

The evidence of proximity

Tattoo practices of the Baka in southeastern Cameroon

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Abstract: this article focuses on ‘*tele*’, the traditional tattoo practice of the Baka huntergatherers. an analysis of data collected from 1134 participants from the East region of cameroon shows that there is little correlation between *tele* styles and social attributes such as clan, residence, or social position. the extemporaneity of the *tele* practice in terms of flexibility of design and purpose reflects the nature of egalitarianism among the Baka. tattoo styles are, however, correlated with kinship relations between the tattooist and the recipient of the tattoo. *Tele* are interpreted as the visual evidence of close individual relations and as a means of fine-tuning co-residence in small groups.

Keywords: tattoo, Baka Pygmies, relationship, proximity, fluidity

1. Introduction

Tattoo practices of indigenous peoples, especially among hunter-gatherers, are usually thought to be markers associated with ‘rites’, ‘the sacred’, ‘social status’, or ‘identity’. For example, among the Kalinga in north Luzon Philippines, the art of tattoo *batok* is an important practice in rites of passage, for their social status and identity (Salvador-Amores 2002). Among the Gw/i Bushmen, women’s tattoos are made using a specific plant and by a specific relative, as the important mark of their passage and marriage (Silberbauer 1963). The tattoo of the New Zealand Maori, the *ta moko* pattern, has its own story and only Maori people can wear these tattoos (Hata 2014). Tattoos and piercings among the Alaskan Aleut are considered to protect their physical bodies from the maritime environment (Krutak 2008). In each of these communities, the practice of body modification, including tattooing, carries significant social meaning for the wearer and observer.

In the case of the Pygmy hunter-gatherer groups in the African equatorial forest, bloodletting scars are the most common bodily modification in their daily life. They use specific plants for the treatment of the cuts to cure certain illnesses or to make a wish come true. We can read the history of illnesses and wishes from these scars and understand the threats they faced in forest life (Sato 2005). Moreover, we can also learn about their diverse utilisation of forest resources, which is linked to their bodies and relationships with others and nature (Hattori 2006).

Some researchers have also included tooth modification with tattooing (or scarification) as related practices among some Pygmy groups. Vallois and Maquer (1976:140–146) undertook a statistical analysis of tattoo and tooth pointing/filing among the Baka in Cameroon, and interpreted the symbolic meaning of each tattoo pattern. However, their sample size was small and most of their informants were male. Walker and Hewlett (1988), by contrast, produced a much larger analysis of modification that included Pygmies (Aka, Efe, Mbuti) and Bantu-speaking communities (Bira and Nande). They suggested that the differing tooth modification styles between them helped maintain ethnic group boundaries. They noted continuance of tooth modifying among the Pygmy groups, in contrast to its abandonment among their Bantu neighbours, suggesting that continuity could reflect a desire of the Pygmy communities to maintain their ethnic identity. Tattooing and tooth modification have also been mentioned as markers of Pygmy identity in subsequent research. Lewis (2002:63–65) indicated that for the Tua Yaka people to choose to be tattooed and have their teeth sharpened to points as markers of being Yaka, and for distinguishing themselves from neighbouring Bilo farmers. Similarly, Hewlett and Hewlett (2012:88–89) argued that tooth pointing

is the way for Aka adolescents to establish their self-identity as an adult, and make distinct their social identity from their farmer neighbours.

In my own research on the Baka in southeastern Cameroon, I have found six forms of body modification: bloodletting, men's circumcision (*beka*), sharpening of front teeth (*sange*), piercing (*yuku*), branding (*batabata*) and tattooing (*tele*). Among adolescents tattooing behaviour strongly reflected their vision of themselves as sexually mature adults and contributors to the group's well-being (Peng forthcoming). There are in general multiple purposes fulfilled by scarification and tattooing among Pygmy hunter-gatherers, including decoration, medication, ritual and social identification. These uses also sometimes overlapped among the Baka themselves. As Kroeber (1901:335) said in his work on the decorative symbolism of the Arapaho, 'In reality, ethnic phenomena do not exist separately: they have their being only in a culture. Much less can the causative forces of the human mind, the activities or tendencies, be truly isolated.' This may hold true more generally and we should not consider the phenomenon of tattooing among Pygmies as having only one purpose or meaning. More studies are needed to clarify the correlation between the social identity that tattoos represent and the purposes of beautifying or healing the body. Turner (2012 [1980]:487) remarked that bodily decoration could constitute the cultural medium that is 'most specialized in the shaping and communication of personal and social identity'. This article examines the proposition that the *tele* practice among the Baka is related to an individual's personal and social identity. Quantitative statistics are presented from a survey undertaken among the Baka, followed by an analysis of the social contexts of the practice to assess its associations and possible uses.

2. Research method and study area

The first period of fieldwork in southeastern Cameroon took place from August to December 2010, with the focus on learning the Baka's language and their daily life. The tattoo on the Baka women's face (as Figure 2 shows) interested me because they explained that these lines are for 'fashion' (*nyanga*). Living in S village with a low language level, I decided to observe the performance of their tattoo and other body modifications, recording these activities, techniques used (see Section 6) and the social status of the participants. By the end of this fieldwork, my language ability had improved and I was given a Baka clan affiliation by my host family. A second field season was undertaken from July to December in 2011. I stayed with my Baka family in their gathering camp in the forest for a month. In September 2011, I went to visit 85 Baka camps in the Eastern Region of Cameroon, and gathered 1134 Baka individuals' data about their body modifications for statistical analysis. I had hired two Baka for one week for guiding me along the route, but I undertook all the interviews. After my guides returned home, I hired a bike taxi driver to continue my wide area research. During this month of interviews and conversing with my Baka informants in their language, my language ability had improved greatly to the extent of being able to understand about 70 per cent of the content of our conversations. The interviews produced much information about body modifications, including information on gender, age, clan and pictures of body modifications. These data are discussed below. By the start of October 2011, I ended my area research, and returned to my village, S village, to continue observations until December 2011. I spent most of my time with Baka women and children; followed them all the day, watching their activities and listening to their gossip, sometimes joining their talks. A third period of fieldwork was undertaken from August to September of 2013. I had an opportunity to visit and stay at another camp of my Baka brother. In 2014, I had one month more in the field with my Baka family from August to September where I joined their camp, and foraged with them.

On the other hand, in August of 2013 and 2014, I joined a Japanese project of study on the Baka's social learning as a research assistance and translator (ie Baka language and Japanese). I spent about one week in each research period to help other Japanese researchers. That work gave me an opportunity to meet and talk with another Baka group around Lomie town region, which is about 200 km from S village.

As shown in Figure 1, the camps visited over these phases of fieldwork were divided into five areas, based on the major ethnic groups of local farmers. The Bangando area is located near an arterial road, with easy connections to a large town with a school,

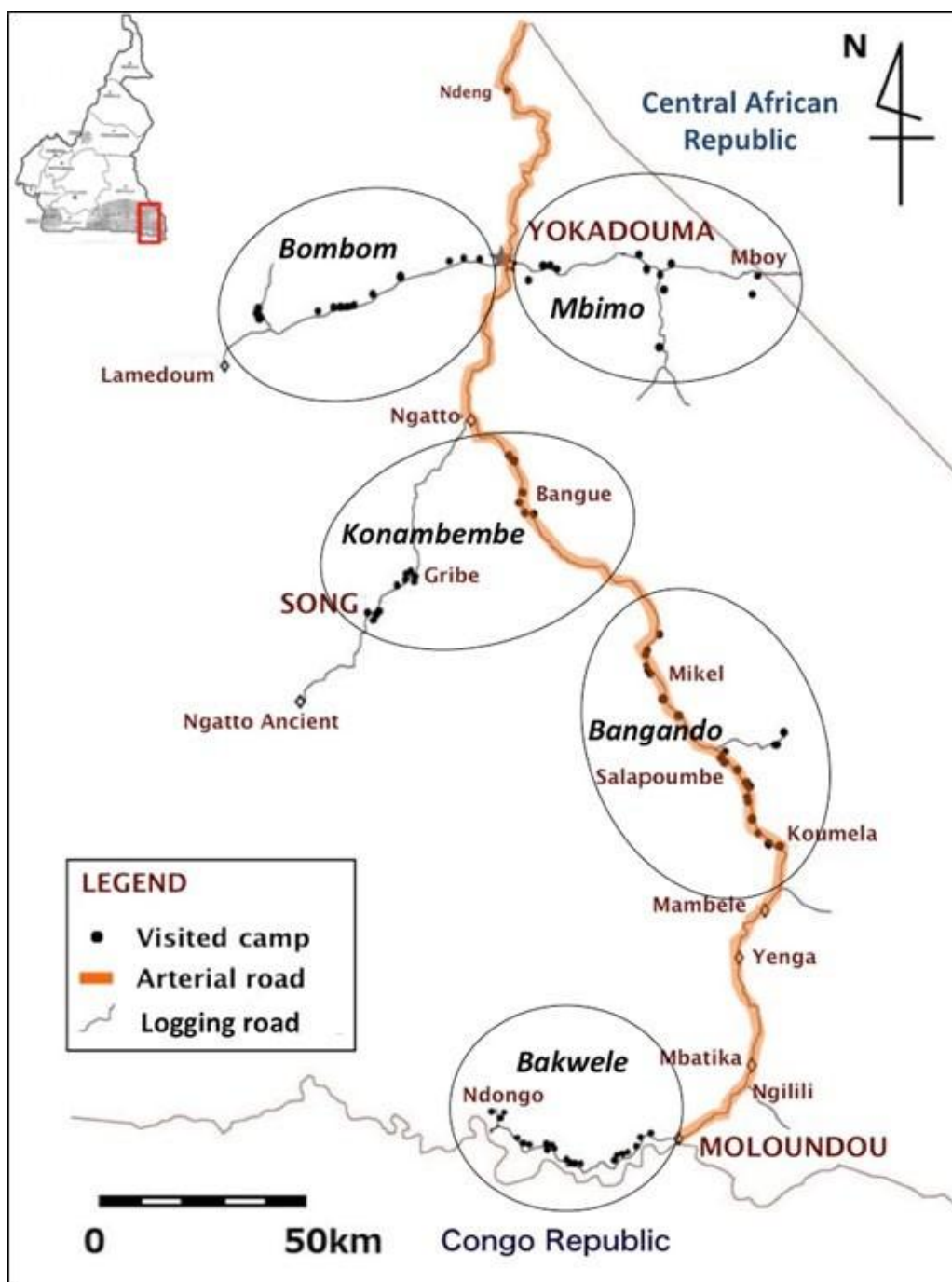


Figure 1 visit area and major ethnic group of neighboring farmer



Figure 2 a Baka woman's face: the newer *tele* covers an older one

church and hospital. The Bakwele area is located along the border between Cameroon and the Congo Republic, which has become a bustling area with the migration of merchants since the 1990s. The Bombom area and Mbimo area are at a distance from Yokadouma, a large town in eastern Cameroon, where road access is not as convenient as in the Bakwele area. The Konambembe area is also some distance from a large town, but the logging company improved the road in 2012, and it has become busier. I spent 12 months in S village, located in the northern edge of Boumba-Bek National Park to collect qualitative data, including recording the daily life of the local people, including the Baka and the farmer Konambembe. Generally, the Baka also farm but only for consumption, whereas the Konambembe occasionally also enter the forest for hunting or gathering.

3. People, residence pattern and a fluid life among the Baka

It is necessary to know the Baka's residence pattern and mobility in order to determine the environment of their tattoo practice and understand how the surrounding people are related to the tattoo practice. Other research has reported the Pygmies' residence and mobility. Terashima (1985) demonstrated the variation and composition of the Mbuti Pygmies' residence patterns. He indicated that the residence of Mbuti does not follow the typical patrilocal band model, but is strongly influenced by the symbiotic relationship with neighbouring farmers. Similarly, with a large dataset from the Bamgombi (Baka) and the Efe (Mbuti), Pedersen & Waehle (1988) argued that the patrification of African Pygmies forms the important framework of residence choice, where their actual organisation is strongly correlated to the neighbouring agriculturalists. However, they did not show the qualitative data for this. Moreover, demographic statistical analysis indicated that the Baka do not migrate easily although their mobility patterns showed resilience and flexibility (Kretsinger & Hardin 2003). Focusing on individual travel, Hewlett et al (1982) provided data on the Aka's travelling distance and their purpose of travel, and estimated that travelling distance is correlated to an individual's age, sex and travel purpose. MacDonald & Hewlett (1999) did further intracultural research on huntergatherers' mobility by focusing on their reproductive interests. They identified three levels of mobility: most frequent annual travel, travel with a temporary residence and exploration with high risk. They emphasised that an individual's mobility is territorial and overlapped other individuals' regions and cultures. They also stressed that the cultural categories of kinship terminology and marriage rules could influence their reproductive decisions and the distance they might travel. However, they did not have data to evaluate this proposition in depth. These previous studies were concerned primarily with residence or mobility (ie travel), and demonstrated the patterns of residence or movement, the travelling distance and purpose, but we lack data on the aspect of residence in mobile life, namely the stay or residential pattern in the context of high mobility. I will present these data here based on my own fieldwork.

3.1 Descent and residence

Every Baka has his or her own clan, which is called ‘*ye*’ in the Baka language. ‘*Ye*’ originates from their ancestors in the old myths and is inherited from his or her father. Thus the ‘*ye*’ could be considered the demonstration of patrilineal descent. It provides an important identity for the Baka. Sometimes I found a Baka had forgotten another Baka’s name, but he or she would never forget the *ye* of that Baka, once they have a relationship with each other.

While visiting them in the East Region of Cameroon, I found 27 sorts of *ye* from my informants.¹ As Chart 1 shows clearly, six *ye* encompass the majority of participants in the East Region: *ye-Ndumu*, *ye-Likemba*, *ye-Mombito*, *ye-Makombo*, *ye-Njembe* and *ye-Silo*. *Ye-Ndumu* and *ye-Likemba* stand apart as the largest clans. The concept of *ye* is important in Baka society as the basis of their marriage, kinship and residence. The demographic composition of each camp is reflected by the fact that a specific *ye* forms the majority in each camp. Usually a man builds a camp then becomes the chief of this camp (*kukuma*). However, this man does not have absolute authority but a relatively bigger voice in the camp’s affairs. Relatives of that man are resident in or around this camp and therefore his *ye* becomes the majority in that camp. However, marrying a person who has the same *ye* as his or her parents, or sometimes even grandparents, is strictly forbidden in Baka society. The demographic composition of a camp, after all, is clan-mixed, even if a certain clan has demographic dominance.

3.2 Fluidity and residence

About 33 per cent of Baka informants were not at their birthplace when interviewed in the Eastern Province of Cameroon in September 2011. This includes people absent due to permanent emigration, temporary visits to relatives, and for wage labour. Permanent immigration of an individual is usually caused by marriage, whereas immigration of a whole camp could be caused by a death, conflict with neighbours, and so on. The reasons for a temporary stay are not strictly differentiated and often were based on personal preferences and convenience, such as staying with a relative during employment periods. As mentioned, Baka residence is basically based on their clan (*ye*) and kinship. This preference is also represented by their choice of places to stay during travel.

A young Baka couple walked with me as guides for five days while I was travelling in the Bakwele area, along the border between Cameroon and the Congo Republic. They helped me to find Baka camps in the area and places to sleep at night with the exception of the last night when we stayed in a hotel that I had booked in the town. Otherwise, we all slept in Baka houses every night. The Baka hosts were the relatives

¹ For various reasons, about a hundred individuals did not tell me about their *ye*, and interviews were not forced.

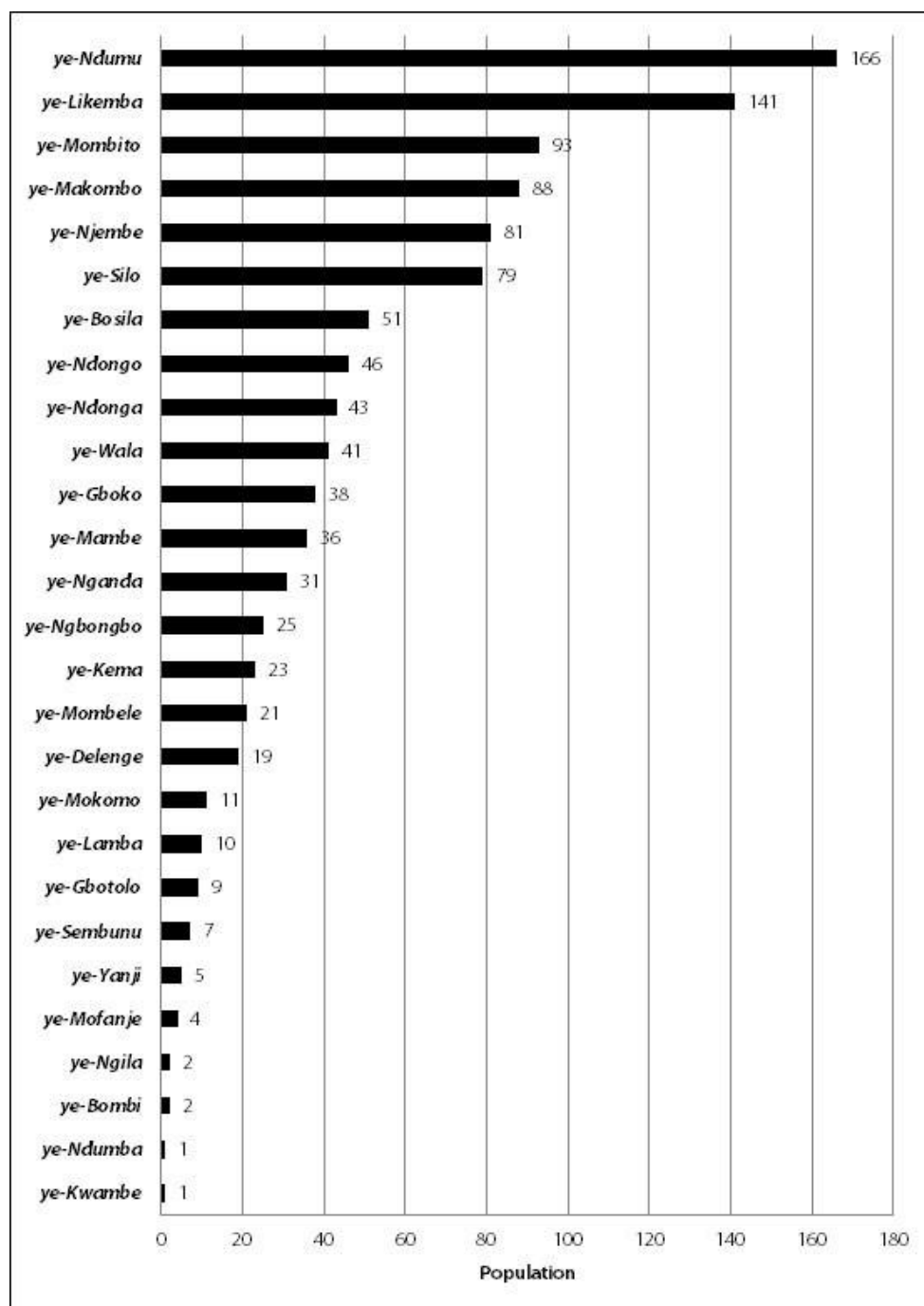


Chart 1 distribution of the Baka's *ye* (clan) (N=1070)

of the young husband or wife, such as grandparent, sibling, or parent's sister or brother. There were some little local hotels built by local farmers, but they recommended that I stay with them in their relative's house because 'we will sleep well'.

Members of L camp, my key fieldwork camp, changed six times in only three weeks in the forest in 2014 and are documented as follows: (1) two women visited this camp because their relative lost her husband; (2) a girl came from her parents' camp and stayed at her grandmother's for one week; (3) her father came there later then took her back to his camp in the forest; (4) a man left this camp with his little daughter, later his older sister started using his house; (5) two farmers came there asking for forest products and lived in a Baka woman's hut; and (6) this Baka woman went to stay in her parents' hut, then went back to her hut when they left.

On the other hand, when a Baka does not have any relative at his or her destination, they like to stay with the person who invited them to visit. A girl stayed with her brother's wife during her first visit to L camp in 2013, the birthplace of her brother's wife. In 2014, two Baka men came to S village from another village about 200 km away. The farmer of S village asked them come to gather forest products. They explained that they could only stay in the house of that farmer.

My field research on the Baka's residence and their descent shows a similar result to Pedersen & Waehle's research (1988), which implies that the Baka did not change their residence pattern during the past 30 years. The Baka residence pattern might be similar to the Mbuti, as Terashima (1985) demonstrated. However, the Baka's residence fluidity and their temporary stay pattern during travel could be with the closest kin, especially based on 'parent-offspring' relations, when the destination is a well-known place for them, or with the person who takes them to where they have never been before. The most common stay patterns at a well-known place could be based on relationship, such as 'parent-offspring', 'grandparent-offspring'. From a Baka viewpoint, however, siblings of a parent or grandparent have a similar linguistic description, so this kin is also included.

4. The styles of tele

4.1 The nameless designs and the identity of the Baka

Decorative body modifications of the Baka, including tattoo (*tele*), sharpened front teeth (*sange*), piercing (*yuku*) and branding (*batabata*), are not practised by force or as a special event, they are practised for fashion (*nyanga*) or pleasure, as explained by the Baka themselves. Front-tooth sharpening is initiated by an old man with a sharp knife and participants can be of any sex or generation. The main criterion for undertaking tooth sharpening is the participants' willingness to do so (Peng forthcoming).

Their tattoo patterns are quite simple, and the detail of how they are carved (using razor blades) is described in Section 6. There are two sorts of tattoo, one is called '*tele*', consisting of 1–2 geometric patterns, like short lines or small squares, and is the focus of this research because of its association with the Baka. The other tattoo is called '*tele na kaka*', and also has association with the Baka and means 'tattoo of villager'. The Baka and their neighbours, Bantuspeaking farmers and Hausa merchants, regard *tele* as part of the Baka culture. The '*tele na kaka*' has obvious figurative motifs and names, like leaf, scorpion, snake, or fish. It is not considered a Baka tattoo both by the neighbouring people and the Baka themselves.

The meanings of the term '*tele*' are line, tattoo and scar (Brisson 2010). The Baka in my research area do use the term '*ka*' to refer to the scar. According to further interviews on patterns and styles of this tattoo, Baka do not have a specific name for pattern or style, but only use 'line' (*tele*) or 'square' (*bobo*) to describe them. Sometimes those styles are placed everywhere on their face, and look like they were designed without paying attention to others already there. For instance, some women have newer *tele* covering a faded old *tele* (see Figure 2). It is easy to learn from interviews how each design had been done and the steps involved. Every Baka could tell their own experiences of receiving *tele* (described later), though some *tele* are not of a clear black colour and are hard to find. The Baka could remember all of them but did not notice that some of them had already faded. By contrast to the barkcloth of the Mbuti (Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza 1991), the patterns for constructing *tele* of the Baka have extremely low variety (eg, only two named patterns). Their meanings have no correlation with the forest, whereas the Mbuti's barkcloth includes about 14 patterns of forest or nature (out of 18; Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza 1991:5).

Figure 3 shows the ten styles of *tele* I categorised from counts and the *tele* they actually received from different practices. These styles were drafted symmetrically by me, but in fact, sometimes they are carved not in a symmetrical way, or were only tattooed on one side of the face. Short black lines were carved along these drafts, represented by the red lines in Figure 3, and consist of a certain style. It is a rough method of categorisation, but provides an image of the *tele* styles. They also have the essential features of Baka *tele* practice; composition of a style of *tele*, and of the preference for consistent lines for one practice.

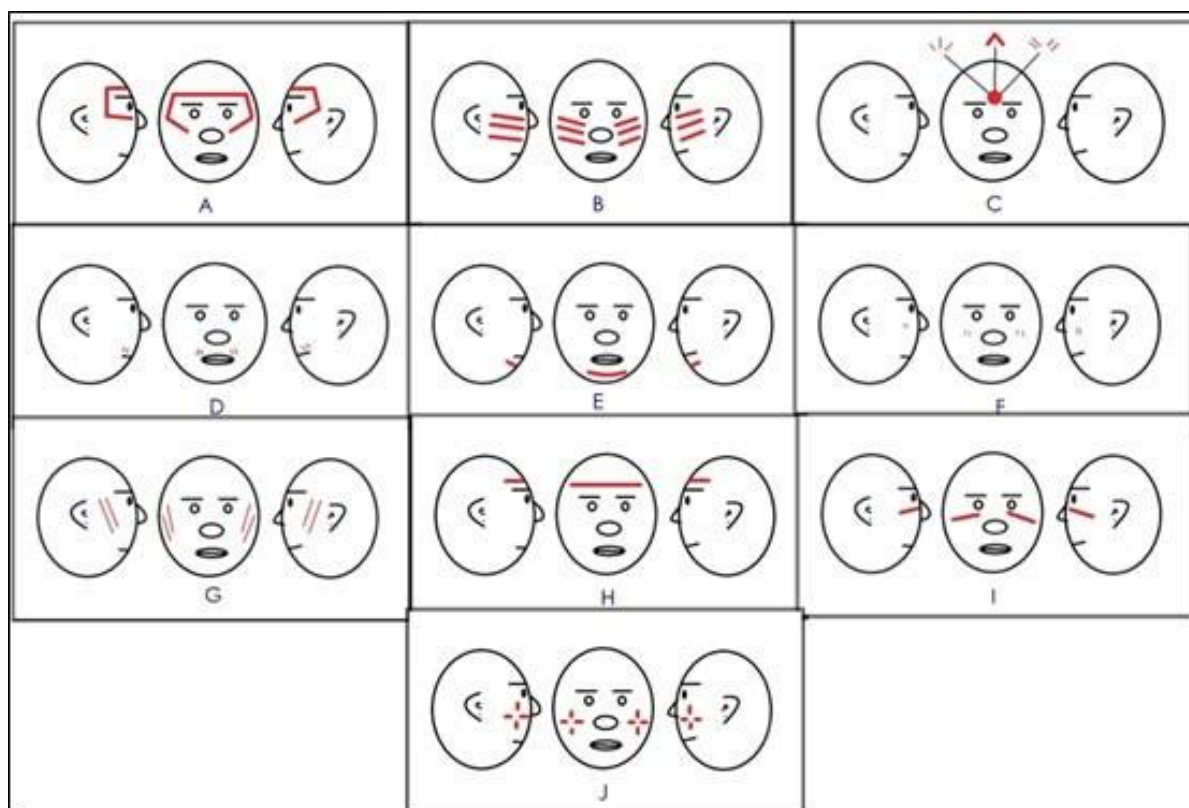


Figure 3 categorised styles of *tele*

4.2 Social identity and tele style

4.2.1 Sex

Baka's *tele* could be found on their faces, arms, abdomens, chests, lower backs and legs. However, the most popular part of body tattooing, as Chart 2 shows, is the face, particularly the cheeks. The population of tattooed men is 463 of which 119 (25.7%) had their cheeks tattooed. Of the 671 tattooed Baka women, about 466 individuals

(69.4%) had their cheeks tattooed. *Tele* on other parts of the face also showed higher proportions among the women compared with the men. In general, other parts of the body were less likely to be tattooed in both sexes, with their having no tattoos on their bodies, whereas about 20 per cent of women had their arms or abdomen tattooed. Few women had tattoos on the chest, lower back and legs. In particular, most young women do not have *tele* on their bodies, ‘because [they are] afraid of pain’ (*awa a pe keke*). Men received simple styles of *tele*. I found the *tele* style C was used on men’s foreheads, which is the style between the eyebrows. *Tele* on men’s cheeks are commonly styles F and I, whereas women prefer to have more varied styles on their face, such as style A, B, or J (Figure 3). Both men and women regard *tele* as women’s fashion (*nyanga na wose*) when they were asked, Why do Baka men not tattoo?, despite the fact that many men had face tattoos.

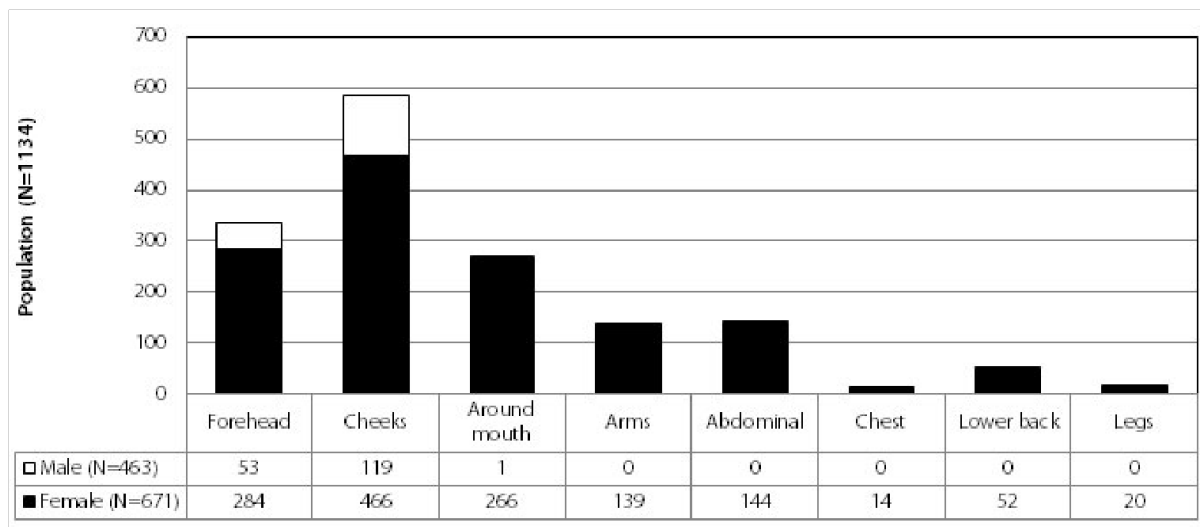


Chart 2 *Tele* on each part of body among the Baka

On the other hand, most of the male informants showed me their ‘*ma na waiya*’ (medicine of trap) on the palm, arm, or forehead. They were saying that this is the scar (*ka*) for the man (or hunter) (Peng forthcoming), but it is not the *tele*. I had once observed the performance of *ma na waiya*. Men were holding their spears or shotgun (only one), letting their wife or parent carve their palm, and rub the soot of a specific plant into bleeding scars. After the practice, they all went to the forest for hunting. Thus, *tele* and *ma na waiya* are for different purposes; initiated by a different gender: *tele* is for fashion (*nyanga*), and mainly for women, but *ma na waiya* is for hunting, and only for the men.

4.2.2 Other social identities

Age groups

The frequencies of *tele* styles in each age group show the gap between generations of the Baka (Table 1). Because the *kobo* (adult) generation includes those from approximately 20s to 60s, so I divided them into three groups for analysis. The *kobo* generation has the highest frequency of *tele* tattoos. But distributions of each *tele* style in each age group do not give a clear correlation between age and *tele* style. From *yande* to the older *kobo* (50s–60s), type E and F have the highest frequency over other styles. However, in the case of *gbékwà* (over 70s) they do not remember their experiences of tattooing as clearly as other generations,¹ and *tele* on their skin is difficult to find. It could be suggested that the Baka take their time to receive *tele* from their childhood to adulthood, or the younger generation is not practising *tele* as much as in the previous generations. On the other hand, over 95 per cent of adult informants had explained that they usually practice *tele* from *yande* to younger *kobo* (20s). Thus, it is assumed that the amount of *tele* on the Baka individual's body would increase while they are young adults and then stop increasing around the 30s. However, it is difficult to see any pattern in these data of an association of a specific *tele* style with a particular age group.

Table 1 Distributions of tele styles for each age group

¹ Most elders' explanation of their *tele* are '*maa o te dadi*' ('I have had many'), or '*maa nde te teleo, awa wo gbingi te nyanga-le*' ('I don't have *tele*, because they and my fashion have died'). But they rarely tell the detail of tattoo practices like other generations.

Age groups	Number	Frequency of each style	Totals									
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	
<i>Yandé</i> (5–10)	10	2	1	0	2	11	1	1	5	0	23	
<i>Sia/wanjo</i> (11–19)	113	1	2	8	1	6	28 4	5 17	2	74		
<i>Kobo</i> (20s)	255	75	43	96	54	167	290	70	65	1172		
<i>Kobo</i> (30s–40s)	338	47	56	99	69	118	151 185	161 138		1122		
<i>Kobo</i> (50s–60s)	232	60	118	145	99	79	106 118	106 129	65	1025		
<i>Gbékwé</i> (70s–)	115	6	10	14	1	2	6 9	11 13	6	78		

Descent

In general, there are 12 types of kinship terms and one term which refers to ‘friendship’ among the Baka (Table 2).² However, the terms for describing kinship vary. For instance, the word ‘*nana*’ (mom) is used to address the mother, and ‘*baba*’ (dad) to address the father. For the grandparents, Baka might say ‘*nana a gbengbe*’ (big mom) or ‘*baba a gbengbe*’ (big dad), instead of ‘*tita*’ (grandmother/grandfather). There are two ways of addressing the sister or brother, ‘*gbeba / tadi*’ or ‘*la nyua*’. Moreover, Baka would use varied phrases to explain more distant relatives in their daily life, but the basic categories of the kinship are limited, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Terms of kinship and friendship in Baka language

² Table 2 is made based on my interviews and observations of Baka daily life in the East Region of Cameroon, and is referenced by Brisson and Boursier’s dictionary of Baka–French. However, because the utilisations of terms are not the same across areas, meanings of a term are not used in some areas exactly as shown in the dictionary. Moreover, this table only includes the most common sorts of kinship within the area I visited.

	Baka	English
1	<i>nyùà-</i>	father, sometimes father's brothers or person who has the same clan to father
2	<i>nyúa-</i>	mother, sometimes mother's sister or person who has the same clan to mother
3	<i>gbébà-</i>	older sibling (the same sex)
4	<i>tàdì-</i>	younger sibling (the same sex)
5	<i>là</i>	child, sometimes the child of the brother or sister of the actual parent
6	<i>wo-</i>	wife
7	<i>ko-</i>	husband
8	<i>kàa-</i>	1) mother's sister or father's sister; 2) spouse of father's sister
9	<i>títà-</i>	grandparent
10	<i>gí- / bèndè-</i>	spouse's sibling (the same sex)
11	<i>là nyùà-</i>	1) sibling; 2) cousin; 3) child of person who has the same clan to his or her father (the opposite sex)
12	<i>là nyúa-</i>	1) sibling; 2) cousin; 3) child of person who has the same clan to his or her mother (the opposite sex)
13	<i>bí- bo</i>	friend (human being)

There is a difficulty in finding a correlation between *tele* style and the clan (*ye*) of the Baka receiver. As indicated previously, one Baka would have experienced a tattoo more than once, and her or his received style is rarely only of one type. Two Baka within the same clan might have completely different styles of *tele*, although they are sisters. On the other hand, there is no evidence to demonstrate that a specific style of *tele* only could be carved by people from a specific clan. According to results from interviews and observation, not every Baka, particularly Baka women, has the skill to carve *tele*. Only 84 (7.4%) people were found to be skilled in this sample of 1134 individuals, which means on average that one camp has only one carver. According to

interviews and observation of their tattoo practice, Baka usually discuss a style of *tele* in the moment. Thus, there is no specialist or authority on their *tele*, to which they might visit for a specific style of *tele*. In addition, they may have been tattooed by different people. Consequently, it is suggested that there is no correlation between the style of a Baka's *tele* and their clan.

Received styles of *tele* do not show the effect of kinship. As observed in S village, women and girls would ask for similar styles of *tele* to each other. A girl from clan *ye-Ndumu* gave style I to her cousin within the same clan (the daughter of her father's younger brother, from clan of *ye-Ndumu*), whereas she received the same style from her mother (from clan *ye-Mombito*), and two years later she received it again from her other cousin from a different clan (the daughter of her father's older sister, from clan *ye-Likemba*).

Other affiliations

The Baka have other affiliations that were not based on their clan or age, but on associations of local residents (Rupp 2014). It should be noticed, however, that there are gaps between areas. In S village, I did not find any association among the Baka that the Baka could join. The Baka explained that there is no specific spirit (*me*) walking around S village, so they could not practice a spiritual dance and sing (*be*). In other areas I visited, the Baka never linked *tele* with either a specific spirit, spiritual dance, or an association of local residents. In addition, all instances of tattooing that I had observed were performed during the day, even though they generally dance and sing during the night (Tsuru 1998; Bundo 2001).

In contrast, while I was travelling throughout the Bakwele area in the East Region of Cameroon, I met some Bakwele men who had an arm scarred with a special pattern (see Figure 1). Unfortunately, I was not able to ask them about their scars, because it is only practised by male Bakwele and I was not allowed to ask about it as I am a female alien. This kind of scarification among Bakwele men, particularly its design, apparently shows a strong correlation with their affiliation or identity and this pattern warrants further research. The Baka of the same village told me they do not scar themselves like the Bakwele men, as among the Baka *tele* is considered a representation of beauty. This explanation confirmed that for at least some Baka, they regard *tele* as a marker of their identity as Baka.

Among the ten styles of *tele* (Figure 3), it is difficult to determine differences between areas and effects due to interaction with neighbouring farmers. As the map (Figure 1) shows, in each area visited, there is a dominant ethnic farmer group. They have strong economic and sociocultural relationships with the local Baka as long as they live there (Takeuchi 2014). Nowadays, the area is inhabited by many other groups, such as merchants, people of the Catholic Church and NGO and NPO institutions. Although the economic and social relationships between farmers and the Baka have changed, their interdependence is still strong (Hattori 2012; Takeuchi 2014).

Charts 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 show the distributions of ten styles of *tele* over the five areas. Because one individual usually does not have only one style of *tele*, the value

of N does mean either the total population of visit individuals or the population of tattooed individuals. The value of N indicates the frequency of *tele* styles, for example if one individual has both style A and B on her or his face then it would be counted as 2. Thus, the value of N is more than the population of tattooed individuals.

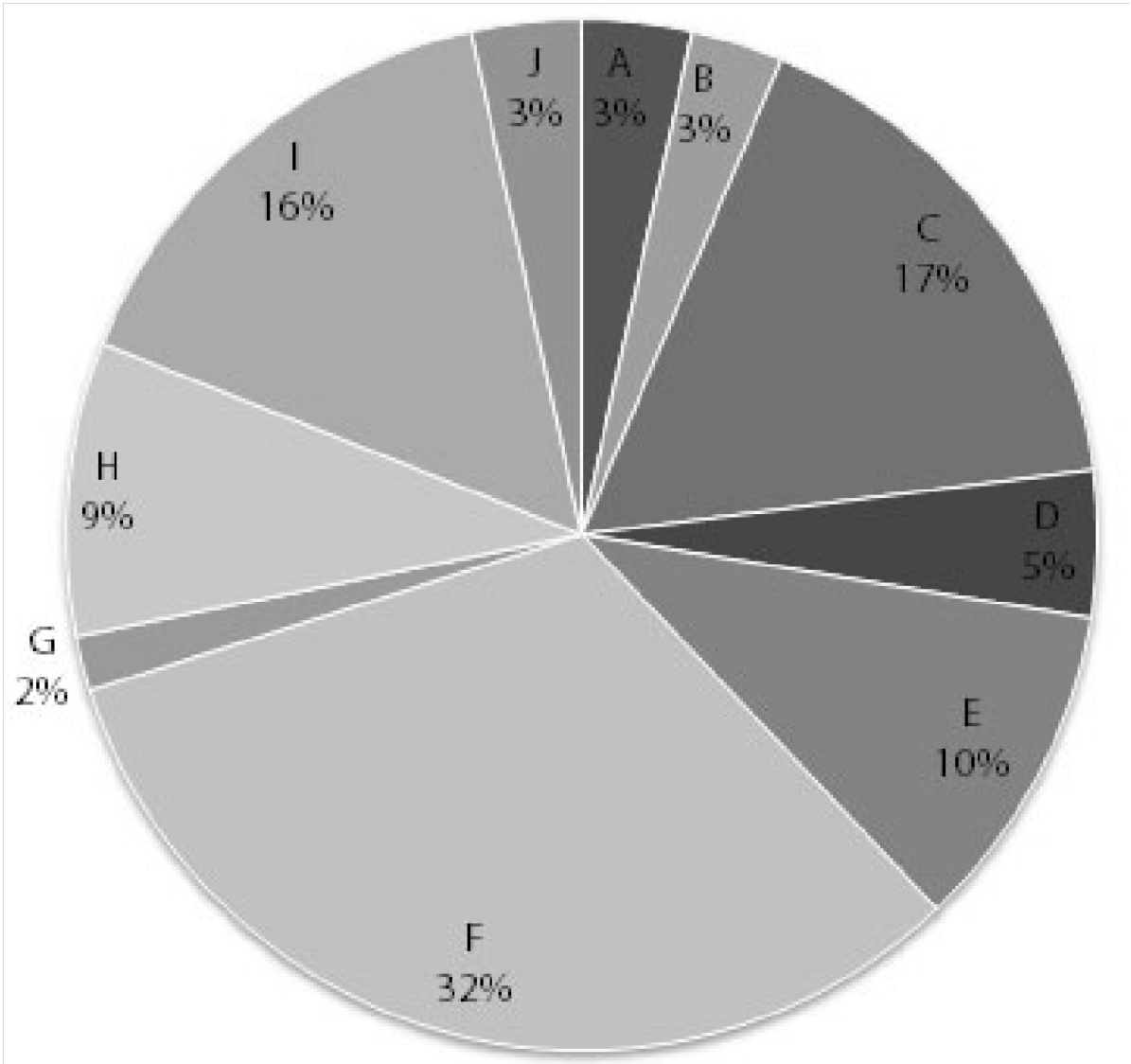


Chart 3 *Tele* style distribution in *Mbimo* area (N=174)

These charts show small differences between areas, with the ten styles found in every area and in similar statistical distributions. There is, however, one exception, which is the styles' distribution in the Bombom area. Here, styles A and B are far more prominent than in any other area. Considering the pattern of *teles*' cultural transmission, which is strongly affected by local context (Peng forthcoming), it could

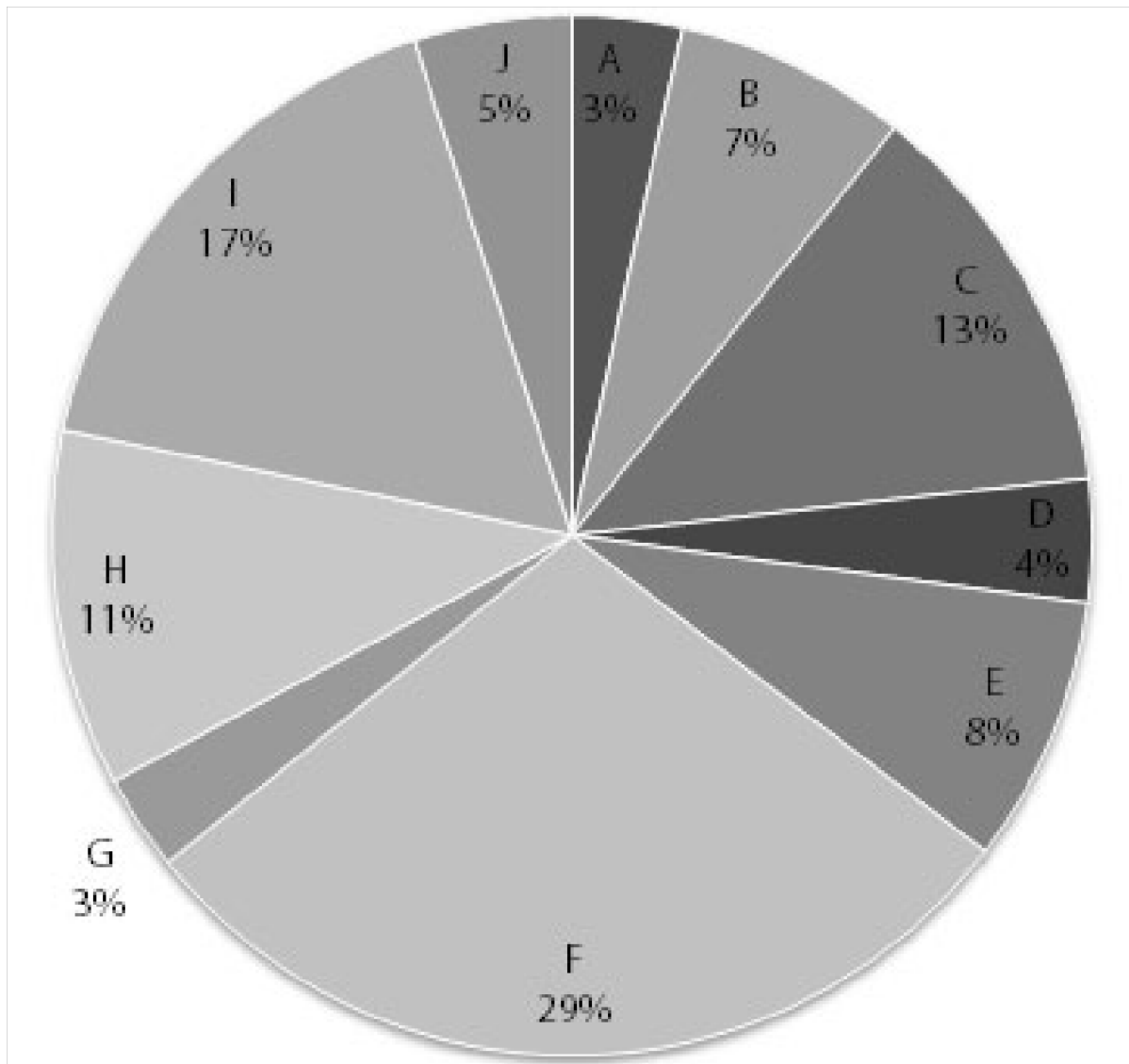


Chart 4 *Tele* style distribution in Bangando area (N=469)

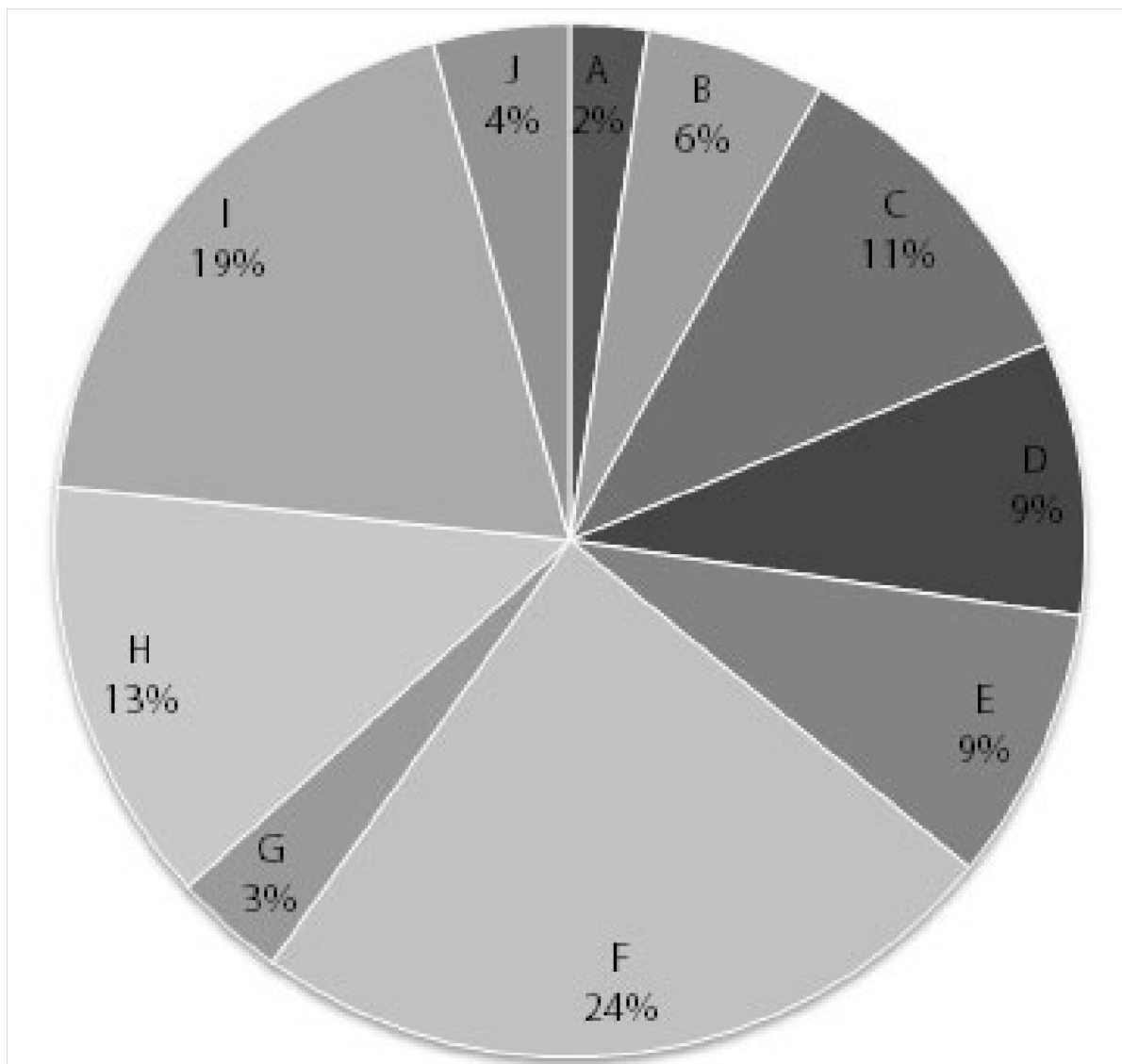


Chart 5 *Tele* style distribution in Bakwele area (N=373)

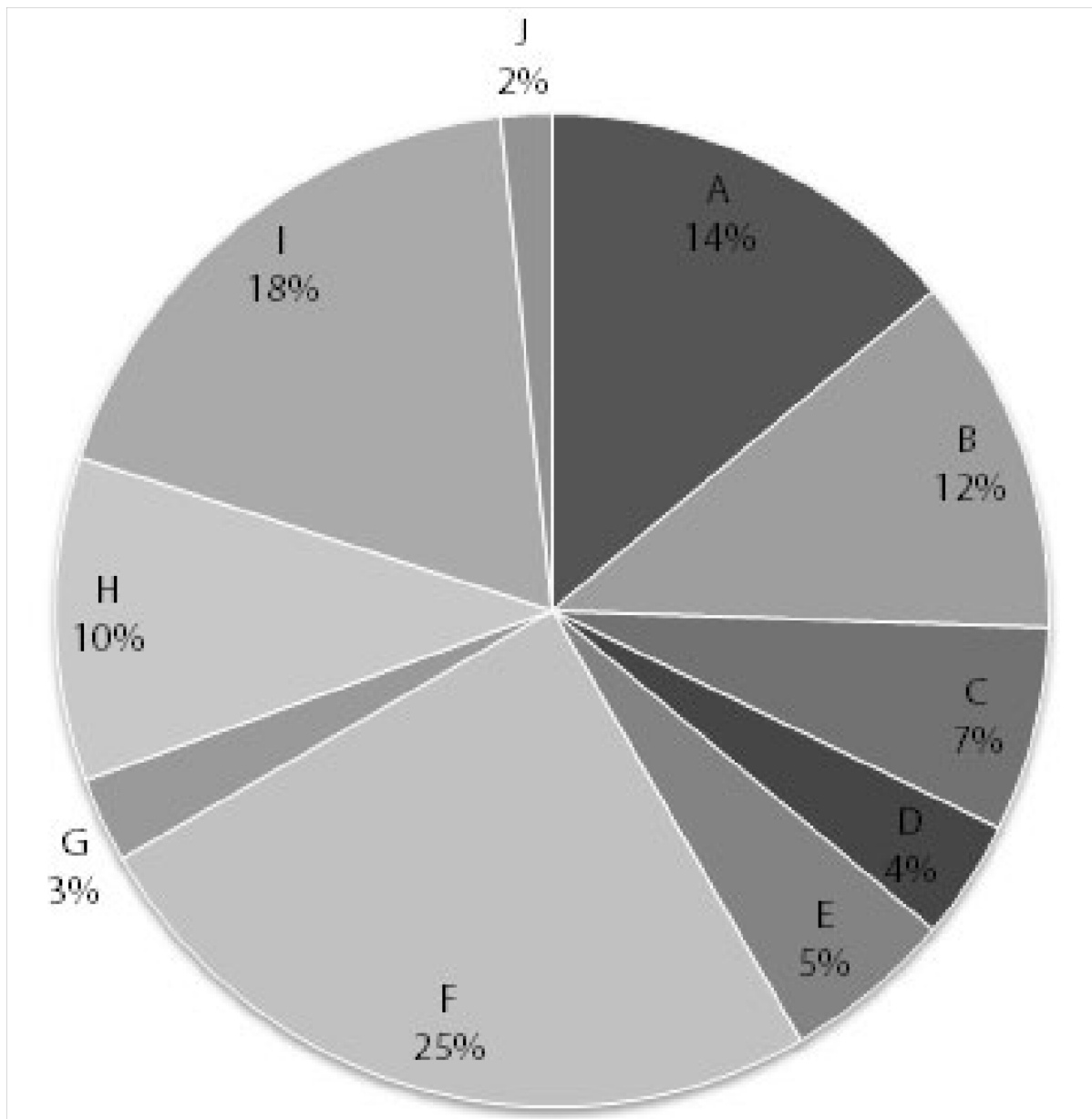


Chart 6 *Tele* style distribution in Bombom area (N=180)

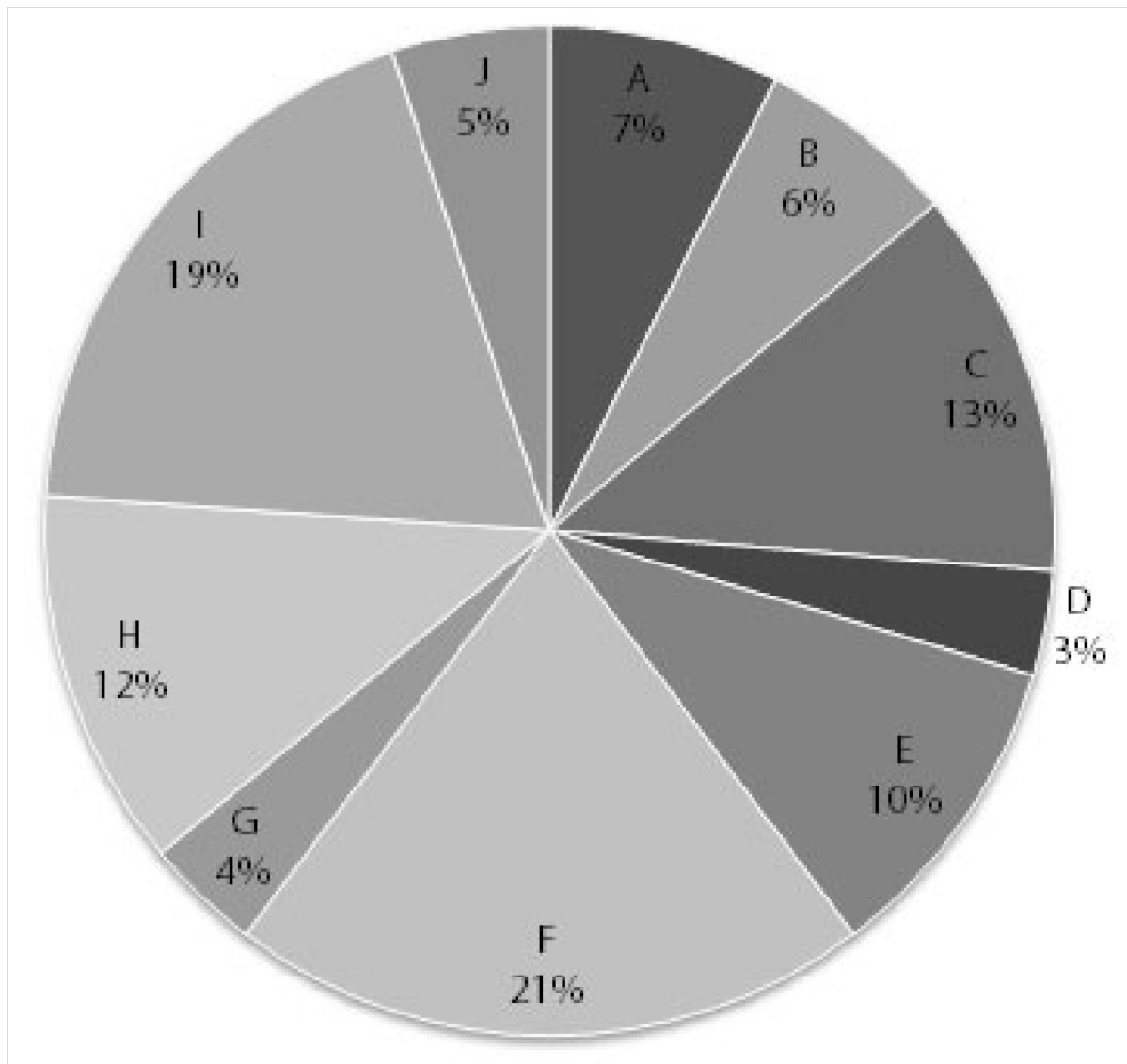


Chart 7 *Tele* style distribution in *Konambembe* area (N=297)

be expected that there might be more regional variability than actually occurs. The similarity shown may be related to their mobility and residency patterns. This fusion of *tele* styles will require further work to understand fully, with more effort needed on the analysis of the performance of carving as a key part of the transmission process.

These charts do show enough consistency of data to infer that *tele* is regarded as a marker of identity, of being a Baka man or Baka woman. They have multiple purposes, including for identifying themselves as the Baka, like the tattoo of the Tua Yaka people (Lewis 2002:63–64) or tooth pointing of the Aka (Hewlett & Hewlett 2012), as well as for adorning a woman's body as most of my informants explained. The style of presenting identity is influenced neither by the participant's regional environment (eg, neighbouring ethnic group, social associations, area's level of economic development, etc), nor by its symbolic expressions (defined design, named style, meaningful pattern, etc). They are though influenced by their gender identities within Baka society, such as being a woman.

5. The carver and receiver

5.1 Frequency of tele receiving during a Baka's life

The frequency of getting *tele* for a Baka is considered not to be high. According to interviews in the East Region, one Baka woman is tattooed about three times on average. However, based on observations, there is significant variability in this figure among individuals and particularly between households. In S village, about 100 Baka live in four camps. Two camps (A and B) were initiated by the clan *ye-Ndumu*, one camp (L) was initiated by a Baka from clan *ye-Likemba*, one (E) is built by a Baka from clan *ye-Bosila*. However, the Baka from clan *ye-Ndumu* have a comparably sized population, and are in the same original camp. The residence of the Baka in S village comprise of related kin and the camps are connected to each other also by consanguinity, and in addition, they exchange members with each other or with other villages according to marriage norms.

Baka's tattooing practices were recorded over ten visits to S village from 2010 to 2014, over a total of about ten months. Significant differences between the camps were observed in the frequency of tattooing. Six practices of tattooing occurred in L camp, moreover, another practice in E camp was initiated by a woman from L camp. Another two practices were observed in E camp, and one practice was observed in B camp. Therefore, the frequency of *tele* practice is about once a month in aggregate, but it varies between camps. Household differences in frequency of tattooing are similar to those between camps. In terms of the pattern of residence, they live together with consanguineous relations and affines, with members changing as they move between camps and between households.

When comparing adolescents or young Baka women, it is easy to find the differences and link them to individuals. In L camp, 5 of 6 observed practices for *tele* occurred in a specific household, whereas the other one was initiated by women from each household of L camp. Differences also exist among individuals of the same household, but these are smaller than the two above. In the most active household in terms of practicing *tele*, only one daughter did not receive her *tele*, whereas the other three daughters and her mother have undergone *tele* several times (over twice during the whole period of my research) respectively:

I had my first *tele* carved by my mother-in-law here, when I was a little girl before marriage. Then I grew up, my friend gave the second one in her village, now she married my husband's brother. When I married my

husband, my sister came from another village, and then I had my third *tele* carved by her. My fourth *tele* was made by my husband's uncle's wife here, after my marriage.

– Woman MD from B camp (2011.10.07)

In contrast to woman MD, 29.6 per cent of Baka women (my informants) do not have any *tele*. They claimed that they would never have a *tele* because it brings a lot of pain. Furthermore, among Baka women who had experienced *tele*, some of them had been tattooed only once:

I have my cheeks' *tele*, I have my forehead and chin's *tele*, I also have *tele* on my calf but now it is without black (colour). My older sister did them for me; she carved all of them at once, when I was a girl. She also carved *tele* on my other sisters. But I did not receive *tele* again – Woman ES, a visitor to L camp¹ (2014.08.26)

Compared to woman MD, woman ES has more *tele* on her face, but had a far lower frequency of receiving *tele*. The frequency of receiving *tele* appears to be dependent on the background of an individual's residence. It is affected by the number of members of the same household in the same camp, or in the neighbouring camp.

5.2 Carving experiences of *tele*

As indicated above, there are four camps of Baka in S village: A, B, L and E. Members of L camp have the highest frequency of tattoo practice. Three women, SY, LB and JS, did all the tattooing during my stays. Seven cases of their tattoo practice are recorded. Most practices have one carver, but only one practice had two carvers.

In woman SY's case, she undertook tattooing four times, three times for her own daughters. She gave her three daughters *tele* on their chins one morning in October 2010. In November 2010, she carved her daughter's face first, then carved woman LB's forehead after LB finished her own carving for another woman (the detail of this practice will be interpreted in the next section). During October 2011, SY had carved twice at L camp and E camp, about 100 m from L camp. In the practice at L camp, SY had carved two of her daughters and a woman who visits L camp from village M, which is about 25 km from S village. Two days later, she gave type A (on forehead and cheeks; see Figure 3) to a young woman, that is the daughter of her husband's mother's sister. Another woman that SY carved is SY's husband's cousin who received

¹ Woman E came to L camp to visit her younger sister, who had married a man from L camp who died recently. She and her mother and younger sister were living around Lomie village, which is over 200 km from my visit area. Her younger sister left her home village, and started living in L camp after her marriage, but would go back there for one or two months sometimes.

a forehead *tele* (style H). According to interview (through chatting), these two women had been tattooed by SY before.

Woman LB is SY's husband's sister's daughter, and she was born in S village but married a man from village M and resides in his village. LB came to S village to visit her parents, and had a tattoo done there in October 2010. The woman LB tattooed was born in M village. Her age is similar to LB, and she married a man of S village, L camp, but resides in M village. Thus this woman is LB's mother's brother's wife, and has had the same residence experience as LB.

JS is SY's daughter, and was about 13 years old in 2010. Three of her tattoos were all done in the same month and within about 10 days. Other people tattooed are JB's peers. Two girls who were tattooed in three episodes are the daughters of JS's father's brother, that is JS's cousin. The younger one received her *tele* on her cheeks, forehead, and chin respectively, whereas her older sister only had her cheeks tattooed during the three times. Moreover, JS's younger sister was a joint participant in JS's third practice, and had her chin tattooed.

In these seven cases of tattooing, *tele* practice is usually initiated in parent–offspring and sibling relationships. The other relationships are commonly based on the participants' matrimonial relationship, such as 'husband's cousin (sister)–cousin's (brother's) wife', or 'uncle's wife–husband's niece'.

5.3 Relationship between participants

The relationship between tattooist and tattooed needs further explanation in order to find out whom they ask for tattoos or whom they would like to tattoo. I interviewed informants in the East Region and asked the question, *La dengi/konongi pe mo tele ke?* (Who carved this *tele* for you?). Their answers provided key information about relationships between the giver and receiver of *tele*. They usually answered my question by mentioning their links with kin such as '*nyua-*' (parent), '*gbeba-*' (older sibling), or '*tadi-*' (younger sibling). Sometimes they gave the name directly when the person was just nearby at that moment, whereas sometimes they only could tell the sex or clan of that person, like 'an old woman' or 'clan *Mombito*'.

'*Nyua-*' (parent), '*gbeba-* /*tadi-*' (sibling) and '*kaa-*' (aunt) are the most frequent relationships mentioned by both female and male informants (Charts 8 and 9). The top three of the relationship rankings are her or his (1) mother or sister of mother; (2) sister; and (3) mother's or father's sister (see Table 1).² A difference showed up, however, in the fourth most common relationship: 9 per cent of women mentioned '*gi-/bende-*', the spouse's sibling, as one of the people who carved *tele* for them. On the other hand, 10 per cent of men experienced being carved by their wife. These two sorts of relationships are all based on the informant's marriage. Thus, the top four of

² For the question whether the carver is a man or woman, all carvers of '*kaa-*' are women. Thus the meaning 'spouse of father's sister' of '*kaa-*' is not included here.

the relationships' ranking covered over 74 per cent of the mentioned relationships, and could be considered the closest relationships for the Baka.

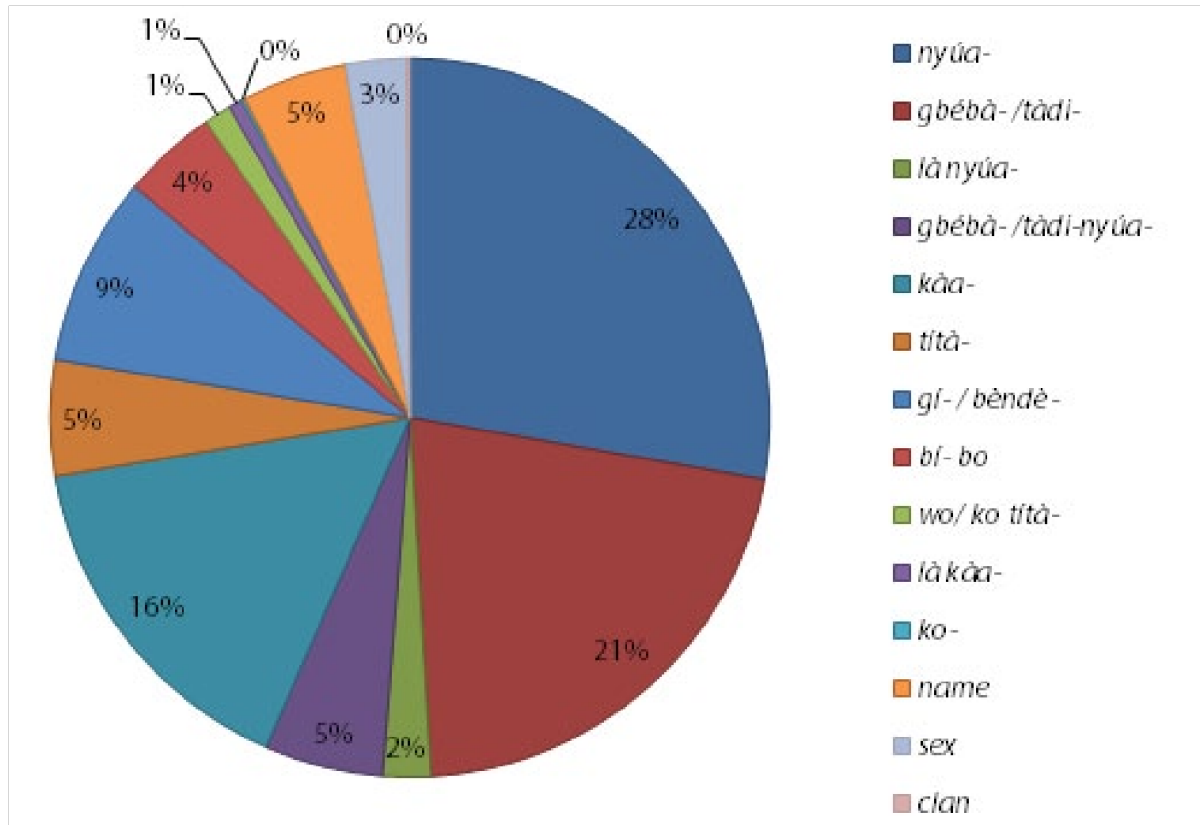


Chart 8 Proportion of mentioned relationship with tattooist by female tattooed informants

I was asked to join their tattoo practice after I became able to communicate with them in their own language at the level of joking with them as they did with me. This happened after I had experienced two seasons of fieldwork in S village (after about nine months in the field). Once, when I was watching their *tele* carving, though it did not occur so often, the women asked me if I was willing to be carved with their *tele*, but I refused. They did not force me to do so, but enjoyed seeing the fear on my face. They also showed interest in my tattoos (I had my arm and leg tattooed in China), and asked if I could carve them some tattoos like mine. I could not give them that tattoo, because I do not have tattooing skill, but they did not blame me. These two cases gave the essential hint about why they like to carve *tele* on each other. The carver–receiver relation is based on their existing proximate relationship as shown previously, for example co-residence based on their consanguineous relationship or affinal relationship. Moreover, the requirement of having the same *tele* (or tattoo) could be considered a style of demand-sharing, as one of five types of property in

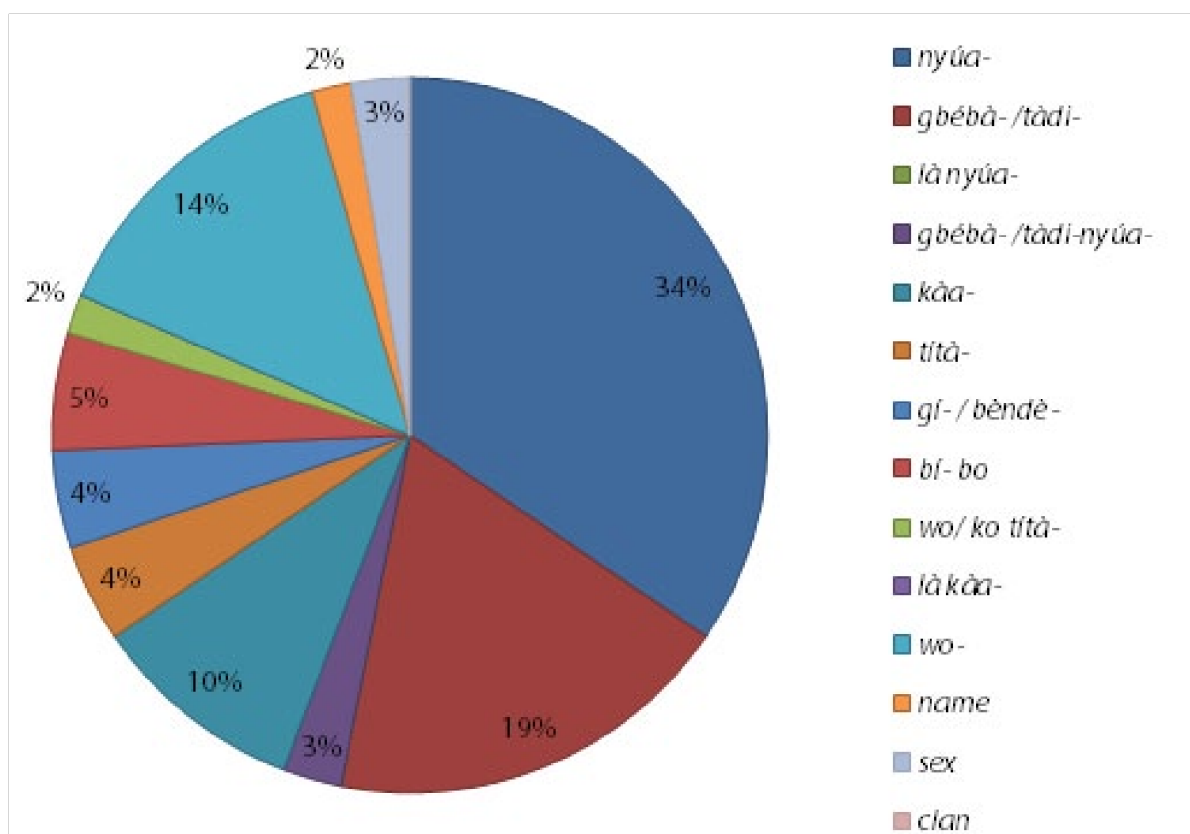


Chart 9 Proportion of mentioned relationship with tattooist by male tattooed informants

immediate-return societies as analysed by Barnard and Woodburn, the ‘rights over knowledge and intellectual property’ (1988:14). They demand sharing the experience of their physical body and the same ‘fashion’ (*nyanga*). This sharing of body experience also could be a means of reaffirming emotional bonds, as well as existing proximate relations.

6. The practice of tele

The relationship between participants of *tele* practice has been examined in previous parts of this article. However, the detail of their practice, particularly the participants' interaction in their carving performance, is suggested as important in order to understand their motivation of practising *tele*. Usually the Baka women use razors to carve the skin and soot ground from the lamp for colouring. When women are talking about tattoos, if some of the women are interested in the designs, and have a razor and enough soot, they might ask for a new tattoo from a woman skilled in the procedure. First, the carver usually draws the lines of the requested design with string and soot on the candidate's skin, and then carves along those lines with a razor, and rubs some soot into the bloody scars. After washing away the blood, the carver might check the scars, or recarve some that have not yet bled, and rub in enough soot once more. Some carvers explained that they might also rub boiled pepper leaves on the scars 'to make them black (*a me bie*)'. Once the new tattoo is finished, or has to be stopped for some reason, the receiver could go back to work, such as going into the forest to find fruits or weaving a bread basket or straw mat, and the carver could do the same. When the tattoo is complete the recipient offers no payment or recompense, and the carver does not ask for any.

6.1 Commencement of tele practice

During my first visit period at S village in 2010, I observed the practice of *tele* three times. Each time the event started with sudden carving and I felt that I must have missed something important as a prelude. Thus, during my research in September 2011, I asked my informants what were they doing before and after the practice, but no one could answer the question except telling me their age group while they got tattooed, or because they saw someone else was practising. When I returned to S village after conducting research in a number of other areas, I decided to focus my observation on the skilled *tele* carvers, SY, the wife of my Baka mother's younger brother and her first daughter, JS. I tried following them as closely as I could, and despite observing seven *tele* events, their sudden commencement still surprised me. What follows is an extract from my rough field notes:

In the morning, a Baka man asks me borrowing him a knife, because they are going to sharpen children's front tooth. I gave them my knife, and had

observed the practice of tooth sharpening. After about 8 children had their tooth sharpened, people backed to their home or went to work. Two young women from my camp stayed, LB and DD. They are about 18–22yrs girls, had been born here but immigrated to another village after their marriage. But this time they were back to visit their families. They were chatting sitting in the center of camp. I walked to them to join their conversation, then I saw DD enter her hut. I asked LB what are they going to do, LB tells me that they are going to make some *tele*. After while DD backs and holding an oil lamp and a little razor. Then LB grabs soot from the oil lamp very carefully, and DD finds some leave and half bucket of water. When all materials of *tele* carving had done, LB is ready starting drawing lines on DD's chin. When they are carving, SY passes occasionally then joined them. SY calls her first daughter and third daughter and asks them if they want some lovely *tele* on her face, the little daughter agreed but older one refused then escaped. After LB and DD's carving done, SY borrows their razor and starts carving. (2010.11.10 at camp L)

Similarly, the first tooth-sharpening practice that I had observed at another Baka camp in S village was accompanied by the *tele* practice in October 2010. However, I was not able to observe how it has started, because I was busy recording the tooth-sharpening practice. But it should not be suggested these two practices always coincide or are causally related. I had observed that *tele* had been practised without tooth-sharpening practice eight times (of ten), and sharpening teeth without *tele* was practised one time (of three). Again, from my notes:

This afternoon, SY is sitting under the roof with her four daughters, and two daughters of her husband's older brother. She is cleaning the oil lamp; children are eating cooked cassava leaves, and playing with soot they took from the lamp. SY then start helping children painting their face with soot. After drawing, she asks her first daughter JS to find the razor and some water. While SY is carving, another woman AJ finds their practice, then asks SY to give her some *tele* on her forehead. SY takes the deal. (2011.10.8 at camp L)

I followed SY go to visit camp E, about 100 meter far from the camp L. I asked SY why her fourth daughter does not have any *tele*. She laughed and told me that because she is very afraid of pain, every time she refuses when she is asked. 'But someday she may want *tele*' she added. We joined the women's talk when we arrived at the camp, they asked me how is my work. I told them about other Baka and their *tele* I had seen and met during wide area research. Women enjoyed my talk and then a young woman, the daughter of SY's husband's mother's sister, asks SY to carve some *tele* on her cheeks and forehead [type A; see Figure 3]. SY asks her to find some

soot, water, and the razor, then starts the practice. Another woman of this camp, SY's husband's cousin, asked *tele* on forehead [type H; see Figure 3]. After SY finished the first carving, she starts the second requirement. (2011.10.12 at camp E)

With the exception of two cases, in which the *tele* practice and toothsharpening practice coincided, most cases of *tele* were not accompanied with any other kind of special event. Typically, before the start the participants were chatting as usual, and after the carving, they went back to their work, or stayed to watch each other's carving, or just left straight away. The 'suddenness' of a *tele* carving episode reflects the Baka's value of extemporaneity and interest in the immediate present.

6.2 Changing draft in the carving performance

During the carving performance of *tele*, another phenomenon attracted my attention. It is that they seem not to mind changes to the planned draft design or if the draft is not completed. The first *tele* practice, in which I had observed the complete process is of SY and her daughter, LB and DD (2010.11.10 at camp L). SY drew one line on both cheeks of her little daughter, but when the girl started crying, SY stopped carving even though she had only finished one side. I asked when she would finish the other side's draft and she told me 'maybe tomorrow'. That other side still remains to be done and every time I ask her 'when' it will happen she tells me 'tomorrow'. The high extemporaneity is not only found at the beginning of practice, it also exists throughout the whole performance. Here I show the dialogue during the carving performance of SY, LB and DD's practice:

Dialogue 1:

After children's teeth sharpening was done, two girls, DD and LB, were chatting. Suddenly, they found materials for tattooing and began to make a new tattoo for DD. Meanwhile, SY, the good carver of this area, occasionally came to watch their performance after their casual commencement.

... ..

SY: Where are you going to carve?

DD: (pointing to her chin) around here.

SY: (pointing to the side of DD's mouth) How about (to carve) reach? here? DD: Is that good?

SY: Yeah.

DD: How (about her advice)?

DD: (raises her eyebrows to agree)

Then LB starts to draw lines and starts to carve.

... ..

SY: Hey, (tattoo) on the cheek is good.

LB: (points at DD's cheek) like here?

SY: Yes. You carve them for her (DD), both (sides). DD: (keeping silence and bearing the pain) LB: Well, I think it is good.

SY: Then I will carve your cheek for you.

LB: (laughing) Wow!

... ..

Then SY keeps arguing about carving DD's cheek during LB and DD's performance, and DD agrees about it finally and gets the new tattoo on her cheek by LB.

Dialogue 2:

While LB was carving the new tattoo on DD's chin, and chatting with SY and DD, a Baka man G, from another camp which is about 100 m from there passed by, joining their conversation occasionally: G: Oh, you are carving a tattoo. LB and D: (laughing) G: How is it going?

SY: (LB will) carve 3 lines on her (DD) chin and cheeks.

G: 3 lines?

SY: Then I will carve for LB on her cheeks!

G: 3 lines too? Ah, maybe 2 lines on her cheek?

SY: No, her forehead, chin and cheeks, 4 lines in total.

LB: Wow!

G: (laughing) Well, it's good but must hurt.

SY: So? You want it too?

G: No! I don't want!

SY: This guy said it hurts.

G: That hurts! (tattoo) is for you. Women's (thing).

Women laugh at that.

SY: Hey, LB, how about a new tattoo on your forehead? It must be good!

G: That sounds good!

DD: (laughing and bearing pain)

LB: (laughing) but it must hurt ...

... ..

DD picked her bucket up and went to the forest to gather after her new tattoos had been done. G went back to his camp, SY and LB continued their conversation:

SY: So? (tattoo) On forehead is good. (I) Promise!

LB: (point at forehead of herself) Really? Around here?

SY: Yes, so?

LB: But it hurts ...

SY: (laughing) I carved it for my little daughter recently, but it was bad, they (scars) didn't become black. I want to carve it for you.

LB: Umm ... Just wait a minute.

SY: My friend got some really good tattoos on her forehead, cheek and chin. (That is) really good!

LB: (looking at mirror that she borrowed from me) Ok ... let's do it!

Then SY started to draw some lines and carve them on LB's forehead and cheeks.

However, because of a lack of soot, SY only finished LB's forehead tattoo.

(2010.11.10 at camp L)

In the end, DD had new *tele* on her chin and cheeks (type E and I; see Figure 3), which is more than originally planned (just on her chin, type E). LB unexpectedly had her new *tele* on her forehead (type H), which was totally different from their first plan (ie on the cheeks, type I), but then became part of the second plan (on the cheeks and forehead, types H and I).

The Baka's easy-going practice of *tele* is not performed as a rite, and neither is there a specific person to be the carver like the girl's rite of passage of the San in Kalahari (Silberbauer 1963), nor is it accompanied with specific song or dance or other event like the Kalinga's *Batek* (Salvador-Amores 2002). The discussion that took place between all the participants, including the man G who was passing by, influenced the designs. Similar to its extemporal commencement, the carving performance has much variety. It could be watched, be commented on, or judged by any person, and its process is without firmly defined rule, such as their spiritual performance as other researchers describe (Tsuru 1998; Lewis 2002).

7. Discussion

This article gathered quantitative data from a wide area and qualitative data through long field observation. Two types of carver–receiver relationship have been found in the Baka society based on consanguinity and affinity. Consanguinity includes vertical relationships and horizontal relationships; they are all of the clan-based consanguineous relationship of the Baka, that is, the father’s brother is the uncle, but in the Baka’s concept, they prefer to regard that person as the male parent. The vertical relationship is based on parent to offspring. The carvers of this type are parent, grandparent, parent’s sibling and grandparent’s sibling, especially females. The vertical type of carver–receiver relationship is the most common relationship between carver and receiver. The horizontal relationship of consanguinity includes sibling and cousin, and shows as a high proportion in carver–receiver relations. The affinity type, of course, includes married couples, but also includes relationships based on marriage.

These relationship types are not influenced by the location where the practice had been held, whether the carver or receiver was staying at their home camp or during the travelling period.

The second general observation to emerge from this study is that there is no clear correlation between the *tele* patterns (or styles) and several important social identities including age group, descent, or associations. However, the *tele* practice itself, not its visual style, is related to the identification of being women within Baka society. Baka men, by contrast, do not engage with the *tele* practice as often as women. They typically receive *tele* from women, which reflects the intimate relationship between a man and the woman he lives with. Attending *tele* practice could also be a way for maintaining close connections between the sexes, which are grounded by consanguinity and marriage. At a more general level, the *tele* serve as markers of inter-ethnic identity of being Baka from the perspective of neighbouring ethnic groups or other outsiders and among the Baka themselves.

The extemporaneity of the practice itself, including its commencement and completion, may reflect the nature of the Baka as an immediate-return society (Woodburn 1982). This relatively unconstrained dealing with each other (Woodburn 1997) in the *tele* practice seems to be linked only loosely to a defined social identity such as ‘being Baka’ or ‘being Baka woman’. The presented here have shown the reality that not all Baka have experienced receiving *tele* or even not all Baka women. Skin (or the shape, figure of the physical body) as the boundary between individual and society, as Turner (2012 [1980]) observed, could be used to mark categories or classes of individuals. Though the Baka rarely differentiate themselves into different social entities,

women do prefer to engage in group activities. This tendency is similar to Lewis's (2008) remark on the Mbendjele where women are more likely to take part in group activities than men who are more likely to stay alone or with few people. This preference for collective behaviour could contribute to the sense of why Baka regard *tele* as the women's fashion (*nyanga na wose*). Their enjoyment of being with each other, tacitly shaping libidinous selves into socialised individuals (eg, the categorised group), are derived from a series of collective activities during daily life with co-residents, in particular with immediate family and affines. These close relationships already bind them and give them time and opportunities for socialising in many ways. They interact in very flexible ways without prohibition or force, but as Lewis (2008:208) argued, 'they are embedded in inevitable sensory experiences connected with bodily maturation and performance rather than conveyed just by instruction and verbal exhortation'. These accumulated experiences, not only associations of spirits but also the casual *tele* practice, act like countless strings connecting individuals as a whole. The *tele* practice of the Baka, however, should not be recognised as a form of ritualised sharing as Woodburn (1997:358) describes, such as the spirit associations of the Mbendjele women's *Yele* (Lewis 2008) or of the Baka women's *Yeli* (Tsuru 1998). Conversely, by using Turner's theory, the non-defined styles of *tele* and its extemporaneity of performance exactly confirm the egalitarian characteristic of Baka society; there is no specific pattern of *tele* for representing social status, no specific person of leadership and decision-making, and particularly the tacit way of bodily sharing is present, which internalises others around them for the purpose of keeping proximate relationships with each other. *Tele* practice shows the mode of the Baka's co-presence, though there are some people who do not have *tele* at all. The experiences of participating in the practice, including receiving or carving *tele*, advising about design, or even only watching beside them, could be the tacit way to 'tune the connection parameter to the resonance as a whole' (Kimura 2003: 33).

Once the carving is complete the *tele* becomes the visible identity of being Baka women, and it is *the consequence* of being Baka women because they are the majority of *tele* practitioners and *tele* practice is one of their collective activities. For Baka men, conversely, joining *tele* practice (ie receiving, viewing, discussing, or suggesting ideas) is a way communicating and keeping intimate relationships with women with whom they live. Men also do not seem to represent any internal social identity through *tele*, but they do serve to identify being Baka for outsiders or to themselves when interacting with outsiders. The outsider, such as neighbouring ethnic groups or researchers like us, tends to regard the *tele* as the visible identity of the Baka as a group because nowadays only the Baka practice *tele* in their living area. The *tele* is, however, more than a marker of identity; its distinctive features in terms of its practice and imagery make it a visible expression of how the Baka manage their personal relationships and maintain an egalitarian way of life.

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