

BaAka Music and Dance

The essence of the BaAka culture, preserved over the millennia, is also expressed in their music and dance: serving to maintain bonds with their gods, spirits and ancestors. Language alone has not been able to fulfil this task since



it has been exposed to many modifications over time. In the past, the BaAka frequently incorporated language from their Bantu neighbours into their own, exacerbated by their nomadic existence. Music and dance, however, have always been an expression of genuine BaAka feelings and imagination. Each singer and percussionist chooses his or her own rhythm resulting in a wonderful array of polyphonic harmony. This universe of movement, rhythm and sound is unique, and cannot be conceived without experiencing it first-hand.

Trips in Dugout Canoes (Pirogue)

The Sangha River, which, in part, has given its name to the complex of protected areas, flows from north to south towards the magnificent Congo River, over 700 kilometres away. Long-time a major communication channel, today the Sangha River is the "spinal column" of the Sangha Tri-National complex.

Dugout canoes are carved directly from the trunks of trees. Discovering Bayanga from the Sangha river allows one to experience a completely different aspect



of life in the rainforest. These tranquil expeditions also provide excellent opportunities for viewing a diverse array of forest and water-loving birds, from brightly-coloured kingfishers, to hornbills, and eagles, with the chance to catch a glimpse of elusive hippopotami and Nile Crocodiles.

The Local Extraction of Palm Wine

To witness the extraction of palm wine one has to travel along the river in a dugout canoe to a completely different landscape. The tributaries of the Sangha River run in meanders through a lush swampy area. It is here that one finds the raffia palm. Wine extraction is carried out from the top of standing palms and the sap flows for several hours into a container. Once extracted, alcoholic fermentation immediately triggers, diminishing the sugar content and producing carbon dioxide in the process. The end product is a pleasant drink that is reminiscent of the musty taste of wine. In Bayanga, numerous „buvettes“ (small bars) sell palm wine that has been fermenting for 5 to 10 hours. The wine rarely contains more than 4% alcohol and costs less than commercially made beer.

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The village of Bayanga

Originally a small village, inhabited by Sangha-Sangha fishermen and BaAka hunter-gatherers, Bayanga was already charted on German colonial maps in 1901. Located approximately 10 km from today's Dzanga-Ndoki National Park, the village is the base of the Dzanga-Sangha Protected Areas (DSPA) administration. Additionally, in an isolated location on the banks of river, is found the Doli Lodge and Tourist Welcome Centre: the starting point for all tourist activities.

In the last two centuries, the Bayanga region has experienced several population migrations, the potential for employment attracting people from across the country. The period after Second World War brought the installation of coffee plantations to the south, and in the 70's, an industrial sawmill operated by different logging companies during the 80's, and 2000's. Today, apart from the original inhabitants, Bayanga is home to approximately 5000 residents. The majority of residents speak the (local) national language, Sango, developed from Ngbandi, a trade dialect used along the Oubangui River. This shared language is an important factor uniting the country as a whole, and facilitates migrations. When in operation, the sawmill employs approximately 350

people, with others profiting from the increased commerce; the DSPA administration employs close to 200 personnel.

With the advent of the modern industrial world, its purchasing power and working tools (electricity, data-processing, cars, and motorbikes), Bayanga has lost a few elements of its traditional lifestyle. The majority of the population live in wooden houses with roofs topped with palm tree leaves, but more traditional mud-housing and BaAka huts made of leaves can still be seen towards the outskirts.

Approximately 3-5 km from Bayanga, visits to the small villages of Mossapoula or Yandoumbe, can give a clearer impression of the more traditional groups' lifestyles: fishermen, hunters, and farmers, the latter cultivating principally cassava, coffee, corn, and peanuts. These groups, and in particular the hunter-gatherer BaAka, have preserved their traditional ways of life, contributing to the region's charm.

BaAka hunter-gatherers

Glimpsing the secret culture of the BaAka is an experience few have known. The BaAka are the group in the Congo Basin who are still most dependant on the forest: hunting meat with traditional nets, spears, and cross-bows; collecting much-desired honey using their amazing tree-climbing skills; and gathering the roots, bark, leaves, fruit, and seeds from an vast array of forest plants for food, medicine, shelter and numerous other practical uses.

Net-Hunting

Net hunting mobilises large groups of BaAka men, women, and children, who leave together on foot for the forest. Each family brings with them a long net, woven from fibrous strips of bark taken from a forest vine (locally named "kusa"). The women carry their few belongings in traditional raphia baskets, or "ikwa", hung low on their heads, small infants are carried in slings around their bodies, and the men carry their nets and spears. Depending on their needs and the season, net-hunting outings can last from one day, at short distances from the village, to months on end, establishing temporary forest camps along the way. The departure is often preceded by lengthy discussions as to which zone they will hunt and how they will get there. In decision-making, everyone's

opinion counts. On the way, the women start to sing their particular unique mix of „yodelling“, melody and polyphony.

Once in the forest, the families spread out, attaching their nets to broken twigs and saplings in a rough circle. The hunters then enter the circle and begin to shout and pound the undergrowth with broken saplings, driving out any hidden duikers and porcupines towards the nets. Once an animal is caught, it is killed with a blow to the head, and put into the family's basket. On the way back to their base camp, the women gather forest leaves and nuts to make into a sauce to accompany the meat. Later the game is carved up and



shared amongst the women; the family whose net was successful in catching the prey, receives a larger portion of the game.

Gathering Medicinal Plants

In the BaAka culture, ancient knowledge of medicinal plants is kept primarily by the women. It is the older women that most neighbours consult. When collecting plants in the forest, the exceptional abilities of these women are highlighted by their excellent powers of observation and skillful use of their hands and machetes to carry out the most intricate of processes. Leaves are pressed to extract drops while at the same time rolling other leaves into a funnel to apply the medicine to the eyes and ears. This activity highlights the BaAka's extensive knowledge and use of the forest, employed almost as a natural supermarket but perfectly in tune with their environment.