



# FORESTS *of* BELONGING

*Identities, Ethnicities, and Stereotypes in the Congo River Basin*

**STEPHANIE RUPP**

CULTURE, PLACE, AND NATURE • STUDIES IN ANTHROPOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

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*Forests of Belonging: Identities, Ethnicities, and Stereotypes in the Congo River Basin*

by Stephanie Rupp

# Forests of Belonging

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IDENTITIES, ETHNICITIES, *and* STEREOTYPES  
*in the* CONGO RIVER BASIN

STEPHANIE RUPP

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FOR MY PARENTS, NANCY AND GEORGE . . . FOR EVERYTHING.

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## Tangles

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### PARALLEL CLANS, ALLIANCES, RITUALS, AND COLLECTIVE WORK

**E**thnic affiliations are thick with historical, linguistic, and ideological value. While not immutable over time, monolithic across communities, or of constant emotional value among individuals, ethnic affiliations are collectively valued, recognized, and upheld. As a result, it is relatively difficult for people to manipulate their ethnic affiliations outright to suit particular interests in particular contexts. In contrast, interethnic social relations are established and nurtured, and interethnic social identities emerge where individuals live in a shared environment, face shared crises and opportunities, and experience shared historical events and social change. Where existential conditions are common, collaborative relationships result in interethnic networks and communal social identities that individuals call on with frequency and ease. While maintaining partner-





FIG. 5.1 Building friendship, Dioula Village, 1996

ships of any kind requires constancy and effort, in southeastern Cameroon individuals are involved in numerous interethnic social relations at once, offering a diversity of ways to interact and to promote mutually beneficial relationships and identities. Moreover, interethnic social relationships have both calculative and affective dimensions, as people balance practical and emotional reasons for coming together in partnerships and networks, or for abandoning these relationships. By exploring the tangles of belonging that bring people of different ethnic affiliations together, it becomes apparent that processes of identification provide multiple channels for people to position themselves in the plural, multiethnic communities of southeastern Cameroon, enabling individuals selectively to emphasize social relationships that transcend their particular ethnic affiliations.

Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam individuals come together in numerous collaborative social contexts, including parallel clans, interethnic alliances, shared ritual ceremonies and societies, and collective work efforts. These channels of interethnic collaboration highlight the many, varied ways that people in the Lobéké forest region come together, building on and sustaining the core of shared experiences that enable individuals to form meaningful, lasting relationships and fluid, flexible ways of identifying oneself

and others. As lianas and vines integrate the forest into a dynamic, interactive ecosystem, so do partnerships, alliances, and collaborative ties integrate the people of southeastern Cameroon in horizontally tangled relationships that cut across vertical trunks of ethnic affiliation.

## Clans and Parallel Clans

Throughout the Lobéké forest, families of the four main ethnic communities are internally organized according to patrilineal clans, representing extended families whose narratives of social origins indicate that individuals belonging to the clan have descended from a common, although often mystical, set of ancestors. In addition to sentiments of ethnic affiliation that are based on the sharing of a primary language and story of origin, membership in clans adds another layer of emotional solidarity among individuals of shared patrilineage. As clan members recount stories of the clan's history, uphold taboo restrictions, and overlap in domestic space, individuals belonging to particular clans recognize and reaffirm their deep interconnectedness.<sup>1</sup>

By clan I refer to a kinship group in which members of each group believe themselves to be agnates related by unilineal descent, even though they often cannot trace their relations with other members of the kinship group with genealogical precision (Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1950; Burnham 1980). Membership in the clan is passed to each individual from his or her father, who in turn "received" his membership from his father, and so on. Membership in a particular clan is represented by three social features that are passed from a father to his children: a clan name, an emblem or totem (which reflects the clan name), and the social rule of exogamous marriage<sup>2</sup> (see Burnham 1980: 83 to compare with Gbaya clans).

Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam clans offer ligaments of structural parallelism, facilitating interethnic collaboration. The clan systems of all four groups are based on patrilineal, exogamous, noncorporate structures. This organizational alignment across the communities means that their basic kinship structures often correspond and can operate in tandem. Thus if individuals from different ethnic backgrounds marry, the fundamental systems of kinship organization of their respective families are often analogous, allowing the couple and their eventual children to fit within the structural logic of both families. This structural congruence facilitates interethnic marriage, because couples find that despite differences in lan-

guage and history of origin, the principles and structures of kinship in both families are fundamentally coherent. In addition, certain clan affiliations are held by more than one ethnic group among the Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam. These overlapping clan affiliations lead to alliances between members of different ethnic groups who belong to the same clan. Each Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam clan is represented by a totemic symbol, usually a plant or animal found in the surrounding forest, whose consumption is tabooed. Clans rarely recognize apical ancestors.<sup>3</sup> Instead clan origins are based on stories of the rescue of the initial nuclear family by a particular forest animal. A woman of the monkey clan, *bò dáwà*, explains her family's association with chimpanzees and monkeys:

During the war when the Ndzimou attacked Bangando villages, my family became connected with the family of monkeys. We [Bangando and monkeys] were neighbors living in the forest. When the Ndzimou tried to attack our village, the chimpanzees [*wáké*] saw the Ndzimou approaching, because they were high up in trees. The chimpanzees warned our family that the Ndzimou were coming. The chimpanzees ran ahead of our family through the canopy, showing us the best path for escape and the safest places to hide. Our family was so grateful to the chimpanzees and said that we would never hunt and eat chimpanzees—or other monkeys—again.<sup>4</sup>

Similar stories of rescue are recounted by members of many different clans. In other clans' stories of rescue and alliance, elephants stomped away traces of families that fled into the forest, gathering around them to protect them from advancing enemies. Other clans were saved by birds, which flew into the faces of advancing enemies and blinded them by their flapping as families fled. Still today the rescuing animals serve as the clan totem for the patrilineal descendants from the original families that were rescued; the clan members faithfully observe the taboo restriction on eating the meat of their totem.

In addition, most clans recognize particular insignias that can be used to mark the movement of a clan member, and uphold rituals that pertain to the birth of a new clan member. For example, *bò fóló* clan members, the people of the elephant, mark their passage at the junction of forest trails by taking a vine and tying it loosely into a circular knot. The ring made by the vine represents an elephant's footprint; the toenails of the elephant's footprint are represented by the crossing of the vine in the loose knot, thus indicating the direction that the elephant-clan person traveled. An example of birth rituals

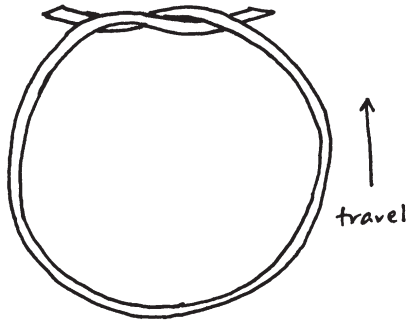


FIG. 5.2 Insignia of the *bò fóló* clan, “the people of the elephant”

*Bò fóló* clan insignia,  
indicating direction of  
travel in forest.  
“Elephant footprint” is  
moving forward.

comes from the *bò wé* clan, the people of fire (whose totem is the monitor lizard). *Bò wé* mothers deliver their children in complete darkness. If a child is born at night, no lamp, candle, fire, or even match may be lit. At the first light of dawn, the child is passed over a ceremonial fire (*wé*) at the doorway to the house to purify and protect the child.

Over and above each clan’s story of rescue by and alliance with a particular forest animal, the broader history of Bangando migration into the forest of southeastern Cameroon and their ethnic genesis from Ngombé ancestors connect all Bangando lineages. Thus Bangando kinship reinforces agnatic kinship across all clans, even as clans themselves may share important symbolic, ritual, and social ties that are specific to their own lineages, ties that they may share with clan members of other ethnic affiliations.

Bangando clan structures are effectively noncorporate: no internal structure of roles defines positions or formal responsibilities of individuals within a clan. Despite this lack of internal structure within clans, the eldest male of each clan traditionally served as the *mókóndjí* or chief of the clan, taking charge of family decisions. If multiple clans lived within a single village, as is usually the case today, traditional political relations would bring the heads of each clan together during times of crisis to make collective decisions regarding the larger multiclan community. But as a result of the political restructuring of communities in southeastern Cameroon and the

establishment of village-wide, officially sanctioned chiefs, clans have ceased to function as political structures. Today clans offer extended families a cohesive, sentimental net, as well as a means of internal reckoning of patrilineal relations.

Each Bangando clan tends to have a geographic epicenter where elder male relatives and their families have established their households. The spatial focus of each clan is historically based and is often the location where clan forefathers established a neighborhood of a village. The locations of many Bangando villages have changed over the course of the past century as a result of German and French colonial resettlement policies (Rupp 2001). When entire villages moved, resident clans usually shifted as well. Often these relocations provided opportunities for clans to adjust the layout of their neighborhood with respect to other clans, and for individual families within a clan neighborhood to alter the configuration of their houses, defusing simmering tensions or consolidating new alliances and friendships.

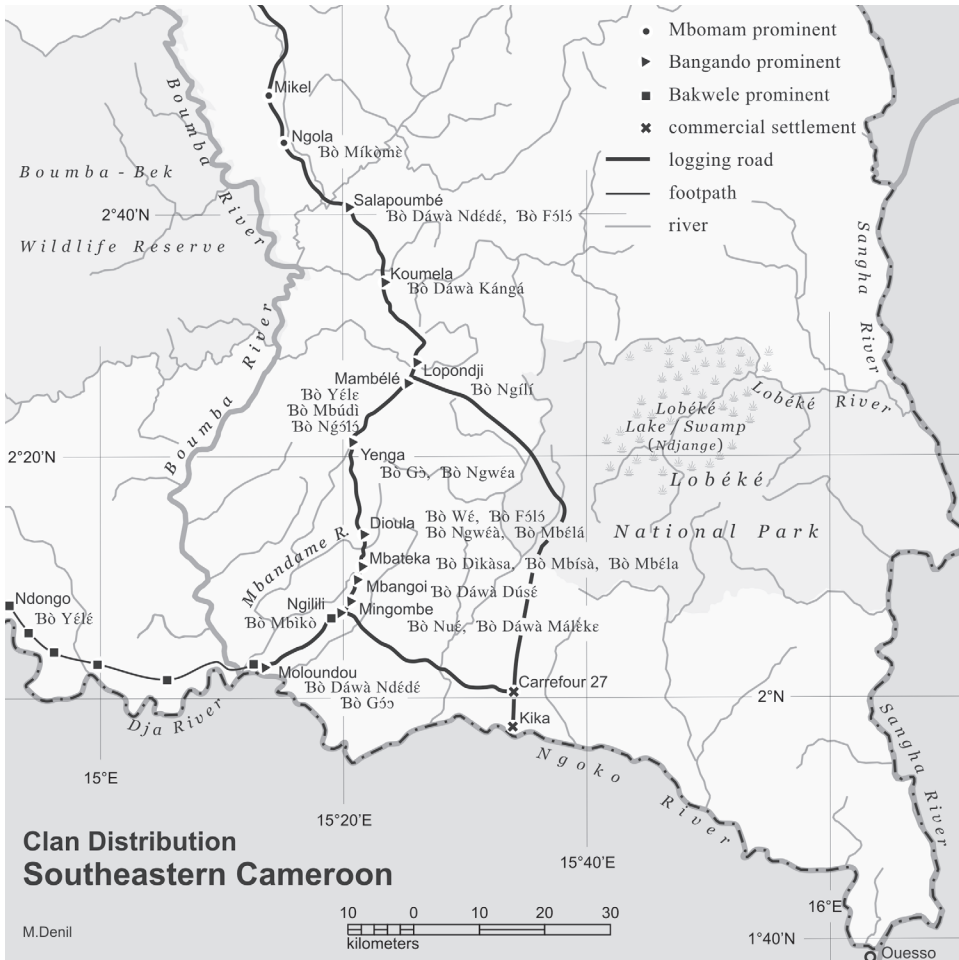
Not all contemporary clans have one single, spatial center. Because economic and social opportunities are distributed throughout the Lobéké forest region, and because mobility was (and continues to be) an entirely acceptable and normal dynamic among the four ethnic groups, young adults were at liberty to establish their own households in other villages. Not infrequently brothers or parallel cousins decided together that their ambitions were best fulfilled in a village some distance from the rest of their clan, which was often dominated by their fathers and grandfathers. In such cases, young men and their families moved to a different village to establish a new neighborhood, or they founded an entirely new village in a new location in the forest. This strategy of internal social mobility and flux enabled the wider, interethnic community to maintain general balance, by neutralizing small-scale conflicts and facilitating new and mutually beneficial relations with individuals from various clans, villages, and ethnic communities. Today when clan members are dispersed in more than one location, members of the clan recognize the various areas where they can find solidarity and hospitality among extended family members, and often visit the other villages of their clanspeople for a holiday or in search of other opportunities. This spatial distribution of clans is significant; family members traveling to a different village, or even to a different region of the forest, can be sure that if they find someone from their clan they will be welcomed and cared for as kin.

If epicenters of clans are predicated on the patrilineal relations of male clan members, the dispersion of the clan is mobilized by women of the clan. Because of the social assumption that an individual's identity derives from

the patriline, the children of a couple formally become members of their father's clan, not their mother's.<sup>5</sup> As adults, women marry into the clans of their husbands. Thus wives are affiliated with two clans simultaneously: their patrilineal clan of birth as well as the clan to which their husbands and children belong.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Bangando, Bakwélé, and Mbomam communities follow virilocal marriage patterns; women tend to live and raise their children in the villages and according to the clan allegiance of their husbands. Through the dual clan affiliation of wives and their virilocal distribution throughout villages in southeastern Cameroon (and beyond), the regional spread of clans is convoluted, complex, and wide. Although not every village includes representatives of every clan, many villages are characterized by a surprising diversity of clans, whose representatives are often women who have married into the core patrilineal clans of the village founders. Especially where multiple women from the same family—sisters or female cousins, for example—marry men of a given family, often the households of these women provide important “sub-hubs” of their own patrilineal clan in their marital villages.<sup>7</sup> These multiple marriages between two clans, sometimes involving sibling exchange, also result in the tendency for certain pairs of clans to have particularly strong and affable relations. Through the rigid requirements of exogamous marriage, the extended iterations of virilocal marriage, and the acceptance of social mobility, relationships among the many clans of the four ethnic communities are manifold.

Individual clans reinforce their solidarity through the mythic histories and totemic ideologies that clan members embrace. Each clan name is constructed by placing the prefix *bò* in front of the name of the animal that serves as the clan's totem.<sup>8</sup> Thus the clan name of the forest pig, *ngwéà*, is *bò ngwéà*; the clan members are also called *bò ngwéà*, meaning “people of the forest pig.”<sup>9</sup> The evolution of the prefix *bò* as a flexible, nominal marker of identity referring to “people of” in contemporary contexts beyond the clan system also enables speakers of Bangando to construct countless and continually shifting ascriptions of social identity.

Clan affiliation, and thus patrilineal kinship, is one of the fundamental ways that Bangando and the other communities of southeastern Cameroon reckon who is who and conceptualize networks of intimate kin relations. While most Bangando throughout southeastern Cameroon know each other—or at least know of each other—because of their extensive social networks, if strangers meet for the first time, one of the first pieces of information that each person inquires about is clan affiliation. Clan membership provides general orienting information about the social and familial back-



MAP 5.1 Distribution of Bangando clans in southeastern Cameroon

ground of the individual, who her relatives are, and where she may have grown up.

In addition to offering practical support and emotional connections among clanspeople, certain clans have fostered particularly close relations as allies of other clans. These interclan links are often spiritually charged, mythically remembered, and socially reinforced through a high degree of intermarriage of their women. For example, the clan of the monitor lizard, the *bò wé* family, which includes the ancestral line of Wanguwangu, has deep and enduring links with the clan of the elephant, *bò fɔ́lɔ́*. The quasi-apical ancestor of the *bò wé* clan was Wanguwangu, a legendary Bangando warrior

TABLE 5.1 Distribution of Bangando clans in southeastern Cameroon

BANGANDO CLAN	FOCAL VILLAGE	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<i>bò míkò mè</i>	Ngola	People of the wild cat
<i>bò dáwà</i> <sup>10</sup>		People of the monkey
<i>bò dáwà kángá</i>	Salapoumbé, Moloundou	... colobus monkey
<i>bò dáwà málèkè</i>	Koumela	... de Brazza's monkey
<i>bò dáwà ndédé</i>	Mbangoï	... Guenon monkey
<i>bò dáwà dúsé</i>	Mingombé	... ? monkey
<i>bò ngí lí</i>	Lopondji	People of the tortoise
<i>bò yélé</i>	Mambélé	People of the buffalo
<i>bò mbú dí</i>	Mambélé	People of the sitatunga <sup>11</sup>
<i>bò ngól</i>	Mambélé	People of the snail
<i>bò gò</i>	Yenga-Doucement	People of the panther
<i>bò ngwéà</i>	Yenga, Dioula	People of the forest pig
<i>bò mbé lá</i>	Dioula, Mbateka	People of the eagle
<i>bò wé</i>	Dioula	People of the monitor lizard
<i>bò fí l</i>	Dioula, Salapoumbé	People of the elephant
<i>bò dí kà sà</i>	Mbateka Njong	People of the hardy shrub
<i>bò mbí sà</i>	Mbateka	People of the <i>mbísa</i> fruit <sup>12</sup>
<i>bò mbí kò</i>	Ngilili	People of the caiman
<i>bò nué</i>	Mingombé	People of the bird
<i>bò gó s</i>	Moloundou	People of the snake

and elephant hunter. According to the oral mythologies of the clan, Wanguwangu fought enemies with the strength of an elephant. Wanguwangu could also transform himself into an elephant during battle to escape his enemies, and during the hunt to sneak up on elephants that he intended to kill. Kebikibele, Wanguwangu's granddaughter and one of the oldest living Bangando in the region, recalls the merging of attributes from the *bò wé* and *bò fí l* clans, evident in his death and funeral:

When Wanguwangu died, our family placed two large wooden poles on either side of his grave, sticking out of the ground. The wooden poles had special signs



on them. These poles represented the tusks of an elephant, because Wanguwangu had been a great elephant hunter and warrior. Just as we placed his body in the grave, Wanguwangu transformed himself into an elephant and disappeared into the forest. But an unburied spirit is an unsettled and dangerous thing, so the *bò wé* organized an elephant hunt to find and kill him, so that we could bury him properly. When we finally managed to kill the elephant [Wanguwangu], his tusks had the same markings on them that we had made on the wooden “tusks” that we had placed over his grave. My family took the elephant meat and ate it—we ate Wanguwangu. So the power of *kífi* [transforming from human into animal form] was passed on to younger generations.<sup>13</sup>

It is significant that even though Wanguwangu had the power to transform himself into an elephant, he was not *bò fɛ́lɛ́* (person of the elephant) but *bò wé* (person of fire, represented by the monitor lizard). Usually clans protect their secrets—origin stories and the power of transformation into the form of their totem—from discovery by other clans. But Kebikibele explains that in Wanguwangu’s case, he made a pact with elephants because their powers of strength and cunning would be invaluable in battle and in hunting, giving him a strategic advantage beyond any powers that transformation into the form of a monitor lizard, the totem of his patrilineal clan, could offer. Because of the alliance that Wanguwangu had forged with elephants, during the wars and conflicts of the nineteenth century, the *bò wé* clan would flee into the forest along with the *bò fɛ́lɛ́* clan, and elephants would protect them all, people of the elephant and people of the monitor lizard alike. As Kebikibele explains,

The people would all flee ahead of the elephants, and the elephants would trample over the people’s footprints, stomping out any traces of their passage. If the children were crying or the people were making too much noise, the elephants would make noises to cover the people’s voices. When the *bò wé* and *bò fɛ́lɛ́* would stop for the night, the elephants would gather around them to protect them.

The same thing would happen today if a war were to break out or if the war comes from Congo. The Bangando and Baka would all flee along the same path into the forest, and the *mòkelákelá* [elephants, including people transformed into elephants] would follow and stomp out the footprints of the people. The *mòkelákelá* would protect both Bangando and Baka, because we are all one family.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of the alliance made between Wanguwangu and the elephants, two social articulations were initiated. First, the *bò wé* clan and the *bò fɛ́lɛ́*

clan initiated their long-standing relations of interclan cooperation, coresidence in the same village, and intermarriage. Today the emotional bonds between *bò wé* and *bò fóló* individuals continue to be intimate, as these two clans have intermarried and collaborated closely for numerous generations.

Secondly, Wanguwangu's alliance with elephants and his use of the powers of transformation—*mólómbí*—brought Bangando and Baka together in intimate relations with elephants: both groups share the power of elephant transformation and come under the joint protection of elephants. *Mólómbí* was first a Baka form of sorcery, allowing Baka hunters to move about the forest invisibly, transformed into the bodies of elephants. According to Bangando and Baka elders alike, as their ancestors forged alliances and became partners, Bangando warriors realized that *mólómbí* would offer powerful protection against their enemies in the interethnic conflicts of the nineteenth century. So Bangando warriors added their own magical powers to the Baka expertise in *mólómbí*, enhancing its potency.

*Mólómbí* is a special power to make yourself invisible, especially for times of war or for hunting, so that others can't see you. *Mólómbí* is a mixture of Bangando and Baka powers; the strongest of both mixed together. You must be initiated to know and practice *mólómbí*. It is *móbúlè* [very secret].<sup>15</sup>

Today *mólómbí* is used by Baka and Bangando both for hunting and for protection in case of conflict.

Just as both Bangando and Baka families that have affiliations with elephants will be protected by them, numerous Bangando and Baka (as well as Bakwélé and Mbomam) clans share other animal totems, creating an interethnic network of parallel clans and mutual support. It is likely that the social structures of the four communities developed independently of one another, the coincidences of shared clan totems being reinforced by their mutual social and natural contexts once the communities settled in the Lobéké forest region. Names of Bangando and Gbaya clans in some cases are identical, suggesting that at least this structural element of Bangando organization arrived with them intact when they migrated to the forest from the Gbaya-dominated grasslands. Baka clan names refer much more frequently to plants than do Bangando clan names, indicating that Baka and Bangando clans have distinct origins. As Bangando and Baka families developed close affinal ties, deepening their social relations through the sharing of meat and other food, mutual aid, and neighborly cohabitation, the clan systems belonging to these two separate groups also began to intersect. Bangando

and Baka recognize a certain mutual reliance on clanspeople of the overlapping, interethnic clan, particularly in situations of stress or need. Some of these shared clans are sketched in table 5.2.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the Lobéké region, Bangando and Baka alike point to the overlapping of their clan systems as an indication of their intricately connected communities. As a mixed group of villagers in Dioula explain, where two clans intersect, the overlap indicates a special friendship between the Baka and Bangando members of these clans. So if a Bangando *bò dáwà*, a person of the monkey clan, is in a village far away from home, and if there is a Baka *yě kémà* family, also the monkey clan, the *yě kémà* family will take in the *bò dáwà* and care for him. Likewise, if a Baka *yě kémà* comes to a Bangando village where there are *bò dáwà*, the Bangando “people of the monkey” will take care of the Baka “person of the monkey,” as they are members of the same family.<sup>17</sup>

Bangando and Baka clans that overlap in the same village know who their fellow clanspeople are, including members of other ethnic affiliations, and know that they can turn to these interethnic clanspeople if they are in need of assistance. Anda, a Baka man who is generally sour about his relations with Bangando neighbors, nonetheless explains the overlap of clans with some appreciation:

Some Baka and Bangando clans are the same. They have different names, but they ritually avoid [*síní*] the same forest animals. I am *yě gùgà*, so I don't eat monitor lizard. The [Bangando] *bò wé* also don't eat monitor lizard. So the *bò wé* avoid monitor lizards; the *yě gùgà* also avoid monitor lizards. [Then in Bangando he said] *Mí bò bò wé* — I am a person of the monitor lizard. If I have an illness in my family, I can go to Wanguwangu, the elder of the *bò wé* clan, to ask him for help. Wanguwangu will help me by giving me some money or by helping me find medicine. And if Wanguwangu or another *bò wé* comes to me for help, I will try to help him, too. But because I don't have any money, I could only offer Wanguwangu a chicken, which he could then sell, and use the money to sort out his problem.<sup>18</sup>

Although Anda recognizes the links of friendship and support that people who *síní* (avoid) the monitor lizard can fall back on, he also emphasizes that Baka were *yě gùgà* before they met Bangando; there are no compelling historical circumstances that make the *yě gùgà* reliant on or responsible for their parallel Bangando clan, the *bò wé*. The coincidental overlap of their clans' affiliations—the monitor lizard—provides a context in which they can turn to each other for assistance. But other social circumstances, includ-

TABLE 5.2 Interethnic overlap of clans in southeastern Cameroon

BANGANDO	BAKA	MBOMAM	BAKWÉLÉ	TOTEM/TABOO
<i>bò dāwà</i>	<i>yé kémà</i>		<i>yá dadjak</i>	monkey
<i>bò gʒʒ</i>	<i>yé mòkùmù</i>		<i>yá zozape</i>	snake
<i>bò wé</i>	<i>yé gùgà</i>			monitor lizard
<i>bò fʒlʒ</i>	<i>yé líkèmbà</i>			elephant
<i>bò yélé</i>	<i>yé ndúmù</i>			buffalo/drum
<i>bò ngwéà</i>	<i>yé mʒndʒ</i>			wild pig
	<i>yé mòmbitó</i>			kind of tree
	<i>yé ngándá</i>			black civet
	<i>yé silò</i>			electric fish
	<i>yé njèmbè</i>			kind of fish
	<i>yé ngílá</i>			switch, stick for beating
	<i>yé ngbé</i>			?
	<i>yé kpóngbò</i>			rattan
	<i>yé ndóngá</i>			?
	<i>yé lékèmba</i>	<i>yá zɔma</i>		rat
		<i>yá bàngò</i>		green pigeon
		<i>yá mísùlà</i>		?
		<i>yá biótà</i>		weaver bird
		<i>yá ùgól</i>		?
		<i>yá bàng</i>		hornbill
		<i>yá ndyápàngéi</i>		?
		<i>yá chtí bá</i>		?
		<i>yá msɔla</i>		ground squirrel
		<i>yá sike</i>		?
		<i>yá bɔsɛla</i>		?
<i>bò gʒ</i>			<i>yá kei</i>	leopard
<i>bò mbé lá</i>			<i>yá biel</i>	eagle
			<i>yá kwíè</i>	blue duiker
			<i>yá bàmò</i>	<i>súúm</i>
			<i>yá bomun</i>	?
			<i>yá dada</i>	?
			<i>yá kuaduak</i>	?

ing residence, hunting partnerships, and intermarriage also play a role in their friendships and alliances with Bangando.

Maga, an elder from Lopondji, offers a slightly different explanation for the overlapping of Bangando and Baka clans. He suggests that Baka maintain two clan affiliations: a Baka individual belongs to one clan by virtue of his patriline, and he belongs to a second clan by sharing the clan membership of his Bangando partner. In this case Baka partners do not rigorously uphold the food prohibitions of the Bangando clan. Maga's Baka partner, Andusa, and his extended family are linked to Maga's extended family through a *bándí* partnership. Because of his alliance with Maga, Andusa and his family belong not only to their own patrilineal Baka clan, but also to Maga's patrilineal clan, the clan of the tortoise (*bò ngíli*). Maga and his family, however, are not members of Andusa's clan; indeed, Maga does not know what Andusa's Baka clan affiliation is.<sup>19</sup> This unidirectional "sharing" of clan affiliations seems to reflect the imbalance in social relations of power between Bangando and Baka, in which Bangando hold more social, economic, and political power than their Baka partners.

In practice, Bangando and Baka seem to rely on concentric circles of relations for assistance, turning to wider circles of parallel clan affiliations for support when no other options are available. The most intense and focused support comes from the smallest circle of intimate relations for both groups: their nuclear families, affines, and close friends. If additional support is needed, for example if an individual is traveling beyond the geographic range of her close social ties, or if closely tied friends and relatives are not able to offer help, Bangando and Baka turn to other families and individuals with whom they have social links either through common clan affiliations or, as we shall see below, through other intimate alliances. The existence of clan-based, interethnic relations indicates that the metaphors of kinship and responsibility have coevolved between the two communities, enabling them to support each other in circumstances of need. Parallel clans enable individuals to look for logistical, social, political, and economic assistance through relations that traverse ethnic lines, opening additional avenues of cooperation and support.

## Alliances

Because patrilines are often linked through structural alliances that emphasize and reinforce interethnic cooperation, individuals are often connected

through lasting friendships and partnerships that transcend ethnic boundaries. At the level of structural kin relations, there are no overlapping terms for kinship relations in the Bangando and Baka languages. One term for a very intimate friend is included in the palette of kinship terms in both languages, however: *bò jáá mù* (in Bangando) and *bò jáá àlè* (in Baka), where *bò jáá* in both cases refers to a “person of the same stomach” (and *mù* and *álè* are first person possessive pronouns in Bangando and Baka, respectively). The appellation *bò jáá mù* evokes the intimate connections that siblings share and is attributed to a very close friend or *bándí*. The shared concept for an especially close friend, partner, and ally indicates that sentiments of emotional and social solidarity have developed between individuals of different ethnic groups, affections that can and often do surmount ethnic differences.

In analyzing social relations, however, the literature on relations between “hunter-gatherers”/“farmers” and “pygmies”/“villagers” emphasizes economic relationships between the groups. According to these analyses, labor is provided by “hunter-gatherers” while goods—particularly agricultural produce and commercial goods such as clothes, iron tools, and salt—are provided by “farmers.” As classically portrayed by a leading expert on hunting and gathering communities in central Africa,

Each Pygmy family has exclusive economic relations with a family of farmers. The Aka [Pygmies] provide the villagers with game, forest products, and seasonal agricultural labor (for forest clearing and harvesting). In return, they obtain metal tools and agricultural products. But the two communities are quite independent, with different systems of kinship, and social and religious organizations. The relationship between the two populations is comparable to the “patron-client” relationship in ancient Rome. (Bahuchet 1999: 193)

The summary of socioeconomic relations between “pygmies” and the nondescript “villagers” is typical of much of the literature on forest dwellers. Scholars often portray such exchanges of labor for goods and forest products for agricultural products as the basis of social interaction between groups of “hunter-gatherers” and “farmers.”

But alliances between Bangando “villagers” and Baka “pygmies” involve much more than exchanges of labor for goods and forest products for agricultural products. Bangando and Baka families support each other in diverse ways, not only economically but also by providing emotional and political support, formalized through the creation and maintenance of relationships between interethnic partners. While these relationships are often initiated

between two men, they frequently develop into alliances between families that pass from one generation to the next, often extending to special friendships between the wives and children of the families as well.

During the tumultuous era of precolonial conflict and the onset of colonialism, when forced labor such as road building and rubber collecting as well as capitation taxes stretched families to the limits of their productive and protective abilities, Bangando and Baka families extended support to each other (for detailed discussion, see Rupp 2001). The pressures wrought on the communities of southeastern Cameroon through the German and French colonial eras, as well as during independence and the postcolonial decades of the twentieth century, brought Bangando and Baka together in mutual support. Little by little, first through internal dynamics of shared affinity and reciprocal support in times of difficulty, and later as a result of the “push” factor of Baka resettlement along the road, Bangando and Baka became more and more intricately involved in each other’s lives, struggles, and successes. Intimate relations evolved between men, women, and children of all four communities as daily interactions generated sentiments of affection, providing the contextual foundations for friendships (*bándí*), the sharing of first names (*kólá*), and alliances (*mbòní*). Today, crosscutting relations of amity and alliance transcend ethnic boundaries, weaving together individuals from various ethnic communities.

### Bándí—Friendship

Whereas intimacy increases the potential for tension as well as affection, the emergence of the *bándí* relationship between Bangando and Baka men, a relationship of formalized friendship that continues to link interethnic partners among men and women today, is testimony to the fostering of interethnic friendship. As explained by Ambata,

Bangando and Baka are tightly connected. Most Bangando and Baka families have associated families of the other group. Baka families who are allied with Bangando families tend to live in the same neighborhood as their Bangando friends, or even in the same house compound.

The two families are connected as groups. But they are also connected as individual people: the heads of each family are special friends; the wives are friends; and often the children are friends, too. So this *bándí* friendship will pass down to the next generation.

Sometimes the Baka family will give names from the Bangando family to their own children.

The head of the Bangando family is responsible for the actions of the Baka family with respect to other Bangando. The head of the Baka family is responsible for things that the members of the Bangando family do with other Baka. And if someone in the Baka family has a conflict in the village, the Bangando man will help him in discussions or at the *gálá wè*, the tribunal. If a Baka *bándí* has trouble with the government or missionaries, often his Bangando *bándí* will help him. . . . If the Bangando *bándí* has a conflict with other Baka, the Baka partner will help to sort out his problem.

If a woman from the Bangando family gets married to a man from another village, sometimes a member of the *bándí* family will go with her when she moves to her husband's village. Then the *bándí* relationship can be extended to include the new husband's family.

The Bangando family helps to look after the needs of the Baka family, especially in terms of money—buying clothes or pots, paying school fees, and paying for medicine. The Baka family also helps the Bangando family. If someone falls sick, both partners will help find medicines to cure the illness.<sup>20</sup>

A few days after this conversation, Ambata's goat was struck by a passing logging truck, breaking its leg. Nakolongjoko, Ambata's father's *bándí*—who remains a very intimate friend and partner of Ambata's family despite his father's death—found the goat by the side of the road. He set aside his work to splint the goat's leg and to nurse it back to health by means of medicines he collected in the forest, enacting the pattern of care and assistance that *bándí* partners share.

This account of *bándí* relationships reflects elements of the basic exchange relationship often described in “hunter-gatherer” studies. But it also indicates that *bándí* partnerships involve ties at a level of intimacy that surpasses simple exchange. As a result of these *bándí* friendships, Bangando and Baka engage in daily, often prolonged interaction. Bangando and Baka male *bándís* interact informally during hours of leisure and often during activities such as clearing land for a garden or during hunting. *Bándís* support each other formally during village meetings, especially if the men seek to resolve a conflict, either within their own families or between a member of their families and an outsider (or an external element such as the government). Bangando and Baka women interact more frequently and for longer durations of time, because women's work is both more time-consuming and often involves collective tasks during which women can socialize.



Indeed, Bangando women tend to have more frequent domestic and intimate relations with Baka women *and* men than Bangando men have with Baka of either gender. Bangando women may seek but do not rely on domestic and agricultural labor provided by Baka women and men. Baka often help Bangando women by clearing land for planting, carrying water, and collecting edible leaves for preparing the evening meal or useful vines and rattan for weaving baskets or mats. It is not at all unusual for Baka to linger and chat with Bangando women in and around their kitchen houses before and after working, and often to visit Bangando kitchen houses just to socialize. But because of the imbalance of social and political power, Bangando women only occasionally assist Baka families with *their* domestic work; the majority of social and productive activities that involve both Bangando and Baka happen in the context of the Bangando domestic sphere. It is important to take into account the asymmetry in social power between Bangando and Baka, leading Bangando to assume directive roles in public arenas as well as in multiethnic domestic contexts. However, to fully grasp relations between the communities, it is also essential to recognize the voluntary, mutually supportive, and extended nature of *bándí* relations.

To illustrate the quality of *bándí* relations between Bangando and Baka, consider the interaction between neighbors during a period of stress. In the course of one week in early May 1998, a small Bangando family experienced three crises: three babies were born; one of these newborn infants died; and the grandmother's tuberculosis dramatically worsened. Because the family was preoccupied with pressing health concerns, no one was able to harvest plantains, check snare lines, or gather leaves from the forest to prepare the family's meals. Instead, the family's *bándí*, a Baka family that lives just a stone's throw away in a neighboring cluster of houses, provided their Bangando *bándí* with plantains as well as leaf sauce and other prepared dishes. In situations where misfortune or stress befalls this Baka family, their Bangando *bándí* support them in similar ways. The readily forthcoming, mutual support between *bándí* partners is evident in the friendship and assistance that flows in both directions. A few weeks later, when the acute symptoms of her tuberculosis had subsided, the grandmother of this same Bangando family brought her *bándí*, whom she addresses as *mbaié*—"friend"—a basket full of avocados from a tree near her garden, mushrooms that she had collected in the forest, and a block of soap. By sharing their space and resources, work and materials, Bangando and Baka women cultivate deep ties of mutual help and goodwill across ethnic lines.

Wanguwangu offers another perspective on the enduring intimacy of his *bándí* friendship with Ndomonyo, a Baka man who lives with his family just on the other side of the logging road from Wanguwangu's home. He indicates that where *bándí* relationships retain emotional significance over the course of numerous generations between a Bangando and a Baka family, the bonds of mutual collaboration and support generate bonds of fictive kinship, resulting in interethnic sentiments of siblinghood.

Oh, yes! I have Baka *bándí*. Don't you see me with those neighbors who stay just on the other side of the road? Because our father left them with us, so they are also our friends [*bándí*]. Ndomonyo is my *bándí*; but he is no longer my friend, he is already my brother. My father was the *bándí* of his father, and because his father is dead and my father is dead too—because we were both left as orphans—I consider him to be my brother. And also because I am with him.<sup>21</sup>

In some cases, the melding of intimate relationships between *bándí* partners may reinforce the overlap between parallel clans. Where *bándí* friendships link numerous members of two families, it is probable that parallel clanship was a contributing factor in initiating the friendship; the shared observance of clan rituals also reinforces the close relations between the two extended families. Cooperative engagement during rituals and mutual support during times of family crisis offer clear indications of particularly close interethnic *bándí* friendships and parallel clans. For example, the *bándí* alliance between Mosongo, a Bangando elder and renowned hunter, and Lembi, a Baka elder and renowned spiritual leader, is reinforced by their membership in parallel clans, *bò wé* (Bangando) and *yě gùgà* (Baka), both of which take the monitor lizard as their totem.

Where *bándí* alliances are particularly intimate, such as the partnership between Mosongo and Lembi, which is reinforced by their parallel clanship, *bándí* partners may assume roles of siblings. Lembi and Mosongo live in adjoining house compounds with their wives and families, share meals together, hunt together, and are actively involved in the successes and difficulties that each encounters. So when Lembi's younger brother died during a hunting trip that took him more than twenty kilometers from the village, Mosongo and Lembi together arranged an expedition to retrieve the body and bring it back for the funeral and burial in the village. Several days later, the body was buried and the loss was mourned by Lembi's extended family and network of friends at Mosongo's household. The funeral ceremony, including dancing and singing as well as the bulk of the participants, were

Baka. But, as Lembi's *bándí*, Mosongo and his family organized, hosted, and financed the funeral. Mosongo also undertook the significant task of digging the grave for Lembi's deceased brother. Because of their close *bándí* friendship, Mosongo and his family supported Lembi and his family the way siblings would in such a tragic situation, through logistical, ritual, and emotional help.

### *Kólá—Homonyms*

Daily, informal contexts of interethnic friendship serve as a base-level indicator of the high degree of integration among the communities in southeastern Cameroon. Rainy days often find women of neighboring households and mixed ethnic affiliations gathered together in someone's kitchen house near a slowly smoldering fire, smoke and conversation mingling as they rise from the damp thatch roof. The kitchen house of Salo, an elderly Bangando woman who maintains friendships with both her Bangando and Baka neighbors, offers warmth and conversation on rainy days. In the midst of a morning deluge, Bangando travelers passing through Dioula on their way to another destination stopped at Salo's kitchen to take refuge from the rain. Salo invited the visitors to sit on stools near the fire, demoting a Baka woman and her toddler—Salo's close friends—to the floor, where they sat on a mat that is used for drying cocoa on sunnier days. This Baka friend, Alombi, cuddled her little girl in her lap, listening to the conversation which had shifted to topics initiated by the arriving Bangando visitors. The embrace of friendship included neighbors and visitors from various ethnic communities, even as the hierarchy of social power was evident in the seating arrangements.

The next morning the thatch of the kitchen house was steaming as the early sun dried the damp roof after the long rain that fell the day before. The socializing with her Bangando visitors and Baka neighbors was over, the grandchildren had been fed and were washing clothes at the river, and Salo prepared her tools and basket to leave for her garden. Alombi and her toddler came by again to visit Salo. As the women quietly shared the news of the morning, Salo noticed the damp cough of Alombi's young daughter. Reaching back into the black, resin-encrusted storage rack above the fire, she pulled out a bundle of leaves (*sàà òngò*) and bark (*kangáá*), the local treatment for a cough (*sábé*). Salo carefully divided her store of cough medicine into two bundles and retied them in large, round leaves, passing one packet to Alombi. Alombi bundled her little girl—whose name is also Salo—into a

sling and headed back out into the bright morning sun, going home to treat her child's cough. Salo, the elder Bangando woman, who is well-known for her knowledge of medicinal plants, took up her large carrying basket and went off to her garden to harvest plantains. Arriving at their home just down the road, Alombi gave her daughter, Salo, the medicine prepared for her by her Bangando homonym, the elder Salo.

When Alombi, the young Baka mother, visits Salo, the elderly Bangando woman, they often sit quietly for hours on end, escaping the glare of the afternoon sunshine sitting behind the kitchen house, where they weave baskets, sort squash seeds, or just rest. Alombi brings her daughter to visit Salo each time. When her daughter was born, Alombi named her "Salo" to honor the Bangando elder, and to place the young girl and older woman in special, intimate relations as *kólá*—homonyms. When Alombi and Salo visit, the elder Bangando Salo often gives them something to bring back home with them: an enamel pot filled with dried, pounded manioc for their supper; several carefully dried tobacco leaves; some edible leaves, snails, or meat from the forest. Alombi is the daughter of Nakolongjoko, a sprightly, wrinkled Baka man who is the *bándí* partner of Salo's deceased husband. Alombi named her child after her father's *bándí's* wife, cementing the relations of friendship and support between the Bangando and Baka families for another generation, despite the death of the initial Bangando *bándí* partner.<sup>22</sup>

The giving of a first name to an infant initiates intimacy between the child and the person for whom she was named; these explicitly created relationships between homonyms serve as powerful, emotional ligaments between two individuals, who are often of different ethnic affiliations. The establishment of relations between homonyms also serves the practical purpose of ensuring, ideally, that the child has a formal, extrafamilial sponsor as she grows—someone who will contribute to her school fees, buy her new clothes for the annual celebration of Children's Day (*Fête de Jeunesse*), and support her should calamity befall her family.

Relationships between *kólás* are usually imbued with special emotions of affection and respect. Because the role of an elder *kólá* is to support and guide the younger *kólá* from a position outside the nuclear family, *kólás* often enjoy a relationship permeated by positive emotions of giving and receiving, gratitude and guidance rather than one dominated by ambivalent emotions of discipline and respect, as between parents and children. *Kólá* relations are recognized and experienced as something special. Thus when the elder homonym does ultimately die, the younger namesake fulfills the role of chief mourner at the funeral. While the most intimate biological

members of the deceased's family often participate in the funeral and burial in a state of quiet shock punctuated by intermittent wailing, the *kólá* of the deceased is the most vocal and consistent of the mourners, often embodying and expressing the collective grief through her continual wailing throughout the several days of funeral activities. Because of the outpouring of grief from family and friends in the name of the dead homonym, a name that by definition the *kólá* shares, and because the *kólá's* spirit is searching for refuge now that its body is dead, the living homonym is at great risk of spirit possession by her deceased homonym. During the funeral, the *kólá* wears protective garlands of braided banana leaves diagonally across her chest and shoulders. When she mourns over the body, she vigorously shakes a ceremonial rattle—which today may simply be an old tin can filled with stones—to keep the spirit of her dead homonym from lodging itself in her body. Thus, while homonyms are still alive, they typically enjoy an intimate relationship of sharing and support; at death, the proximity of their interrelationship is enacted by the younger *kólá*, who now must protect herself from the wandering spirit of her deceased *kólá*.<sup>23</sup>

That *kólás* and *bándí* partners play active roles in rites of passage in the lives of their partners and their families underscores the social importance of these interethnic relations. For example, when a man marries, his *bándís* and *kólás* will contribute to the *díkwèlí*, the bride price that he will offer to his fiancée's family. If his *bándís* and *kólás* have means to contribute cash, they will do so. If not, they may contribute meat or local whisky (*ngòlòngòló*) to the wedding feast, or something else that can be sold in order to contribute to the bride price. From the bride's side, her family's *bándí* and *kólá* partners will contribute woven mats (*fé*) and chickens to her dowry, which will be presented to the family of the groom as a return gift. When the groom's and bride's family have exchanged these marriage gifts, the gifts that have been received by each side will be redistributed to the individuals who contributed to the initial wedding offering. Thus *bándís* and *kólás* who contributed a woven mat to their partner's daughter's dowry will each receive a return gift of money, whisky, or meat when the marriage rituals (and associated transactions) are complete. Not only with marriages, but also in ritual occasions that mark the beginnings or ends of socially significant relationships such as initiations and funerals, alliances between *bándís* are reinforced by their joint participation in the presentation of gifts and the redistribution of return gifts.<sup>24</sup> *Bándí* and *kólá* relationships offer individuals formal ways to acknowledge and perpetuate interethnic partnerships that, often begun in generations past, continue to have intense meaning today.

## *Mbòní—Blood Pacts*

While *bándí* friendships continue to link Bangando and Baka today, even more potent political and social alliances that were founded through a pact of blood—*mbòní*—are no longer undertaken. The atrophy of social relations between *mbòní* allies does not necessarily indicate disintegration of overall social ties or interconnectedness. On the contrary, where *mbòní* served to unite previously warring communities through public commensalism—the eating of collectively shed blood signaling acceptance of mutual peace—the need for such ceremonies has been largely overcome as interethnic coexistence and cooperation have replaced interethnic war in southern Cameroon over the past century.

Conflict, violence, slavery, and flight typified social dynamics among the shifting communities of central Africa throughout the nineteenth century. When two warring communities ultimately resolved their differences, often an *mbòní* alliance was undertaken to seal the former enemies as allies, as they pledged their mutual loyalty and support in the face of future aggressors. During the ceremony to initiate the *mbòní* alliance, the elders, warriors, and youths of both groups came together to prepare for a joint circumcision ritual of young men. Meanwhile, women came together to prepare a large feast of pounded maize and meat. The boys were circumcised in the center of the village, with male elders of both sides witnessing the cutting. Blood from the boys' circumcision wounds was caught in a gourd and used to prepare maize meal; this blood-soaked maize served as the centerpiece of the communal feast.<sup>25</sup> As they shared the conciliatory meal, the former antagonists ate the blood of their sons, representing the inextricable mixing of the essences of both groups, the literal and symbolic consummation of the alliance. Through the *mbòní* alliance, former enemies were now literally “of the same blood.” Or, as an elder explained, through *mbòní* the enemies become “one people” [*gà wì síkínò*].<sup>26</sup> After entering into an *mbòní* alliance, the two communities were prohibited from engaging in warfare against each other, and instead were obliged to support and defend each other. These allegiances between *mbòní* partners approximate the obligations among kin; *mbòní* alliances created kinlike loyalties among communities of different ethnic affiliations.

The incidence of *mbòní* alliances varied across the communities. Bangando, Bakwélé, and Mbomam seem to have been more directly implicated in the wars and violent conflicts of the nineteenth century, both as victims initially and later as perpetrators. Thus it is not surprising that oral histo-

ries recount *mbòní* pacts among these groups (Bangando with each of the Bakwélé and Mbomam) as well as between each of these groups and other communities beyond the Lobéké forest region (Bangando with Ndzimou, for example). Baka entered into *mbòní* alliances with Bakwélé and with Mbomam; although oral accounts mention latent tension between some Baka and Bakwélé communities, nothing approximating aggressive conflict characterizes their contact and integration. Perhaps at a later time, when Bakwélé and Mbomam were established in villages in southeastern Cameroon and when friendships and partnerships with the Baka stabilized, Baka engaged in peacetime *mbòní* pacts to cement their social relations of cooperation with these groups of neighbors, a slight variation of the *mbòní* pact that was usually made to formalize peace between enemies.<sup>27</sup> It is notable that Baka who live in villages that are dominated by interactions between Baka and Bangando claim never to have engaged in these alliances with Bangando, perhaps indicating the success of *bándí* alliances from the inception of their relations.<sup>28</sup>

### Shared Ceremonies—*Békà*, *Jengi*, and *Dìò*

In addition to relationships that unite individuals, families, and even entire communities through alliances and partnerships that transcend ethnic boundaries, several central ceremonies also serve as interethnic social adhesives that hold men of different communities together in special relations of spiritual fraternity.

*Békà* is one of the most important ceremonies that men throughout southeastern Cameroon—Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam alike—undertake. According to Bangando elders, the *békà* ceremony is the initiation of adult men into a men's secret society that is charged with the general protection of society and the maintenance of stability in everyday life in the Lobéké forest region. Men who have been initiated into the *békà* society are also obliged to arrange and undertake the funeral celebrations of fellow members, and to support the families of deceased members (Joiris 1998). Men who are initiated in the same cohort are bound by strong emotional solidarity. For the remainder of their lives, they will share meat with each other following a successful hunt and will offer contributions to a cohort member's bride price payment, constructing relations of kinship and upholding the responsibilities of caring for and supporting each other as brothers. Entrance into this extraordinary society of men requires extraor-

dinary endurance: adult men who are usually in their twenties and thirties are recircumcised, involving the reopening and extension of earlier circumcision scars.<sup>29</sup> While not all men choose to enter into the *békà* society, the ceremonial society refuses entry to no man, regardless of ethnic affiliation.

Entrance into *békà* society was formerly limited to men who had accumulated enough wealth to afford the sizeable contribution of prestige goods required for the initiation to be held. Although the prestige items consisted mostly of items that were consumed during the ceremony, such as meat—both domestic (goats and chickens) and from the forest (elephant, wild pig, duiker)—as well as *ngòlòngòlò* whisky, the ability to amass the resources to make such offerings served as an indication that the initiate possessed the means to make future contributions to meet the needs, ordinary as well as urgent, of the community at large. In this way, men of the *békà* society served as community trustees: wealthy, respected, courageous, and presumably wise individuals who could help to see the village through contingencies and conflicts that might arise. Because *békà* initiation required this



FIG. 5.3 Baka candidates for *békà* initiation, with their Bangando sponsor, Yenga, 1995



ability to accumulate and then dispense with significant amounts of wealth, and because Baka typically did not amass property in goods, the first Baka members of *békà* were sponsored by their Bangando *bándí*, who also served as advisors and protectors to their Baka partners who underwent initiation. Thus the process of initiation into *békà* society reinforced the ties between Bangando and Baka *bándí* at the same time that membership in the *békà* society advanced interethnic relations among a larger community of Bangando and Baka (and also Bakwélé and Mbomam) men. Although scholars typically assert that “villagers” sponsorship of their “pygmy” partners as they enter into ritual initiations and secret societies amounts to coercion and continued unilateral domination by the “villagers” (for example, Turnbull 1965), the relationship between Bangando and Baka men in the *békà* society of southeastern Cameroon appears to be based on willing, even enthusiastic, participation of both Bangando and Baka partners. That Bangando initially sponsored Baka initiates is a reflection of historical conditions of economic, social, and political disparities. Today Baka are initiated into the *békà* society without complete reliance on the economic support of their Bangando *bándí*, indicating their increasing economic parity with other ethnic communities in the region.

*Békà* is celebrated throughout southeastern Cameroon, although with significant variations in ceremonial structure, proceedings, and ensuing relationships; Bangando elders along the Moloundou road as well as Bakwélé elders in Ndongo emphasized that their respective *békà* ceremonies are distinct. In Ndongo, Baka and Bakwélé men jointly undergo this circumcision ceremony, and together they guide the *békà* society and by extension the society as a whole. In the Republic of Congo, where Baka and Bakwélé also live as neighbors but in different political and cultural contexts from those of southeastern Cameroon, *békà* is also an interethnic affair, although the circumcision takes place in the village rather than in a forest clearing. According to Congolese Baka, joint participation in *békà* reinforces the contemporary mixing of Baka and Bakwélé in villages alongside logging roads.<sup>30</sup> Among Mbomam, Bangando, and Baka living along the main Moloundou road in Cameroon, each community maintains a sense of ownership over the *békà* tradition; Bangando elders are convinced that *békà* was initially their ceremony, into which Bakwélé, Mbomam, and Baka participants were integrated later; Bakwélé argue that *békà* was initially a Bakota ceremony, which passed through the Sangha-Sangha to the Bakwélé, and from Bakwélé was disseminated throughout the Lobéké forest region. And while Baka participants in *békà* do not claim to have been the original initiates, today they

take great pride in their unflinching participation in the ceremony, claiming to best represent the potency of men initiated into the *békà* society.

Two other important ceremonies bring men together in rites of passage, although each includes active participants from predominantly one ethnic community or another. As explained by Maga,

Bangando and Baka also take part in each other's ceremonies. Bangando men may join Baka men in celebrating *jengi*, and Baka men may join the *dìò* ritual of Bangando men. But usually one group of people won't participate as fully in the other's ceremony. The other group usually watches more than they take part.<sup>31</sup>

*Jengi* constitutes the most important ceremonial occasion for Baka men, who are initiated into the society of *Jengi*, a prominent Baka forest spirit. Likewise, *dìò* is the central ritual of Bangando men's spiritual initiation, participation, and death; the powerful and potentially violent spirit *Dìò* is invited to return to the village where an important elder has passed away, to ensure the proper burial and spiritual repose of the deceased.<sup>32</sup> But, despite the ethnic particularities of each ceremony, a significant number of men from the "other" communities actively participate through initiation and continued involvement in the ceremonies.

*Jengi* is the central ritual institution of Baka throughout southern Cameroon. During the ceremony, whose intricate stages take place over numerous months, male initiates live together in an isolated camp in the forest, where they learn about the roles and responsibilities of adults in society, techniques of hunting, and spiritual life in the forest. The process of being initiated into *Jengi* is the process of becoming an adult man. At the end of the ritual instruction, the initiates are ritually killed, to be reborn during the culminating ceremony as adult men ready to participate fully in social life (Bahuchet 1992). Once initiated, *Jengi* protects his "children," granting Baka men the powers that they need to survive the dangers of the forest (Joiris 1998).

Initiation in *Jengi* is not limited to Baka men. Today men of various ethnic backgrounds participate, including Bangando, Mbomam, and Bakwélé, as do young and adolescent boys of various ages. As suggested by Joiris, it is possible that the age of Baka participants is declining, as Baka struggle to maintain control over the changes in their lives, changes that seem to be accelerating with each generation. Perhaps by initiating Baka males at a young age, parents attempt to inculcate their children with values that they hold dear while they feel they still have influence over the younger generation. At a *Jengi* ceremony in 1998, a Baka boy of two was initiated.



FIG. 5.4 Interethnic participation in *jengi* ceremony held in Yenga, December 1998

Although the radical reduction in age of Baka *jengi* initiates seems to be a recent phenomenon, it is likely that *jengi* initiates of multiple ethnic backgrounds have entered into the ceremonial society for many generations. Although renowned Baka elephant hunters are the ritual guardians of *Jengi*, the forest spirit, in the context of Ndong Bakwélé men initially desired to participate in and learn through *jengi* initiation because they hoped to benefit from Baka knowledge of the forest as well as from their mystical powers (Joiris 1998). It is likely that motivations for participating in interethnic ceremonies vary from community to community because the dynamics of interethnic relationships vary markedly between different regions of southeastern Cameroon. The interethnic sampling of this research indicates that today Bakwélé participate least intimately in Baka ceremonies, including *jengi*; Bangando men participate very regularly in *jengi*; Mbomam men participate most often in *jengi*, and with the least imbalance of social and ritual status.

While for the most part shared participation in ceremonies enhances solidarities among the communities, occasionally interactions in ritual settings highlight conflicts of interest. In one such case, “outside” participants—observers from neighboring ethnic communities for whom the ritual is not part of their time-honored cultural repertoire—upstaged and upset the smooth proceedings of the ritual. At a *jengi* ceremony in 1998 in Yenga, a large village with roughly equal proportions of Bangando and Baka

residents, several young Bangando men disrupted the initiation rites and threatened to tear down the initiates' *mòngúlu* (dome-shaped, leaf-shingled house), where they were receiving their final ritual instruction from *jengi* elders just prior to their ceremonial death and rebirth, the climax of two weeks of intense activities. The young men charged into the *jengi* ceremonial area with self-important swaggers and an air of self-righteous modernity, wearing stiff new jeans and stylish T-shirts, together with adornments such as a necklace, a watch, or a leather cap. The Bangando youths had no particular conflict with the *jengi* participants, but expressed their condescending judgment of the *jengi* ritual by insulting participants as "primitives" who, they said, were "enslaved" by meaningless rituals. After a few minutes of ruckus, a group of Baka and Bangando elders drove the youths away, shepherding them out of the ceremonial space.<sup>33</sup>

Conversation among participants in and observers of the *jengi* ceremony took a negative turn, as observers criticized the Bangando youths on two counts. For one, some Baka grumbled and muttered that Bangando interfere in Baka ceremonies and spoil the proceedings, whereas Baka treat the Bangando *díò* ritual with appropriate fear and respect. However, no one suggested that Bangando should not participate in *jengi*, nor Baka in *díò*; interethnic participation in these ceremonies has been well established. In this particular ceremony, an adult Bangando man was initiated, and took his *jengi* instruction and induction with great gravity. The fact that a majority of Bangando men have been initiated into *jengi* serves as an important indication that, conflicts aside, the structural and emotional participation of both communities in shared ritual knowledge and experience has long been accepted and continues to be cultivated.

The other line of criticism was directed toward youths—of both communities—who follow the lures of money, markets, and commodities to jobs and "urban" life and fall away from "traditional" practices such as *jengi* and the relationships and way of life that *jengi* celebrates and promotes. Analyses of other cases of conflict during performances of power suggest that, although these youths may overtly embrace values of urban society and modernity, evident in their ostentatious display of clothing and commodities, they simultaneously fear and respect ritual power all the more acutely because of their emotional distance from these time-honored values. Thus, perhaps, the Bangando youths' derision of *jengi* initiates stems from their need to dismiss and undermine these expressions of continuing ritual power, power to which they feel they have no access and over which they have no control (Worby 1998).

If *Jengi* is the signature spirit into whose ritual community adult Baka men expect to be initiated, *Díò* is the quintessential Bangando spirit into whose cult men also enter. *Díò* ceremonies are conducted very infrequently: only on the occasion of the death of very respected Bangando elders. A short time after the death of a notable elder, Bangando men who have been initiated into the *díò* community call this potent and potentially violent spirit to come out of the forest and to oversee the settling of the deceased elder's spirit. *Díò* is the most feared spirit of all communities in southeastern Cameroon, and improper handling of the spirit can quickly result in the death of participants. Because of the violent death suffered by the first woman who encountered the spirit *Díò*, women are not allowed to see the ritual (for discussion, see Rupp 2001). Instead, women, uninitiated men, and children close themselves into a collective kitchen house near the *mbánjó* verandah where the initiated men and *Díò* conduct the ceremony; women and uninitiated men listen to and participate in the ceremony by singing and talking with *Díò* from this safe enclosure.

Even though both *Jengi* and *Díò* are feared by all residents of the Lobéké region, participation of adult men in both secret societies is widespread. The undertakings of both *jengi* and *díò* ceremonies are momentous events for the entire interethnic village. Given their deep expertise with the particular ritual preparations and requirements, Baka and Bangando men take responsibility for the ceremonial preparations for *jengi* and *díò*, respectively; men of all ethnic backgrounds who have been initiated into the societies are expected to contribute according to their ceremonial roles. Although in the past it is likely that Baka did not participate in *díò* initiation and ceremonies, today their participation is widely accepted. The imbalance in interethnic participation in *jengi* and *díò* ceremonies, in which it is more common for Bangando men to be initiated into *jengi* than for Baka men to be initiated into *díò*, reflects continued but narrowing differences in social status between the two communities.

Participation in these central rituals is an indication that a man embraces the traditions of life in the forest and the village, emphasizing these values over and above the potential benefits brought by the increasingly common orientation toward commercial involvement in regional and national markets. While young Bangando and Baka alike embrace the luxuries and changes offered by contemporary music, clothing, and wage labor at timber or safari companies—at least while they are young and relatively free of family responsibilities of their own—a good proportion of these youth will still participate in initiation ceremonies such as *jengi* and *díò*, but usually in

only one or the other. At the same time, men who have chosen to remain in their villages within the forest, following a way of life that is in keeping with the rhythms and patterns of their forebears and upbringing, increasingly participate in *both* communities' initiations and subsequent rituals. This increasing joint participation in central rituals of both communities underscores the increasing integration of interests and values across the ethnic communities of southeastern Cameroon.

### Collective Work— *Pómó* and *Éésòngé*

To face occasional circumstances of misfortune, the interethnic communities of the Lobéké region come together through collective work and cooperative networks of support. Collective work has long been a feature of both Bangando and Baka social life, as exemplified in their cooperative hunting of elephants and portaging of baskets of meat back to the village (see chapter six and Rupp 2001). Collective clearing of weeds, however, is less rewarding work. *Pómó*, the clearing of weeds and undergrowth by means of machetes, has been a feature of collective labor since the colonial era, when communities throughout southeastern Cameroon built the German and French roads by hand and under duress and then were required to maintain the road by clearing away weeds and underbrush and by diverting streams and flows of water and mud. Today *pómó* activities are carried out by villagers not because of threats of physical abuse by colonial officials, but instead as an attempt to impress Cameroonian government officials or other bearers of development aid, and thus to wring scarce resources from the deep pockets of external powers. In Dioula, for example, villagers come together to clear the central areas near the chief's verandah, where important village-wide political meetings and ceremonies are held, and in front of the small dispensary, where Catholic missionaries arrive occasionally to vaccinate young children.

Political meetings to which government officials are invited arouse village pride and anticipation as residents come together to present the best face of their community. These political meetings also raise village hopes, as well as collective cynicism, that the ever-stingy and deeply corrupt government officials based in Moloundou will finally assist in village development projects such as the rebuilding of the elementary school. Knowing that their chances of receiving any kind of nationally sponsored development aid are slim, and realizing that they have never received the tax on lumber cut from

the forest that is legally due to them, villagers nevertheless do what they can to curry the favor of government officials. By presenting a clear, weed-free public space and chief's verandah for the gathering of government officials and village elders, villagers demonstrate that they have done their part to maintain their community to the best of their collective ability.

Early one December morning at the end of the rainy season, villagers from the far ends of the long village of Dioula answered the call of Ndong, the village chief, gathering in the early morning sun to clear the weeds from the chief's central verandah in preparation for an official meeting between village elders, the *Sous-Préfet* of the district, and the mayor of Moloundou. Because of heavy rains, weeds were thick; Bangando and Baka, men and women, worked together from early morning until the sun was high and hot, and finally the meeting area was prepared. *Bándí* partners of Bangando and Baka men had met in their neighborhoods and come together to the center of Dioula to work; when the public meeting area was clear, they set off again together toward their neighborhoods—hot, sweaty, and dirty. Not all villagers came to work. But those who did experienced a cheerful setting for working and socializing and seemed to take genuine pride in investing their efforts for the good of the village. Those who did not come for the collective work session were subjected to criticisms and derision from their irritated neighbors, who had invested time and energy for the good of the community.

When the entourage of officials arrived the following morning, village participation in the meeting was high. Elders, both Bangando and Baka, articulated their disappointment with the government for neglecting to contribute the proportion of timber taxes legally due to the village. The *Sous-Préfet* acknowledged the existence of the village development committee (an official prerequisite for receiving the 1,000 CFA—approximately US\$2.00—per cubic meter of wood felled by international timber companies operating in the area) and made note of the overall organization and neat presentation of the village. Although he promised that funds would be forthcoming to rebuild the dilapidated school, not surprisingly, no resources or building materials ever materialized. Yet the positive emotions generated by working together to present their village in the best possible light, the collective courage that numerous villagers demonstrated in standing up to government officials to demand what the villagers knew was their right, and the shared sense of having been swindled by a corrupt political regime all served to reinforce village-wide, interethnic solidarity and helped to generate momentum for future collaborative working groups.<sup>34</sup> The collective

sense that all of the villagers of Dioula, regardless of ethnicity or social identity, were victims of a political system that rewards corrupt officials at the expense of impoverished villagers is a powerful force that rallies the various families and neighborhoods to improve the standard of living in their poor and marginalized interethnic community.

### *Éésòngé*

Even as Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam residents of Dioula come together to present a unified, organized front to political officials in an attempt to secure their legal rights to economic resources, women of Dioula come together in cooperation and solidarity to offer internal support to individual women who may face particularly difficult circumstances. This interethnic, collaborative association of women is known as *Éésòngé* and offers women a means of practical assistance and emotional support during trying times, or during times when a woman suddenly needs to amass great quantities of resources.

For example, early one morning, before the dew had dried on plants along the forest paths, women had collected bundles of firewood, hauled buckets of fresh drinking water from streams, and harvested plantains from their gardens. The women of *Éésòngé* changed from their work clothes, now wet from working in the dew-soaked forest so early in the morning, into their best: a fresh T-shirt, a clean *sándà* cloth wrapped as a skirt, a less tattered head scarf. They washed their feet and rubbed thick palm oil onto their arms, legs, and faces, preparing to go out to celebrate, even so early in the day. From the top of the hill, singing trickled down into the center of Dioula, as the women walked together along the damp red road. Passing households as they walked through the village, more women emerged from their kitchen houses to join the procession, bearing their gifts of wood, water, and plantains on their heads or in large carrying baskets slung down their backs. The parade of women gathered enthusiasm and volume as they walked and sang together.

Finally, the coterie of women arrived at Mengala's house, where her husband was already busy preparing the ceremonial verandah, covered with palm fronds. Mengala still wore the black, tattered clothes of mourning that she had worn for five years since the death of her husband's father. But on this day, she would finally end her period of mourning; her husband would present her with a set of fine, new clothes to celebrate her reemergence into





FIG. 5.5 Bangando, Baka, Bakwélé, and Mbomam women participating in *Éésɔ̀ngé* Dioula, May 1999

society. Because of the extended duration of her mourning, and because her husband had returned from his job at a timber company for the ceremony, scores of guests attended, perhaps as many as two hundred. The ceremony involved an exchange of mats and chickens for money, foodstuffs, and whisky (*ngòlòngòló*) between Mengala's paternal family and her family-in-law, followed by a banquet of plantains, manioc, and many different kinds of meat from the forest.<sup>35</sup> With full bellies and glad hearts, the participants continued dancing and drinking until sunrise.

Mengala's end-of-mourning ceremony would have been infinitely more difficult to accomplish without the contributions and assistance of the women's association, *Éésɔ̀ngé*. Rituals such as marriages, funerals, and end-of-mourning ceremonies, particularly difficult births and the birth of twins, and unexpected visitors—these occasions may require more work and productive output than the women of a single household can muster. When the women of Dioula recognize the sudden or impending difficulties faced by a fellow woman, the “*presidente*” of the association organizes the date and time for the collective donation of supplies. The women are emphatic in

stating that they help other *women*, not men. Even if a woman's husband is sick, women who participate in *Éésòngé* will help the woman by easing her domestic work, but will not directly assist her husband. While *Éésòngé* expressly excludes men, it actively includes women of all ethnic groups. Bangando and Baka women, as well as the chief's wife (who is Mbomam) and an elderly Bakwélé wife of a Bangando man, participate actively and openly, and know that because of the help that they extend to other women—of any ethnic community within Dioula—when they encounter difficulties, the women will reciprocate and support them.<sup>36</sup> By helping each other, women say that they are developing their community. *Éésòngé* is a group of women “of the same heart.” The group includes women from all ethnic groups, recognizing that “heart-ness” is not ethnically bounded.

## Tangles

It is in the interests of both sides of an interethnic partnership to remain on good terms, providing an informal social insurance policy. Especially in southeastern Cameroon, where the weak and corrupt national bureaucracy tends to undermine rather than support possibilities for economic prosperity and social advancement, there is no alternative to hard work and mutually beneficial collaboration to contend with uncertainties and contingencies. By building reliable and trustworthy partnerships, one friend knows that the other can help her access meat from the forest or plantains from a garden, if she cannot manage to gather enough food for her family's evening meal. Another friend may rely on his partner to help him amass chickens and whisky from their combined network of extended families and friends to pay his bride price. Partners understand that they can turn to each other in case of emergency, illness, or death. Through their participation in collaborative partnerships and networks, peoples' pools of resources for meeting daily needs and contending with unforeseen circumstances are vastly increased.

But the collaborative relationships generated through parallel clans, *bándí* friendships, and alliances are neither uniform nor ubiquitous throughout southeastern Cameroon. The warmth bestowed by a Baka man on his Bangando *bándí's* newborn son as he attached a tiny monkey-tail bracelet onto the tiny wrist to ensure the baby's health and speedy growth, may be contrasted with occasionally bitter experiences between *bándí* friends, resulting in the termination of the partnership. Perhaps as a result of his father's bitter

experience with his Bangando *bándí*, the Baka man named Anda who earlier described parallel clan relationships remains acerbic about partnerships between Baka and Bangando. Anda argues that Baka work much harder for the benefit of their Bangando partners than the stinginess of Bangando reciprocation should warrant; Bangando are tightfisted in providing their share of compensation through material goods, money, or work. From Anda's perspective, Baka simply invest more energy and more thought in their relations with Bangando than Bangando partners do for their Baka counterparts. Bangando know that Baka are hard workers, so they call Baka to come do their hard work for them. When Baka work in Bangando gardens, their work will produce a good harvest for the Bangando family, whereas the little bit of food or compensation that the Bangando gives to his Baka partner is hardly enough for the Baka partner to feed his children for that one day. This discourse of inequality between Baka and Bangando is recurrent, and offers a counterweight to overt statements and actions that reflect interethnic amity. When pressed about why Baka would continue to work for Bangando—even voluntarily—if they harbor such negative emotions for their Bangando partners, Anda and his friend Molomb shrugged their shoulders in unison as Molomb replied,

Some Baka want to work for Bangando, and some don't. Some Baka like Bangando, and some don't. Some Bangando like Baka, and some don't. Baka work for Bangando because people have to do what they have to do for their families. But it's better if Baka work for themselves.<sup>37</sup>

Anda and Molomb then explained that some Baka *do* like Bangando and have Bangando friends, tempering their firmly (almost fiercely) negative comments about Bangando at the outset of the discussion. Anda began to describe his own friendships with Bangando *mbaié*, people he likes and whose friendship he values. For example, Anda often walks from his neighborhood at Dioula-Mbandame to Dioula-Beligela, four kilometers to the south, to visit Ngola. Anda emphasizes that he goes to *see* Ngola—a *sèbi* a *sèbi*—only to visit him, not to work for or with him; Ngola is one of his friends, not his *bándí* partner. Anda explained that his wife left home early that morning to visit Ngola's wife, Pauline. Anda walked to Dioula-Beligela to join his wife at Ngola's house at midday, to find that Pauline had prepared a large meal of plantains and leaf sauce with chunks of pangolin meat. Anda also recalled that his wife had carried a basket of plantains and a packet of peanuts when they returned home to Dioula-Mbandame, a gift from Pau-

line, so Anda and his family ate well again in the evening. Anda explained that he and his wife do not visit Ngola and Pauline because they are obliged to under some kind of collaborative agreement or partnership. Anda enjoys visiting Ngola simply because he enjoys Ngola's company. Just a few days later, Anda and Ngola were sitting together under a guava tree near Ngola's house in the late afternoon, when another Bangando man hurried along the road nearby, and called out that he would meet Anda later in the evening. When Ngola asked what they were planning to do together, Anda's face broke into a sly grin as he replied, "Ɔ̀ò b̀ò má yé mbaìé ná?" (Aren't we friends?)<sup>38</sup> Anda articulated the tangle of interethnic relations between Bangando and Baka, explaining "Ɔ̀ò b̀ò kìnò m̀, bém̀ngó òò b̀ò má kìnò m̀ ná" — (We are the same thing, *but* we are not the same thing).

This fundamental ambiguity concerning the sentimental unity of Bangando and Baka seems to lie at the core of their interethnic social relations. While Anda is vociferous in his critique of Bangando participation in *bándí* partnerships, alleging that Bangando cannot be counted on as trustworthy, equitable partners who look out for the interests of both parties, he embraces Ngola as a friend, someone whom he can count on not only for companionship, but also for meaningful collaboration. Negative social attributes, when encountered in consistent or parallel contexts, may be conflated with fundamental characteristics of the entire community, generating readily recognized and accepted stereotypes of the ethnic "other." Although these stereotypes are familiar and generally acknowledged throughout the communities of southeastern Cameroon (Bangando as manipulative cheapskates; Baka as unreliable thieves), as individuals of various communities delve into the particularities of their own interethnic relationships, the nuances of other social dynamics and sentiments emerge, and even individuals who begin by criticizing people of a different ethnic community often conclude by affirming their fundamental unity, recognizing but no longer condemning their ethnic differences. Social intimacy does not override ethnic difference; instead the complexities of allegiances, friendships, and long-standing relationships often cut across boundaries of ethnicity, bringing subsets of the various ethnic groups together through shared ceremonies and celebrations, collaborative subsistence activities and cooperative work efforts. The dynamics of belonging that emerge from collaborative efforts and amicable partnerships often result in social identities that offer alternative attributions of self and other beyond those of ethnicity.