

## Chapter 14

# “Twenty–Six Letters of the Forest Alphabet” or Community Social Learning Among the Ba’Aka in the Central African Republic

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### ABSTRACT

*The chapter discusses three areas of education for indigenous children from the Ba’Aka hunter-gatherer community in the CAR: public, formal education; private, missionary-run institutions; their traditional, collective education, metaphorically called “the forest alphabet.” Children used to be socialized into engaging with the forest-based on the relationship of reciprocal cooperation, protection, and justice. However, this relationship has become incongruent and undesirable in a reality dominated by developmental projects, deforestation, missionary activities, and environmental conservation initiatives. Each undermines indigenous epistemic rights and relationships with and claims to the land. Missionary and state education are shown as posing challenges to indigenous children, while particular attention is paid to forest education in terms of the social learning and engagement of Ba’Aka children in the environment in which they grow up, and in terms of their resistance and adaptation strategies in the face of these developments.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the struggles of indigenous children from the Ba’Aka hunter-gatherer community inhabiting the Sangha-Mbaéré rainforest region in the Central African Republic in the face of changing ecological and sociopolitical climates. Ba’Aka children find themselves standing at a crossroads (Markowska-Manista 2019), confronted by a choice between three educational pathways: (1) their traditional, collective education, metaphorically called “the forest alphabet” (2) private, missionary-run ORA method schools, and (3) in the public, formal educational system, dating back to the colonial era. The Ba’Aka refer to the forest as a “Father” and “Mother” with whom they have an inextricable bond. Children used to be socialized into engaging with the forest based on this relationship of reciprocal co-operation, protection, and justice (Ichikawa, 1996). However, this relationship has become incongruent and undesirable in a reality dominated by developmental projects and deforestation, missionary activities working to transform their indigenous culture, as well as environmental conservation initiatives designed in the Global North. Each in their own way undermines indigenous epistemic living rights, and relationships with and claims to the land. I discuss these 3 areas of education for Ba’Aka children indicating (in the case of missionary education and state education) the challenges of being students. I outline forest education as resistance and adaptation strategies of Ba’Aka children in the face of these developments as they grapple with being silenced and made invisible. It is a paradox that the voices of those, whose polyphonic singing was included on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* in 2008, remain unheard.

In this text, based on desk research and my own fieldwork (ethnographic) materials, I pay particular attention to the social learning (Salali et al., 2019) and engagement of Ba’Aka children in education in the environment in which they grow up. The perspective and experiences of children as active participants (Munn, 2010) who shape their own and their communities’ futures are important aspects for understanding the complexity of this environment and the process of multidimensional, holistic education.

In order to better acquaint the reader with the sensitive context of Ba’Aka life in which it is currently impossible to fully pursue traditional community social learning, I have analyzed academic literature and reports from the period of my research (2002-2022). The article is written in a decolonial approach (Datta, 2018) and based on a humanizing research methodology (Reyes et al. 2021). Decolonial approach refers here to breaking down the established patterns of thinking about the Other and showing the complexity and persistence of the factors of colonial entanglement of minority groups in the “production of knowledge” and (globally) transmitted knowledge about them, which usually does not include their voices and their own representations of their everyday life. Humanizing research is a methodological stance turned toward a research effort in which inquiry involves “dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of dignity and care for both researchers and participants” (Paris 2011: 137). This makes it possible to highlight the contribution of the non-dominant community to the research. At the same time, it highlights the importance of this community in explaining the meanings of the Ba’Aka everyday world to the researcher, allowing us to understand the non-Eurocentric ways of knowing others and the ‘non-human’, that is the multidimensional ecology of human relations and relationships with the surrounding material and immaterial world (Magnat 2020).

By discussing the metaphorical 26 letters of the forest alphabet - that is, the process of forest education - I point out how children acquire different knowledge resources, how they develop diverse abilities and skills to survive in the traditional environment, and the challenges of passing on ancestral knowledge based on oral stories in the 21st century.

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