

« Food from the forest »
Ethnobotanical immersion among the Baka from South-East Cameroon

TRANSCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW WITH SANDRINE GALLOIS, ETHNO-ECOLOGIST AT UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN

You leave early the morning. At 5 or 6 am you have to be up and then you meet the local guides with whom you made an appointment the day before, and then you go to the forest and you walk, walk walk... So the first days quickly find plants because you don't have anything, so you find the most common plants. Then, progressively, it becomes more and more... well, you need to go further and further in order to find the plants that you have seen yet.

"It's me!"

"..."

"What do you want?"

This is part of a study I began one year a half ago on the role of wild plants in diet. That is a research project led by an archaeologist in Leiden, in the Netherlands, and whose idea is to understand what is the role of wild plants in human evolution. There is one component of the research project that was to explore what were the factors influencing the choice of food, and for this to work with populations that are still hunting and gathering, even if they also use agriculture, but for whom the forest has an important place in their diet.

And thus, in this context, there was the place of plants, of wild plants. During these three fieldworks I have done here, the idea was to explore, through questionnaires, to ask what people were eating, which were the wild plants entering into their daily meals and also which plants do they know, and all this was based on a survey work, mostly in the villages, with people. Then after this, we told ourselves that it would be worth seeing the plants, and going to the forest with people in order to be able to identify and understand better the plants we were talking about.

Thus the idea was to really go to the forest with people and discover with them what were these plants, to see the plants that were collected in our list through the surveys, and then, obviously, when you are walking in the forest, then you discover things that you never heard about before.

The question that came to me was actually... I have done surveys, interviews such as "what did you eat yesterday, etc." or "what do you know...?" and thus the whole list of plants that they might have given on edible plants – it reached maybe about 80, something like that- and when I was asking them "what did you eat yesterday?", the list of wild plants, over one year of work (as this was something I already did before, within my PhD, as I participated to a project and thus, during one year already we worked with 2 villages, I don't know, 400 individuals and thus with interviews on "what did you eat yesterday?"), and there were only 14 wild plants that appeared.

So, really, the question was "Is this because it is not really important, is this because they don't remember... well, was this behind all this?"

"when the elders were looking for it, maybe they might have given it to me, I don't remember"

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“and you, Jean Marie?”

“I have never eaten it”

“You neither ? Even by the past?”

“Maybe they gave it to me before, but”

“you don’t remember”

And thus, when we were going to the forest, in front of plants that either were in the list of things they knew, or something that was not, because there were also surprises, and then, “but this one, when was the last time you ate it ?” because in other interviews that we did before, well this plant was not in.

So, it was thus combining several methods in order to get the whole set of forest resources that are used in their diet.

I have worked with two botanists, one student and one botanist working in the Netherlands, and during the three last weeks, actually the last month that we have spent together, we collected about one hundred plants.

“and thus here what are you doing?”

“I am putting all what we have found today in the press. Thus I am cutting stuff choosing what I keep and what I threw away, in order to be able to do the identification later on. I am making one for the Naturalis in the Netherlands, one for Yaounde, and another, if possible, for leaving it here, in order to show it to the Baka during the meetings.”

There is already a work that you do when you come back to camp meaning that you already begin to identify the plants you have, that you have seen in the forest, when you have doubts on some then you consult reference books, and then, after the first step is that once you arrive to the herbarium in Yaounde, because we always leave duplicates of all what we have collected to the herbarium, and there we identify some specimens that we could not identify here, and if it is not possible to find what it is in the Herbarium in Yaounde, then in the Netherlands, they have a whole collection that would help us to finally identify the plants. This is the first step.

During the fieldwork, with people, when we were talking about forest plants and trying to understand the reason why some plants were not in the surveys on “what did you eat?”, some people answered to us “well, it is actually because there are plants that we use, that we used to use, but the younger generation doesn’t remember them, or they don’t know about them, or don’t know to prepare them.”

And thus, we were talking like this and then I was showing them some pictures, we were talking about some recipes that they knew, and in these meetings, the Baka themselves told me that it would be worth doing something to remember all this.

So, then, we did not really know which medium we’ll use, but with them we thought we could try to make a book, with pictures, Baka names, taking the preparations, going here and there in several villages to ask about recipes, how they vary.

Last time, in this fieldseason we brought a draft of all the data that I had collected, the pictures we did and the ones we did in the forest and to talk with people about all this, in order to be sure that what we will put in this book will be correct.

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And yes, indeed, now the idea is to come back to France, to Europe, to come back with all this material, the pictures, all the recipes, all this knowledge, and then to try building a draft for coming back after and being able to gift it back to the communities, because it is something that really motivated them.

« Currently, the Baka are facing many changes in their way of life. Deforestation and the decreasing access to natural resources represent direct threats to their daily diet, but also to their health and culture. Our research is still underway, and we aim to provide both scientific insights on food choices and edible plants, as well as meaningful outcomes to the local communities.

We hope our project contributes to the valorization of Baka knowledge and livelihood, and helps further the maintenance of biological and cultural diversity in this region. We are looking for partners to help us make their book a reality. For more information, find us on harvestproject.eu

Many thanks to our field assistants Ernest Isidore Simpoh, Appolinaire Ambassa, and Alain Fezeu, and to Bonaventure Sonké and all the IRD team who make this work possible in Cameroon.

We acknowledge our deep debt and profound thanks to all the men, women and children of the villages of the Borough of Lomié and Messok who choose to take part and help us in this adventure (Le Bosquet, Kungu, Ngola, Bizam).

This research was funded in part by an ERC Starting Grant (ERC-STG 677576) to AG Henry, Leiden University, the Alberta Mennega Stichting, Treub Maatschappij, Naturalis Biodiversity Center, and Wageningen University, and Musée de l'Homme. »

**To go further, see the website HARVEST: Plant foods in Human Evolution :
<http://harvestproject.eu/index.html>**

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