

Documenting cultural vocabulary: the case of the elephant in the Baka (hunter-gathering) community of Gabon

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The Baka are a minority group of hunter-gatherers in Gabon, with less than 500 individuals. The surrounding Bantu-speaking villagers consider them to be the local specialists of the elephant and the elephant hunting. As a matter of fact, the various lexical distinctions used by the Baka population for naming the elephant (one generic term and six specific terms) clearly attest the central place of this animal within Baka society. However, compared to other lexical domains and distinctions, this specific subdomain of cultural vocabulary is particularly exposed to reduction nowadays. The loss of lexical contrast is not only due to inter-generational differences, but also induced by the government's sedentarization policy and the ban imposed on elephant hunting in response to the demands of certain NGOs.

The elephant, as such but also as a major concept, is present in many aspects of everyday life in Baka society. It plays an important role in rituals, musical instruments, tales and stories, and affiliation (lineages). As a matter of fact, elephants are not only useful for the subsistence of the group, but also for the skin of the ears, which are used for making drums, and the kneecaps, which are used in cooking. Nowadays, the Baka are well aware of the fact that money can be made by selling tusks and hair from elephant tails, but this is only a minor aspect and they do not kill elephants just for commercial ends. The animal holds a much more general and highly-valued place in the life of the Baka. A Baka man who is successful in catching an elephant automatically acquires the status of "Master of Hunting", capable of taking care of his community and family.

Currently, the Baka community is facing various exogenous and endogenous pressures. Traditional lifestyle (hunter-gathering) is under great strain, and it is obvious that the more rapid and brutal the changes in lifestyle are, the greater the risk of loss of language and culture. The "Elephant" case presented here is only one out of many possible examples.