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## **Dynamics of Social Changes and Relationships with Neighbors among African Hunter-Gatherers: A Case of the Babongo in Southern Gabon from 2003 to 2012**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Remarkable social changes have occurred among African hunter-gatherers since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by neighboring ethnic groups and various outsiders. This article demonstrates the recent social changes and interethnic relationships of the Babongo, a group of central African hunter-gatherers. Based on field research data for about 10 years between 2003 and 2012, the author demonstrates Babongo social change in terms of population dynamics and intermarriage and the response to influences from the outside world, referring to three events. It is revealed that there are (1) increased migration of young people that promotes the enlargement and establishment of their social networks, (2) increased intermarriage between the Babongo and their neighboring farmers, and (3) drastically changing Babongo livelihoods influenced by outsiders although ties with the forest are retained.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary African hunter-gatherers do not always maintain a traditional nomadic lifestyle, but their livelihoods change influenced by neighboring ethnic groups and various outsiders like governments, development agencies, international NGOs, and international companies. In particular, remarkable social changes have occurred since the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Schweitzer *et al.* 2000; Kent 2002; Widlok and Tadesse 2005). Many hunter-gatherer groups have either sedentarized in roadside villages owing to governments implementation of sedentarization policies, or have resettled away from their homelands in government-constructed residences. These groups have been included in modern State systems and become highly dependent on manufactured goods following the penetration of market economies into their societies. In addition, in many places development projects have had negative influences on the lifestyle of hunter-gatherers.

Hunter-gatherers in the Congo Basin, or Pygmies, also experienced considerable social change during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many groups began a sedentary

existence as farmers along roads (Sato 1992; Kitanishi 2003; Knight 2003; Matsuura 2006; Bahuchet 2014). As foreign company logging and mining operations expanded during the 1970s and 1980s, migrant laborers and manufactured goods entered forest areas, thereby also introducing the market economy system. Consequently, Pygmies, who have vast knowledge of wild animals and advanced hunting skills, have become involved in the bush meat trade (Auzel and Wilkie 2000; Yasuoka 2006; Poulsen *et al.* 2009; Pemunta 2013). On the other hand, some Pygmies began cash crop cultivation, because of the development of agricultural activities. For example, some Baka Pygmies in Cameroon practice cacao cultivation and trade (Kitanishi 2006; Oishi 2012). Although some improved their economic capacity based on new sources of cash income, most benefits flow away from local communities, such that economic inequality increases (Oishi 2012; Wodon *et al.* 2012).

On the one hand, the exploitation of natural resources has been expanding and the market economy has infiltrated, but on the other rainforest conservation policies have been promoted globally. These sometimes affect Pygmy subsistence and land-use patterns negatively. In many cases, their livelihoods and cultures, which are tied closely with forests, are not considered adequately by policy-makers. Some scholars have criticized the way that Pygmies are evicted from their homelands and economically displaced by restricting access to lands and forest resources (Lewis 2005; Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau 2006; Schmidt-Soltau and Brockington 2007). Also, Pygmies were regarded by the global Indigenous Peoples Movement in the 2000s as politically and economically marginalized minorities that were exposed to serious human rights violations (Mulvagh 2006; Pottier 2007; Wodon *et al.* 2012). International agencies and NGOs have attempted to protect their human rights (Ichikawa 2014; Takeuchi 2014). Pygmies are included now in global social networks whether or not they want to be, and are in the process of reorganizing their social system.

Of major importance when considering Pygmy social organization is the relationship with neighboring farmers, who have long established mutually dependent symbiotic relations (Bahuchet and Guillaume 1982; Joiris 2003; Takeuchi 2014) based on economic exchanges, with the Pygmies providing forest products or labor to farmers, who in return give agricultural products or manufactured goods to them (Bahuchet and Guillaume 1982; Terashima 1986). In addition to economic ties, there are pseudo-kinship social links that are supported by a specific bond between pseudo-siblings (Joiris 2003; Rupp 2011; Takeuchi 2014). Such solidarity is not limited just to individuals, but is applied also to their families and even inherited by their descendants. Interethnic social ties are established also through shared ritual practices. It was reported that both the Baka Pygmies and their neighboring farmers in Cameroon are initiated into the same circumcision society, and the Baka, who are talented singers and dancers, also participate in the farmers' rituals (Joiris 2003; Rupp 2011).

Although Pygmies and farmers have established close ties, it is also noted

that socioeconomic relationships between them are not always equal. The Pygmies have been socially distinguished from farmers in the context of latter's patriarchal and hierarchical social system. In addition, their interethnic relationships have changed drastically because Pygmy lifestyle has altered as influences from the outside world intensified. Some studies reported that discrimination by farmers against Pygmies, which used to be latent, has become clearer since the Pygmies sedentarized, because competition for land and resources has increased (Biesbrouck 1999; Van de Sandt 1999). When development projects and rainforest conservation are implemented, farmers can adapt first because they are generally politically and economically superior to Pygmies, thus distinctions between farmers and Pygmies are increased (Kenrick 2005; Lewis 2005). The Indigenous Peoples Movement has been trying to protect the human rights of Pygmies, but it can potentially damage the symbiotic relationships between the two groups and reinforce distinctions between them because it tends to emphasize them over the farmers (Takeuchi 2014).

Although the social distinction between Pygmies and farmers generally becomes clearer along with social changes among the former the opposite process also occurs in which the distinction and ethnic boundary become ambiguous, as the author has demonstrated in southern Gabon for a community of the Babongo Pygmies (Matsuura 2006, 2009, 2011). The Babongo in the author's research site share language, clan system, and rituals with their neighboring farmers, the Masango, and they have adopted the matrilineal-patrilineal social system of the Masango. After the sedentarization of the Babongo in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sharing of the social system has been reinforced and intermarriage has increased between the Babongo and Masango. The intermarriage in the author's research site is unique compared to other regions in that it occurs not only between Masango men and Babongo women but also between the Babongo men and Masango women (Matsuura 2006, 2011). In the case of the Babongo communities studied by the author, biologically and socially mixed identities have increased. At the same time, such identities have also accelerated interethnic mixing.

However, it is impossible to generalize to all Babongo communities the pattern of interethnic relationships existing in the author's research site, since even in a nearby community the Masango dominate the Babongo and the ethnic distinction is clearer (Sylvie Le Bomin, Pers. Comm.). It is assumed that there are specific ecological, cultural and social conditions in the author's research site on which the neighboring farmers and various outsiders have had an influence. In any case, Pygmies in the modern world have experienced drastic changes in their lifestyle, and their social relations have become increasingly complicated and diversified. However, there are few detailed studies about the various actors and their influences. It is not clear which kind are involved, including both neighboring farmers and outsiders, in social changes among the Pygmies, to what extent they influence Pygmy societies, and how the Pygmies are reorganizing their social system in response to change.

In this article, based on long-term and continuous studies, the author therefore demonstrates the recent social changes in a community of the Babongo. First, he analyzes population composition and intermarriage with neighboring farmers, based on quantitative data and qualitative information obtained since 2003, during about 10 years of field research. Second, three typical events are described that characterize the outside influences. These are logging operations, development of traffic and a communication infrastructure, and rituals and national events. Third, the recent dynamics of social changes among the Babongo and interethnic relationships with neighbors are summarized. How the Babongo have incorporated the changes into their livelihoods is discussed, emphasizing their flexible response to the changes, and social and cultural backgrounds that enable flexible adaptation are examined.

## RESEARCH SUBJECTS AND METHODS

The research was conducted at Boutoumbi Village, in Ogoulou Department, Ngounié Province of southern Gabon (Figure 1). The Babongo is a group of Pygmies that inhabits an area in the southwest of the Republic of Congo and southern Gabon. It is estimated that there are approximately 20,000 Pygmies in Gabon (Massandé 2005), but no numerical data are available focusing on the Babongo alone. A Bantu farmer group, the Masango (Bantu B42: Guthrie 1967–

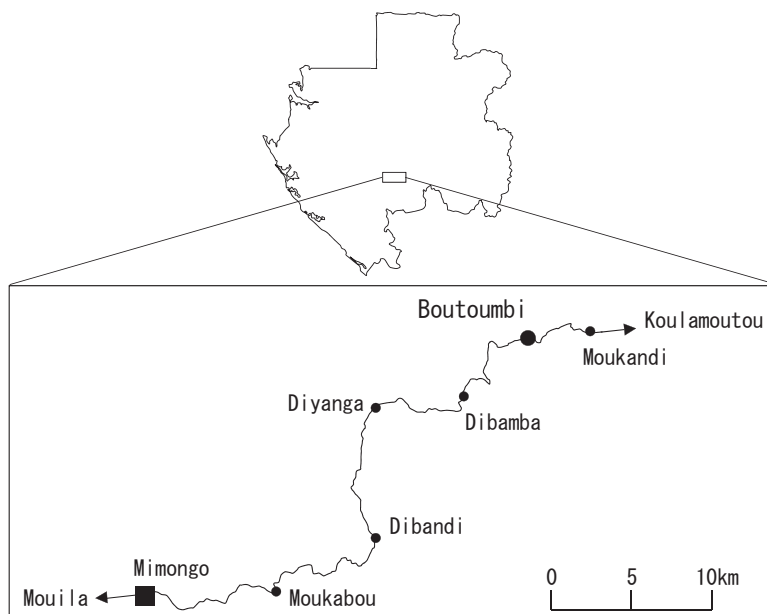


Figure 1 Research Site



**Photo 1** The research village.

1971) also lives in the research area. There are 100–200 persons in villages around Boutoumbi, and the Babongo are not separated spatially from the Masango in the same village. Boutoumbi Village is unique in that the population is much smaller (about 30 persons) and is composed entirely of close relatives of the Babongo (Photo 1).

The uniqueness of Boutoumbi Village is thought to derive from its history (Matsuura 2011). In the 1960s, the people living around Boutoumbi, including both the Babongo and Masango, were assembled in the adjacent village of Moukandi, under the Gabonese regrouping policy. However, the Babongo originally from Boutoumbi and those from Moukandi were unable to coexist peacefully. Consequently, an extended family of the Babongo moved away from Moukandi and resettled in Boutoumbi, where it has lived until today. However, this does not mean that the people of Boutoumbi are socially isolated, because they have maintained close relationships with others through marriage, mutual visiting and ritual practices (Matsuura 2006, 2009, 2011).

The Babongo in Boutoumbi are highly sedentarized, and spend most of their time in the village, except for short periods in the forest for hunting and gathering. They stay occasionally in a forest camp several kilometers from the village for a few days to a week (Matsuura 2006). On the other hand, they visit neighboring villages and towns frequently and there are many visitors to Boutoumbi Village coming from other villages and towns (Matsuura 2009).

The principal subsistence activity for both the Babongo and Masango is

shifting cultivation. The Babongo in the research site cultivate their own fields, and agricultural products like cassava and plantain are their most important sources of calories (Matsuura 2006). Hunting, gathering and fishing in the forest also provide protein and fat. However, commercial activities are rare in the village. There are few opportunities to sell bush meat and other forest products owing to the bad travel conditions, so cash income is limited. Some merchants come to the village seeking hunted products or gathered useful plants.

Social changes among the Babongo in the research site in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on which this article is focused, should be premised on already established relationships. As mentioned above, the interethnic relationship between the Babongo and Masango in the research site is different from that of many other groups. Takeuchi (2014) categorized Pygmy-farmer relations into four types: (1) subordinate and heteronomous, (2) subordinate and autonomous, (3) coordinative and autonomous, and (4) coordinative and assimilative. The relationship between the Babongo and Masango in the research site is coordinative and assimilative (Takeuchi 2014).

Intermarriage is one indicator. In the case of type 1 and 2, both farmers and Pygmies regard the other as 'animal-like' and intermarriage is strongly avoided. In many cases of type 3, there are only a few intermarriages. Although intermarriage occurs relatively frequently in some cases of type 3, it is always one-sided in that the farmer males marry Pygmy women. Thus, the one-sided intermarriage is not considered a result of personal choice, but rather is due to the socio-economic exchange system in which Pygmy women are incorporated (Terashima 1987). In contrast, there is frequent intermarriage between the Babongo and Masango, and those between Babongo men and Masango women exist although less than between Babongo women and Masango men (Matsuura 2006, 2011). As the ethnic distinction has become less important among them, owing to Babongo social changes, they have been able to choose spouses more freely, based mainly on personal qualities rather than on ethnic categories.

Field studies have been conducted 10 times since 2003. The author did intensive research on the population composition and kinship relations from July to October, 2003, December, 2004 to February, 2005, May to August, 2005, and January to March, 2007. The author also did short-term research in September, 2008, January, 2010, and August, 2012 to verify the population change owing to marriage, death, births, and migration. Events that occurred in the village were asked about in each research period.

## **SOCIAL CHANGES AMONG THE BABONGO IN THE RESEARCH SITE**

To demonstrate the change in the Babongo Village in 10 years based on quantitative data, first the population composition between 2003 and 2012 is compared. Second, the marriage cases which occurred during that period are analyzed, focusing in particular on intermarriages that demonstrate social



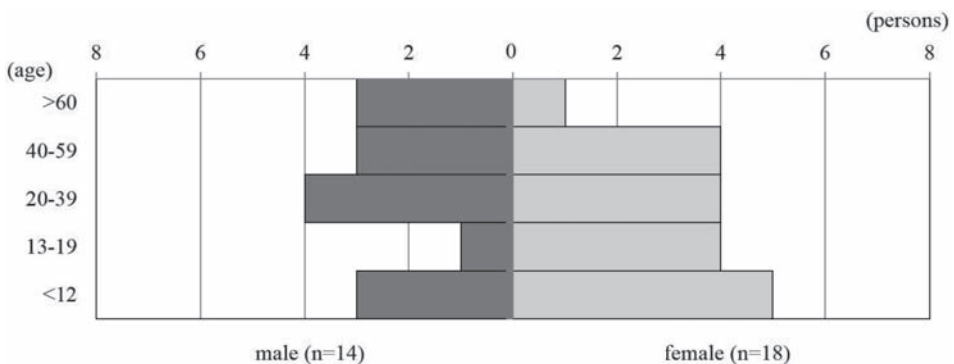
relationships between the Babongo and Masango.

**Population Dynamics**

There was a total of 32 people (14 males and 18 females, including children and infants) in Boutoumbi Village in August, 2003 (Figure 2). As mentioned above, Boutoumbi villagers are composed mainly of the Babongo having a close kin relationship. They are siblings born in the 1950s and 1960s, together with their spouses, their children, and grandchildren. In August, 2012, the total number had changed but little (29 persons: 14 males and 15 females), but there was a remarkable change in the age composition and membership (Figure 3). Although there had been no change among the main inhabitants in their 50s and 60s, there had been many instances of migration among young people and children (Figure 4). Many people who were 3–12 years-old in 2003 have become teenagers and moved to neighboring villages and towns to live with other relatives. Consequently, the number of people of 13–19 years old decreased considerably (from 5 persons in 2003 to one in 2012), and there were no girls in the 13–19 age range in 2012.

There is a general tendency that young people who have reached marriageable age leave the village to seek wage labor and marriage partners, since opportunities to find both are limited particularly in Boutoumbi Village, where most villagers are close relatives and the population is quite small. Such migration might be supported by the vast social network that includes other villages and towns, which is established by marriages described below. In addition, migration is promoted now by an improved transport infrastructure, demonstrated in the following section.

Whereas migration of young people has progressed, the number of children under the age of 12 increased (9 persons in 2003 to 13 in 2012). One reason is that there were births during the period. In addition, some people of Boutoumbi origin living in other villages brought their children to relatives in Boutoumbi. A



**Figure 2** Population composition of Boutoumbi Village in Aug. 2003



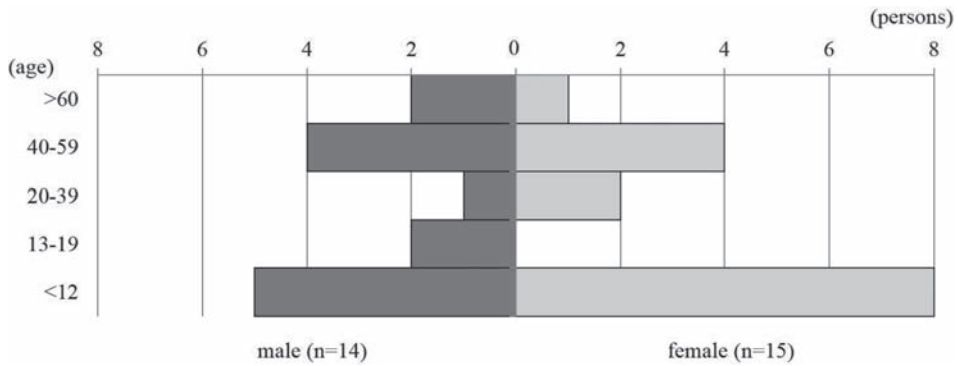


Figure 3 Population composition of Boutoumbi Village in Aug. 2012

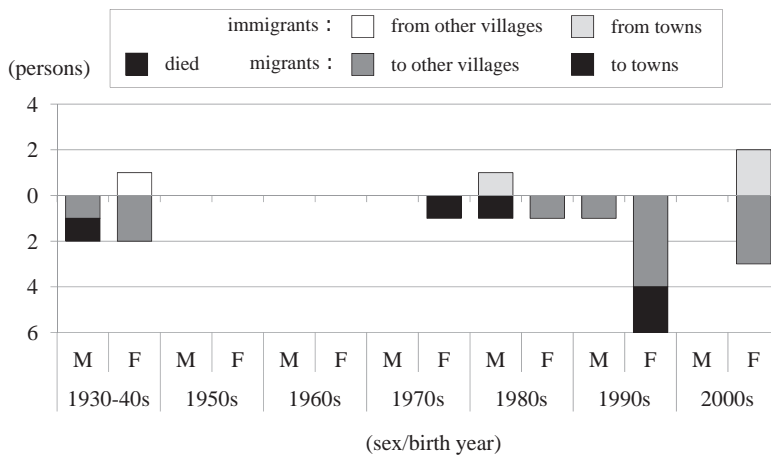


Figure 4 Immigrants and Migrants of Boutoumbi Village 2003-2012

characteristic of child raising in the research area is that parents do not always live with their children. Instead, many relatives such as grandparents, uncles and aunts are involved. In some cases children even grow up in a different village from their parents. To demonstrate this, three examples of women in their 30s, who are of Boutoumbi origin and live in other villages, are given below.

Example 1.

A woman (hereafter WA) married a Babongo man and moved to Moukandi Village. She has two daughters and a son. WA's parents have already died, but her uncle, aunt, and older brother in his 40s live in Boutoumbi Village. Because her husband works for a logging company, she sometimes leaves the village to live with him. When WA left for her husband's place in 2010, she took one of her daughters, born

in 2003, to Boutoumbi Village to live with her relatives. In 2012, the daughter continued to live in Boutoumbi apart from WA, being cared for by WA's older brother and his spouse.

Example 2.

A younger half-sister of WA by a different father (hereafter WB) married a Masango man and moved to Mounongo Village, the second neighboring village to the east of Boutoumbi. She has a daughter and two sons. Of these, the daughter, who was born in 2001, came to Boutoumbi Village with WB in 2003 and continued to live there with WB's maternal uncle and his family. WB sometimes visits Boutoumbi to spend a few days to one week, but she lives mainly in Mounongo Village apart from her daughter.

Example 3.

A woman (hereafter WC) had two sons and two daughters with several men, but does not have a specific partner. She had lived in Boutoumbi Village with her father in his 60s, her mother in her 50s, and her siblings. After WC married a Masango man in Mounongo Village in 2011, she has come to live in Mounongo, but her four children continue to live in Boutoumbi with their grandparents' family. WC visits Boutoumbi occasionally to see her children.

From these examples, it can be seen that the women of Boutoumbi origin maintain close ties with their relatives even after marrying out, and that their children also establish close relations with their maternal relatives. This is partly because the women tend to depend on their relatives to reduce the burden of childcare. It is supposed that the burden is especially large for women living outside their original village due to husbands' wage labor and/or marriage to Masango men. On the other hand, this is also because Boutoumbi people need the labor of children since teenagers tend to leave the village and the Boutoumbi population is aging. Even children around 10 years old can do housework and farm labor.

In addition to the demand for childcare and labor, there seems to be an intention to have the children adopt the Boutoumbi culture and lifestyle. The children are always taken to the forest by their caretakers, where they learn hunting and gathering techniques as well as knowledge of wild animals and plants. The children also participate in the traditional rituals. In particular, a chief of Boutoumbi Village and some of his relatives are well-known traditional healers (*nganga*), who conduct frequent rituals to cure serious diseases and solve problems. The children play peripheral roles, such as singing and playing musical instruments, in the rituals, and learn ritual knowledge through practical experience.

It is suggested that the migration of young people does not always cause the disappearance of social ties between them and others in Boutoumbi Village, neither does the aging and decline of the village population. It sometimes results

in the expansion and creation of social networks by visiting activities and childcare, and to the renewal of the membership of the village through child in-migration.

### Intermarriage

There were 32 marriages in the approximately 10 years between 2003 and 2012 among the people in Boutoumbi and its two neighboring villages, Moukandi and Dibamba. These cases are classified according to each ethnic group's husband and wife pair (Table 1). Because they have a matrilineal social system, each individual was categorized based on their mother's ethnic group. Nearly half of all marriages (47%; 15 of 32) are between the Babongo and Masango. Although most intermarriages occur between Masango men and Babongo women (13 cases), there are also two cases of marriage between Babongo men and Masango women.

When the post-marital residence is categorized "within the region" (villages in the same department as Boutoumbi Village) and "outside the region" (other places, including towns), most marriages of Babongo men are "within the region" (92%; 11 of 12). Most spouses of Babongo men are from the same region, and they tend to live within the region, based on the patrilocal rule. In contrast, there are more cases of Babongo women going outside the region after marriage (43%; 10 of 23). As described in the previous section, there is a general tendency for young women to migrate to the town where their relatives live. In such cases, they find marriage partners there, and many are Masango men. Even when they marry the men in the region, they often go outside the region because of the husband's wage labor. This occurs frequently when the husband is Masango.

Regarding the five cases of marriage of Babongo women of Boutoumbi origin who were born in the 1990s, one married a Babongo who is also from Boutoumbi Village and another married a Babongo in Moukandi Village, and lives in the husband's village. Three other women married Masango men (but one of them divorced after a few years). Two live in Moukandi Village and one lives in Libreville, the capital of Gabon, because of her husband's wage labor. The younger sister of the woman who lives in Libreville also migrated there, to live with her sister.

**Table 1** Marriage Cases in the Research Site

residence \ Pair*	BB	MM	MB	BM	IMI**
within region	9	2	4	2	0.35
outside	1	5	9	0	0.60
total	10	7	13	2	0.47

\*BB: between Babongo, MM: between Masango,

MB: between Masango man and Babongo woman, BM: between Babongo man and Masango woman

\*\*Inter Marriage Index = (MB+BM) / (BB+MM+MB+BM)

## **INFLUENCES FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD AND RESPONSE OF THE BABONGO**

Gabonese policies and international trends regarding exploitation and conservation of rainforest influence Babongo livelihoods, as a consequence there have been remarkable changes in Boutoumbi Village between 2003 and 2012. The author examines three significant examples that indicate social changes of the Babongo caused by outside actors, and demonstrates the Babongo response to them.

### **Logging Operations**

Timber has been a principal export product of Gabon since the 1960s, and foreign logging companies developed in the country largely in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, logging and mining operations have penetrated deeply into forested areas since the late 1990s, as costs of transport and employment decreased owing to the devaluation of the local currency (the CFA franc), in 1994.

In the research area, there was also a trial drilling for diamonds by a South African mining company in July, 2003. However, it was discontinued after about two months because few diamonds were found. On the other hand, a Malaysian logging company began operations in 2008, and constructed a logging road. The road connects Diyanga Village, the second neighboring village to the west of Boutoumbi, and Mounongo Village passing through the northern forest (Matsuura 2011). The road penetrates the area where Boutoumbi people frequently hunt and gather (Matsuura 2011). The area is also important culturally because it contains the remains of ancient settlements. Therefore, it was worried that the large-scale logging operations would destroy traditional Babongo lifestyle and culture.

However, it is false to assume that hunter-gatherers were expelled from their land and their traditional culture was destroyed by the development project alone. The reason the logging road penetrates the Babongo resource use area is that the Babongo employed by the logging company guided them to it because they knew it well. In addition, rituals were carried out prior to the road construction at the initiative of the local people, including those of Boutoumbi, and destruction of culturally important places was avoided.

Finally, the logging operation was closed in 2009 and the road left as it was until now. This was done largely because of implementation a new forest law in 2010. The law banned the export of unprocessed logs to add economic value locally to forest resources and assist domestic employment. Gabonese forest policies conform to the international trend of rainforest conservation and the framework of REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation), which gives economic value to the rainforest. Owing to these policies, massive exploitation of a forest important for the Babongo people's livelihood and culture was averted. However, it is not appropriate to regard it as only the positive result that land rights and traditions of hunter-gatherers are



**Photo 2** A campsite along the former logging road.

protected, since some Babongo had anticipated an increased cash income, and complained that the logging company abandoned the operation, contrary to their expectations.

It should also be noted that the Babongo at the research site are not always at the mercy of outside influences. For example, the remaining logging road is convenient way to travel when going to the forest and selecting campsites because there are open spaces and it is easy to access water near the bridge. Thus, the Babongo now frequently set up their campsites for hunting and gathering along the former logging road (Matsuura 2011) (Photo 2).

A series of events from the beginning of the logging operation to its closure due to the new forest law obviously indicates that today global political and economic trends influence even local communities. However, the Babongo are not always the victims whose rights are threatened and whose resources are exploited. As described in the above case, the Babongo have the potential to interact independently with outside actors and sometimes adopt to an extent change in their livelihoods while maintaining close ties with the forest.

### **Development of Transportation and Communication Infrastructure**

There were two significant changes in Boutoumbi Village in 2010. One was the repair of the road and the other construction of a mobile phone antenna. The condition of the road around Boutoumbi Village had been extremely bad, so its use by vehicles was limited. Although traffic had increased temporarily during the period of the mining and logging operations, it returned to previous low levels immediately after their closure. Road conditions improved with a repair project in 2010.

The repair work reached Boutoumbi Village in July, 2010. Although a site supervisor and specialized workers, such as operators of heavy machinery, were employees of the road company, villagers near the construction site were employed for simple physical labor. During the approximately three months of the road reconstruction work around Boutoumbi Village, 10 men, four Babongo and six Masango, were employed from Boutoumbi and two neighboring villages, Dibamba and Moukandi. Wage labor opportunities are important for the people at the research site because sources of cash income are scarce. Thus it is supposed that the local political power relations reflected the selection of the road laborers to some extent, because sons of the chiefs of Moukandi and Dibamba villages participated in it. However, other workers were chosen because they were young and strong and not because of either ethnicity or family connections. Further, the number of workers showed no bias between the Babongo and Masango. In addition, the wage was fixed and based on the Gabonese labor code, and there was no distinction between the Babongo and Masango doing the same type of work. It is noted that the relatively equal social position of the Babongo and Masango in the research site reflects these points.

With respect to construction of a mobile phone antenna in May, 2010, since 2008 there had been an antenna in a departmental capital approximately 50 km to the west of Boutoumbi Village, so it was just possible to connect to a telephone network from particular places. In the research period of 2008, it was observed frequently that some villagers went to a hill or open space, about 10 minutes from the village, to access the telephone network. They mainly called their relatives and friends living in town, and sometimes contacted people concerning political issues to obtain information on political events. At that time, mobile phone owners at the research site were limited to only those Masango who went frequently to town and had relatives working there.

However, the construction of an antenna changed the condition of communication in the research area. The antenna was constructed in 2010 in the forest between Dibamba and Boutoumbi villages. Fourteen men from Dibamba, Boutoumbi and Moukandi villages were employed as laborers. They consisted of eight Babongo and six Masango, who worked for about a month. As with the road construction, there was no difference in the wage between the Babongo and Masango, nor was there any ethnic distinction in the number of laborers. Rather, more Babongo people were given an opportunity to work.





**Photo 3** A mobile phone antenna in the forest.

Owing to the new antenna, it has become possible to use mobile phones everywhere in the village (Photo 3). In conjunction with the increased traffic resulting from the repair of the road, the number of persons to contact and ways to charge credits became varied. The number of mobile phone owners in the village increased because some people had received a cash income from the construction work. The Babongo now also own mobile phones. Among adult males in Dibamba and Boutoumbi villages, 57% of Masango (4 of 7) and 17% of Babongo (2 of 12) had mobile phones in the research period of 2012.

One Babongo mobile phone owner is a man in his 40s (hereafter MA), who worked for the construction of the antenna. Because MA is also a traditional healer, he treated a site manager of the telephone company who fell sick, for which MA was rewarded with a mobile phone. When the author checked MA's phone in 2010, there were only nine addresses; four of them were clients of his traditional healing practices and bush meat commerce, including a local politician who sometimes asked MA to go hunting with guns. During the research period for about a week in 2010, the author observed that MA was requested by this person to go hunting and worked for two days to obtain game, such as duiker. After that, MA phoned the client to inform him of the result of the hunt, and the client came to Boutoumbi Village only about three hours after the call. The client paid for the bush meat and placed another order with MA. This can be regarded as a bush meat business based on use of a mobile phone network.



The circumstances surrounding MA's acquisition of a mobile phone and his actual use of it clearly indicate the Babongo response to the change influenced by outside actors. As demonstrated in detail in the following section, the Pygmies in Gabon are sometimes regarded as special ritual practitioners, and some Babongo at the research site have established special social statuses as traditional healers. This is also suggested by MA's receiving a mobile phone as a reward for his treatment. On the other hand, his use of the phone for bush meat trading shows that the Babongo remain talented hunters who are relied on by townspeople. It is generally said that hunter-gatherers are assumed to be increasingly marginalized by the rapid progress of information technology. However, the Babongo at the research site are not always marginalized, but to some extent incorporate the information technology into their original lifestyle. Now, they are able to connect from a periphery to the very center of society.

### Rituals and National Events

Many Gabonese believe in a traditional ritual named *bwiti*, which is so familiar that it is found in postcards and DVDs. *Bwiti* is supposed to have originated among the Bantu of central Gabon (Bonhomme 2006), but has been adopted by many other ethnic groups. There are shades of difference in the ritual practices of each ethnic group, and specialized branches of *bwiti* (Bonhomme 2006). One is the *bwiti* for healing, not just the curing of disease but including treatment of family and business problems. Traditional healers (*nganga*) have a unique social status in Gabon.

It is unclear when and how the Pygmies adopted *bwiti* for healing in their society, but they are presumed to have long shared rituals with neighboring farmers. Because the Pygmies have a vast knowledge of natural resources, especially of medicinal plants, they might have integrated that knowledge easily with the healing rituals. At present, Pygmy healers are regarded as special because they live in peripheral villages in the forest and have an enormous range of knowledge about medicinal plants. Some townspeople have a deep fear and respect for the supernatural power of Pygmy healers (Bonhomme *et al.* 2012; Matsuura 2012).

A chief of Boutoumbi Village is known as a prominent traditional healer, and there are two other healers in the village. Many clients, mostly from town, come to the village for healing (Matsuura 2012). They are not only from nearby towns, such as a provincial capital, but also from coastal towns, including Libreville, located several hundred kilometers away from the village. In addition to the cure of disease and the treatment of business and family problems, there are requests from politicians for *bwiti* to ensure success in elections and other political events. Through these ritual practices, the Babongo at the research site have established a unique social status and are able to obtain a cash income (Matsuura 2012).

Because *bwiti* is regarded as a symbol of Gabonese traditional culture, it is often performed at national events, at which the Pygmies play important roles as

ritual practitioners. There were at least two cases between 2003 and 2012 in which the Babongo at the research site participated in a national event to perform a ritual dance. These were an independence day ceremony in the provincial capital, and a cultural event in Libreville. In January, 2012, when the African Nations (soccer) Cup was co-organized by Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, *bwiti* was also performed at the award ceremony in Libreville. Surprisingly, the dance team was formed by the people of Boutoumbi and Moukandi villages. A chief of Boutoumbi, in particular, played the most important role in carrying a trophy. He appeared widely in Gabonese newspapers the following day.

This event was promoted by a politician originally from the research area. He has long known the people of Boutoumbi and Moukandi villages and, in addition, is a regular client of *bwiti* healing. Therefore, he decided to organize *bwiti* in the ceremony and asked the people of Boutoumbi and Moukandi to perform it.

There were 33 participants in total; four persons (two couples) from Boutoumbi and 29 from Moukandi. The Babongo consisted of 27 participants (including five mixed persons with a Masango father and Babongo mother) and six Masango (including a mixed person with a Babongo father and Masango mother). Most Masango participants were from the family of a chief of Moukandi Village. Although the Babongo are talented singers and dancers in rituals, their French literacy and conversation skills are generally low, because of their lack of a school education. Therefore, a Masango woman, who is a village chief, and her sons and a son-in-law acted as intermediaries. The Babongo participants were composed mainly of elders with many ritual skills and a deep knowledge of traditional culture. Forty percent of Babongo participants (11 of 27) were over 60 years old, and there were no children and teenagers.

On the evening of February 8, 2012, a minibus came to the village to pick up the participants. They spent the night in the provincial capital and continued to Libreville the following day. On the day of the final match and the award ceremony, on the 12<sup>th</sup>, they performed singing and dancing. They were dressed in ritual costumes and played the traditional musical instruments they had brought from the village. After that, they were taken to the provincial capital on the 13<sup>th</sup> and returned to the village on the 14<sup>th</sup>. They were paid 1,320,000 CFA (about 2,000 Euros) for their performance, and it was distributed to each participant equally (40,000 CFA [about 60 Euros] per person).

These cases concerning the rituals show clearly that the Babongo present a social status that is influenced by outside actors. Namely, they are interconnected with the town and townspeople through ritual practices while living in a peripheral village, and they sometimes take part even in national events and rituals. In the rituals, the Babongo are often considered indispensable and occupy important positions. That *bwiti* was performed at an international event indicates how much the Gabonese believe in *bwiti* and regard it as a symbol of their traditional culture. In the performance, the majority of participants were Babongo, and they played the most important role. Whereas the Babongo played a central role in the event,

a Masango chief and her family acted only as supporting intermediaries. They were not paid more than the Babongo.

The cultural value of *bwiti* is presumed to be increasing in Gabon, and the Babongo are valued increasingly because they are famous for their expertise in its rituals. The Babongo respond positively to outside demands by accepting the position as ritual practitioners. Although it was a show-like performance of *bwiti* in both scenery and audience, and the event was completely different from the one in the village, the Babongo performed the ritual at a national event in a legitimate way, using traditional costumes and musical instruments.

## DISCUSSION

Focusing on one of the Pygmy groups, the Babongo in southern Gabon, this article has described the present situation of social change among African hunter-gatherers, which has developed since the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is accelerating in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Based on field research lasting about 10 years, between 2003 and 2012, the author has demonstrated (1) the change of the Babongo in the research village in terms of population dynamics and intermarriage, and (2) their response to outside world influences using the three examples in the research site: logging operations, development of transport and communication infrastructure, and rituals and national events.

### Social Change within the Community

The analysis of population dynamics revealed that migration of young people has increased at the research site, but that they visit the village frequently and maintain social ties with their relatives. It is generally said that the migration of young people leads to increased generational gaps and the disappearance of the elders' traditional knowledge. However, in contrast the present study demonstrated that migration to town by young people promotes the enlargement and establishment of social networks and increases the possibilities of visits to the town. Young people also seem intent on transmitting traditional knowledge, which is cultivated through village life, to their children, since they bring their children to relatives in the village and the children spend long periods with them.

The analysis of intermarriage demonstrated the characteristics of the interethnic relationships between the Babongo and Masango, which, as the author has pointed out previously (Matsuura 2006, 2009, 2011), are becoming increasingly prominent. The author has demonstrated previously also that there is frequent intermarriage between the Babongo and Masango, and the rate of marriage has increased since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Matsuura 2011). Such a tendency is shown clearly in the research conducted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. About half the marriages at the research site are between the Babongo and Masango, and the ethnic category is becoming less significant in their choice of partners. Both biological and cultural mixtures have been developing as a result of the

intermarriage, which reinforces social ties between affines. The social distinction and ethnic boundary between the Babongo and Masango is becoming more ambiguous.

However, this does not mean that the social distinction is vanishing completely. There are many more marriages between the Babongo women and Masango men than the inverse. It suggests that the Masango are still superior to the Babongo politically and economically. Comparison with the author's previous study, that analyzed the proportion of intermarriage in each generation (Matsuura 2011), leads to the supposition that the inequality always exists in each generation and is expanding to some extent. Depending on context, it is also possible that the Masango strengthen their power and come to dominate the Babongo. In any case, the relation with the Masango is always the most important element for Babongo social life within the community. It often influences or even drives the social changes of the Babongo.

### **Influences from the Outside World**

The three cases concerning influence from the outside world suggest that, influenced by outside actors, Babongo livelihoods are changing drastically, and that they respond to the change while retaining close ties with the forest. The case of the logging operations demonstrates that the Babongo are not always victims of exploitation, stripped of their land and restricted from undertaking subsistence activities, instead they were involved positively in the operation. In addition, after the operation closed and only the logging road remained, the Babongo used the road to access the forest easily. They also establish campsites along the road.

Similarly, the Babongo response to change was shown in the case of development of transportation and communication infrastructures. Although transportation and communication conditions have improved dramatically the Babongo have adapted to them while maintaining their forest-related life. For example, mobile phone use did not cause a radical change in their social relations and lifestyle. They frequently contacted their old acquaintances and used the mobile phone for their bush meat trade.

Regarding rituals and national events, it was shown that the rituals have been valued for curing diseases and handling other kinds of problems. Also, they are regarded as a symbol of Gabonese traditional culture. In such situations, Pygmies are considered as special ritual practitioners with mystic powers and in this way have established a unique social status. The Babongo responded to the demand from the outside taking advantage of their ritual skill and knowledge. They practiced their ritual in events, such as the international soccer championship, which they had never experienced formerly in terms of place, audience or purpose.

The Masango have relatively little influence over relations with the outside world such that the Babongo sometimes interact independently with outside actors. However, this does not mean that the Masango are completely ignored. On the contrary, they are concerned in some way in every case. For example, both the

Babongo and Masango worked together for the construction of roads and the antenna, and the Masango intermediated Babongo participation in the national soccer event. In today's globalized society, the influences from the outside world are supposed to increase. Thus, the Babongo are facing various outside actions, such as forest conservation policies, promotion of traditional cultures, development projects by foreign companies and international agencies, demands concerning the bush meat trade, and ritual practices requested by townspeople, to name but a few. The Masango are always important, not only within the region but also because they are related to the outside world, and interethnic relationships reflect the Babongo interaction with actors from the outside.

### **Babongo Flexible Response to Social Changes**

One important factor supporting the Babongo response to social changes in the research site is their long-established relationship with the Masango. Bantu societies in southern Gabon, including the Masango, are characterized by their matrilineal and patrilocal social system and highly mobile residential patterns, which result in fewer ties with territories and a smaller concentration of authorities (Vansina 1990; Gray 2002; Mayer 2002). This is one significant reason why the ethnic distinction between the Babongo and Masango has not been emphasized, as shown in the cases of intermarriage, and a social and cultural mixture has been developed. The Babongo at the research site take advantage of the relations with the Masango to advance to the town and interact with outside actors. In contrast, the neighboring farmers have highly hierarchical social systems and the social distinction between Pygmies and farmers are apparent, Pygmies are sometimes subordinated to the farmers and are unable to access the outside world without their intervention (Kenrick 2005; Lewis 2005). One reason why the vulnerable status of the Pygmies has been emphasized in many previous studies is that such unequal relationships are actually assumed in many regions.

Regarding the social status of the Babongo at the research site, it is also supposed that the political and economic context has an influence. In Gabon, traditional rituals are strongly believed, and the Pygmies are regarded as special ritual practitioners. It is said that the former Gabonese president, Omar Bongo belonged to the ethnic group closely related with the Pygmies, and that he established his political domination owing to the perception of Pygmies as being mystical (Ngolet 2000). In the author's research site also the Babongo are well-known for their ritual practices and have many regular clients in town, including a politician who helped organize the national event.

The phenomenon of the importance of rituals being heightened in modern society has been observed in many African countries (Geschiere 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001), and the trend is being reinforced greatly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rituals are by no means pre-modern practices, but are flourishing in globalized societies despite capitalist economies and modern State systems, and have penetrated deeply into societies all around the world. Townspeople, in particular,

depend increasingly on the ritual practices owing to the unpredictable circumstances that accompany rapid modernization (Geschiere 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Although the value of rituals is rising and the Pygmies are recognized as special ritual practitioners, the Babongo interact with various outside actors through the rituals without being subordinated to them. In some cases they even receive special treatment as important persons in an event.

On the other hand, owing to its relatively rich natural resources and a small human population, there has been little exploitation or serious conflict over lands and natural resources in Gabon. Because of its economic richness, the political situation is also stable and there have been no civil wars in Gabon. At the research site as well, there have been no serious conflicts over resources between the Babongo and Masango. Rather, they depend on each other because the site is isolated and far from town. On these points, the political and economic situation surrounding the Babongo at the research site differ from other regions. For example, serious human rights violations against the Pygmies have occurred in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the political and economic situation is extremely unstable and there have been intensified resource exploitation and frequent conflicts (Mulvagh 2006; Pottier 2007).

However, the Pygmies are economically poor and in a weak political position owing to their lower education levels (Wodon *et al.* 2012). In addition, the environmental problems and conflicts with local people due to excessive exploitation have risen to the surface. Natural resources, such as petroleum, are declining gradually, and commercial logging is largely expanding (Laurance *et al.* 2006). In addition to European companies, those from China and Southeast Asia are developing rapidly. As Knight (2006) pointed out, the victims of such over-exploitation are always Pygmies, who are politically and economically in weak positions. However, the case of the Babongo Pygmies described in this article demonstrates that the human rights of hunter-gatherers are not always violated, nor are benefits exploited unilaterally. As demonstrated by a considerable number of previous studies, the characteristics of hunter-gatherer societies include the fluidity and flexibility of their social organization. It is thus supposed that the Babongo's flexible response to various external influences, characterized by their incorporation of change while simultaneously sustaining their original lifestyle that is tied closely to the forest in made possible by might be possible, taking advantage of their flexible social characteristics as hunter-gatherers.

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