Baka ritual flow diverted

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Abstract: Ethnographers of Congo Basin hunter-gatherers have emphasised ritual as a levelling mechanism that strengthens community spirit and mediates power evenly between individuals and subgroups. Pursuant to recent research with a Baka community in Cameroon, now largely abandoning the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, I analyse the mutual causal interactions between ritual alterations and other markers of social change. I argue that there is a positive feedback loop between ritual change and general social transformation towards a less egalitarian mode of sociality. Increasingly pressed into convening with globalising forces and integrating into the capitalist economy, the rhetoric of development has been adopted by the Baka. This community talk of a history of isolation, as a public road was extended to the district as late as 2007 by a mining corporation. The result of the new road and burgeoning mining activities is that the community has been exposed precipitously to new peoples, lifestyles and technologies. Ritual has become an arena in which Baka individuals grapple with a widely experienced ethnic identity crisis, leading to structural changes that encourage further social transformation. Ritual diversion thus refers to social changes being explored through mimesis in ritual spaces, resulting in the changing character of ritual. It creates a hierarchical flow of power among the Assoumindele Baka. The hypothesis this case study yields is that, in egalitarian societies, ritual rebellion favours explorations of inequality, whereas in hierarchical societies it explores equality. In situations of rapid social transformation these ritual potentialities can be consolidated into the social order.

Keywords: social transformation, ritual diversion, feedback loop, mimesis, ritual rebellion, ethnic identity crisis

Ethnographers of Congo Basin hunter-gatherers have hitherto emphasised ritual as a levelling mechanism that mediates power evenly between individuals and subgroups and strengthens community spirit (Turnbull 1978; Kisluik 1998; Lewis 2008; Fürniss 2006, Finnegan 2013). Polyphonic singing and dancing is thought of as a metonym for the thoroughgoing or immediate-return egalitarianism of these peoples (Woodburn 1982; Fürniss 2006; Lewis 2013). But what becomes of the ritual dynamic of levelling when, through a process of social transformation, an egalitarian group starts to become politically differentiated?

Fieldwork data from research with a recently sedentarised Baka community suggests that alterations to ritual structure and performance are best viewed
as both cause and effect of a social crisis and rapid transformation towards a less egalitarian mode of sociality. In other words, ritual is involved in a positive feedback loop with social organisation. Ritual has become an arena in which Baka individuals grapple with a widely experienced ethnic identity crisis, leading to structural changes in ritual that in turn encourage further social transformation. Ritual flow refers to the continuity that has been ethnographically observed in the ritual practices of Congo Basin hunter-gatherers, characterised by the levelling of power. Ritual diversion refers to changes being explored experientially and mimetically in ritual spaces, resulting in the changing character of ritual. Ritual diversion supports a hierarchical flow of power, and an infusion of commercial values.

From forest to village life

The changes to ritual in this Baka community have come about in a very particular context, a context of accelerated social transformation. In general, the Baka have long been associated with an egalitarian hunter-gatherer lifestyle, alongside a gradual process of sedentarisation, the adoption of small-scale agriculture, and increasingly mixed economic strategies (Köhler 1998, 2005; Leonard 1998; Hewlett 2000; Oishi 2012, Weig 2013). My fieldwork was conducted in 2011 and 2012 with the Baka villagers of Assoumindele II, who live on the border of Cameroon (South Region) and the Republic of Congo. Assoumindele has both Baka and Njem ethnicities, divided by segregated spaces and discriminatory client-patron relationships. There is also a growing population of newcomers.

The Baka community of Assoumindele represents a sui generis case in the history of Baka social transformation because of its relative isolation from so-called ‘development’ activities in Cameroon in recent years. In addition, it presents a case study of how radical social and political change can come about rapidly for the Baka and for other immediate-return groups. Locals in and around Assoumindele talk of an ‘enclaved’ past, as there was no road until very recently, only a foot-track. They thus have had a shorter history of exposure to state intervention, commerce and non-governmental organisations than have other forest-dwelling communities in the southeast of Cameroon. A settled Baka component of the village has existed since the late 1970s or early 1980s, according to the life histories of senior residents. This is by comparison with the 1950s to early 1960s for Baka who currently live near long established roads (Althabe 1965; Hewlett 2000).
The Baka of Assoumindele were excluded from the initial phase of sedentari-
sation, which was first instigated by the colonial government of Cameroon
during the 1950s. Subsequently, the current government sent representatives to
induce Baka in the Assoumindele area to settle alongside the major footpath,
by offering each band a lump sum of cash, according to the senior residents I
spoke to. It is unclear precisely when this happened but seems to have been
during the early 1980s.

More recently (in 2006), an Australian company, Sundance Resources Ltd,
began establishing an iron ore mine near Assoumindele, with headquarters
at the village Mbalam. By 2008, a rudimentary dirt road was opened over the
pre-existing footpath in order to facilitate company activities. The result of the
new road (see Figure 1) and burgeoning mining activities is that the community
has been exposed precipitously and overwhelmingly to new peoples, glamorous
lifestyles and extraordinary new technologies. These novelties are seductive
to the Baka because they involve high consumption of things traditionally
considered gratifying, including sex, alcohol and food – now in exotic new forms.
New luxuries such as fashionable clothing, radios and mobile phones have also
been introduced, accompanied by a boom in the cash flow. Increasingly pushed
into convening with centripetal forces and seduced by the capitalist economy,
the Baka now use the adopted rhetoric of development.

Figure 1 The new road to Mbalam
R ritual flow diverted

My ethnographic data suggests that there may be two mechanisms by which rapid socioeconomic upheaval in the area has led to concomitant diversion of ritual:

1. Ritual infusion: the character and performance of ritual activity is influenced by new external factors, for example new technologies, cheap alcohol, and highly-acquisitive values.

2. Ritual rebellion: where radical changes to the social order are experienced with, by means of mimetic performance.

I will discuss these factors separately, though they are interrelated. They, in their turn, feed into further alterations to the shifting social order by means of a positive feedback loop.

In order to gauge the extent of the resulting transformations to ritual, I compare the character of the ritual activities of the Assoumindele Baka with what I refer to as the ‘ritual dialogue model’ for Congo Basin hunter-gatherers, which exemplifies what I also refer to as ‘ritual flow’ because it represents a macro-level of continuity in the rituals of Congo Basin hunter-gatherers across time and space. The model is based on Morna Finnegan’s (2008, 2013) synthesis of various ethnographic accounts from Congo Basin hunter-gatherer societies (notably Colin Turnbull 1978; Michelle Kisliuk 1998; Jerome Lewis 2002), in which she describes a type of egalitarian ritual themed around the procreative power of the body as ‘a recurrent ritual dialogic hung around sexual duality’ (2013:698). Lewis (2002) describes the mechanics of this process as one in which one gender coalition sporadically prevails while the other works on undermining or overthrowing such dominion.

Finnegan uses the analogy of a political pendulum to describe the ‘somatic conversation’ involved in maintaining gender equality (2013:713). She argues that the prominent social position of women in the societies concerned is not a result of their egalitarianism, but a causal factor in it, asserted by women’s coalitions in ‘the ritual theatre of conflict’ (2013:705). In Finnegan’s view, egalitarianism is profoundly dependent on public ritual exchanges between the sexes, which form the very structure of social life. She writes:

Public ritual performances among the Mbendjele Yaka, the BaAka, or the Mbuti operate as a powerful bodily statement on behalf of egalitarian reality. These exchanges are a means of creating society, not one of society’s tools. (712)

The Assoumindele case indicates both that changes in social structure are encouraging changes in ritual and that these changes in ritual then cause further
changes to the social structure. The situation is one of mutual causal interaction between social organisation and ritual such that \( x \) affects \( y \), \( y \) affects \( x \) and so on. In other words, there is a positive feedback loop between ritual and other factors that contribute towards transforming the social order of the Assoumindele Baka. As a more general principle, this illustrates that ritual may be involved in feedback loops during the process by which social order is in constant co-creation by its members.\(^1\) Finnegan’s ritual dialogue model is thus an illustration of ritual continuity or flow that may come under revision through interaction with other social factors.

The changing character of rituals in Assoumindele is suggestive of the term ‘ritual failure’ or ‘ritual imperfection’ (Geertz 1957; Hüsken et al 2007) in that the changing rituals may have outcomes that differ from the conventional outcomes of specific rituals. However, as ritual is a process which the community appear to be using to cope with radical change, I prefer the term ritual diversion, or Kisliuk’s (1998) term ‘distress performed’. However, ‘distress performed’ is perhaps not specific enough, as a mourning ceremony is distress performed, but of a different quality to the ongoing expression of loss of value, purpose and legitimate ethnic identity that the Baka are experiencing and expressing through ritual. Also, not all of the ongoing changes to ritual are necessarily experienced in terms of distress; there is also a certain optimism and excitement about modernity. Failure or imperfection, on the other hand, both have unfortunate judgmental connotations, and they gloss over the important social dynamics taking place through ritual transformation, for example mimetic take-up of the new, and a battle between two social orders where the new confronts the old.

**A ritual diverted**

The following vignette traces the course of a ritual that diverges from an egalitarian flow of power in a variety of ways. These are analysed in terms of two mechanisms of divergence in the subsequent discussion, namely ritual infusion and ritual rebellion.

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1. It is possible that evolutionary modelling and Approximate Bayesian Computation could shed some light on these processes by ascertaining the relative probability of ritual and day-to-day causal factors of social change (see Kandler and Laland’s 2013 model). But this would require the identification of appropriate cultural variants to describe the social dynamics involved and subsequently the collection of sufficient frequency data, a major project.
It is almost midday. Groups of people meander in and out of the courtyard, fenced by wooden stakes and raffia mats that have been erected in the past few days. They have come from as far as Ntam to participate in this lifting of mourning ceremony that has been the subject of much preparation and planning. Most of the carousing passed during the early hours in a blur of noise and energy, occasioned by the sound system and lighting hired for the event. Many have made a special effort with their appearance.

The exuberant ambience of the departed night has faded. Many people are exhausted after hours of drinking and dancing to pop music, followed by polyphonic singing and drumming, but six persistent Baka women chant and clap with abiding rhythm as they shuffle and gyrate around the two drummers in the middle of the courtyard.

The few Njem vendors who have not yet abandoned their stations sit slumped over their colourful plastic baskets of cigarettes, lollipops, 50 ml ‘whiskey’ sachets and bottles of ngolongolo (strong moonshine).

A small boy darts surreptitiously into the mud house annexing the courtyard. When he slips out again, a group of men, including the village chief, Mengbwa, draw together authoritatively. After a brief conference Mengbwa sallies forth, whistling loudly. ‘Bo na nda a do!’ he announces in Baka, repeating the words in Njem (The people of the house are coming!). A Njem man moves towards the front of the mudhouse, and crack! He fires his shot-gun over the raffia rooftop, followed by an eruption of cheering and whooping from the assembled crowd. On cue, the drummers strike up a slow beat, and the crowd falls silent, waiting.
Gradually the mourners appear, spilling out of the mud house and into the courtyard one by one. Their heads downcast, six Baka men and seven Baka women emerge from their overnight confinement, marching forward very slowly, with stiff clockwork movements. They proceed towards a bench positioned to one side of the courtyard. Tears stream down their faces as they mourn their beloved Sawa for the last time. He died many moons ago, and his widow and relatives are due to take off their dark mourning clothes, and move on with their lives.

When the bereaved are seated, members of the community, both Baka and Njem, come forward to incentivise them, and remove the head-dresses that have been worn during mourning. Some people reach out to the relatives by rubbing their arms and heads, each in turn. Others provide a sip of alcohol or a coin or two to each.

Once everyone has paid their regards, the bereaved resume their shuffling procession. They spill out of the courtyard en route to the burial ground in the nearby forest. Wild flowers decorate the path to this sacred space. The drummers and singers accompany the mourners’ ponderous motions with music. I find myself moved by the atmosphere of deep respect that has been created.

Suddenly, there is a disturbance on the periphery of my consciousness. Strident male voices rise above the pensive melody, and I turn to see two Baka men shouting and pushing each other. Within seconds, a punch has been thrown, it all happens so quickly, and a third man has entered the fray, trying to separate the pair. They turn their fury on him.

The fracas erupts into a ball of violent energy, noise and red dust. Attempts by bystanders to quell the fight only seem to fan the flames, and soon several men are involved. Alarmingy, an agitated and heavily pregnant woman runs up to the mob, trying to draw her husband out by tugging on his arm. He is one of the pair who began the altercation, and she is too distraught to take heed of the peril. The mourning procession has stopped in its tracks, and the singers have dispersed into the general melee. The attention of the crowd has completely shifted from the commemorative rite towards the drunken brawl, everyone babbling excitedly about its speculated cause.

Mengbwa approaches me, explaining that the two rivals are fighting over the privilege of taking the widow as a second wife. He thinks the situation is becoming dangerous, and asks me to get myself safely indoors. I do not argue but begin my retreat down the path to my own mudhouse. At that moment, a tall Njem visitor from the Congo and his local relative come charging into the fray wielding whips. I break into a run for cover.

Once inside, I lie down on the bamboo bed to try and get some rest. Exhausted, I quickly drift into blissful oblivion. A crack of a gunshot startles me back into the present. In my agitation, I open my shutters to peek out of the window but my house is set well back from the ritual centre, and I can see no activity. I only hear the shouts and screams that ensue. I daren’t move. Another shot is fired.
In the aftermath of Sawa’s miscarried commemorative ceremony, I learn the extent of the chaos that transpired. Just before nightfall, I give medical aid to several people with injuries and receive visits from Mengbwa, and the Njem village chief. I learn that the occasion descended into an ethnic clash. The Baka villagers resented the Njem villagers’ interference in what they perceived as a Baka matter. The shots had in fact been fired into the air by a level-headed Njem villager in order to scare people back into their houses. Luckily on this occasion, it worked.

The disastrous ritual sees in what is to be several especially sour weeks of Baka–Njem interaction. Inter-Baka relations are not much better. Sawa’s widow confides in me that she is worried that her husband’s spirit (me) has not safely departed for the forest but is still present within the household, entering her dreams at night. She is afraid that he will lead her into the world of the dead. The pregnant wife of one of the original tusslers is highly distraught about her husband’s frenzied ardour for another woman. She goes to stay with her sister’s household, and in bad grace he demands that her family return his bridewealth payments. The rest of the community seem intent on forgetting Sawa’s commemoration.

**Mechanisms of ritual diversion – ritual infusion**

The first mechanism of ritual diversion is the infusion of new economic and political values into the Baka community at Assoumindele, causing change to the social order, which in turn alters the way rituals are conducted. A new preoccupation with development, integration and wealth infuses the Baka ritual activities of music-making and dance. The recent influx of material goods such as money, cheap alcohol, electric generators and sound systems has also changed the character of ritual events towards that of the nightclub or boîte, where recorded pop music is often preferred to polyphonic singing. In my experience, the Baka of Assoumindele spend relatively little time making music, compared with the Mbuti hunter-gatherers of the Ituri Forest, Democratic Republic of Congo, who seem to conform more closely with the ritual dialogue model (see also Turnbull 1978, 1983).

On a Saturday night, many of the younger Baka generation in Assoumindele walk 7.5 kilometres to attend the boîte that recently opened in the border town of Ntam. This involves dancing and socialising with an ethnically-diverse collection of people, who are likely to be itinerant, or have an otherwise

2. I visited the Mbuti for a two-month field trip during 2009.
transitory status in the region (for example truckers, small-scale entrepreneurs or Congolese prostitutes cashing in on a few weeks of cross-border business). These people have come to Ntam to make money from the emerging commercial opportunities. I estimate that the population of Ntam tripled in size during the course of my fieldwork.

The atmosphere of the boîte is generally raucous; gambling and heavy drinking are the order of the day, and brawls, swindles and thefts are not uncommon. A massive generator runs throughout Saturday night, to chill the beer and to power high-decibel pop music and flashing lights. Nightclub goers, including the Baka, typically dress up in flashy clothes (influenced by the hip hop bling bling fashion popular in urban Cameroon). Sunglasses and baseball caps are highly prestigious items in this local context, and these are often shown off at the boîte. Baka youngsters may spend a large proportion of their hard-earned cash on buying the jauntiest outfit they can afford, which they reserve for nights out.

Many urbanites in Central Africa have a pronounced interest in sartorial exhibitionism, increasingly with a hip hop flavour amongst the younger generation. This is akin to the sapeur phenomenon in urban Congo where the consumption of imported European clothing is an expression of high status. Friedman (1994) analyses this conspicuous consumerism as borne out of colonial transformation during which ‘an existing hierarchical praxis’ (1994:7) became inscribed with a mythologised vision of the West. Friedman’s key insight is that consumption is an instrument of identity creation, a way of fulfilling desires associated with chimerical lifestyles.

Locals in the rural context in the Assoumindele region emulate the style of urbanites as they aspire to appropriate the glamour of the city. In the same way that urbane sapeurs acquire Western status by donning Western clothing, the Baka acquire the credentials of modernity by donning the clothing of urbanites. And the Baka villagers, at the bottom of the local hierarchy yearning to establish their equal status, conspicuously consume the marvels of modernity as they try to establish their place in the new utopia promised by development. They actively explore the opportunities of modernity, seeking to acquire its mystical powers by ritually consuming and displaying its material manifestations. This is analogous to how more traditional polyphonic rituals draw forth the abundance of the forest by mimicking its sounds and feeding the forest spirits with the resulting music.

3. A slang term referring to showy jewellery and ornamentation in hip-hop culture.
Figures 3a and 3b  Baka youngsters at the boîte in Ntam
Back in the village of Assoumindele, the influence of the boîte seeps in. The Baka villagers now mark some of their important ritual events by collecting money for a kitty to hire an electric generator and sound system. Alcohol and cigarettes are also bought with this money, to be shared out during the events. On some ritual occasions, polyphonic singing only takes place once the fuel for the generator runs out, which fundamentally changes the form and character that those rituals take, as illustrated by the vignette of Sawa’s commemorative ceremony, which involved pop music, large quantities of alcohol and flashy clothing. One middle-aged woman wore a tinsel wig.

Lewis (2013) demonstrates that communal music-making is critical for cultural transmission and social cohesion, with special reference to the polyphonic style of Congo Basin hunter-gatherers. Oishi and Hayashi (2014) have noticed both the influx of outdoor discos as a replacement for polyphonic rituals, and the ‘commoditization of the Baka labour force’ further afield in Cameroon (Oishi & Hayashi 2014:145). In Assoumindele, rituals that lack the socially binding activity of polyphonic music-making also lack the cooperative and egalitarian spirit of polyphonic rituals.

Commercial mores have also become mixed into Baka rituals, in the form of status symbols from the emerging nightclub scene, for example the flashy hip hop clothes, sunglasses, and (slightly) more prestigious brands of liquor for the emerging Baka elite who can afford them. These new infusions indicate that some of the force of ritual flow is being diverted away from creating egalitarian cohesion towards providing an outlet for competition and conspicuous consumerism. For example, at an Ejengi ritual performance in Assoumindele, a young Baka man from the village asked me for a little money to buy alcohol sachets for himself and his cohorts. I gave him 1,000 francs (CFA), which would have been enough to purchase ten double tot sachets of liquor, the standard drink on such occasions. I then observed that he did not buy sachets to share among the other young men of his household but spent the entire amount on a beer from the village shop, a prestige item not generally affordable to locals (passing truck drivers are the target market).

Many Baka villagers have a severe problem with alcoholism, a problem that intensified with the opening of the road. This is partly because the local economy has become rapidly monetised (see Köhler 2005, Kitanishi 2006 and Oishi 2012 for descriptions of how cash is expended in order to purchase alcoholic drinks and consumer goods by Baka people in other places). The road has brought an influx of small-scale entrepreneurs, who pay Baka individuals for bushmeat, ivory and artisanal gold. The entrepreneurs go on to sell these at a profit in the capital of Yaoundé. The same entrepreneurs have brought cheap
alcohol into the region for sale to local people. This low-quality industrially manufactured alcohol with artificial additives is sold in 50ml volume plastic sachets. A sachet will sell in village stalls or at ritual events for 100 CFA each (about thirteen pence sterling). The Baka villagers now have easy access to large quantities of very cheap alcohol.

Cheap liquor compounds already existing problems of alcohol addiction, as the Baka have long obtained high-proof distilled spirits from their Njem neighbours in exchange for labour (effectively locking alcoholic Baka into relationships of servility and dependency). Alcohol is often sold on credit, setting up fraught relationships of indebtedness between Baka individuals and merchants. In frontier situations, the use of alcohol as a form of dominion or imperialist violence to seduce and subjugate a marginalised group or indigenous peoples is well documented (see for example Levine 1987; Langton 1993; McKnight 2002; Lewis 2002:224–227; Samson 2003). While Douglas (1987:3) observes that anthropologists prefer the notion that anomie leads to alcoholism over the notion that alcohol leads to anomie, the Assoumindele case shows that there is some interaction between these factors. Widespread alcoholism has been created by a combination of changing cultural values, anxiety surrounding these changes, and the increased availability of cheap alcohol.

The arrival of the new road in Assoumindele has effectively set up a new frontier situation in which alcohol has aggravated relationships of inequality between the two local ethnic groups, and between locals and newcomers, as illustrated in the tensions between Baka and Njem on the occasion of Sawa's commemoration. Oishi and Hayashi (2014) have documented how alcohol has become part of the village way of life for Baka in the East Region, and they argue more generally that the consumption of large amounts of alcohol at dancing rituals is a recent development. The Assoumindele Baka are aware of the social problems created by alcohol, and they interpret its pernicious effects in terms of a structural violence done to them. The following are excerpts from what some of my Baka interlocutors at Assoumindele had to say about the impact of alcohol brought about by the road:

When the road was opened, those who sell liquor started coming round here. They came in numbers. When the Baka saw liquor...the Baka introduced themselves to it then. We Baka have to drink that liquor. That’s all I have to say. (DD)

It’s since the road opened that alcohol came to destroy our lives. If the Baka had drunk liquor in the past, they would be just like the Bantu today. If the Baka don’t progress now, it’s because of liquor. The money the Baka receive gets used up on drink. The money you receive gets used up on drink. We need to leave this
drink alone because it has come to destroy the village and destroy the world. We’ve been crying because of the road. We live in poverty here in the forest. (BJ)

...that liquor divides the family. Let’s talk about the history of alcohol. We say that alcohol is bad. But from whom does alcohol come? From the Whites and the Blacks. Previously, they were the ones who came with alcohol and now it has come to break up the family. (MS)

The newly intensified problem of alcoholism, along with the influence of the boîte, means that ritual flow is sometimes diverted to accommodate heavy drinking sessions, drunken forays and consequent discordance. Njem individuals also frequent ritual occasions held in the Baka quarter of Assoumindele, often in order to sell alcohol sachets and bonbons to the Baka participants. The (sometimes uninvited) involvement of the Njem at Baka ritual occasions is potentially disruptive because of the ethnic tension that exists between the two communities in conjunction with the excessive alcohol consumption that is itself predicated on exploitative alcohol-driven relationships, as was the case at Sawa’s commemoration ceremony. This tension appears to be diluting the potential of ritual to facilitate solidarity and positive identity-making processes among the Baka. Collectively the Baka villagers show signs of a challenged sense of ethnic identity due to discriminatory attitudes to their partially egalitarian hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Discriminatory attitudes place unprecedented pressure on the Baka to conform to the dominant national ideology of social stratification and status-seeking behaviour.

Alcohol-instilled violence often disturbs the ordered flow of a ritual event, as an outbreak of chaotic brawling ensues. This is probably not unique to Assoumindele. Susanne Fürniss (2008) observed an incident in which one drunkard almost caused the suspension of a bèkà circumcision ritual among the Baka of Messéa. The scale of disruption may vary quite a lot in different scenarios, and may depend both on how much alcohol is available and existing social tensions.

Once people in Assoumindele are spurred to begin drinking excessively, this continues until the drinkers’ resources and energy have been exhausted. After days of mass drinking, the community is left in a state of despair. Some people are seriously ill, and others too weak to resume their work. Some have horrible injuries, most notably women who have been attacked by their husbands.

4. See, for example, Ngouanet et al (2008) on how status-seeking activities negatively impact on health in the West Highlands region of Cameroon, de Garine (1998) on how five different Cameroonian ethnicities use food and alcohol in status-seeking behaviours, and Friedman (1994) on how conspicuous consumerism of clothing is prominent in the practice of social differentiation in Central Africa.
Elderly women must work harder during these times to shoulder the burden of childcare, and children may go hungry because nobody has prepared food. The young are also traumatised by witnessing uncharacteristic violent behaviour from the older generations. Sometimes the desire to continue drinking more on such occasions leads to thefts of money or household items to sell. It is no accident that Baka terms for hard liquor are ngo na keke, meaning water of suffering, and ngo na yékà-yékà, meaning water of madness.

Alcoholic disruption has particularly mutative potential to the type of ritual activity performed by immediate-return societies insofar as this activity functions to maintain political equilibrium.5 Woodburn (2005) notices that in Hadza and Congo Basin hunter-gatherer societies, male and female cults make ‘attempts to build a simple gender hierarchy of ritual privileges’ (2005:26) within ritual life. Gender and age distinctions are more marked in ritual life than day-to-day secular life, and property rights held exclusively by initiated members of a gender cult are stressed in opposition to the minimisation of property rights in day-to-day life. Woodburn theorises that ritual potentiates the appropriation of power by men, that ‘we should see male ritual privilege as a weak point in the operation of immediate-return systems and a possible opening for one of the potential routes to delayed return’ (2005:27). This is precisely what a descent into violence by the Assoumindele community facilitates, due to the superior physical strength of men.

Ritual occasions can become a stage for machismo performances involving the physical domination of women. This phenomenon is marked within the Baka community when the ritual events involve the broader community. For example, after a Labour Day celebration held at Mbalam in 2011, most of the Assoumindele men arrived back home in the evening drunk and angry about the fact that the women had independently left the village to attend the festivities.6 The men had come under ridicule from a group of Njem men for not being able to control their wives.

Their collective masculinity slighted, the Baka men stoked up each other’s anger to the extent that immediately upon arriving back in Assoumindele, a number of domestic arguments began which quickly escalated into violence. There was general chaos and discord through the night, leaving the community in upheaval for several days afterwards. Three women were seriously injured. One had nine deep bite wounds, another had a torn ear and a large gash on her

5. See Lewis (2002, 2008); Turnbull (1978); Barnard (1980); Power and Watts (1997); Biesele (1993)
6. Throughout Cameroon, national holidays are important occasions which involve extensive festivities and the consumption of alcohol.
forehead, and the third – suffering from apparent concussion – was obliged to take refuge in my house with her infant until her irate husband was persuaded to leave on a hunting trip the following day.

During fieldwork conducted within the period of 1986 to 1995, Michelle Kisliuk (1998) became an apprentice of women’s dances among the Aka hunter-gatherers of the Central African Republic. She noted that when Aka people spent extended periods near a village, there was increased tension surrounding the women’s dances. In the village context, Aka men seem to have felt threatened by the assertion of female solidarity that these dances entailed.

Kisliuk describes the tension she witnessed as ‘distress performed’, and attributes the hostility displayed by the men to the blow felt to their male identities within the village context (caused by the influences of misogynistic and patriarchal village ideology, discrimination, modernity and social flux). For example, due to the diminishing role of hunting in village life and the inferior status that Aka men held in their increased dealings with non-Aka, the men felt emasculated and thus found the assertive women’s dances more threatening than in the traditional forest context, where the men felt more assured.

The Labour Day violence at Assoumindele can be seen as a full-blown version of performed distress relating to the challenged self-esteem and masculine identity of hunter-gather peoples in the village context of Equatorial Africa, a continuum first noticed by Kisliuk. For the Assoumindele Baka, the village context is their everyday reality, and forest life is only an occasional interlude. This possibly amplifies the levels of distress incurred as a result of undermined masculinity.

Another indicator of a ritual imbalance of power resulting from external patriarchal pressure is that male-conducted rituals, such as the Ejengi ceremony, are performed regularly, whereas women’s rituals such as Yeli are seldom performed.7 Within the context of the competitive and alcoholic aura of the village, cliques of opportunistic Baka men have realised the commercial potential of the Ejengi spirit play, which is recognised far and wide among non-Baka as a powerful curative ritual (this etic usage does not accord strictly with the Baka interpretation of the Ejengi ritual as one of thanksgiving). In the past, the Ejengi ritual was exclusively conducted by initiated Aka and Baka men, who possess the secret ritual knowledge required to summon a visitation to the community of the powerful male Ejengi spirit (Joiris 1996, 2013). But in

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7. When asked why Yeli is not performed, female informants replied that it is a thing of the past, or that women have become weak and/or negligent (wùbù). The purpose of Yeli is to aid men in the hunt, and as hunting has diminished as the primary economic activity of men, it follows that Yeli has diminished in tandem.
Assoumindele, men from other ethnicities can now become initiated into the Ejengi society in exchange for payment and alcoholic rewards. 8 I myself was offered the opportunity to become initiated into the Ejengi society, which is normally forbidden and dangerous to women.

It has been argued (Shaw 1979; Altman 1987) that alcohol-fuelled rituals serve as a levelling mechanism amongst Aboriginal Australians because they involve balanced reciprocity over long periods of time and prevent individuals from becoming too successful economically. However, David McKnight (2002) suggests that excessive violence associated with excessive drinking led to normal processes of control and ritualisation breaking down when Aboriginal Australians became disempowered.

In a similar vein, there is undoubtedly pressure on Baka individuals to spend newly earned cash on drinks for others, and it is an ostentatious way of displaying sharing behaviour, an effective means of displaying that money is shared to avoid accusations and envy. Alcoholic rituals are also a temporary release from the stresses of a rapidly changing world, and a psychological means of escaping the amplified inequality and disempowerment it has brought thus far to the Baka. Oishi and Hayashi (2014) argue that in the Moloundou District (East Region, Cameroon), Baka youths create outdoor discos instead of using ‘traditional practices of song and dance’ (2014:143) in their attempts to forge solidarity amidst drastic socioeconomic change. However they also note the ‘escalation of alcohol-related conflict after continuous co-drinking’ (2014:154).

According to the alcohol myopia model, a cognitive-physiological theory of psychology first developed by Steele and Josephs (1990), alcohol can reliably reduce anxiety and depression in drinkers, provided that a distracting activity is available. Alcohol also inflates the self-evaluation of drinkers. Both of these effects are due to impaired attention allocation, but the temporary relief they provide from psychological stress appeals to the Baka community of Assoumindele, who face challenging questions of social identity. The community looks forward to ritual occasions as a chance to escape from the gritty realities of everyday life, as they provide the opportunity to relax and have fun.

Anthropologists have long noticed that alcohol can create social communion through the suppression of inhibitions, that it aids the ability of people to ‘let go’ of their concerns for a brief period by creating an ideal world in which self-judgment and anxiety are suspended, and that it is a gatekeeper of inclusion and exclusion in social identity, often turned to by minority groups experiencing

8. This practice is widespread in logging towns too, according to Jerome Lewis (personal communication).
marginalisation (Yudkin 1978:4; Douglas 1987; de Garine 2001). Moreover, the ephemeral release that alcohol provides is in tune with an immediate-return ethos in which celebrating the abundances of the present is highly valued, and concerns about the future are minimised (Woodburn 1982a, 1982b). Given their circumstances, it is small wonder that many Baka individuals seek to alleviate their anxiety about the future and their identity within it through drinking and revelry.

The alcohol myopia model (Steele and Josephs 1990; Giancola et al 2010) holds that the attention-dulling properties of alcohol mean that attention is allocated to immediate, salient environmental cues at the expense of less salient cues causing extremes in social reaction, whether empathetic or aggressive. Thus, if cues in the ritual environment are those of communion and animation, such as sharing, joking, laughing, singing and dancing, the individual drinker is likely to join in with abandon. In fact, the model predicts that given an appropriate context in which inhibitory cues predominate, alcohol consumption can actually decrease aggression, below levels observed in sober individuals.

The downside of this is that a hostile or provocative cue is likely to be highly salient, and overpower less immediate and less salient cues (such as thoughts about the consequences of aggression). Alcohol thus has the capacity to provoke an aggressive Jekyll-to-Hyde reaction on the part of a drinker who may be predisposed for various reasons. The myopia model also indicates that alcohol’s attractive effects of self-inflation and relief are likely to reinforce addiction, especially when individuals are dealing with chronic inner conflicts (Steele and Josephs 1990; Giancola et al 2010). The Baka are experiencing severe discrimination based on derogatory stereotypes. Baka men are also experiencing a loss of the legitimate and positive identity that their role as hunters used to bring, which may be causing just such inner conflict for many Baka men. In addition, Baka adults frequently express their anxiety about modernity and their future within it.

In Assoumindele, boîte-styled events generally pass through the initial phases with plenty of bonhomie reaching a peak about midway through. As time goes by and people drink more, there is a gradual lessening of empathetic ambience and drinkers show signs of frayed tempers, clumsiness, boisterousness, as well as impulsive and inconsiderate behaviour. When a ritual event lapses in benevolent energy, individuals may display marked anger or aggression, paranoia and depression, depending on how heavily they have been drinking. At these moments, negative emotion, a cue which can precipitate alcoholic aggression according to the myopia model, may break through the otherwise distracting effects of ritual communion. For example, the two men at
Sawa’s commemoration began their fistfight when the benevolent ritual energy had slumped, and the violent cues from the fistfight were taken up rapidly by bystanders, leading to a generalised brawl.

The fervour of alcoholic individuals to keep drinking may undermine any camaraderie or solidarity that was gained at the start of a ritual drinking session. People are often left debilitated and depressed after such events, as was the case after Sawa’s commemoration. On another occasion during my fieldwork, the aftermath of a drunken ritual saw a Baka man attempt suicide at the smaller Baka village of Sai, after his wife fled from his abusive behaviour to find refuge with relatives in Assoumindele. Resentments caused by fighting are not easily dispelled, especially in a community that is no longer highly mobile and cannot practice the avoidance mechanism as easily as their previously mobile lifestyle would allow.

**Mechanisms of ritual diversion – ritual rebellion**

Alcoholic excess among the Baka of Assoumindele goes hand-in-hand with outbreaks of arguments, violence, and appropriated property during the course of ritual performances. This may simply be due to the prevalence of alcohol on such occasions. But, as argued by Max Gluckman (1954, 1963) ritual may have a cathartic effect, during which rebellions are staged and social tensions released. Rebellions can be observed in Baka rituals where individuals ostentatiously defy the egalitarian norms of the past, and experiment with new ideas and lifestyles. This rebellion may be an independent cause of discord, which is then provoked by alcohol. Violent ritual eruptions in Assoumindele do not seem to aid social harmony by serving as a standardised pressure valve to expunge tensions however. Rather, the effect in the community is experienced as an ongoing part of a transformative crisis during which the Baka experiment with the social aesthetics of capitalist consumption, which is how modernity is instantiated for them. The stark contrast between the new aesthetics and the former egalitarian ethos is what constitutes rebellion, leading to the shockwaves and moments of ordinary-life crisis so in evidence.

Gluckman originally conceived the cathartic effect as a conservative phenomenon that comes about through the simulation of revolutionary moments. These ‘rituals of rebellion’ (1954) uphold the status quo by defusing

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9. De Garine (2001:7) notes that the consumption of alcohol creates an atmosphere in which it is more permissible to challenge the social and political order, and Douglas (1987:11) that alcohol facilitates the performance of ritual’s task through the creation of a transient ideal world.
the potential energy from politically unequal relationships. But in a society undergoing rapid and stressful change, is ritual rebellion revolutionary rather than conservative?

In the case of Assoumindele, the Baka are transforming their rituals into an arena in which key aspects of the new market-connected world can be appropriated. These new forms may have an exploratory role in allowing the new to be compared with the old, so that individuals can gain first-hand experience with them. The boîte, with its mystically-generated music, flashing lights, and its abundance of sex, flirtation and drink, is the theatre in which mimetic performance takes place, one that mirrors an idealised modern world. Here the community can experiment with casting off old ways that no longer serve them well, and appropriating new ways of life from the milieu they now find themselves in, suffused as it is with the politics of differentiation.

In old-school spirit play performances, known as be for the Baka and massana for the Yaka, one mimes or mimics the thing one wants to hunt, appropriate or know (as described by Lewis 2009). Ritual mimicry is about establishing channels of communication with the object desired. The new process of mimetic performance is not dissimilar in this respect, but what is being learnt about here is how the new worldly protocols produce different emotional dispositions and enable novel types of relationship. What is desired is modernity. In the old-school performances, music is made to imitate the sounds of the forest and ensure that it provides abundantly, and by the same logic music made with modern sounds and equipment may be a way of ensuring that modernity opens itself up to the Baka, providing for them abundantly. The tensions created in playing with the clash between old and new can perhaps spark unexpected violence.

Clifford Geertz (1957) attributed ritual ‘failure’ at a Javanese funeral to psychological tension that resulted from discontinuity between a changing sociopolitical order and a more conservative cultural sphere of meaning. Geertz challenged functionalist models that emphasise the conservative role of ritual over its transformative potential, pointing out that the failed funeral occurred within the context of ordinary historical change not exceptional circumstances or anomie. The story of this Javanese funeral has clear parallels with Sawa’s commemoration ceremony in Assoumindele, as the ordinary course of mourning the dead was not followed in both examples.

Notwithstanding the everyday transformative potential of ritual noticed by Geertz, instances of ritual diversion in Assoumindele clearly have radical transformative potential, and the historical circumstances of their creation are indeed critical. Some of the Baka villagers talk of experiencing a time of
hardship (*tie na siti*), which is a gloss for generalised social crisis. This is borne of exceptionally rapid change, where they now perceive their former lifestyle as deficient, and complain about suffering and poverty, a complaint that appears to be relational in origin, aggravated by their degraded ethnic identity. Within this turbulent context, the tension-producing aspects of ritual sometimes seethe up into periods of social agitation, where violence and conflict are rife, and aided by alcohol’s myopic effect.

The idea that rebellion in ritual may be influenced by overall social stress has been developed by theorists studying politically unequal societies. Victor Turner modified Gluckman’s characterisation of the political potential of ritual, by coining the term *communitas* (1969, 1982). *Communitas* is an ephemeral experience of egalitarian solidarity, primarily constituted in ‘liminality and the ritual powers of the weak’ (1969:102). It is the result of a ritualised co-experience that aligns individuals as statusless and possessionless equals, contrasting with the hierarchical structure of temporal social life.

*Communitas* resembles the cathartic rituals of rebellion described by Gluckman, in that it involves ritualised occasions or subcultures where the everyday political order is turned upside down. Differing from Gluckman, Turner thought that the powers of the weak hold the capacity to transcend ritual, and that to the conservatives of hierarchy ‘all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions’ (1969:109).

Turner’s concept of *communitas* stands in a theoretically useful relationship to the ritual dialogue model, in which Finnegan (2013) argues that ritual is the fabric of egalitarian social structure. In prioritising the role of ritual, Finnegan perhaps does not give due weight to factors such as division of labour, sharing behaviour, mobility, access to lethal force, free individual access to resources, levelling mechanisms such as mockery, ethical constraints such as taboo, political jostling, conflict resolution and the influence of external sociopolitical models. By comparing Turner and Finnegan’s models however, we can see that, in hierarchical societies, rituals that contain a contrasting politics of equality abound, whereas in extremely equal societies, ritual contrasts with the quotidian political system in that the possibility of domination is encountered and overturned.

In the egalitarian ritual dialogue model, the repeated contest for power between men and women, which always evens out, is a form of political negotiation that normally has a conservative egalitarian outcome despite the potential for the emergence of inequality being explored. This implies that in extremely egalitarian societies, ritual rebellion favours explorations
of inequality, whereas in hierarchical societies it explores equality. As James Woodburn (2005) has noted of immediate-return political systems, they are societies of equals because inequality is actively resisted through institutional procedures, which constitute an extreme resolution to

the coexisting pressures for equality and for inequality which are present in the desires of every one of us as an individual and in the operation of the political systems, and indeed of the kinship systems and religious systems, of every human society. (22)

Expanding on the ideas of Gluckman and Turner, contemporary scholars have traced various permutations of the revolutionary or conservative potential of ritual in politically unequal societies. Susanne Schröter (2004) redresses what has been considered an imbalance in the ‘rituals of rebellion’ theory initially developed by Gluckman.10 She argues that in contextual situations of rapid social change, the ‘rebellious’ aspects of ritual are not always conservative but may upset the status quo beyond and outside of ritual time-space. For example, cargo cults in Melanesia tried to develop, through ritual, a system in which wealth would be equally distributed in order to restore the political imbalance created by colonialism. Her general point about ritual is that: ‘political rebellions can drift to mere rituals and ritual rebellions can reveal themselves to be more political than ceremonial’ (Schröter 2004: 54). Ritual analysis is crucial to understanding social and political rebellion for this reason because ritual is often focused on joining groups of people together in sharing intentions that produce coordinated and purposeful action, which may lead to a political outcome in quotidian life.

Similarly, historian Curtis Hutt (2012:35) argues for a ‘dissipative model of ritual system change’, in which rituals are seen as open and complex systems that may adapt in unexpected and nonlinear ways. Analysing striking changes in Jewish, Christian and Islamic pilgrimage in sites in Israel and the Occupied Territories over the last 100 years, he shows that they have undergone profound transformations, including ‘restructuring’, ‘birth’, ‘death’, and ‘failure’. During periods of abrupt change and conflict, material or political contextual factors may catalyse ritual alteration, which can itself be extremely destabilising to the status quo – causing conditions in which new beliefs, practices and leaders are likely to emerge.

The aforementioned theories all apply to societies where there is already an unequal political system in place, thus conservative ritual energy is assumed

10. See Teeffelen (1978) and Hutt (2012) for a critique of Gluckman’s theory on account of its incognisance of social and political transformations.
to sustain the hierarchical flow of power, and revolutionary ritual energy is seen as a kind of levelling device. But what happens when these situations are reversed, when an egalitarian system starts transforming into an economically and politically-differentiated one? What befalls the conservative ritual dynamic of inequality apprehension in a rapidly changing context like Assoumindele, where differences in status, power and wealth are emerging out of a recent history of immediate-return egalitarianism? Is it something close to subversive *communitas*, as described by Turner, or the conservative rebellion described by Gluckman?

Music-making is an element of ritual that enhances social bonding and relies on specialised cognitive functions. Jerome Lewis (2013), notes that music, through its aesthetic qualities, provides a resilient medium for ‘the way culture is held in human brains and transmitted down the generations’, and is ‘biased toward long-term interaction and cohesion of social groups’ (Lewis 2013:65). Following Widdess (2012), Lewis links this flexible semantic capacity of music with the ‘cultural foundational schemas’ described by cognitive anthropologists Maurice Bloch (1998) and Bradd Shore (1996).

It is likely that music, and the ritual activities that it facilitates, played a crucial role in the evolution of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism. Biological anthropologist Christopher Boehm (1993, 1999) coined the term ‘reverse dominance hierarchy’ to describe a system in which the communal majority collectively control would-be dominants or upstarts, while Erdal and Whiten (1994, 1996) use the term ‘counter-dominance’. Dor et al (2014), using Power’s (2009, 2014) sexual selection model of ritual, suggest that ritual and music were central to establishing the counter-dominance that allowed symbolic culture, and thus language, to evolve (a compelling multi-disciplinary argument beyond the scope of this essay). Lewis (2009, 2014) adds mimesis to the equation. Given that ritual co-experience in an egalitarian society may be geared towards maintaining the political order of ‘counter-dominance’, when there is ritual rebellion in a society transitioning towards the hierarchical dominance structures of the outside world, the logical (if counterintuitive) hypothesis is that the revolutionary ritual motion would swing in the direction of political inequality.

There does appear to be evidence of this in the context of Assoumindele, where the rebellious impulses bubbling up in ritual practices are not conducive to counter-dominance and equable communion but rather to differentiation,

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11. Boehm’s model is useful, but does not adequately address the centrality of gender equality in thorough-going ‘immediate-return’ egalitarianism.
status-seeking behaviour and gender conflict. However bubbles of rebellion, often alcohol-driven, work against the backdrop of more traditional rituals of equality, which have the tendency to seem mundane and lacklustre by comparison with boîte-styled events.

The night that I moved into the mudhouse the Baka community had built for me, a surprise party with a celebratory ritual was held outside my house. As it was situated far away from the road, at the border of village and forest, the ritual could be kept secret from the broader community. This ritual was unexpected by me, as a larger housewarming party that included the Njem had been held only a few days before (with unfortunate consequences). The surprise Baka ritual involved comic dance performances by male Mbouamboua spirits. The antics of the spirits, who wear baskets and leaves on their heads, are enjoyed by all. They dance, writhe around on the floor growling profanities, and exchange banter with the women. The polyphonic singing, drumming and dancing was vibrant up until around midnight, when a group of men approached me to ask for money to buy alcohol. Uncomfortable with this request, I decided to go to bed. The spirits then quickly departed and the village fell silent as people went home earlier than they would at boîte-styled events, which continue through the night.

Figure 4 The comic antics of Mbouamboua spirits
The changing character of ritual: a revolution of inequality

The socioeconomic impact of the new road and mine on the social world of the Baka community of Assoumindele has been sufficient in scale and rapidity to provide a case study illustrating how ritual can be transformed by socio-economic change. I have outlined why the alterations to ritual structure and performance are best theorised in terms of a positive feedback loop with social transformation towards less equal ways of living.

The theoretical model can be summarised as follows: a continuum of day-to-day social transformation leads to changes being explored experientially and mimetically in ritual spaces, resulting in the changing character of ritual (veering from sharing, polyphonic and harmonious to competitive, exclusive and discordant).

The case study suggests two mechanisms by which rapid socioeconomic upheaval in the area has led to the concomitant diversion of ritual flow, namely ritual infusion and ritual rebellion.

Rather than harmoniously consolidating the Baka community’s former ideals and levelling power relations, the new boîte-styled alcoholic events agitate society. They challenge the once-egalitarian order by allowing the rapid infiltration of practices inspired by paternalism, patriarchy, commercial values and hierarchical flows of power. Given that ritual co-experience in an egalitarian society may be geared towards maintaining the political order of counter-dominance, when there is ritual rebellion in a society transitioning towards the hierarchical dominance structures of the outside world, the logical (if counterintuitive) hypothesis is that the revolutionary ritual motion swings in the direction of political inequality. These various dynamics – catalysed by external factors – sporadically divert the character of ritual events from the creation of collective ‘effervescence’ (Durkheim 1915:157–158, 163–164, 283–284) towards competitive pandemonium, potentially leading to more gradual, but also more permanent, change. However, discordant events may exist alongside events involving resilient cultural elements (eg, polyphonic music, ritualised sharing and the appearance of forest spirits), which emphasise social continuity and an egalitarian cosmology.
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