



McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

Towards a Broader View of Hunter-Gatherer Sharing

Edited by Noa Lavi & David E. Friesem



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Noa Lavi & David E. Friesem,
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Chapter 7

Sharing pleasures to share rare things: hunter-gatherers' dual distribution systems in Africa

Jerome Lewis

Most research on the economic institutions of what James Woodburn defined as 'immediate-return' egalitarian hunter-gatherers has focused on demand sharing as the primary mode for ensuring the distribution of food and goods amongst group members. Although Woodburn mentioned the importance of parallel systems for distributing non-local goods – such as gambling among Hadza and *xaro* exchange among the San – in his seminal article 'Egalitarian Societies' (1982), no work has examined these systems cross culturally. Based on recently published research into a system shared by Western Pygmies in Central Africa that circulates things, including non-local goods, through ritual initiations (Lewis 2015), this chapter seeks to make some preliminary observations of similarities and differences between these systems for sharing non-local products across three African groups: the BaYaka (represented by the Mbendjele), the San (represented by the !Kung) and the Hadza. In contrast to similarities in demand sharing, each of these parallel systems for circulating non-local products has a different model: ritual performances (*massana*) among BaYaka, gift-giving (*xaro*) among San, and gambling (*lukuchuko*) among Hadza. Despite structural differences, each system is primarily driven by culturally determined pleasure-seeking and produces a sense of group that extends far beyond those with whom each is daily present in camp.

Since it is less well known, I shall begin by outlining the system of the BaYaka Pygmies of the Western Congo Basin, to contrast daily demand sharing with their ritual economy (see Lewis 2015 for more detail). The ethnography is summarized selectively to emphasize economic aspects and emic perspectives for cross-cultural comparison with San and Hadza.

Pygmies today

The greatest number of contemporary and former hunter-gatherers in the world live in the forests of the

Congo Basin and estimates of their overall numbers range from 220,000 (Bahuchet 2014, 08) to a possible 900,000 (Olivero et al. 2015). They are composed of groups speaking different languages – mostly Bantu languages but also Ubangian and Central Sudanic languages, and who today seek out 'hunter-gatherer situations' (Widlöck 2015) by practicing a range of subsistence activities from hunting and gathering, to fishing, farming, entertaining, day labouring, and begging. They have a range of different relationships with farmer neighbours belonging to many different ethnic groups. Despite this diversity, all groups define themselves as current or former forest hunter-gatherer specialists and recognize their shared origin as the indigenous forest peoples of Central Africa.

To illustrate the dual economy present among BaYaka Pygmy groups living in Western Central Africa I will focus on the ethnography of Mbendjele, where I have conducted most of my ethnographic research since 1994. The BaYaka are comprised of several groups: notably the Aka, Baka, Bofi, Gyeli, Luma, Mikaya, Mbendjele and Ngombe mostly living in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, western DR Congo and Gabon. BaYaka people across this region say that they share the same forest hunter-gatherer ancestors, and the same economic, ritual and musical systems. Mbendjele more often refer to themselves as *Bayaka* or *Baaka* than Mbendjele. 'Mbendjele' is used to distinguish themselves from neighbouring BaYaka groups such as the Mikaya, Ngombe or Luma. The term 'BaYaka' is contracted to different extents by these groups to be spoken as *bayaka*, *baaka*, or *baka*. Since some of these groups speak Ubangian languages (e.g. Ngombe and Baka) while others speak Bantu languages (e.g. Aka and Mbendjele) I write this regional ethnonym as BaYaka.

Although there are important cultural differences between BaYaka groups (e.g. Bahuchet 1996, 2012), differences also exist within each of the constituent

groups depending on where they live. For instance, some Mbendjele near the Central African Republic speak Mbendjee with many Sango loan-words, are evangelized and although relatively sedentary do not farm. Further south in Congo-Brazzaville, Mbendjele speak Mbendjee mixed with many Lingala words and have local variations in vocabulary due to loan words from diverse neighbouring groups. Those Mbendjele living in or near logging towns may spend long periods working outside the forest and practice regular farming. Others further south spend most of the year in the forest, with some groups not coming out to villages for years at a time. But in general, many Mbendjele spend about two-thirds of the year hunting and gathering in forest camps and some part of the year near agriculturalists' villages or the activities of logging companies. Although continuing to hunt and gather, here they will also trade, labour or perform services for villagers and others in return for food, goods, alcohol or money.

There is much variation in the living conditions of BaYaka groups today as they are differentially affected by the global forces of development, market expansion, conservation, logging, mining and chronic armed conflict (Bahuchet 2012, 2014; Ichikawa 2014). Industrial, road and market expansion into remote forest areas have drawn outsiders in to exploit resources. Discrimination by majority groups has led to BaYaka land and resource rights being ignored, their violent exclusion from large areas of forest by conservationists, and their persecution for hunting (Lewis 2016). Many now do some farming and serve as a labour force for other groups, often in return for alcohol and food. These forces combine with aggressive government sedentarization policies since the early 1990s, and earlier in Cameroon and Gabon, to have a negative impact on many BaYaka groups' ability to maintain their autonomy, hunting and gathering lifestyle, and culture.

BaYaka cultural area

Despite the diversity of interaction and experiences with many different outsiders over several centuries, BaYaka, like !Kung, G/wi and !Xo San (Wiessner 1986; Lewis-Williams 1984), demonstrate long-term cultural continuity in their shared material culture adapted to their distinctive forest-focused economy, their egalitarian political order, and in their shared musical style until very recently. The Pygmies' shared material culture is comprised of characteristic dome-shaped marantaceae leaf and liana huts, honey collection implements, some yam digging tools, bark cloth and axe styles (Bahuchet 1996, 2012). These shared material

solutions to forest living, similar political organization and musical style identify forest-dwelling Pygmies in contrast to their non-Pygmy neighbours across the Congo Basin, and are evidence of a highly resilient and successful forest adaptation.

BaYaka are explicit about their connections and aware of their cultural unity, even beyond the western Congo Basin. In 2010 I played recordings of Mbuti music made by Colin Turnbull in the 1950s to Mbendjele over a thousand miles to the west of Mbuti forest. Almost immediately they exclaimed that 'They must be BaYaka to sing like this!' Indeed, BaYaka view the remarkably similar vocal polyphonic singing style they share as evidence of shared culture (Furniss 2014; Lewis 2014a) and origins (Lewis 2013, 2014a). Genetic studies now confirm this (Verdu 2014).

BaYaka are familiar with the other Pygmy groups around them because they visit each other and intermarry. Members of the different BaYaka groups, notably young people, visit neighbouring BaYaka groups to explore, participate in commemoration ceremonies (*eboka*), establish friendships, meet potential spouses, and seek or find work with farmers and other outsiders. Such voyages are made possible by their cultural similarities – their egalitarian political ideology; a mimetic and predatory approach to non-Pygmy outsiders and their languages; a ritual and religious system focused on the forest and calling forest spirits into camp with polyphonic singing; a set of taboos (*ekila*) defining proper sharing and driving a gendered division of labour premised on keeping menstrual blood and the blood of killing animals apart; dynamic egalitarian gender relations in which each gender undermines special claims to status by the other; a rich sung fable story-telling tradition; an economic ethic focused on demand sharing, immediacy and the superiority of wild food; and a similarly broad binary classification of people into (Pygmy/BaYaka) 'forest people' (*bisi ndima*) and (*Bilo*/non-Pygmy) 'village people' (*bisi mboka*) (Lewis 2014b).

Mbendjele consider the status and property-obsessed *Bilo* village people in their region to be reborn as 'gorillas' because, like gorillas, they do not share on demand, they fight for status, power and authority between themselves, and make aggressive efforts to claim parts of the forest, in this case their fields, as their own exclusive property. In normal speech *Bilo* are simply referred to as 'gorillas' (*ebobo*) because of this. Europeans are called 'red river hogs' (*bangwia*) due to their extraordinary accumulation of wealth (fat) despite sharing the same forest as everyone else. Such labels cast non-Pygmies as 'prey', and make deceit, trickery and the application of hunting techniques in order to get goods from them legitimate.

In contrast to Ingold's claim for hunter-gatherers (1986) or Sillander's similar characterization of South East Asian 'open aggregation' groups (this volume), Pygmies in this region are clearly defined, and self-define as distinct from acephalous, segmentary shifting cultivators, articulating clear social boundaries, contrasting political ideologies and economic practices. BaYaka share with anyone present, but non-forest *Bilo* people are defined by their 'hard hands' (*mabo budi*) that do not easily share on demand. While there exists the possibility of marriage relations between BaYaka groups, most *Bilo* villagers refuse to marry BaYaka, many will not eat together with BaYaka nor allow them to stay in their homes or villages. While BaYaka share and do not trade goods with one another, relations with *Bilo* 'village people' are predominantly based on trading and exchanging goods. Rivers divide the territories of different BaYaka groups ensuring they do not overlap, however villagers superimpose their land claims over parts of BaYaka land.

BaYaka egalitarianism and demand sharing

BaYaka individuals might achieve different outcomes from time to time – by hunting more, being charismatic and persuasive, and so on, but a range of 'levelling mechanisms' (Woodburn 1982) ensure that these inequalities do not last. Such mechanisms include demand sharing, avoidance, mockery, direct individual access to resources, to the means of coercion and to freedom of movement. To emphasize the active nature of maintaining an egalitarian society James Woodburn labelled them 'assertively egalitarian' (1982). Such groups are actively fashioning their worlds in similar ways that ensure that normal differences between people are not culturally converted into differences in status, authority or rank.

Practices such as hunting that result in differential outcomes between people are carefully handled by a combination of popular vigilance and ideologies of taboo that broadly support the principle that resource abundance is ensured through correct sharing with all present of what is extracted from the environment (Lewis 2008). Here there is no pressure to produce, but huge pressure to share anything that is produced. Demands for a share are imposed on the producer by the group with such insistence that it is impossible to ignore. Individuals may hide produce they do not want to share, but others will be suspicious and insistently demand from them, or trick them into revealing what they have hidden in order to take some of it. They will be mercilessly mocked for trying to avoid sharing. This is *assertive* egalitarianism.

The Mbendjele's system for distributing material property through demand sharing resembles similar practices among immediate-return hunter-gatherers (e.g. Blurton-Jones 1987; Ichikawa 2005; Peterson 1993; Woodburn 1982, 1998). In contrast to the donor-organized sharing familiar to most people, where the person owning the resource dispenses it according to their choice, demand-sharing is recipient controlled. Potential recipients constantly demand shares of things they suspect may be around. It is the possessor's duty to give whatever is requested of them, rather than being entitled to refuse the request. Such demands are not perceived as a burden, but as an opportunity for demonstrating care and affection, and that one is a properly moral person.

For most material items need determines who can claim them, especially when they are consumable. Possessing something here is more like a guardianship or caretaker role until someone else needs it. Certain personal possessions, such as a woman's basket, her cooking pots, and machete, and a man's bag, his spear, knife and axe, are recognized as belonging to named individuals, often the person who made, found, or bought the item. These individuals have priority over others' claims to the item. But when not in use by them, these objects may be shared on demand with someone who asks.

Certain foods, such as the meat of game animals that may be obtained in large amounts, must be carefully shared out (*bwedye*) among all present according to detailed rules generically referred to as *ekila* (Lewis 2008). These determine exactly how each species should be butchered and to whom different parts must be given. So when a pig is killed, the hunter gets the heart, the men get the liver and kidneys, a dog that participated would get the lungs, and so on. The remaining meat must be fairly shared amongst all present or the hunter's luck will be ruined. If sharing is not conducted according to these rules it jeopardizes future success.

Unlike meat, gathered foods such as wild yams, honey, vegetables, fruit and small fish are dependable food sources that regularly provision camp. When more than can be immediately eaten is gathered, the food is shared among all present in the forest before returning to camp. Once in the camp women prepare and cook the food and share it again by sending plates (*djalo* or *gabo*) to the men's area in the middle of camp, and to their female friends and relatives at other hearths. In contrast, game meat is always publicly redistributed on arrival in camp before being cooked and redistributed by the women's *djalo*.

In such a society all people are encouraged to contribute according to their ability, but if you are very young, old, physically or mentally challenged in some

way and only rarely contribute, your entitlement is not diminished. You have just as much right as anyone else to a share of whatever comes into camp. The principle is that if someone has something that you need just ask them for it; and, as Mbendjele often say ‘we have easy hands, we always give’.

Contradicting models of economic behaviour which assume producers’ require rewarding, or that those who are good producers will get recognition, status and fame, here it is not the case. Men are very sensitive to who is provisioning the camp with meat. Rather than gain prestige or girlfriends, men who hunt a lot become the target of teasing and mockery if people think that the group is eating their production too often. Such men should stop hunting for a while; otherwise they risk being cursed, or exiled if they persist. This occurred in the case of a famous elephant hunter (*tuma*) in the early 1990s (Lewis 2003). Despite repeated calls for him to stop hunting so often, he continued. First, he was cursed to meet silverback gorillas when he went hunting. But this did not stop him. Eventually the women of his camp forced him into exile by refusing to cook any meat that he produced. He moved to the neighbouring Luma Pygmy area and married a Luma woman. In 2012, I met him again, now single, in a Mikaya Pygmy village even further away from Mbendjele forest.

What is not shared on demand

As just described, when sufficient gathered or hunted food is ‘taken out of the forest’ (*benda o bila ndima*) it is carefully shared with all present. Other material items such as clothing or tools are shared on demand if not in use. However, some of the most valued forms of cultural knowledge – the songs, dances and ritual procedures related to named forest spirits *mokondi massana* (spirit-play) – are not shared on demand, but accessed through initiation requiring payment.

There is a cultural logic to this seeming inconsistency. Komba, the creator, made the forest for all

creatures to share. The rules of *ekila* that determine how forest produce is shared are said to originate from this time. No individual or species has any greater right than any other to the forest and its resources. For instance, Mbendjele resent silverback gorillas’ territorialism, and will insult them angrily. No animal can claim part of the forest as his own. This is why Mbendjele view villagers’ claims to own forest and fields as illegitimate, and so refer to villagers simply as gorillas (*ebobo*). Since Komba created all material things for creatures to share, anyone can take what they need, or demand it from someone who already has it. By contrast, products of human inspiration or dreams belong to their creator. Since they are the product of human creativity, their creator can decide whether and how to circulate them.

This has resulted in the emergence of a shared set of rules among the different BaYaka groups for sharing spirit plays. One set of rules organize local level participation, the other set, regional exchanges of the rights to call different spirits from the forest. At the local level within the community, every eligible member will be initiated for a fee into the spirit-plays appropriate to their gender and activities (Table 7.1). Since there is innovation in the generation of new spirit-plays, even elders will find themselves as neophytes from time to time when new spirit-plays are introduced to their local area. To have the right to organize a spirit-play, one must be a spirit guardian. A parallel, regional distribution system operates to circulate guardianship rights to new spirit-plays between clans and between communities across national and linguistic boundaries (Lewis 2015 provides further details).

Each spirit-play belongs to a named class of forest spirit (*mokondi*) with its unique identifying songs, costumes and dances that can produce a distinctive affect among participants. It is reliably reproducing this affect that is the objective of performing spirit-play. Initiates also learn secret knowledge and sacred lore associated with that particular class of forest spirit.

Table 7.1. Southern Mbendjele *mokondi massana* (spirit plays) organized according to context of use (Republic of Congo).

Elephant hunting <i>Mwaka ya baito</i>	Food quest <i>Beke yoma</i>	Male power <i>Mendo ya batopai</i>	Female power <i>Mendo ya baito</i>	Funerals, sorrow <i>Eboka, mawa</i>	Fun <i>Bisengo</i>
Niabula Moshunde Malimbe Yolo Minyanggo Eya Yele Ejengi (once feasting)	Yele Malobe Sho Eya Bonganga Ejengi (once feasting)	Ejengi Niabula Mabonga Sho	Ngoku Yele Djenguma	Ejengi Ngoku Yele Djenguma Monano Bibana Enyomo Sho Niabula Mabonga	Mombembo Longa Djoboko Bolu

For instance, *Ejengi*, one of the most widespread and important classes of forest spirit, protects his male initiates from charging animals and helps them to see forest paths. Only initiates into *Ejengi* can enter the secret path (*njanga*) to organize an *Ejengi* spirit-play, and the ceremony is called *Ejengi*. Each clan has its own named *Ejengi* and so there are many individual *Ejengi*. Each one has an acknowledged spirit-guardian (*konja mokondi*) responsible for calling it from the forest. This is done on the secret path (*njanga*), where the initiates come together to prepare key aspects of the spirit-play such as the spirits' clothes. Initiates ensure that the ritual follows the correct procedures in order that the forest spirit is drawn into the human group and so generates the characteristic pleasurable-euphoric states associated with its spirit-play.

Access to the secret *njanga* path is governed by initiation. Initiations can occur whenever a spirit-play is performed. There is no fixed age for this to occur, it depends on an individual's circumstances at the time of a ceremony. Fees can be paid in kind with desirable goods such as alcohol, smoke, meat or honey if for a man, and as stingless bee honey (*koma*) and wild yams if for a woman. Today, most initiation fees are simply paid in cash. Although given to the spirit guardian, as soon as the fee is received it becomes subject to the rules of demand sharing and is distributed among all present, including the neophytes (*mboni*) that just paid it. Cash will be converted into alcohol or smoke for immediate consumption. In this way, the fees feed the spirit by fuelling celebrants to sing and dance more enthusiastically. The Mbendjele are proud of their ability to make such fun immediately produce so many desirable goods and contrast this with the 'empty' ancestral rites of Bilo that project promised benefits into the future.

This local level system instituted by spirit-plays circulates desirable and hidden goods such as smoke or cash among all present. In conjunction with the local system, a regional system circulates the right to call a spirit to play – to become a spirit guardian. This right is obtained by inheritance or purchase if you are not the original founder (see also Tsuru 2001). The regional system trading spirit-plays exists amongst all BaYaka groups across all five of the Congo Basin countries they inhabit. Although items paid will vary according to the demands made by the original spirit guardian, it is generally composed of consumables (alcohol, smoke), cash and iron objects.

Old spirit-plays, such as *Ejengi* and *Yele*, are widely distributed among BaYaka groups and so rarely traded. However, newer spirit-plays are unevenly distributed, even between clans living in the same forest area. These newer spirit-plays have a

variety of histories. Some were traded from other BaYaka (Mbendjele in RoC say they got *Malobe* and *Niabula* from Baka in Cameroon), some came from Mbendjele in other areas, and others, such as *Monano*, were recently captured in the forest, others were encountered in dreams (for examples see Furniss & Joiris 2011; Lewis 2015; Tsuru 1998). BaYaka love to discuss which spirit-plays different groups have rights to perform, comment on the accomplishment of specific songs and the dances employed, and compare each other's performances. These are a key way that Mbendjele identify, discuss and judge the extent to which other Pygmy groups are real 'forest people'.

The regional economy exists because the distribution of spirit-plays across the BaYaka region is uneven. This matters when performing their most important rituals – commemoration ceremonies for the recently deceased (*eboka*). These large dry season gatherings are the highlight of the social calendar, lasting between one and six weeks. Young people get to meet each other, marriages are agreed and friends meet again to share news from the forest. These events draw groups from far and wide, and participants expect a variety of spirit-plays to be performed. During *eboka* BaYaka experience their kinship networks and extended selves at their maximum. Sharing such moments together materializes and makes palpable their sense of themselves as a large-scale society across the forest.

Due to their immediate-return economy, when Mbendjele organize commemoration ceremonies it is challenging to provide for all the guests that turn up. Although strong families will organize net-hunting expeditions and tap palm trees for wine to share, the requirement to give whatever guests demand is always difficult to fulfil. In this context having some new spirit-play rituals to perform will reduce the burden by generating desirable goods such as alcohol, or money to support the ceremony since many will be eligible for initiation. Neophytes pay an initiation fee. If not already in kind, fees are immediately spent on alcohol and other consumables to fuel the performance. During large commemoration ceremonies several dozen neophytes can be initiated generating significant amounts of consumables for several days of performance. This is an important source of sustenance during these long ceremonies.

If the hosting clan entertains their guests with a wide variety of spirit-plays this is appreciated and will be a favourite topic of conversation for years to come. However, if the hosting clan does not own the spirit-play that their guests are expecting, they will be obliged to find and possibly pay a spirit-guardian to call the spirit-play for them. This can become a source

of conflict: Since Mbendjele have so little they may be tempted to do the ritual without following this protocol. At its least problematic, this can simply involve doing the spirit-play without a spirit guardian present, or more seriously, as I have described (Lewis 2015), by stealing a spirit-play witnessed elsewhere among other groups. This is done by changing its name and claiming to be its creator. Now the thief can attract as many neophytes as possible and ‘pull-out’ (*ulua*) goods. If discovered by the original spirit guardians – as it inevitably does – this provokes serious and occasionally violent conflict.

Past conflicts led each clan to want its own spirit guardians for those spirit-plays performed at their commemoration ceremonies. My close friend Emeka told me that the ancestors have bought and sold spirit-plays since ancient times. He knows which spirit-plays his ancestors bought and from whom, as he knows which people his ancestors initiated as spirit-guardians. Some of these transfers occurred two or three generations ago. Like Emeka, most elders know who legitimately owns what.

Among Southern Mbendjele groups I recorded over 20 different spirit-plays, Tsuru describes 53 among Baka living along the Yokadouma – Mouloundou road in Cameroon (1998, 54–5). Furniss & Joiris (2011) analyse the creative process by which Baka re-combine key musical and costume elements in the generation of new spirit-plays in a constant but structured innovation process. While the Baka tradition is possibly the most creative, the Mbendjele system seems the most conservative because it continues to dance all of the most widespread spirit-plays: *Ejengi*, *Niabula*, *Ngoku* and *Yele*, and is especially appreciated by other BaYaka groups who make long journeys to learn from them. Kisliuk (2001) describes how BaAka in eastern CAR walk to northern RoC to buy spirit-plays from the Mbendjele. Louis Sarno (pers. comm. 2014) explained that Mbendjele in the southwest of CAR also make special journeys to visit Mbendjele in RoC to buy spirit-plays. They love to watch footage of Mbendjele spirit-play performances that he filmed in RoC. They integrate what they see, and revive forgotten elements to enhance their own performances.

The wide distribution of this spirit-play economy is testimony to substantial networks of interaction between diverse BaYaka groups of such antiquity that participating groups now speak different languages and interpret and perform the same named spirit-plays differently. For instance, whereas the Mbendjele *Ejengi* is concerned with the creation of contemporary society when men and women first came together, Baka *Ejengi* now celebrates elephants and elephant hunting.

Economies of joy

Spirit-plays are by far the most valued and expensive items that BaYaka will purchase. While Toma’s younger brother was working for a logging company prospecting for trees he bought the spirit-play of *Enyomo* for an anvil (costing about 120 Euros) and cash equivalent to about 150 Euros from an Mbendjele co-worker. These men probably earned 70 or 80 Euros a month, so the price paid represented four months’ worth of wages. The only other item of similar cost that Mbendjele would consider buying would be a shotgun, then costing around 150 Euros. But since shotguns can be borrowed from other people fairly easily Mbendjele men prefer to spend their hard-won earnings on the rights to perform a ritual.

Introducing a new spirit-play to one’s clan after a long voyage (*molongo*) is highly appreciated, as one of the spoils of the journey brought back for others to enjoy, like smoked meat or fish. Most often it is men who travel to do brideservice in a distant community, or who seek work outside their traditional forest area that encounter new spirit-plays. If accepted by the original spirit-guardian, and he pays, he is initiated to become spirit-guardian of a spirit child of the original guardian’s forest spirit. Then he can begin producing joy by initiating the eligible but uninitiated of his home community so as to ‘pull-out/bring into the open’ (*ulua*) more goods and money to fuel the joy produced by spirit-play.

The motor driving this ritual economy is the desire for the joy spirit-plays provide. When the techniques associated with a particular spirit-play are performed faultlessly they reliably produce delight and wonder. During the performance, initiates try to build this up to produce euphoric, trance-like states in participants. It is the euphoria or joy (*bisengo*) of these moments that people value so highly and are concerned to freely share, but not the techniques employed to produce them. In effect, each spirit-play is a skill-set that once understood and mastered enables participants to establish a situation in which all experience joy and communion. The spirit-play economy is a unique system for distributing practices and knowledge that ensure particular euphoric states are repeatedly produced and made available to all present.

Each spirit-play creates a different quality of joyful experience. During no-moon *Malobe*, for instance, fires are extinguished and light forbidden, participants huddle together in the middle of camp, legs resting on their neighbours’, voices intertwining in complex polyphony until tiny luminous dots float into camp producing a calm, wondrous and expansive joy. In the

pitch black participants melt into one another and the forest. *Ejengi* is quite different. *Ejengi* produces the 'frisson' of feeling safe in the presence of something beautiful but dangerous, combined with an erotically charged joy generated by sexy symbolism and dancing, seductive playfulness and excessive consumption. Other spirit-plays, such as *Enyomo* or *Monano*, produce a relaxed joy by blending clowning humour with virtuoso singing and dancing. Spirit-plays enchant many senses; using strange sounds, stirring sights, beautiful songs and dance movements, with humour and parody, touch and smell, emotions and desires, their overlapping rhythms entrance and produce joy.

Individually, each spirit-play is a work of art – aesthetically charming the senses and emotions. Mbendjele say that the animals and the forest appreciate this too. Even UNESCO has felt it, and recently inscribed the distinctive polyphonic singing of spirit-play songs on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2003).

The regional economy and contemporary change

It is the high value that BaYaka place on community well-being (Lewis 2002; Oloa-Biloa 2016) as the means to assure abundance that motivates the search for new spirit-plays. Successful spirit-play banishes disharmony and conflict while producing prized social products: music, dance and joy; and desired goods such as drink, food and smoke. Each new spirit-play produces a new variation of joy that contributes to the overall well-being of the community and by extension to the forest keeping the camp 'open' for food to come. The high social value of joy leads to performances that often run right through the night, sometimes lasting for several days. These are people's most cherished moments, sometimes provoking watery eyes when reminiscing about particularly memorable ceremonies. The desire for novelty and variation results in this vigorous search for new spirit-plays and for novel songs and dances of existing ones. Joy is the motor of this ritual economy of remarkable scale by hunter-gatherer standards.

As the search for new techniques for producing joy drives the movement of spirit-plays between groups, so it also moves difficult to obtain, high value items from outside the forest. These items circulate between communities as new spirit guardians are initiated and the goods acquired are shared on demand. Then locally, initiations into new spirit-plays cause things hidden in the community to emerge for all to share. While the right to perform these spirit-plays is traded, the items demanded in the trade are shared on demand once they have been 'pulled out' (*ulua*)

by the spirit guardian. While the products of performing spirit-plays are shared on demand, the rights to perform them are not. This combination enables spirit-plays to cause desirable goods to circulate at multiple levels – within local groups, between local groups, and between regional groups internationally.

Many of the desirable products that spirit-plays cause to circulate are not to be found in the forest: money, iron, distilled liquor, tobacco, marijuana and farmed food. These items change over time. In interviews asking spirit guardians what they received or paid, they described past payments as mainly composed of metal goods – notably small iron anvils, metal coils or spear blades, but also wine, salt, cloth, tobacco and money. Today spirit-guardians mostly focus on 'pulling-out money' (*ulua mbongo*).

With the expansion of the logging industry throughout the region since the 1990s, scrap iron is relatively easy to find, and ready-made blades widely available. In tandem, far more money is circulating locally than ever before. An increasing familiarity with money since the 2000s has led Mbendjele to become interested in demanding, obtaining and using money, whereas previously they had preferred exchange or to receive goods in return for their labour or forest produce. Although exchange still occurs, Mbendjele are impressed by the way cash can transform according to need into cloth, machetes, cigarettes or manioc, can be used to pay fines that solve disputes or problems in the community, and can be easily hidden away to avoid being shared. Due to its fungibility and storage potential, money has become the elusive, desirable good from outside the forest for spirit-plays to circulate.

Bringing money and goods out into the open is an explicit objective of spirit-plays and how Mbendjele ensure ritual is an immediately productive activity. Spirit-plays are also used in this way to 'pull-out' goods and money from neighbouring *Bilo* villagers. Due to their indigenous status as 'first people' (*bisi bosso*) BaYaka perform spirit-play rituals at all the *Bilo*'s most important ceremonies. These ceremonies are an important arena for *Bilo*' inter-clan status competitions. It is important for inter- and intra-villager claims to prestige and status that large numbers of Mbendjele perform spirit-plays during their rites, especially during weeklong commemoration ceremonies (*matanga*). BaYaka spirit guardians are expert at playing villager status claims off one another to encourage competitive gifting to the singers.

With the rapid emergence of large logging towns in the forest, Mbendjele are now applying this system for producing money there. When I first arrived in the early 1990s outsiders were only exceptionally initiated into spirit plays. As Mbendjele started to visit

logging towns in the early 2000s they realized that on payday weekends workers had lots of cash and would spend it easily. While the standard fee for an initiation would range between 500 CFA and 2000 CFA, in logging towns it was possible to obtain between 5000 and 20,000 CFA for initiating non-BaYaka. Riotously drunken spirit-plays would proceed for the whole weekend.

A dual economy

In contrast to the daily demand sharing focused on circulating forest produce that most individuals have the skill and knowledge to obtain for themselves, spirit-plays circulate rare and elusive goods produced outside the forest. These goods have changed, but the mechanism for transferring them is structurally similar across a huge area of Central Africa: from the Bagyeli on the Atlantic coast to the east bank of the Ubangi River in DRC and probably further east when research in these regions is undertaken.

BaYaka are sometimes considered small-scale, isolated and mutually independent groups with closer ties to their agricultural neighbours than with each other. However, an understanding of how spirit-play networks irresistibly draw people together in larger groups than for any other event, and connect communities over great distances, shows this to be mistaken. This ritual economy circulates songs and spirits, people and their genes, and valued items unavailable in the forest to all BaYaka no matter how remote. Spirit-plays maintain the BaYaka's shared identity across language boundaries and international frontiers.

The circulation of spirit-plays often follow men doing brideservice – they bring metal to pay for initiations, genes mix, news is shared and populations keep in touch. Participation is not motivated by greed or profit, but by the popular desire to experience the variety of collective joyful states spirit-plays establish. Rather than bringing status or prestige, the circulation of goods spirit-plays provoke is seen as evidence of how powerful the forest spirits are, not the spirit guardian or initiates.

Participating BaYaka now have different languages, subsistence practices and neighbours, and the goods they value from outside have changed, but they continue to share the same dual systems for distributing local produce through demand sharing while obtaining and circulating rare but desirable social and economic products widely throughout the forest through spirit-play. The social products of congregation, companionship, and joy are complemented by the economic achievements of spirit-plays that extract distant or hidden production, distribute

actual production and teach skills and knowledge that assure future production. The two systems are highly complementary, and their distribution and adaptability suggests that they are highly resilient and of long duration.

Hunter-gatherers' dual economic systems

The dual nature of immediate-return hunter-gatherer economies has been rather neglected since Woodburn made his initial perceptive insights (1982, 441–4). Following his lead, I will conclude this chapter with some preliminary observations of similarities between what on the surface appear to be very different solutions to ensure non-local products circulate between small, remote and highly dispersed populations without exchange, dependency or indebtedness. I have discussed ritual performances (*massana*) among BaYaka, now I turn to gambling (*lukuchuko*) among Hadza, and gift-giving (*xaro*) among San. Each group uses the same system to distribute local products – demand sharing; whereas each has found a different solution to ensure the sharing of non-local desirable products amongst and between communities.

When food is plentiful Hadza come from far and wide to congregate in large camps around the food source. These are vast bushes of *undushibi* or *tafabe* berries or when large animals have been killed (Marlowe 2010, 66; Petersen 2013, 130). During such times men spend most of their time gambling personally owned objects such as 'metal-headed hunting arrows, both poisoned and non-poisoned, but ... also ... knives, axes, beads, smoking pipes, cloth and even occasionally a container of honey which can be used in trade' (Woodburn 1982, 441). Woodburn notes that these objects are made from materials not available in every part of Hadza country – scrap metal was obtained through trade with non-Hadza, arrow poison is from a tree-sap or seeds only available in certain locations and absent from large areas, as is a shrub producing lightweight arrow shafts. The sandstone used to make stone smoking pipes is likewise only available in certain places. The game is played by throwing bark discs against a baobab tree until one player's disc lands in the same position as a larger 'mother disc' (Petersen 2013, 129). Outcomes are based on chance, not skill, and the winner takes all the goods gambled. Participants must gamble another set of goods for the game to continue. '(M)en would follow their lost possessions as they moved from camp to camp seeking to recover them again through *lukuchuko*. As a result, scarce goods circulated and the game was perpetuated.' (ibid). Woodburn further observed that much inter-camp visiting was stimulated by gambling,

whether to keep hold of winnings or to retrieve them from winners, thus ensuring that scarce goods circulated among all Hadza without forms of exchange that would bind people in potentially unequal relations of contract or indebtedness, or of one-way flows of goods that could create dependency.

'Individual effort, craft skill and, particularly, the skill of trading with outsiders are quite variable. The attraction of gambling mobilises effort and skill but distributes its proceeds at random in a way which subverts the accumulation of individual wealth by the hard-working or by the skilled. It further subverts any tendency to regional differentiation within Hadza country based on valuable local resources which are in demand in other areas.' (Woodburn 1982, 442).

Whereas Woodburn noted that many men spent more time playing *lukuchuko* than they did hunting or gathering, Marlowe and Petersen both note that *lukuchuko* has now waned in most areas, possibly because of the greater availability of scrap metal, and money from tourism and researchers. Nonetheless, young men in Tli'ika have recently begun to play *dobuko*, a modification of *lukuchuko*. In this game, individuals try to throw coins closest to a hole in the ground (Petersen 2013, 130).

Petersen quotes two Hadza men: "'That game *lukuchuko* eats poison arrows" Endeko,' and "'Men can lose everything they have including harmony with their wife and children." Elder Kampala.' (2013, 131). These echo many Hadza's views that *lukuchuko* (like other forms of gambling) is highly addictive, and derives from watching some men spend so much time playing that they lose all their personal possessions, have little time left to search for food or care for their children, and in chasing their lost goods to other camps, occasionally even left their wives behind.

In the Hadza case, the motor driving the circulation of rare, skilfully crafted or difficult to obtain goods, and objects from outside Hadza country, is the pleasure derived from gambling. The pleasure of winning beautiful objects – a fine arrow is a beautiful object to a skilled hunter – and of winning back prized possessions that have been lost. This pleasure, which can verge on addiction in some individuals, made the game compulsive, so ensuring that rare non-local goods circulated to every part of Hadza country.

Employing a different strategy, San groups over a vast region of southern Africa participate in long distance gift-giving networks called *xaro*¹ that circulate

non-food goods such as beadwork, clothing, hunting and gathering equipment, kitchenware and livestock. The networks distributed these goods remarkably evenly across San groups, despite some camps having easy access to wages and store-purchased goods, and others to none. Polly Weissner reports that 'For the 59 !Kung in the sample, 69% of a person's possessions were obtained through *hxaro*, while the remaining 30% were made or purchased by the owner, but destined for *hxaro* networks' (1982, 70). San choose a widely spatially distributed set of *xaro* partners; about a third are !Kung leading similar lifestyles to their own, another third are those leading very different lifestyles or living in very different environments (e.g. farms or settlements) and another third are made up of adolescents and elderly people. Wiessner's work shows that in 1968–69 and 1974 most extended visits by !Kung to different areas were to give gifts to *xaro* partners.

Wiessner's detailed ethnographic study of *xaro* networks demonstrates how they provide a framework within which San groups 'import and export goods to and from local and world markets' and 'structure ties that allow !Kung to redistribute themselves over traditional and nontraditional resources.' (1986, 121).

Hxaro chains, literally 'paths for things', extend for hundreds of kilometers, sometimes crossing linguistic boundaries, although knowledge of others on a *hxaro* path does not extend beyond a certain segment. Wiessner (1986, 109).

As trade goods pass from one *xaro* partner to another they are often altered to fit the aesthetic expectations and existing repertoire of San material culture, and/or to express San identity. 'The continuity and integrity still found in material culture in remote areas may thus be, in part, attributable to the structure of *hxaro* paths.' (1986, 114).

Reflecting on the long, uneven history of the San's engagement with non-San, beginning 1500 years ago in some areas outside the sandveld, Wiessner remarks:

although items foreign to San culture constantly move along *hxaro* networks [Wiessner 1981, 1982], at least until the mid-1970s many items of !Kung material culture did not undergo great change ... The greatest outside influences were in the adoption of a few items of great utility such as cooking pots, and the substitution of new materials for old ones [i.e. iron for bone and glass

beads for ostrich egg shell beads]. In addition, a San specific repertory of material culture covers vast areas ... For example, in the early 1970s among hunting and gathering groups, 90 percent of the material culture was shared by the !Kung, G/wi and !Xo [Wiessner 1983]. (Wiessner 1986, 104).

Here, as in the BaYaka and Hadza examples, the underlying system demonstrates great resilience, able to incorporate the introduction of new items, and surviving for long periods of time without losing its underlying efficacy and structure. Since 2000 these groups have experienced an intensified onslaught on their cultural integrity and autonomy as their land is dispossessed, occupied or impoverished by commercial, industrial and conservation activities, and governments oblige them to sedentarize. Their hunting and gathering lifestyle has been effectively forbidden in many countries by government agencies and international conservationists pressuring for control of biodiverse landscapes at the expense of local peoples' rights and livelihoods (Lewis 2016). Despite this recent dramatic downturn in hunter-gatherers' ability to practice their lifestyles, these dual distribution systems have persisted in some form or other – though more successfully among BaYaka than among Hadza or San.

To better understand the source of this resilience a consideration of the quite different organization and motivation of these distribution systems to those current in industrial-capitalist societies is illuminating. While I have outlined the organizational differences of each system, it is at the motivational level that similarities emerge. When reading Wiessner's ethnography describing the atmosphere in which *xaro* goods are prepared for passing on to a *xaro* partner, or received by the partner, the importance of expressing affection and the pleasure this produces, is what people say motivates the transfer of goods.

In contrast to items for trade with outsiders that are made quickly and often alone, items for *xaro* are manufactured over weeks or months in groups sitting together telling stories and laughing. For instance, a store-purchased woolly hat received from one *xaro* partner will be un-stitched and re-woven to change the pattern before being given to another partner.

'H*xaro* gifts are surrounded by an air of appreciation and expectation partially because many are either pretty or useful and the !Kung enjoy having new things, and partly because they are the expression of a social relationship ... [T]hey grow in social value through conversation after

conversation. Others can later recognize their maker and know how much care was put into them. (Wiessner 1982, 71).

Like the Trobriand *kula* gift that contains something of the essence of the giver to make the receiver feel obliged to return the gift (what the Maori call *hau*, Mauss 2000), so *xaro* gifts materially embody the maker's love, care and attention for the person to which they are destined. It is this expression of affection that motivates the entire system to move valued items over hundreds of kilometres and distribute them surprisingly evenly across San groups. 'Most !Kung feel it is not only the responsibility of the receiver to reciprocate, but of the giver to make him want to do so.' (Wiessner 1986, 106).

The cultural importance and pleasure for !Kung people of holding each other in mind even if they cannot be present with them is well illustrated in Wiessner's fascinating comparison of the content of daytime and night-time conversations:

Night conversations also conveyed the broader structure of *xaro* exchange, particularly remembering distant *xaro* partners. Nine of 122 (7%) day conversations included stories about the exploits of people who were direct or indirect *xaro* partners, compared with 41 of 52 (79%) stories told at night. Night conversations used multimodal communication with gestures, imitation, sound effects, or bursts of song that brought the characters right to the hearth and into the hearts of listeners. People went to sleep with absent kin filling their thoughts; not infrequently they left for visits shortly after. (2014, 4/9).

Conclusion

In contrast to similarities evident in how the demand sharing of local produce is conducted in each society, their systems for circulating non-local products between small, remote and highly dispersed populations are different. Each demonstrates a different economic solution that establishes these societies as existing at both small and large scale, while effectively circulating goods without creating dependencies, indebtedness or political inequalities at either scale. The pleasure derived from holding distant relatives and friends in mind as non-local objects are transformed into San artefacts to demonstrate the maker's affection, and then receiving that affection through the *xaro* object, is what drives the San system for distributing non-lo-

cal goods. The Hadza's, by the pleasure of winning exotic or beautiful objects, and of winning back prized possessions that have been lost. The BaYaka's system is driven by the search for novelty in ritual musics and the social concentration of accompanying performances that reliably produce collective joy and consumables for feasting and indulgence.

Rather than depending on authority or obligation between strangers, their economic systems for distributing their most valued non-food items are motivated by peoples' pleasure-seeking propensities. They are positively reinforced by the delight generated by participation in moments of intense sociality as small groups come together or visit one another – the search for joy among BaYaka, the compulsive pleasure derived from gambling among Hadza, and the opportunity to hold in mind, cherish and demonstrate affection for distant relatives and friends among San. When dwelling in such small-scale societies for most of the year, key moments in which groups come together, whether to dance and sing, eat berries and gamble, or to give or receive lovingly made gifts, are yearned for in a way difficult for many WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich and developed – Heinrich et al. 2010) people to appreciate. It is these moments of large-scale self-awareness, of social concentration and emotional intensity in which prized goods are distributed, that are recounted and discussed as highlights of the recent past, often humorously and vividly brought to life in the intimacy and charm of fire-lit conversations.

In different ways, each system depends on culturally specific pleasure-seeking propensities to circulate outside goods alongside local items, genes, news and stories, broadly across constituent groups. Such dual economic systems are hinted at beyond immediate-return African hunter-gatherers; Tonkinson's (2005) account of how new songs and ancestral rituals emerge and are traded between Aboriginal Australians for important items such as weapons, shows how this circulated these prized items between groups in a large part of Western Australia. Such examples offer ethnographically grounded suggestions to guide investigations of archaeological sites such as Wadi Sura (Honore, this volume) where meeting for ceremony may have supported sharing other items unevenly distributed in the surrounding region.

While being suggestive of much greater variation among such systems in the past, this presentation of three of these dual economic systems for distributing local and non-local products demonstrates that these modern societies of hunter-gatherers and former hunter-gatherers are adapting and fashioning their worlds according to their values and preoccupations

in response to the opportunities presented or denied them by the vagaries of history and change. The San incorporated new items of utility or beauty into *xaro*, where possible refashioning them at each stage of their journey along *xaro* paths to become more San in their aesthetics and styling, or how BaYaka adapted to incorporate iron and now money into their spirit-play economy, or, at least some Hadza, gambling for coins rather than arrow heads now that money's fungibility provides access to many of the key goods previously distributed by *lukuchuko*.

The extent and resilience of these distribution systems until very recently, is striking. *Xaro* paths stretched hundreds of miles across the Kalahari well beyond any known individuals; the BaYaka spirit plays of Ejengi, Yelle or Ngoku, are shared by many tens of thousands of people speaking different languages and living in different countries but who self-consciously recognize each other as sharing the same values, political system and origins. Among BaYaka their shared participation in spirit plays establish an awareness of themselves at a civilizational scale, and mark them as distinctive from politically hierarchical, non-sharing non-hunter-gatherers living in the same region.

The common thread in these alternative African economies is that they are dependent or maintained over long periods by culturally mediated pleasure-seeking rather than by exchange, balanced reciprocity, indebtedness, dependency or sanctions. While each form is different, culturally adapted to the environment and social aesthetics of the culture in which it is embedded, each appears to have been highly effective. Without written laws, specialized roles or institutions to arbitrate disputes or enforce social values, they have been able to ensure long-term continuity through institutions that are non-coercive because they are based on cultivating shared pleasures, on celebrating joy, affection and sociability in the process of revealing a large-scale sense of identity and belonging to participants.

Such hunter-gatherer economic systems show that despite non-producers claiming most of their production, producers are not demotivated, but continue to produce. This may seem paradoxical, but the long duration of these hunter-gatherer societies demonstrates that these are successful and resilient economic arrangements for distributing both local and non-local goods across huge areas, and fairly evenly between widely dispersed small-scale communities occupying some of the most challenging environments for modern transportation and distribution networks.

The distributional systems summarized here offer an explicit critique of current economic orthodoxy that

assumes successful production or exchange requires material rewards to function.² Reward to motivate production is fundamental to capitalist ideology, but is not universally true. For instance, both historically and today, numerous hobbyists often spend a large proportion of their personal resources and time on pursuing their passion. Such non-materially rewarded activity can often be the main focus of an individuals' life, pleasures and free time, but is rarely their means of earning a living or sustaining themselves and their families. By contrast these hunter-gatherer economies have successfully harnessed this human propensity by directly incorporating pleasure-seeking to motivate their distribution systems for scarce and valuable non-local goods over great distances and across highly dispersed populations. In line with their egalitarian ethos, such systems do not depend on authority figures, enforcement bodies or sanctions.

Bird-David's recent work (2017 and this volume) on the importance of taking into account the small-scale nature of hunter-gatherer communities serves as an important reminder of the need for ethnographers to consider the personal, the intimate, the value people in such communities place on caring for one another, and on positive emotional relationships with those around them. Bird-David's analysis of the Indian Nayaka shows the importance of face-to-face interaction or 'pluripresence' in constituting peoples' sense of themselves as a group extending beyond the self, but in a very localized way (2017). In contrast to this Indian example, the secondary distribution systems for non-local products among the African hunter-gatherers described here make present a virtual social group that extends well beyond those in local camps. This wider community extends the notion of 'who we are' to groups and people so far from the local area that they would be unknowable but for these systems distributing their products regionally. Thus BaYaka are made aware of others like themselves in distant communities through experiencing their musical and ritual creativity as they sing their songs and dance their forest spirits. San make distant relatives and friends daily present through the work that imbues *xaro* goods with the affection of the giver, and wearing or using them each day keeps those distant others in mind. As Hadza track their lost gambled goods, or enjoy those they have won from others, they are reminded of their extended community made present through these objects.

Notes

1 The spelling has changed from *xharo* to *xaro* in more recent publications. I use *xaro* here, unless quoting from an earlier publication.

- 2 The efficacy of non-coercive distributional systems driven by collective pleasures have only recently been more formally integrated into capitalist systems by the success of content sharing platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Musically, Pinterest, Tiktok, Open Street Map, etc. or in freeware projects such as Open Office, and in certain real-world spaces such as volunteer-run charity activities, hackathons, or similar community projects.

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