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Abstract	<p>An examination of musical participation and taboo among the egalitarian Mbendjele BaYaka illustrates how cultural learning can be organized without recourse to figures of authority. The chapter describes two complementary pedagogic processes that accompany BaYaka as they move through life. One acts on groups of people playing together (<i>massana</i>), the other on individuals as they are differently affected by taboos (<i>ekila</i>). Both serve to lead growing BaYaka into opportunities for learning more abstract cultural knowledge at salient points in the life cycle.</p> <p>In successfully performing the dense polyphony of BaYaka music (<i>massana</i>), people experience what BaYaka consider to be desirable emotions, ideal relationships, and interaction. They participate in an enhanced learning environment that promotes peer-to-peer imitation rather than direct instruction with its concomitant implication of authority and status. Key economic strategies and political orientations are experienced during <i>massana</i> in ways that stimulate their application to non-<i>massana</i> contexts. The ethnography of <i>ekila</i> demonstrates how counterintuitive explanations of striking hunting and reproductive prohibitions stimulate a learner-motivated pedagogic process that does not depend on defining any individual as a focus for learning important knowledge. These taboos anchor key areas of cosmological knowledge, gender, and political ideology in the physical and biological experiences of human growth and maturation making gendered practices and cultural values take on a natural, inevitable quality.</p> <p>Together, <i>massana</i> and <i>ekila</i> provide major avenues for BaYaka children to learn and to reproduce a distinctive and remarkably durable cultural system. The chapter finishes by suggesting some structural features of these culturally embedded pedagogic systems that contribute to their efficacy, durability and ability to adapt to, and incorporate change.</p>
Keywords (separated by ‘-’)	Play - Cooperation - Imitation - Music - Prohibition - Cultural transmission - Pygmy - Hunter-gatherers - Polyphony - Song - Dance - Ritual - Initiation - Myth - Egalitarianism

# Play, Music, and Taboo in the Reproduction of an Egalitarian Society

12

Jerome Lewis

## Abstract

An examination of musical participation and taboo among the egalitarian Mbendjele BaYaka illustrates how cultural learning can be organized without recourse to figures of authority. The chapter describes two complementary pedagogic processes that accompany BaYaka as they move through life. One acts on groups of people playing together (*massana*), the other on individuals as they are differently affected by taboos (*ekila*). Both serve to lead growing BaYaka into opportunities for learning more abstract cultural knowledge at salient points in the life cycle.

In successfully performing the dense polyphony of BaYaka music (*massana*), people experience what BaYaka consider to be desirable emotions, ideal relationships, and interaction. They participate in an enhanced learning environment that promotes peer-to-peer imitation rather than direct instruction with its concomitant implication of authority and status. Key economic strategies and political orientations are experienced during *massana* in ways that stimulate their application to non-*massana* contexts. The ethnography of *ekila* demonstrates how counterintuitive explanations of striking hunting and reproductive prohibitions stimulate a learner-motivated pedagogic process that does not depend on defining any individual as a focus for learning important knowledge. These taboos anchor key areas of cosmological knowledge, gender, and political ideology in the physical and biological experiences of human growth and maturation making gendered practices and cultural values take on a natural, inevitable quality.

Together, *massana* and *ekila* provide major avenues for BaYaka children to learn and to reproduce a distinctive and remarkably durable cultural system. The chapter finishes by suggesting some structural features of these culturally embedded pedagogic systems that contribute to their efficacy, durability and ability to adapt to, and incorporate change.

## Keywords

Play • Cooperation • Imitation • Music • Prohibition • Cultural transmission • Pygmy • Hunter-gatherers • Polyphony • Song • Dance • Ritual • Initiation • Myth • Egalitarianism

## 12.1 Introduction

31

Building on insights from social psychology (e.g., Lave and Wenger 1991) and cognitive anthropology (e.g., Shore 1996) Maurice Bloch (1998, 2013) shows that cultural knowledge, or any expert knowledge, must be acquired, stored, and recovered in mostly non-linguistic ways if it is to be used

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37 efficiently. This insight suggests that anthropologists should  
 38 attend to a range of different ways through which cultural  
 39 knowledge is acquired and not to be overly focused on  
 40 linguistically articulated channels and verbal instruction in  
 41 pedagogic processes. Perhaps due to their egalitarianism,  
 42 hunter-gatherers such as BaYaka Pygmies of Congo-  
 43 Brazzaville<sup>1</sup> offer particular insight into pedagogic  
 44 processes<sup>2</sup> that do not depend on verbal instruction by  
 45 named individuals as heavily as those we are used to observe  
 46 in hierarchically organized societies.

47 The “assertive egalitarianism” (Woodburn 1982) of  
 48 hunter-gatherer societies such as the BaYaka places  
 49 constraints on what are acceptable instructional relations  
 50 between individuals. In his polemical critique, Ron Brunton  
 51 (1989) recognized the implications of this by suggesting that  
 52 since there are no authority figures in an egalitarian society  
 53 with socially accepted rights to judge and constrain other  
 54 peoples’ behavior, there is no means for such a society to  
 55 maintain its own cultural norms. Instead, he argued, people  
 56 in egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies adopt new practices  
 57 and behaviors regardless of their consequences on cultural  
 58 values such as egalitarianism. In taking his analysis to its  
 59 logical conclusion, Brunton argues that such societies are  
 60 random assemblages of cultural items that are inevitably  
 61 unstable and vulnerable to transformation. “Whatever com-  
 62 plexity may be present is not an outcome of an underlying  
 63 structure connecting the elements, but rather of their num-  
 64 ber” (Brunton 1989, p. 678).

65 My analysis (Lewis 2008) of the taboo complex *ekila*  
 66 shows that this is an ethnocentric perspective because it  
 67 conceptualizes cultural reproduction as dependent on an  
 68 authority judging innovation and maintaining order. There  
 69 are remarkable cultural similarities between several groups  
 70 of Pygmy hunter-gatherers who speak different languages,  
 71 occupy distant areas of forest, and, in some cases, have not  
 72 had direct contact for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years.  
 73 They have somehow maintained key practices and beliefs  
 74 despite changing so many others (Lewis 2014 describes  
 75 these). Among these similarities is the taboo complex  
 76 *ekila*, common to BaYaka (Mbendjele, Bangabo [BaAka/  
 77 Aka], Ngombe [Baka], Luma, Mikaya) and other western

78 groups such as the Bongo of Congo and Gabon. Eastern 78  
 79 Pygmies such as the Mbuti and Efe have a similar taboo 79  
 80 complex they refer to as *ekeri* (Ichikawa 1987).<sup>3</sup> Though the 80  
 81 content of *ekila*-like practices among these groups varies in 81  
 82 terms of which animals are prohibited, there is a striking 82  
 83 structural similarity in the logic connecting the different 83  
 84 elements of the *ekila* complex. 84

85 Here I combine an account of *ekila* with an analysis of 85  
 86 *massana* (play and ritual) and the vocal polyphonic singing 86  
 87 style of BaYaka to show how they serve a complementary 87  
 88 role in the transmission of a distinctive BaYaka socio- 88  
 89 aesthetic. Widess (2012) argues that the isomorphism 89  
 90 between musical, visual, and conceptual patterns of 90  
 91 meanings in music is characteristic of what cognitive 91  
 92 anthropologists such as Bloch or Shore (1996) call “founda- 92  
 93 tional cultural schemas” – the key schemas upon which a 93  
 94 particular culture’s distinctiveness is based. By involving a 94  
 95 huge range of potential meanings and functions – from the 95  
 96 sound and structure of the music itself to the social and 96  
 97 political relationships it establishes amongst performers or 97  
 98 the way it refracts culture-specific concepts, history, or iden- 98  
 99 tity – musical performance achieves an extraordinary den- 99  
 100 sity of metaphoric and metonymic possibility that makes it 100  
 101 such a rich venue for cultural transmission (Lewis 2012, 101  
 102 2013). 102

103 This chapter describes how play (*massana*), vocal 103  
 104 polyphony in ritual (*mokondi massana*), initiation practices, 104  
 105 and *ekila* taboos drive learner-motivated processes of knowl- 105  
 106 edge acquisition that transmit characteristically BaYaka 106  
 107 values, knowledge, and skills. Each growing person is 107  
 108 exposed to a range of valued political and economic 108  
 109 orientations, key areas of folk biology, cosmology, and 109  
 110 vital life skills as they age. It is up to each individual to 110  
 111 explore these to the extent they are interested in them and to 111  
 112 learn key knowledge in ways that minimize the opportunity 112  
 113 for learning to be monopolized or dominated by an 113  
 114 “authority.” 114

115 Key features of these culturally embedded pedagogic 115  
 116 systems include pretend play, humor, music, demonstration, 116  
 117 over-imitation, peer learning, direct instruction, and coun- 117  
 118 terintuitive puzzles. Play groups are always of mixed age 118  
 119 and often gender. They vary in size depending on the camp 119  
 120 (often between 20 and 50 inhabitants) or settlement (some- 120  
 121 times 2–300 inhabitants) but are often composed of between 121  
 122 5 and 25 children. Peer learning often occurs between chil- 122  
 123 dren within about 5 years of each other. While such horizon- 123  
 124 tal and oblique transmission are probably dominant modes 124

<sup>1</sup> BaYaka refers to Pygmy groups in the Western Congo Basin; other names such as Mbendjele, Mikaya, Luma, Ngombe, Baka, etc. are self-ascribed ethnonyms used to distinguish between Pygmy groups who each occupy different territories. When I use BaYaka, I refer to commonalities between these groups; when I write Mbendjele, Baka, or another group, I am referring to specific observations made during time spent with the group named. PhD research (1994–1997) was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, an Emslie Horniman Scholarship, and the Swan Fund. I return regularly to the BaYaka area.

<sup>2</sup> Hewlett et al. (2000) justified their approach to comparing internal working models in different societies on similar grounds.

<sup>3</sup> Similar concepts, most frequently discussed in terms of rules connecting hunting and eating with sex and menstruation, are ubiquitous among huntergatherers, and common in societies throughout the world.

125 of learning, vertical transmission also occurs but in ways that  
 126 tend to avoid singling out one individual as having more  
 127 legitimacy or authority than others. Learners occasionally  
 128 seek intergenerational instruction by asking for an explana-  
 129 tion (*sapwa-me*), but there is no Mbendjele equivalent to  
 130 “teach”.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to misreadings of my previous work  
 131 (Hewlett et al. 2011; Fogarty et al. 2011), my ethnography  
 132 does not conflict with the claim that teaching is ubiquitous  
 133 among human groups but shows that teaching need not be  
 134 controlled by titled or specifically recognized individuals. It  
 135 can be distributed in a range of ways that include counterin-  
 136 tuitive taboos which provide pedagogic cues to learn about  
 137 more abstract cultural areas and events, such as ritual, that  
 138 establish learning environments to promote specific  
 139 experiences of key orientations or cultural models of optimal  
 140 behavior.

141 The *ekila* taboo complex stimulates individually  
 142 motivated pedagogy, whereas *massana* activities establish  
 143 an enhanced communally driven learning environment. By  
 144 engaging in play and music making with peers and others, by  
 145 growing and passing through inevitable life experiences  
 146 (eating, hunting, menstruating, having sex, raising children,  
 147 getting sick, bad luck, etc.) accompanied by striking and  
 148 unusual behaviors (don’t eat this, don’t go hunting as your  
 149 sister is menstruating, etc.), a series of learner-motivated  
 150 pedagogic processes are encouraged and structured. In the  
 151 absence of authority, it is a combination of the desire to be  
 152 accepted by one’s peers and curiosity that act as effective  
 153 pedagogical motivators.

## 154 12.2 *Massana: Learning Playfully*

155 The main way people learn is through imitating someone,  
 156 often who is more talented than they are, and sometimes  
 157 following demonstration by a peer, in the encouraging social  
 158 environment of *massana* (Baka call this *me*). *Massana*  
 159 means “play.” Whether referring to small children chasing  
 160 each other around a tree trunk or the whole community  
 161 earnestly initiating young boys into *Ejengi*,<sup>5</sup> these are all  
 162 *massana*. BaYaka explicitly value the cooperative, humor-  
 163 ous, and joyful quality of relations generated between  
 164 participants doing *massana*. This is evident in their contrast  
 165 with *massana*’s opposite, *mobulu* – noise, trouble, chaos,  
 166 argument, and strife. When people doing *massana* argue or

fight, others quickly react ‘*Pia massana! Tambi mobulu te!*’ 167  
 (Start playing! Stop making trouble!). Doing *massana* (verb, 168  
*bo.sane*) results in specific areas of cultural learning: notably 169  
 in key life skills, cosmology, folk biology, and religious 170  
 practice. 171

In this assertively egalitarian environment, participation 172  
 in *massana* need not be forced upon children in the way that 173  
 formal schooling is, since learning is self-motivated by the 174  
 desire to play. Among teenage inhabitants of Indian slums, a 175  
 similar process was observed in the uptake of new internet 176  
 and mobile technologies (Rangaswamy and Cutrell 2013). 177  
 The major driver for learning how to use these new gadgets 178  
 was “entertainment,” rather than their more functional or 179  
 practical uses such as making phone calls, etc. Learning 180  
 was self-motivated by the desire to play phone games, 181  
 stream favorite Bollywood film sequences, or download 182  
 popular tunes. As a by-product of doing so, novices became 183  
 adept users and learnt or improved their literacy, typing, 184  
 spelling, and general writing skills. Playful peer imitation, 185  
 fun, and music are effective at motivating profound peda- 186  
 gogic processes. 187

Early *massana* activities include infants’ casual fooling 188  
 play and well-established games such as *djambi* where liana 189  
 swings are hung and the group takes turns pushing each 190  
 participant, or *ndaanga ya songo*, in which boys spear a 191  
 rolling softwood cylinder with sharp wooden spears, or 192  
*lango* in which girls build miniature huts and hearths to 193  
 roast wild yams or small animals, or when groups of boys 194  
 mimic animals while other boys enact hunters laying an 195  
 ambush. There are also many musical games combining 196  
 acrobatic coordination with slapstick humor and songs or 197  
 dance moves such as *etebe* (frog) in which participants leap 198  
 around like frogs while singing. While these many games 199  
 teach specific skills and reinforce the understanding of group 200  
 coordination and the increasing pleasure this brings to par- 201  
 ticipation, other *massana* prepare the ground for learning the 202  
 ritual system that represents BaYaka “religion.” 203

The Mbendjele children’s spirit play (*mokondi massana*) 204  
 called *Bolu* (Lewis 2002, pp. 132–6) leads directly into adult 205  
 spirit play ritual. It is a ritual prototype, containing all the 206  
 basic elements of adult spirit plays, including its own forest 207  
 spirit and secret area (*njanga*) where the spirit is called from 208  
 the forest by the initiates who, in this case, are boys aged 209  
 between 3 and 8 years old. *Bolu*’s secret area creates a space 210  
 for sharing secrets. It encourages the same-sex solidarity so 211  
 central to political, economic, and social organization. 212  
 Meanwhile, similarly aged girls dance up and down camp 213  
 singing *Bolu* songs to entice the spirit into camp. Boys and 214  
 girls roles are different but complementary. Boys call and 215  
 prepare the spirit to dance; girls sing *Bolu* songs and dance in 216  
 camp to attract the leafy cloth-covered *Bolu* spirit into the 217  
 central space of the camp. The dancing and singing boys 218  
 surround and accompany the spirit to ensure the girls do not 219

<sup>4</sup>Increasingly people use the Lingala verb “*bo.sambella*” (to pray or advise, often contracted to *bo.sambie*) when speaking about advice or instruction received and Christian-style prayer. This verb is commonly used by Bilo villagers when correcting or bossing BaYaka: “I advise you to . . .”

<sup>5</sup>Mbendjele words use two phonetic letters: *e* = as in elephant and *η* = as in “. . .ing.”

220 dance too close. Keeping *Bolu* in camp makes people happy,  
221 and this keeps the forest open and generous so that food will  
222 be found.

223 This is the basic structure for all spirit plays that involve  
224 both sexes.<sup>6</sup> Men call the spirit out of the forest to the secret  
225 *njanga* area and prepare it to dance. Its power is raw and  
226 dangerous until the women entice it out of the secret area and  
227 into the human space by their beautiful singing and seduc-  
228 tive dancing. In the same way that the raw meat men bring  
229 out of the forest is cooked by women in order for it to safely  
230 enter human bodies, so the women's performance attracts  
231 the spirits to spread their blessings safely beyond the imme-  
232 diate group of initiates. This structure makes the gendered  
233 division of labor seem logical and natural, reinforcing the  
234 cultural principle that a life of plenty is best achieved by the  
235 successful combination of gendered differences and  
236 gendered production. *Bolu* launches each Mbendjele's  
237 apprenticeship in ritual while implicitly teaching them a  
238 range of other skills and cultural models. The development  
239 of the fine musical skills required to perform spirit plays is a  
240 similarly multilevelled pedagogic process.

### 241 12.3 A Growing Musical Education

242 BaYaka polyphonic singing and drumming produce com-  
243 plex interwoven music in which several melodic lines or  
244 rhythms are overlaid and interlock to produce the "song."  
245 While it sounds like each voice sings as it likes, underneath a  
246 deep musical structure constrains innovation and creativity.  
247 This rigorous musical organization is mostly not taught  
248 explicitly. Yet, by inculcation each singer knows perfectly  
249 which variations can be executed and when. By learning  
250 how to join in such a complex overlapping song appropri-  
251 ately, one is also learning a particular style of social interac-  
252 tion (Lomax 1962). By endlessly repeating this same process  
253 during performances, a particular BaYaka way of doing  
254 things is inculcated.

255 Since hearing develops early in the fetus, it is likely that  
256 children begin their musical education in the womb as their  
257 mothers participate in song and dance. Certainly, during  
258 *massana* caregivers often "dance" babies on their laps by  
259 exploiting their standing reflex. The baby's motor develop-  
260 ment for dancing is encouraged together with their rhythmic  
261 and vocal development. Any infant or small child that makes  
262 an attempt at musical performance is immediately and often

lavishly praised and encouraged to continue regardless of the 263  
quality of their performance. As they move away from their 264  
caregivers, they join the group of children and observe and 265  
imitate skilled individuals. Demonstration with imitation 266  
dominates explicit musical learning. Here, mostly slightly 267  
older peers but also occasionally youth and adults will initi- 268  
ate an activity to provide others the opportunity to imitate 269  
and improve. Peers occasionally make critical evaluations of 270  
each other's performances; however, these rarely signal 271  
someone out directly and are generally phrased comically 272  
or involve lighthearted teasing. 273

274 Between generations, elders or parents focus more on  
275 praising successful achievement than on giving instructions  
276 about when to start and what to do. When intergenerational  
277 instruction occurs, it is mostly in the context of addresses  
278 spoken to all the children or specifically to the small boys or  
279 small girls depending on context, in which they are offered  
280 advice – "Small boys should dance like this . . . (demonstra-  
281 tion)" – but as a group, not as individuals. Later when young  
282 men or women begin to take over aspects of the spirit play –  
283 such as raising camp members to perform spirit play by  
284 binding themselves arm in arm in a line while dancing up  
285 and down, singing the key melodies of the forest spirit to be  
286 called – they may get more frequent advice from elders  
287 concerning the particular techniques or dance movements  
288 to employ in the given circumstances and sometimes explicit  
289 mockery of sloppily performed maneuvers.

290 *Massana* leads Mbendjele individuals on a lifelong  
291 learning journey that begins with simple skills such as  
292 handling a machete or using a spear to sophisticated singing  
293 and ritual performance skills and an understanding of  
294 BaYaka religion and cosmology as it is expressed during  
295 spirit plays. As each individual grows, their expected  
296 contributions to spirit plays change – from child to teenager  
297 to young adult then from single person to young married  
298 couple, young parents, mature parents, and grandparents.  
299 Each life situation makes new demands and contributes to  
300 stimulating each to learn important cultural skills and knowl-  
301 edge. Children may suppose that the skills to master for  
302 successful spirit play are singing and dancing. Adolescents  
303 are then challenged as they learn special dance moves, how  
304 to dress the spirit and accompany it appropriately. As a  
305 mature man, the esoteric art of calling the spirits from the  
306 forest, managing *mobulu* (disorder), and motivating partici-  
307 pation, then finally as an elder managing several spirit play  
308 performances during commemoration ceremonies (*eboka*)  
309 the challenge becomes economic. Elder spirit guardians  
310 often joked "The real work of *massana* is finding enough  
311 food for everyone!"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Some spirit plays are danced in private by the initiates (e.g., *Mabonga* or *Bula*) or by only one gender (*Sho*, *Yele* or *Ngoku*). But most (*Bibana*, *Bolu*, *Bonganga*, *Djoboko*, *Ejengi*, *Enyomo*, *Eya*, *Malimbe*, *Malobe*, *Minyango*, *Mombembo*, *Monano*, *Yolo* etc.) require the participation of both genders to achieve their climactic stage when the spirit comes into camp.

<sup>7</sup> *Ko musala ya eboka a die dipedi benda ya bato bese!*



312 During spirit play, complex interweaving melodies that  
 313 interlock together in dense polyphony must be perfectly  
 314 sung in order to attract forest spirits (*mokondi*) out of the  
 315 forest to play with the camp. Now I will focus on the  
 316 polyphonic music central to spirit play, since doing it well  
 317 results in a range of interesting outcomes (Lewis 2013  
 318 provides more detail). It creates a sense of shared identity  
 319 and structures social groups; ensures the transmission of  
 320 characteristic economic, political, and religious ways of  
 321 interacting; inculcates key values such as sharing and egalitarianism; and temporarily establishes a special world of  
 322 time where the deep structure of myth and cosmology can  
 323 be experienced by each generation. Spirit plays are the most  
 324 appreciated and valued musical event of the BaYaka, by  
 325 themselves and by outsiders.

327 Mbendjele largely focus on the skill demonstrated in  
 328 performing spirit play to assess whether other Pygmy groups  
 329 are real forest people (*ko bisi ndima*). They appear implicitly  
 330 to recognize that expertly performing these rituals and their  
 331 accompanying musical styles implies that those able to do so  
 332 have characteristic cultural orientations central to BaYaka  
 333 personhood and identity. This emic emphasis linking identity  
 334 with ritual and musical styles is what led me to focus on  
 335 this in my own work.

## 336 12.4 Spirit Play (*Mokondi Massana*)

337 During spirit play, all present must participate and give their  
 338 best. Typically, singers sit together with their limbs resting  
 339 on one another – literally “mixing up their bodies” (*bo*.  
 340 *sanganye njo*) – or dance in tight coordinated formations.  
 341 Participants seek excellence for its own sake – just because it  
 342 is beautiful, and the more beautiful it becomes, the more you  
 343 lose your sense of self and enter the “sacred zone” of  
 344 *communitas* (*bo.pfane* – lit. to soar) and joy (*bisengo*).

345 This musical and aesthetic participation educates those  
 346 present politically in several ways: Reflecting daily life,  
 347 there is no hierarchy among singers, no authority organizing  
 348 participation; anyone is free to join or cease whatever part  
 349 they choose, and anyone can stop and start the song. If they  
 350 do it well, it builds the intensity of the performance; if done  
 351 badly, it ruins the “swing” and the culprit is called a song  
 352 thief (*moyibi*) and teased. Participating appropriately in a  
 353 song composed of different parts sung by different people  
 354 simultaneously primes BaYaka behaviorally. Each singer  
 355 has to hold their own melody, avoiding entrainment to  
 356 melodies sung by others (if too many sing the same melody,  
 357 the polyphony dissolves) while being in harmony with them.  
 358 This cultivates a particular sense of personal autonomy that  
 359 is not selfish or self obsessed, but is keenly aware of what  
 360 others are doing and seeks to complement this by doing  
 361 something different. The instinctive way that singers avoid  
 362 unison is central to the organization of daily camp life in a

society without centralized authority organizing people's 363  
 activities. Each day enough food must be found to feed the 364  
 camp. Singing like this primes each to seek to do something 365  
 different but complementary to others: so X goes fishing, Y 366  
 goes hunting, and Z goes for honey. If everyone went for 367  
 honey and the hive was old, there would not be enough 368  
 to eat. 369

Recognizing melodic modules in the music and where to 370  
 introduce new melodic modules has parallels with hunting 371  
 and gathering strategies. As you walk in the forest, you look 372  
 and listen for signs. With experience, one becomes sensitive 373  
 to familiar combinations of signs (an “environmental mel- 374  
 ody”) that indicate the likelihood that something desirable is 375  
 near. Then the hunter or gatherer puts into operation an 376  
 appropriate strategy (the new environmental melody) to 377  
 obtain the particular resource indicated by the signs. For 378  
 instance, as I learnt to hunt, I realized that if you come across 379  
 a leafy but relatively open understory with a conjunction of 380  
 duiker trails, squat down and draw them within range by 381  
 mimicking their call. If you come across raffia palms going 382  
 down to a marsh, sit down quietly for a while to listen out for 383  
 pigs' grunts. If you hear monkeys greedily feeding high in 384  
 the canopy, mimic the call of monkey eagle, or the cries of a 385  
 fallen infant, to attract the large males down into range. 386  
 Musical participation is one of the major avenues for 387  
 priming people to these unspoken grammars of interaction. 388

Similarly, there are modules for getting goods from 389  
 neighboring farmers (generically referred to as *Bilo*): 390  
 evoke pity, use flattery, or shame them. These work to 391  
 make farmers generous so they give what is asked of them 392  
 (Koehler and Lewis 2002 and Lewis 2002 provide details). 393  
 Turnbull describes Mbuti discussing the village as a good 394  
 place for hunting: “when hunting tricky animals like 395  
 villagers Mbuti use appropriate tactics, like carrying wood 396  
 for them, or helping them build their houses . . . and so the 397  
 Mbuti talk of eating the villagers” (Turnbull 1966:82). 398  
 Pygmies adoption of farmers' languages has been 399  
 interpreted as a sign of subordination. Rather than univer- 400  
 sally being a sign of subjugation, part of the explanation is 401  
 that Pygmies use these languages to better “hunt” the 402  
 villagers, just as they do with duikers and monkeys. 403

In addition to educating participants in political, eco- 404  
 nomic, and other skills, the performances and their organi- 405  
 zation establish special arenas for groups in society (men or 406  
 women, hunters or life bearers, boys or girls, healers or 407  
 mourners) to identify and explore their distinctiveness. Dur- 408  
 ing *Bolu* or *Malimbe* small children dominate the camp and 409  
 call in their spirit to make demands of the adults that must be 410  
 respected. *Ngoku* brings all the women together to assert 411  
 themselves against the men by celebrating their beauty, 412  
 sexuality, solidarity, and procreative power as they dance 413  
 as one, tightly bound to each other. *Sho* is the men's contrast 414  
 to *Ngoku*, bringing them together with arms over each 415  
 other's shoulders, stamping in unison through camp late at 416

417 night, emphasizing male brawn and unity as the deep bassy  
418 growl of *Sho* and foot-stamping reverberates through  
419 the camp.

420 As they move through life, each person joins the appro-  
421 priate groups by initiation and then engages in group-level  
422 “conversations” in which they learn about the qualities of  
423 that group in relation to society. Through initiation, partici-  
424 pation in specific dances and songs, and in the hidden aspects  
425 of these cults on their respective secret paths, each is able to  
426 explore for themselves the strengths of that particular iden-  
427 tity. In this way, each person learns about the valued  
428 attributes cultivates ideal qualities, skills, and roles – as  
429 boys or girls, mothers, wives, husbands or elephant hunters,  
430 and so on. The etiquette for entering secret paths (*njanja*),  
431 ritual stages and procedures, songs, dances, riddles, special  
432 vocabularies, secret lore, and mystical skills associated with  
433 each spirit play constitute a major avenue for each new  
434 generation to learn from the wisdom of past ones.

435 Music can establish a special zone where participants  
436 connect with their cultural history, mythical past, and the  
437 reflections of those that came before, enabling them to  
438 engage poetically with otherwise implausible scenarios.  
439 This quality of music is commonly employed in sung fables  
440 (*gano*) in which animals behave as people do but also in spirit  
441 play where it confers a “sacred” element to the proceedings.

442 It is because music can create a world of virtual time that Gustav  
443 Mahler said that it may lead to “the ‘other world’ . . . [where]  
444 there is freedom from the restrictions of actual time and com-  
445 plete absorption in the “timeless Now of the Divine Spirit,” the  
446 loss of self in being. (John Blacking 1973, p. 51–2)

447 The spirit play of *Ejengi* exemplifies this by instituting a  
448 special or sacred time in which living people connect with  
449 their deep mythical past. *Ejengi* is a realm in which male  
450 identity is elaborated, expressed, and recreated for each  
451 generation of boys to discover. The time-collapsing quality  
452 of *Ejengi* enables participants to experience cosmology and  
453 myth; in doing so they become aware of the deep  
454 connections that they have with the people who went before.  
455 *Ejengi* spirit play transforms living people into their primor-  
456 dial forebears who originally lived in gender-exclusive  
457 groups (Lewis 2002: 173–197). In *Ejengi* initiation  
458 ceremonies, participants return to these original gender  
459 groups to conduct the 3-day ceremony. Ritual reenactments  
460 take them through the key moments of this mythical narra-  
461 tive and enable participants to enter a mythical space, a  
462 timeless “everywhen” where each generation can reaffirm  
463 the pact between the original men’s group and the original  
464 women’s group that established Mbendjele society.

465 Regularly being called onto *Ejengi*’s secret path is a  
466 public occasion to recreate the original men’s society and  
467 demonstrate male unity. It also brings men together to dis-  
468 cuss important events, make group decisions, and share male  
469 experience. The solidarity and coordinated support between  
470 men is demonstrated to the women in the way they control

and handle *Ejengi* and the uninitiated during spirit play. 471  
*Ngoku* provides a similar function for women (Lewis 2002; 472  
Finnegan 2013). By reconnecting each Mbendjele, in their 473  
own time, with the timelessness of BaYaka deep history, 474  
each generation has the opportunity to reforge the contract 475  
between men’s and women’s groups and reestablish society 476  
for themselves in a triumphant aesthetic outburst of poly- 477  
phonic singing and dancing (Lewis 2002, pp. 193–208 478  
provides more detail). 479

*Ejengi*’s role in establishing contemporary society makes 480  
it the most important forest spirit (*konja yombo* – the guard- 481  
ian of life). This is demonstrated by *Ejengi*’s crucial role in 482  
the most significant group rituals of the BaYaka and local 483  
farming people – the lifting of mourning or commemoration 484  
ceremonies (*eboka*). After a period of mourning, the 485  
bereaved call an *Ejengi* ceremony to lift the mourning taboos 486  
and enable them to continue with normal life again. Farmers 487  
have to pay BaYaka whatever is demanded to do this for 488  
them. Only *Ejengi* can re-establish society after the rupture 489  
of death and loss. 490

## 12.5 Collectively Creating BaYaka Persons 491

Participation in spirit plays forms BaYaka persons in very 492  
particular ways. People participating in the dense polyphony 493  
experience what BaYaka consider to be desirable emotions, 494  
ideal relationships and interaction. They share an enhanced 495  
learning environment that promotes imitation and participa- 496  
tion over instruction. It is also a ritual system that structures 497  
society by regularly bringing people together at different 498  
scales and in greater numbers than any other event. Through 499  
initiation into the secret areas and regular performances, 500  
spirit plays enable different groups in society (men, 501  
women, children, elephant hunters, etc.) to learn about and 502  
explore their particular qualities and strengths and to com- 503  
municate as a group with the rest of society, or between 504  
camps, and even with non-BaYaka such as forest spirits, or 505  
farmers or Europeans. 506

Due to the constant embellishment, variation, and recom- 507  
bination of “melodic modules” during spirit plays, there is 508  
huge potential for variation each time one is performed. This 509  
encourages the creation of new musical repertoires and spirit 510  
plays, the extension of existing ones, but always with a 511  
distinctive BaYaka aesthetic.<sup>8</sup> What is fascinating is that 512  
the music’s deep structure enables, even encourages, great 513  
variation and creativity in its surface manifestations – the 514  
performed spirit play or song being sung – and so manages to 515  
be conservative, yet hugely creative and innovative. BaYaka 516

<sup>8</sup> Furniss’ and Joriris’ (2011) analysis of Baka ritual creativity, following Tsuru (1998), shows the structural continuity evident in ritual form despite great variation in the performed content.

517 belief systems are remarkable for their structural similarity  
518 across generations and space rather than for the specific  
519 content of the belief system being transmitted. This combi-  
520 nation of structural consistency in transmission combined  
521 with content variety in acquisition is a key characteristic of  
522 this cultural system that has provided it with surprising  
523 resilience.

524 The persistence of this structural organization is  
525 described among BaAka Pygmies in the Lobaye forest in  
526 Central African Republic by Michelle Kisliuk. BaAka use  
527 musical performance to explore modernity by adopting mis-  
528 sionary songs and other music. Over time, Kisliuk notes  
529 (2001, p. 188), they transform new songs such as hymns by  
530 “elaborating on a theme until eventually it is engulfed in a  
531 flurry of kaleidoscopic improvisations, counter melodies,  
532 and elaborations,” effectively becoming increasingly  
533 BaAka in style. Through the performance process, BaAka  
534 explore the new, firstly on its own terms, then incorporating  
535 it into familiar structures, or discarding it.

536 This deep structure underpinning participation in spirit  
537 play is an aesthetic orientation that frames the way people  
538 act and think rather than determining what they do or say. It  
539 is not a rigid or dogmatic imposition but an aesthetic orien-  
540 tation that drives sound and behavior into an increasingly  
541 distinctive BaYaka style. Their musical aesthetic is as much  
542 of a social, political, and economic aesthetic as it is a sonic  
543 one. Music does not dictate cultural orientations but  
544 cultivates aesthetic tendencies. It familiarizes participants  
545 with culturally specific ways of organizing themselves into  
546 groups and of understanding the world, shows them to be  
547 effective, and then leaves it up to the individual and group to  
548 make them relevant to the current moment, or not.

549 While learning through *massana* serves to transmit key  
550 aspects of religious and political ideology, and economic prac-  
551 tice, another key cultural pedagogical device complements this  
552 by anchoring learning in each individual’s experience of  
553 bodily maturation. The group-based pedagogy of *massana*  
554 contrasts with the way *ekila* focuses on each individual’s  
555 experience of eating, puberty, hunting, sexuality, and child  
556 rearing. These are elaborated so he or she is stimulated by  
557 curiosity to seek to learn more about BaYaka understanding of  
558 gender identity, folk biology, cosmology, and sharing.

## 559 12.6 *Ekila*: Taboo as Individualized Cultural 560 Pedagogy

561 Long ago Radcliffe-Brown suggested that when Andaman  
562 Islanders forbid boys and girls prized food such as turtles  
563 during puberty rites, it provokes them to think about why  
564 they should be excluded. It becomes a “sort of moral or  
565 social education” (1933, p. 276). *Ekila* uses a similar device  
566 to drive important pedagogical processes. Ethnographically,

*ekila* takes many meanings. In speech it can refer to men- 567  
568 struation, blood, taboo, a hunter’s meat, animals’ power to  
569 harm humans, and particular dangers to human reproduction,  
570 production, health, and sanity. This polysemy makes any  
571 single word translation of *ekila* problematic, so I use the  
572 BaYaka term.

573 The prohibitions generically referred to as *ekila* define  
574 how the body’s vital forces, reproductive potential, produc-  
575 tive activities and their products, moral and personal  
576 qualities, and emotions should be shared so as to ensure  
577 that group members experience good health, unproblematic  
578 childbirth and child rearing, and successful hunting and  
579 gathering. For BaYaka these are the basic components of a  
580 good life. In trying to make sense of *ekila*, I argued (2008)  
581 that it is only possible to understand what connects these  
582 diverse realms when considering how people learn complex  
583 cultural knowledge in this egalitarian environment. My dis-  
584 cussion examines *ekila* from the point of view of people’s  
585 movement through life and the way physique and under-  
586 standing grow together.

587 Formulaic and often counterintuitive explanations of spe-  
588 cific taboos and related behavior stimulate a learner-  
589 motivated pedagogic process which does not depend on  
590 defining specific individuals or an institution as a focus for  
591 learning important knowledge. *Ekila* anchors key areas of  
592 cosmological knowledge, gender identities, economic  
593 relations, and political ideology in the physical and  
594 biological experiences of human growth and maturation so  
595 that gendered practices and cultural values take on a natural,  
596 inevitable quality.

597 *Ekila* is . . . the name of the medicine *Komba* sent women when  
598 women put in the moon [menstruate]. The business of *ekila* was  
599 first with them. It is all about children. You can see women’s  
600 tummies swell up at this time. It’s the wind. They have to expel  
601 their wind as *ekila* (blood); this cleans out their wombs. If *ekila*  
602 (blood) stays in the body, it will make the woman ill. She has to  
603 get rid of it. If she doesn’t do *ekila*, then she has to do *ekila*. That  
604 is how it should be. Women’s biggest husband is the moon.

605 If I’m a hunter, I don’t sleep around with different women. If  
606 I slept with her, then her, and then her, all the animals would  
607 know. They would smell my smell and know ‘that hunter has  
608 ruined his *ekila* (hunting)’. Some will come with great anger.  
609 Others, you shoot them, but they won’t die. . . When you shoot at  
610 an antelope from close range and it doesn’t die, we call this  
611 *ekila*.

612 . . . We BaYaka call all this *ekila* because our fathers called it  
613 that. This whole business comes from our ancestors. Women’s  
614 *ekila* (blood) is one thing, men killing animals is another. *Komba*  
615 made it like this. . . Men’s *ekila* is about hunting. The hunter’s  
616 meat is *ekila*. If someone else eats your *ekila* (hunter’s meat),  
617 then your hunting is ruined.

618 Animals are *ekila*. They caused suffering to our fathers:  
619 buffalo, bongo antelope, black-fronted duiker [all are red  
620 animals] and *sitatunga* – but only the red coloured females . . .  
621 They were frightened of it because it’s like a bongo. The bongo  
622 is a huge and dangerous *ekila*.

623 If you eat a black-fronted duiker, it kills your child. . . You’ll  
624 think it’s sorcery, but it’s actually that black-fronted duiker you



625 ate. It's the same with blue duiker. You must never eat his belly  
626 (*gundu*). If you do your child will get terrible diarrhoea. We  
627 people from Ibamba, we ate blue duiker. Before it was nothing,  
628 it didn't do anything to us. We killed many in our hunting nets  
629 and everyone would eat them. But now we think blue duiker is  
630 *ekila*.

631 -Emeka, 48 year-old Mbendjele man from Ibamba, June  
632 1997 (full quote in Lewis 2002, pp. 113–4)

633 Numerous *ekila* practices, particularly the more visible  
634 ones, concern how people should manage their relations with  
635 animals. As hunter-gatherers, BaYaka are often killing and  
636 butchering animals, ideally on a daily basis. So killing,  
637 preparing, and eating animals become dependable arenas  
638 for associating important cultural knowledge. To maintain  
639 a hunter's success, he and his wife should observe all *ekila*  
640 proscriptions whether concerned with how they share his  
641 production, what animals they eat or who they have sex  
642 with. These practices emphasize that the hunter's success  
643 is tied to the appropriate sharing of his production and his  
644 sexuality and conversely, that his wife's success in childbirth  
645 depends on these same factors.

646 *Ekila* practices are not static. The inclusion of blue duiker  
647 into the core group of *ekila* animals is slowly spreading  
648 northwards as groups meet each other and explain the *ekila*  
649 of blue duikers. If a pregnant woman or her husband ate blue  
650 duiker, this could cause the fetus to turn its head up and  
651 backwards, like a frightened blue duiker looking backwards  
652 as it flees. This would make birth difficult and dangerous.  
653 This ability to absorb new practices into the same ideologi-  
654 cal and moral super-structure is part of the enduring strength  
655 of *ekila*. This flexibility enables *ekila* to account for misfor-  
656 tune and helps to make it a seductive concept. Indeed, each  
657 family I asked had a slightly different list of *ekila* animals.  
658 People told me they followed their parents' prohibitions and  
659 would add any animals that had caused them problems.

660 But *ekila* does more than just explain misfortune. Beliefs  
661 about who should not eat particular foods lead into areas as  
662 diverse as folk biology, sexual morals, definitions of correct  
663 sharing, and cosmological theories about human-animal  
664 relations. These can be durably and effectively transmitted  
665 tacitly because they are embedded in inevitable sensory  
666 experiences connected with bodily maturation and perfor-  
667 mance, rather than conveyed just by instruction.

## 668 12.7 Growing and Learning with *Ekila*

669 By anchoring cultural knowledge on inevitable experiences  
670 associated with normal bodily growth (menstruation, child-  
671 birth, killing animals, and so on) as a mnemonic focus for  
672 thought, abstract cultural concepts become tangible, mean-  
673 ingful, and personalized. The main beliefs and practices of  
674 *ekila* focus on primary human experiences and the primor-  
675 dial symbolism of blood. *Ekila's* striking core symbolism

676 based on menstrual blood is particularly memorable. Around  
677 this are clustered a series of relationships connected to the  
678 core by culturally mediated equivalences and  
679 transformations that emerge over time as bodies grow and  
680 change.

681 Informants often said that the existence of *ekila* was first  
682 signaled to them as young children by the food prohibitions  
683 their parents observed. Their mother would cook them *ekila*  
684 animals without eating any herself and even go hungry. As  
685 children they noticed this striking behavior and so their  
686 awareness of *ekila* was triggered. These actions and events  
687 are only partly understood by the child because knowledge  
688 of Mbendjele cosmology and theories of procreation are  
689 needed to make sense of them, and these are unlikely to be  
690 of much interest yet.

691 Most women describe menstruation as the moment that  
692 triggered their deeper interest in *ekila*. With her menarche, a  
693 girl is suddenly referred to as *ekila*. Her mother explains to  
694 her that during menstruation she should change her cache-  
695 sex as necessary several times a day. She will go down to  
696 water to do this. Using *ngongo* leaves to clean herself, she is  
697 told that the bloodied leaves and blood-filled absorbent bark  
698 (*essiko*) kept in her cache-sex must not be put into water but  
699 disposed of in dense undergrowth. Only when she becomes  
700 pregnant and learns more about the different spirits and their  
701 effect on hunting, will she understand why this is so.

702 In the future, when noticing her menses, she must inform  
703 her siblings and later her husband. They, like her, should not  
704 go far from camp for fear of being attacked by dangerous  
705 animals until it is over. In each subsequent menses, she is  
706 made acutely aware of *ekila* by its startling appearance in her  
707 own body and its impact on her close family, hunting, and  
708 animals. Her brothers become aware of this as they are told  
709 not to accompany hunters or go far from camp while their  
710 sister is *ekila*. To escape these restrictions, adolescent boys  
711 and unmarried men (*boka*) often build their own lean-to.

712 With adolescence, the differing physical experience of  
713 *ekila* clearly differentiates boys from girls, orientating them  
714 towards different activities, spaces, and perceptions of their  
715 role in society. Girls now begin to understand how *ekila*  
716 limits women's activities. They become interested in femi-  
717 nine power, in procreation, and in cosmology as it relates to  
718 these subjects. This interest will lead to a girl's initiation into  
719 the women's secret cults. In *Ngoku* she learns the procreative  
720 secrets of women and how to use her sexuality to control  
721 men. In *Yele* she learns how women use their secret knowl-  
722 edge to "open the camp" for meat, and "to tie up" the spirits  
723 of game animals so that men may find and kill them.

724 A boy begins to learn more about *ekila* through  
725 accompanying his father on hunting trips to help butcher  
726 and carry back the meat. This occurs whenever a boy shows  
727 sufficient strength and ability, often around the age of 8 or  
728 9. As I discovered when I began to accompany hunters,

729 learning is almost entirely implicit and mostly occurs as the  
730 boy overhears hunters discussing *ekila* in relation to hunting  
731 and animals. Once he begins killing game, his father or uncle  
732 will explain how to look after his *ekila* by not sleeping  
733 around, eating his *ekila* (hunter's) meat, etc. Many men  
734 identify this as the crucial moment that they become aware  
735 of the expansive significance of *ekila*.

736 *Ekila's* implicit pedagogy establishes a process which  
737 reveals key aspects of a distinctive cosmological, political,  
738 and ethical identity. In order to make sense of puzzling *ekila*  
739 proscriptions, such as "do not eat Bongo antelope" an indi-  
740 vidual must think about the whole system. As Bourdieu  
741 suggested "an implicit pedagogy can instil a whole cosmology"  
742 (1977, p. 95). *Ekila* is one of Atran's "complex cultural  
743 categories", composed of a "core of spontaneously learnt  
744 knowledge and a periphery of further knowledge that  
745 requires deliberate learning . . . one is more stable than the  
746 other . . . they are functionally related: the very existence of  
747 the periphery is made possible by the core" (1993, p. 67).  
748 The spontaneously learnt core of *ekila* is based on common  
749 experiences of every individual's life cycle – food, menstrua-  
750 tion, hunting, sex, and the procreative process – and  
751 expands, with deliberate learning, to reveal gender, moral,  
752 normative, and political ideologies.

753 Children and young people learn the core of *ekila*  
754 practices and beliefs – concerning *ekila* animals, the effect  
755 of menstruation on animals, and its consequences for hunt-  
756 ing – fairly easily, couched as they are in powerful bodily  
757 experiences and the vivid symbolism of blood. But children  
758 are unlikely to understand the relations between these core  
759 symbols and the clusters of meanings that connect with  
760 abstract social values and cultural ideologies on the periph-  
761 ery of *ekila*. Understanding this periphery builds up over  
762 time as other experiences and models are internalized and  
763 new areas of cultural knowledge are sought and revealed.

764 When young people marry they start to become aware of  
765 ways in which procreation intertwines their *ekila* together.  
766 This is most forcefully imposed on them with pregnancy.  
767 Now both must respect proscriptions against eating many  
768 frequently killed animals. Understanding why husband and  
769 wife together must respect *ekila* taboos requires the acquisi-  
770 tion of folk biological theories of human reproduction and  
771 aspects of Yaka cosmology. The fetus is built from semen  
772 and menstrual blood. Mbendjele say that semen must be  
773 deposited in the womb on a daily basis for pregnancy to  
774 grow well. Since pregnancy is not a one-off event but a  
775 process requiring continuous contributions from each part-  
776 ner, their comportment during the entire pregnancy can  
777 impact on the health of the growing fetus, the outcome of  
778 childbirth, and the food quest.

779 Since prohibitions affecting the couple are maintained  
780 until the child can walk, there is ample time for curiosity to  
781 be aroused. Repeatedly being reminded not to eat such

desirable foods provokes a search for answers or at least 782  
makes someone attentive to proffered explanations. So 783  
learning that small helpless animals such as blue duikers 784  
are often reincarnated sorcerers who ate people when 785  
human explains why they have big *ekila* and must be treated 786  
carefully when killed. It is their jealousy of living people that 787  
causes them to seek to harm human fetuses and infants (the 788  
work of human *ekila*). But they cannot affect hunting since 789  
they are to be repeatedly hunted and eaten as a punishment 790  
by God (*Komba*). 791

As new *ekila* prohibitions are imposed on the maturing 792  
person, new challenges to their intuitive logic are presented. 793  
The developing experience of *ekila* acts as a mnemonic that 794  
guides people towards particular gendered bodily 795  
comportments and roles and to finding out about more 796  
abstract cultural knowledge and values. For instance, that 797  
adultery and promiscuity ruin a couple's *ekila* implicitly 798  
values faithfulness. Through *ekila* practices, such values 799  
are embodied in daily life and so become meaningful, rele- 800  
vant, and memorable. 801

Bloch (1998, p. 7) observed that in highly schooled 802  
societies the prominence of explicit instruction may blind 803  
us to the way much culturally transmitted knowledge is 804  
actually transferred through bodily practice and experience 805  
rather than by explicit linguistic articulation. The way gen- 806  
der roles are inculcated through *ekila* exemplifies this. *Ekila* 807  
taboos claim that certain animals become furious and attack 808  
people who smell of *ekila*. These are gorillas, elephants, 809  
buffalo, leopards, and poisonous snakes that do attack and 810  
sometimes cause serious injury or even kill people. 811  
Premenopausal women fear these animals because they 812  
smell *ekila* from their vaginas. This fear has important 813  
ramifications for gender roles and comportment. 814

Women's fear of attack encourages them to do daily 815  
activities in noisy groups. They gather in groups; fish and 816  
collect nuts, yams, and fruit together; and rarely spend time 817  
alone. This communalism in daily life establishes strong 818  
solidarity between them that has important implications for 819  
women's status. It is often used effectively to influence camp 820  
decisions. If women refuse a proposition made by men, men 821  
can never coerce them. Women quickly support each other 822  
in situations of conflict with men. In situations of serious 823  
domestic violence, I have witnessed women ganging up to 824  
protect the victim by beating the violent husband with long 825  
sticks. 826

*Ekila* practices and associated explanations ensure 827  
BaYaka men and women use their bodies in very different 828  
ways and cultivate distinct styles, exemplified in the way 829  
they talk and walk in the forest. Whereas men walk quietly in 830  
small groups or alone, women walk in large groups, rarely 831  
alone, and talk or yodel loudly to ensure they do not surprise 832  
animals. Women's songlike speech style, and even some 833  
vocabulary, is markedly different from men's (Lewis 834

2009). A careful man will not smell of *ekila* so that he can sneak up on animals without giving himself away. Consequently, men orientate themselves in their activities towards potentially dangerous outsiders such as wild animals and Bilo villagers. Complementarily, women orientate themselves inwards. Their activities are focused on their families, immediate relatives, and other camp members. Women often talk fearfully and suspiciously about other groups. They tend to be culturally conservative and are more reluctant than men to use or try new goods or foods from outside the forest. Bodily events are culturally elaborated to become clearly expressed differences between the sexes and a gender ideology that defines appropriate activities and behavior. Basic beliefs about *ekila* and the piecemeal explanations given for them differentiate people according to gender and, to a lesser extent, according to age.

Core *ekila* practices and beliefs orientate girls and boys to specialize in different, but complementary skills. In the process they also become aware of other areas of cultural knowledge that become relevant because they offer explanations of what they are living. So they may realize that their current gender roles are the same as those of the original mythical same-sex communities of men and women that founded BaYaka society. By connecting contemporary work roles with this mythical time, it is emphasized that men and women could be economically independent. This has political consequences.

A Mbendjele woman, or man, does not depend on anyone else for direct and unrestricted access to food nor for many of their other requirements should they wish to break away from others. As Woodburn (1982) made clear, an absence of dependency is the necessary prerequisite for egalitarian gender relations. A person in authority can exert power over others only if he can withhold basic requirements such as food, access to resources, or marriage partners. This is not possible between Mbendjele. The Mbendjele do not have an explicit discourse on “equality.” Rather the implicit valuation of equality crucially underpins the cultural logic of key social concepts such as *ekila*, just as *ekila* supports the egalitarian nature of Mbendjele society.

### 12.7.1 *Ekila's* Implicit Pedagogic Action

Bourdieu (1977) emphasized the inculcation of inequality and hierarchy when suggesting that if culture is embodied as practice in such ways, it is almost beyond the grasp of consciousness. By passing from practice to practice without becoming explicit discourse, ‘*habitus*’ remains unchallenged. *Ekila* is an example of similar processes inculcating an egalitarianism *habitus*. *Ekila* rules of behavior exert an anonymous but pervasive pedagogic action that prompts each Mbendjele person to learn key cultural knowledge. It occurs through the experience of a series of bodily practices

and proscriptions and the curiosity these provoke. Questions may opportunistically be asked of others, but the learner decides from whom and what they wish to learn, not an instructor.

Menstruation is the ultimate mnemonic for *ekila*, expanding the individual’s awareness outwards into diverse but related areas. The consequences of a Mbendjele girl’s first menstruation and subsequent menses thereafter provoke her, and her male relatives, to explore and learn about otherwise obscure areas of knowledge and ideology. The repetition of menstruation over many years provides numerous promptings to continue this exploration. Implicit in the special actions required of her and the men around her when she menstruates are networks of relations that slowly reveal themselves over many years as they unfold into diverse dimensions of cultural practice and ideology. These networks occasionally find verbal expression in formulaic and counterintuitive explanations of specific taboos and related striking behavior. The counterintuitive qualities of these explanations provoke further curiosity and questioning.

*Ekila* is like a stream running through many areas of Mbendjele practice. Occasionally stepping-stones show through the water, emerging as formulaic explanations for specific practices that lead thought in particular directions. These guide individuals in their personal journey through life, constructing knowledge and understanding as their experience unfolds in an active process of interrogation, speculation, and efforts to resolve inconsistencies between experience and knowledge (Robertson 1996, p. 599).

The natural curiosity *ekila* provokes educates Mbendjele about key values and practices, folk biology, gender, and work roles. But the inclination to enquire about *ekila* is unevenly distributed. *Ekila* practices and beliefs are not enacted or followed by all. Rather people chose to follow, ignore, or transgress them according to the context they find themselves in. What really matters is that they puzzle about why.

## 12.8 Reproducing an Egalitarian Society

The Mbendjele’s egalitarian social organization allows individuals a degree of autonomy and independence that some argue leads to cultural randomness. Here I hope to have shown that this tendency to social fluidity and lack of dependence on specific others is countered by practicing *massana*, and by the ideology of *ekila*. Both set up enhanced learning environments that transmit knowledge, skills, and values central to reproducing an egalitarian society. While *massana* exploits the pleasure generated by play, music, and the wish to be accepted by peers, *ekila* uses counterintuitive explanations and demands striking behaviors that drive each individual’s curiosity to make sense of relations linking

937 hunting and procreation, eating meat and the growth of  
 938 children, and women's labor with men's. *Ekila* counters the  
 939 uniqueness of gendered or individual production by  
 940 emphasizing interdependency. *Ekila* and *massana* act as  
 941 sophisticated ideological leveling mechanisms. *Ekila* beliefs  
 942 serve to reject any group or individual's claim to auto-  
 943 mously produce socially valued capital. *Massana* ensures  
 944 that each member of society appreciates cooperating with  
 945 others and internalizes key models for doing so, and it  
 946 provides the opportunity to learn the skills and attributes of  
 947 the groups joined during *massana* performances.

948 *Ekila* takes advantage of the extent to which human  
 949 bodies develop in fundamentally the same way to provide  
 950 a framework for cultural knowledge to bind onto. It does this  
 951 in diverse ways, and flexibly, enabling new ideas and  
 952 associations to be incorporated if they fit into the overall  
 953 framework. As a "complex cultural category" (Atran 1996)  
 954 *ekila* acts as a mnemonic device embedding key ideas,  
 955 values, and concepts in striking practices associated with  
 956 inevitable bodily experiences. It condenses values and  
 957 meanings to establish a cultural store for communication  
 958 between generations without attributing special status or  
 959 authority to individuals or institutions. *Ekila* works by  
 960 hidden persuasion and by provoking curiosity and  
 961 stimulating each new generation to discover Mbendjele  
 962 egalitarian ethics and the ideology of sharing.

963 *Massana* exploits the natural joy people experience  
 964 playing and making music together to give a context and  
 965 structure for conversations between groups within the soci-  
 966 ety that convey skills and specialist knowledge that educate  
 967 people about their distinctiveness. Through musical partici-  
 968 pation, they internalize ways to interact that promote equal-  
 969 ity and successful hunting and gathering. *Ekila* and  
 970 *massana*'s embodied nature means that they are difficult to  
 971 articulate explicitly as coherent belief systems or as a "reli-  
 972 gion". This makes them difficult to manage by "authority".

973 The ethnography of musical participation and  
 974 prohibitions among the Mbendjele illustrates how major  
 975 avenues for cultural learning can be organized without  
 976 recourse to figures of authority or dependence on explicit  
 977 teaching. People successfully performing the dense polyph-  
 978 ony of BaYaka music during *massana* experience what  
 979 BaYaka consider to be desirable emotions, ideal  
 980 relationships, and interaction.

981 The way people participate in music making and how the  
 982 structure of interlocking melodic lines influences  
 983 participants both serve to transmit a particular cultural aes-  
 984 thetic for interacting with others, providing a context that  
 985 embodies key values such as sharing and creates a special  
 986 world of time where the deep structure of myth and BaYaka  
 987 cosmology can be experienced by each generation.

988 Dance and musical performance can offer a privileged  
 989 window for the analysis of "foundational cultural schemas"

(Shore 1996; Widess 2012) and how they influence people's  
 990 everyday decisions and behavior. The performances do so by  
 991 seducing us to conform using our aesthetic sense, enjoyment  
 992 of harmony, desire to cooperate, curiosity, and pleasure-  
 993 seeking propensities. They resonate with multiple meanings  
 994 and so can adapt and continue to be applicable and useful  
 995 even when things change. This flexibility is crucial for  
 996 enabling foundational cultural schemas to be relevant over  
 997 long periods of time; adapting to change; providing guidance  
 998 but not direction, continuity despite variation, and a means  
 999 of ordering, and making sense out of novelty. Music and  
 1000 dance thus provide special potential for insight into founda-  
 1001 tional cultural schemas. 1002

1003 The combination of constancy in structure and style with  
 1004 creativity in output perhaps offers a partial account of why  
 1005 the interlocked vocal polyphonic style used by all BaYaka in  
 1006 spirit play is so resilient. If it is to be meaningful for each  
 1007 generation, it must be able to adapt flexibly to new contexts  
 1008 and resonate with new domains. It has to be able to frame the  
 1009 way people act and think rather than determining what they  
 1010 do or say. Otherwise it will not cope with change and may be  
 1011 abandoned because irrelevant. A distinctive musical style  
 1012 does this very effectively – by being able to adapt to new  
 1013 circumstances without losing relevance or continuity. The  
 1014 key is that musical meaning is diverse, interactive, situated,  
 1015 multilayered, and wonderfully stretchy. 1015

1016 This is true of *ekila* too. The structuring of prohibitions  
 1017 anchors key areas of cosmological knowledge, gender, and  
 1018 political ideology in the physical and biological experiences  
 1019 of human growth and maturation so that gendered practices  
 1020 and cultural values take on a natural, inevitable quality. But  
 1021 it also enables them to incorporate change and new practices. 1021

1022 Together, *massana* and *ekila* provide major avenues for  
 1023 BaYaka children to reproduce a distinctive and remarkably  
 1024 resilient cultural system despite different languages,  
 1025 territories, and neighbors. By housing these pedagogic pro-  
 1026 cesses in these different realms of social aesthetics, they are  
 1027 far more durable than might be expected. This robustness  
 1028 emerges precisely because they are not controlled by any  
 1029 particular group or class in society but are made present  
 1030 through repeated experiences and a structure that serves to  
 1031 organize these experiences according to the understanding  
 1032 of each. 1032

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