)



c nganga

d



Baluchet 1975

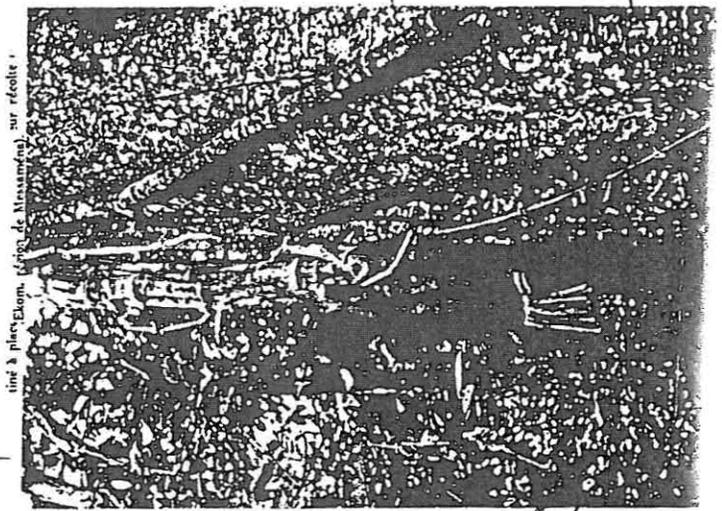


Fig. 64. - Epule, Epule, (Sud de M'bang) sur récolte.

Fig. 43. Gathering equipment, net hunters. a. Bark honey container, *chinda*, Epulu District, Central Ituri. b. Vine-and-leaf honey container, *apagobai*, West Nduye District, Central Ituri. Normally the bark container is used, but if the Mbuti come across honey unexpectedly, they improvise a container of leaves supported by vine strands. This may be found among both archers and net hunters. c-d. Clappers, *nganga*, used exclusively by the Mbuti during the honey season to accompany honey songs, Epulu District, Central Ituri.

Tumbull 1965

TARIEFS A IGARES

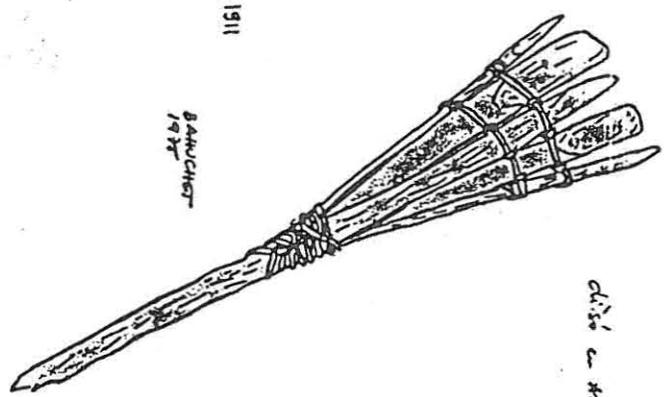
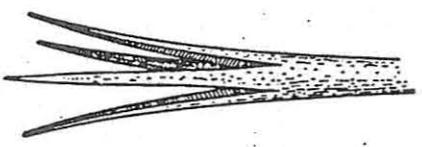
AKA: (R.C.A.)

MBERZIE, SWICHA



REGNAVUT, 1911

BAKA (CAMEROON)



LOBAYE

divisé en thés

BAUCHER 1937

bédingé en baka (Bastien, 1941)

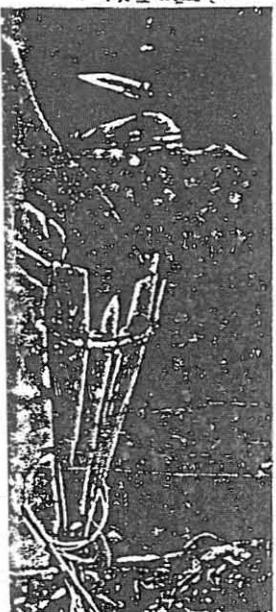
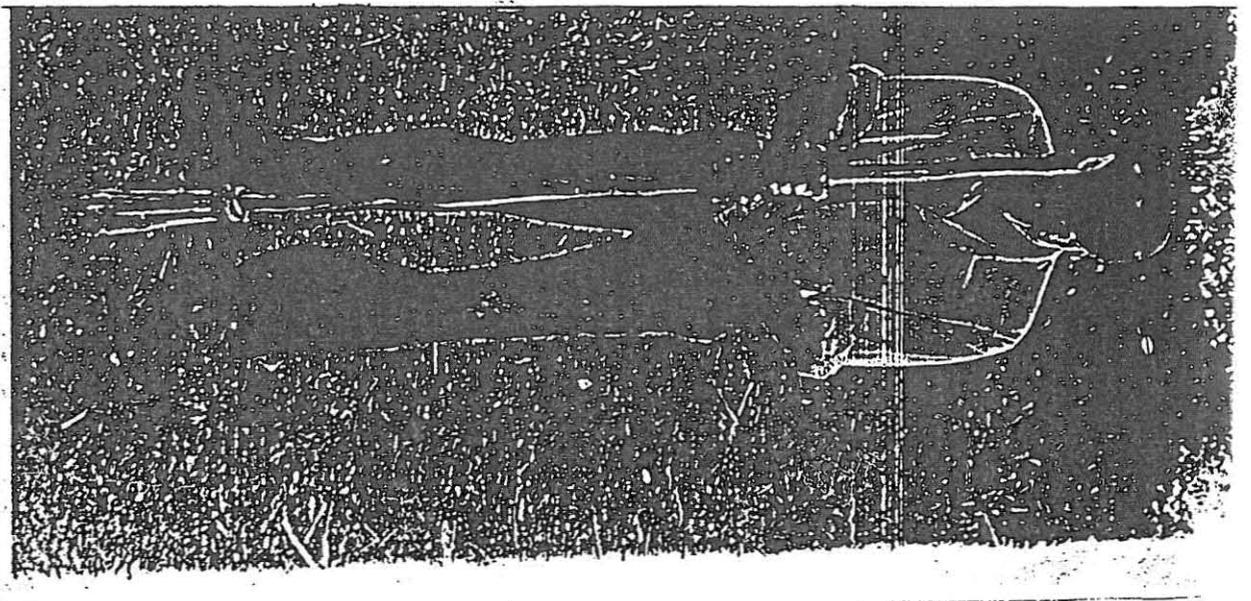
Fig. 70 - Extrait d'un fascicule de la "Revue de l'Ethnologie" n° 1, 1937, p. 10. - Les figures 1 et 2 sont en réalité les mêmes.

Les 20-30 cm ; manche = 2 m de long.

MAQUET UNIV. PARIS, 1936

Baka

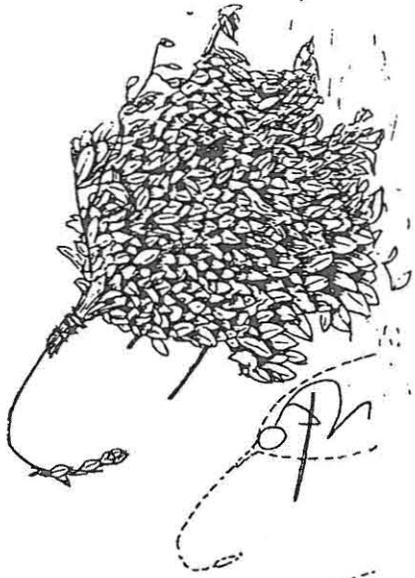
Aka



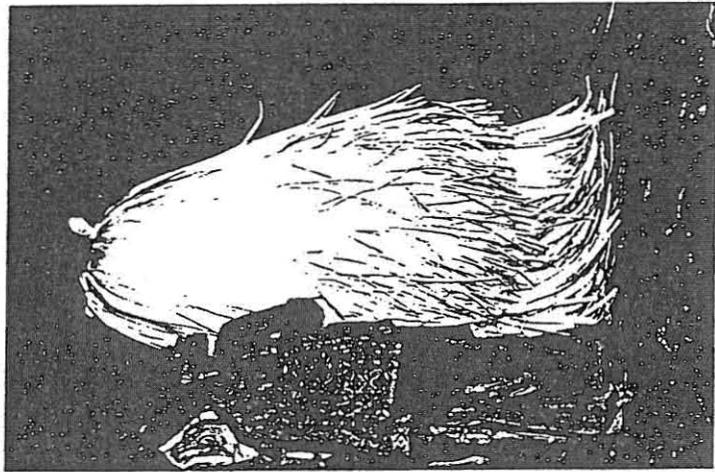
AKA



A

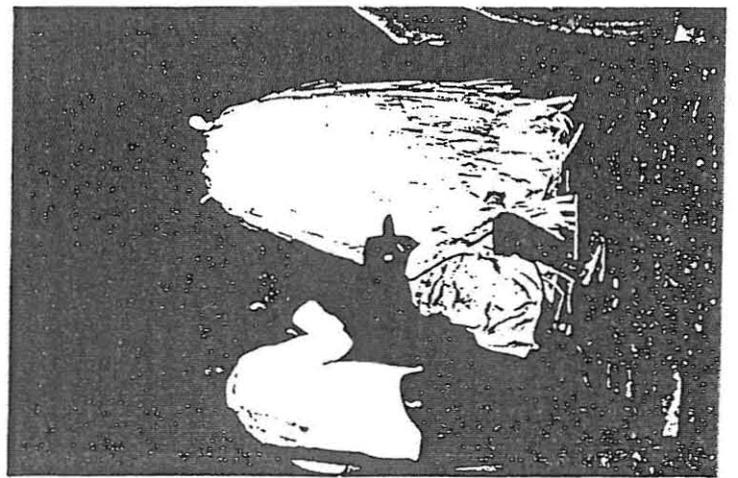


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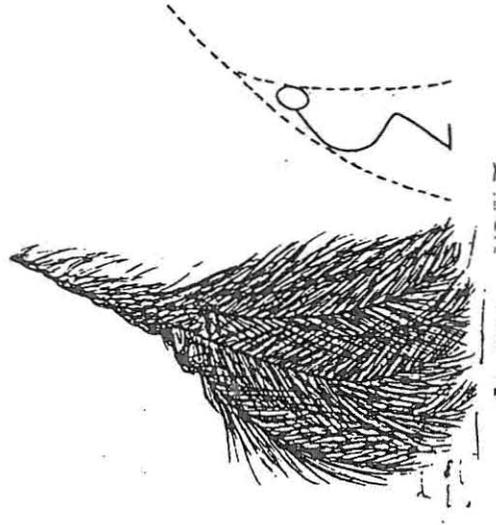


BAKA

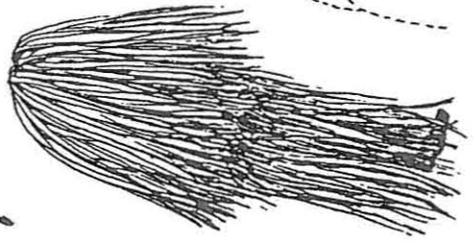
Jēngū mask



ē-zēngū mask



C



D