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Searching for the Truth: The Poison Oracle Among Central African Foragers and Farmers

Barry S. Hewlett, Justin S. Mongosso, Roxanna King, and Arthur C. Lehmann

Conducting fieldwork in the Central African Republic in the late 1990s, Barry S. Hewlett and his co-researchers were surprised to discover human consumption of a strychnine-containing plant, known locally as *mbondo*, for purposes of divination. Individuals imbibe *mbondo* to induce physical responses, such as convulsions, in response to questions about sensitive dilemmas. Earlier anthropologists had reported something similar among nearby populations, but in those cases the poison was administered to chickens, not humans. As recounted in this article, Hewlett and his colleagues documented *mbondo* use as divination among two populations, the Aka and the Ngandu, between 1998 and 2012. While the Aka and Ngandu pursue different methods of subsistence and have contrasting social features, their use and understandings of the oracle are similar.

Divination practices are related to other aspects of worldview, including culturally specific understandings of power, illness, misfortune, and death. Here, the authors describe *molemba*, or powerful evil people, and *gundu*, a malevolent substance that manifests as a bodily organ. Research participants provided drawings to illustrate *gundu*, included in the article. To the Aka and Ngandu, illness and misfortune are frequently caused by *molemba*, as reflected in crime statistics from local police. The poisonous mixture *mbondo*, when consumed by healers, allows an airing of social tensions and concerns that lay behind accusations, and may contribute to determination of guilt. However, evil people are not the only source of illness and misfortune; *mbondo* may also lead to identifying natural illnesses or problems caused by violation of taboos and social values. The article ends by briefly comparing Aka and Ngandu *mbondo* uses, noting differences through a set of case studies.

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This article was written specifically for this volume, and is published here for the first time.

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"Mbalika died from *mbondo*," Boseke, his son, explained. I (first author) was so saddened to hear the news because he was a friend for over twenty years and was a gentle and kind man with a broad infectious smile. "What's *mbondo*?" I asked. "Mbondo is the bark of a root that is mixed with some water. After someone drinks *mbondo* it provides truthful answers to important questions." When I asked about the name of the plant in Sango, the national language of the Central African Republic (CAR), Boseke said it was *mbenge*, the same term used by the Azande for the poison oracle. Sango and Azande are both Oubanguian languages, so it made sense they may use the same word and that the word used by Bantu-speaking Aka foragers would be different. Boseke's description of *mbondo* sounded like the poison oracle used with chickens that Evans-Pritchard described among the Azande back in the 1930s, but this was in 1998 and the Aka foragers were administering the poison to humans rather than chickens. Evans-Pritchard (1976) and other classic studies of the poison oracle (Mair 1970) indicated the last cases of people taking the poison oracle occurred in the 1930s when colonial powers outlawed the practice.

Mbalika's death led to our study of the poison oracle. Art Lehmann, the fourth author and one of the original editors of this edited volume, and I were in the field together when we heard about Mbalika's death. We were aware of other forms of divination used in the village, but this was our initial experience with the poison oracle. Art was a religion specialist, so he started informal interviews with the Ngandu villagers right away while I waited a few weeks before going into the forest to talk with Aka hunter-gatherers. Unfortunately, this was Art's last field trip. He passed away in 1999 and I lost another dear friend and colleague. I continued to collect case studies and conduct interviews with both Aka and Ngandu between 1998 and 2012.

The Aka foragers live in camps of about twenty-five to thirty-five people, move about four times a year, use a wide variety of hunting and gathering techniques, and highly value gender and age egalitarianism, autonomy of each individual, and extensive sharing. The Ngandu are neighbors of the Aka; live in villages of fifty to four hundred people; farm manioc, corn, plantains, and peanuts; and highly value gender and age hierarchy, dependence on

specific others—especially member of the patrician—and maintaining economic equality between households (i.e., no household should accumulate substantially more than others). The Aka have economic, ritual, and kinship relationships with several different farming groups, including the Ngandu. About two thousand Aka and four thousand Ngandu live in and around the CAR villages where this study was conducted (Hewlett 1992).

The term "poison oracle" is misleading. Mbondo is a forest plant that contains strychnine so it is a "poison," but the local people do not view it as such. The Aka and Ngandu view it as a supernatural person or agent that can be spoken to and provide truthful answers to difficult questions. The term "oracle" usually refers to a medium, such as a priest or priestess in Greek literature, through which the gods or supernatural spirits communicate to the people. The Aka and Ngandu mix the *mbondo* root bark with water, drink it, and then ask it questions. The Aka and Ngandu who take the *mbondo* are the "oracles" through which the supernatural *mbondo* speaks. Among the Azande, the chicken is the "oracle" through which *benge* speaks.

Aka and Ngandu distinguish several types of *mbondo*, but the one used for the poison oracle has been identified as *Strychnos icaia* by many ethnobotanists (Neuwinger 1994). Aka and Ngandu use the red root bark of the shubby undergrowth of the plant rather than the adult liana. Strychnine is just one of several alkaloids in the plant and its roots contain the greatest concentrations of strychnine and strongest spinal cord convulsive effects. Another reason local people do not view it as poison is that healers (called *ngangas* in both Aka and Ngandu languages) use it as an ingredient in herbal treatments for worms, HIV/AIDS, and other illnesses. Many Aka also use it as part of a mixture to make arrow poison (Motte 1980).

The Dark Side: Powerful Evil People

It is important to have an understanding of malevolent people—people who cause illness and death—before discussing the poison oracle because it is often used to identify these individuals. Evans-Pritchard indicates that the Azande distinguish sorcerers from witches; a sorcerer learns his or her trade from others while a witch is born with his or her

abilities and has biological properties that makes them different from other people. Azande witches are born with an additional bodily organ, called *mangu*, that activates and directs Azande witches' malevolent activities. The Aka and Ngandu do not make such distinctions; their conceptions blend Azande ideas. *Molemba*, powerful evil people, are not born with or do they biologically inherit their abilities from their parents; parents or other family members give their children small bits of *gundu*, malevolent substance, to eat in their food. Over time the *gundu* grows in the child and becomes an additional bodily organ. Children with *gundu* cry more than other children, but the child cannot use the *gundu* to cause bad things to happen until the *gundu* has grown and they have had some instruction from their parent or other person who provided them the *gundu*. Aka and Ngandu *gundu* is a bodily organ like the Azande *mangu*, and by Evans-Pritchard's definition individuals with *gundu* should be called witches. We prefer not to use the term *witch* because of the negative Western Halloween images of witches—women with long bent noses with warts who get around on a broom. Aka and Ngandu men and women are *molembas*, and it is difficult to distinguish them from others in the community. We use the local term *molemba* whenever possible to refer to supernaturally powerful and malevolent people.

Several Ngandu and Aka were asked to draw the *gundu* bodily organ—what does it look like? The top two drawings in Figure 1 are from Ngandu. Most Ngandu representations were round, but these two were a little different and represent the impact of modernity (Geschiere 1997). The one on the top left is by an elementary schoolteacher and healer who conceived of *gundu* as appendages at the base of the stomach. Each appendage had its own focus, energy, and agent (e.g., an owl, mice, invisible darts) to transmit the *gundu*. A local farmer with a high school education drew the second image. His *gundu* had separate "mouths," each with particular functions, and each mouth had veins that reached to other parts of *gundu* and the rest of the body. He brought out an old magazine article story about the human heart and said this is what *gundu* was like. A few Ngandu drawings had only one mouth, but like these two, when they drew more than one mouth, they indicated that each mouth could have a different function; one mouth for eating others, one for obtaining knowledge,

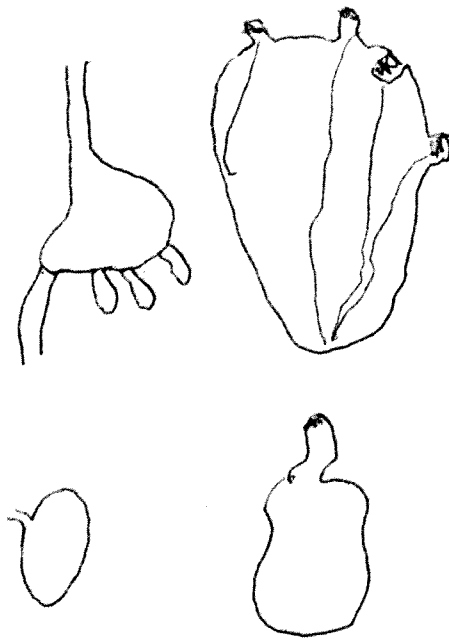


Figure 1. Ngandu (top two) and Aka (bottom two) drawings of *gundu*, the additional bodily organ of *molemba*.

and one for energy to produce large fields. Unlike *mangu* with the Azande, *gundu* among the Ngandu can be used to obtain wealth and prestige—to become intelligent or give intelligence to their children, or produce a large plantation. Most Ngandu informants said *gundu* was round, hard, white with some red, and had one to three mouths. The mouths were described as similar to the sucking mouth of a leech, but with teeth similar to that of a dog.

Aka drawings of *gundu* (bottom two in Figure 1) were consistently round, white with some red, and one mouth. Aka and Ngandu said *gundu* was found behind the liver, just behind the belly button. Autopsies on *molemba* are not conducted today, but several Ngandu and Aka indicated their parents observed autopsies in the 1950s and told them what *gundu* looked like. Aka and Ngandu also said that they knew what *gundu* looked like because guilty *molemba* sometimes vomited out parts of their *gundu* after taking *mbondo* and some children vomited *gundu* when they were sick. The children's *gundu* did not have a mouth.

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Like witches in many parts of the world, molemba are known for meeting at night and eating the souls or body parts of individuals. The gundu generates the enthusiasm to kill and cause harm. Molemba do it out of intrinsic enjoyment rather than for personal gain. Molemba also work at the request of others. Molemba among the Ngandu are often associated with jealousy of other's material possessions, money, number of wives or children. If someone is jealous of others they ask a molemba to use their gundu to send illness. It is generally directed at family members with wealth because they are expected to share it (e.g., kill brother who is government official because he is rich and does not share the wealth with family). Any type of success—political, economic, social—is often thought to be linked to deals with molemba. Government officials/workers/teachers (anyone with monthly salary), gold and diamond miners, are often perceived as being targets of gundu as well as dealing with molembas to obtain their wealth or prestige. They give up their family members to molembas so they can obtain wealth and prestige.

Ngandu are more likely than Aka to accumulate material wealth and this explains, in part, why accusations of sent illness are less common among the Aka. As mentioned above, equality between households is an important value among the Ngandu and sent illness is one mechanism by which it is maintained.

Sent illness is often suspected if someone has been sick for some time and has not responded to indigenous or Western medicinal treatments. Aka and Ngandu turn to a healer who takes mbondo, the poison oracle described below, to see if a sent illness is involved and identify who is responsible. If sent illness and a molemba are identified, the molemba is presented with the verdict. If they reject the accusation, they take mbondo him or herself or ask someone to take mbondo in their place to demonstrate that they are innocent. If they accept the accusation and the victim is still alive, the molemba searches for medicinal plants to cure the person, mixes it with his or her saliva, and gives it to the healer to administer to the victim. The saliva is said to calm the gundu. If the victim gets better, the issue is dropped. If the person dies, the molemba is taken to the police and may be beaten. If the person continues to reject mbondo verdicts and does not take it on their own, they are

taken to the police or mayor's office. Ngandu reactions to guilty verdict can be deadly. In one case, a man was accused over several years of using his gundu to kill five family members. When another family member died and mbondo again identified the man, his son took a machete and chopped his father into pieces. The son was arrested by police, but Ngandu villagers were very happy this very dangerous molemba was dead. A year later the son was out of jail and working in his fields. Local people explained that he continued to kill other family members because gundu excites the molemba, so they often continue to kill even though they say in public that they will stop.

Conversations with police officials indicated that molemba accusations were the number one crime in the commune (about twenty villages), while theft was number two. People were regularly accused of sending illness, and most people were in jail for this crime. Current law does not allow mbondo to be used as an official determination of guilt or innocence, but police officials said it was often used informally and that they felt it was the most effective method to determine if the person was guilty.

Finally, it is possible to try to prevent molemba attacks. Mbondo can be woven into a cord that you wear around your neck or wrist or mbondo can be crushed and mixed with other plants and placed into small cuts made with razor blades on your back or elsewhere ("vaccination"). Some men also get together, generally in secret, to discuss ways to prevent molemba activities.

Searching for the Truth: Mbondo

Mbondon is the primary way to identify someone with gundu. Ngandu men provided the following origin story about the relationship between mbondo and gundu.

Two men, Mr. Mbondo and Mr. Gundu, had a hide-and-seek competition. First, Mr. Mbondo hid from Mr. Gundu, but Mr. Gundu could not find him. They switched positions and Mr. Mbondo looked for Mr. Gundu. Mr. Mbondo looked for a very long time and eventually found him. Mr. Gundu said you are strong and terrible and has tried to stay away from him ever since.

Aka said they knew about mbondo long before the Ngandu and that komba (god) created it, Mobungu

was the first Aka to discover it in the forest, and that Djombi was the first to use it for divination.

The use of mbondo has increased since the 1980s. It was outlawed during the pre-1960 French colonial period and during the early post-colonial period under President Bokassa in the 1960s and 1970s. Local people said mbondo was kept secret during that time, was not used that much, but that some villagers continued to use it. When Kolingba became president in the 1980s people said he recognized that many molemba were killing people and causing problems in the country. There was no way to identify molembas and verify their activities so their numbers and malevolent activities increased, so he changed the laws and made mbondo legal so long as it was conducted in public.

Aka and Ngandu turn to mbondo for a variety of reasons. Mbondo provides truthful answers to important questions they could not otherwise answer: Why is my daughter sick? Why did my wife leave me? Why haven't we been able to capture animals in our nets for several days? Why am I not getting pregnant? Why do I have so many miscarriages? Did somebody steal my ax? Why did my mother die? On a recent field trip we thought someone stole our camera, so local people requested money to pay someone to take mbondo to determine who took it.

To obtain truthful answers to these sensitive issues, one usually finds a healer to drink the mbondo. Any adult can take it, but healers have more experience and knowledge about how to use it. The person taking the mbondo abstains from sexual activity, eats very little, talks to nobody or very few people, and does not drink alcohol the day before taking mbondo (some say they also do not urinate, shave, or wash their faces). Early in the morning he goes to a private location near the camp or village with his one or two assistants. He takes the roots of the plant, scrapes off the reddish bark, mixes the bark with three-quarters cup of water, and waits a few minutes until it ferments and bubbles. Dosage is important and local people pointed out that taking mbondo is like taking any medication; if you take too much of it, such as with malaria medicine, you can die. The healer drinks the mbondo very slowly and then starts to walk back and forth for about twenty minutes. One of the assistants then starts to question the mbondo. The following is an example of questions

posed by an assistant about a man's wife who was very ill.

"Is this a simple illness?" If this is true, give a reaction (no reaction). "Is this a sent illness from a molemba?" If this is true, give a reaction (positive reaction). "Is this person from the capital city?" If this is true, give a reaction (no reaction). "Is this person from the village?" If this is true, give a reaction (positive reaction). The assistant then uses the same structure to go through the names of several people in the village. When the man's second wife is mentioned, mbondo reacts and the healer falls to the ground. The conclusion of this first consultation was that the man's second wife was responsible for sending illness to his first wife. Questions about other individuals were not asked and they had to wait several days to try again, because once the healer falls to the ground the assistant cannot ask any more questions because he may die. It is not unusual to take mbondo three or four times to verify a guilty verdict, especially if one is accused of being a molemba.

Mbondo reacts and provides information through the human oracle with convulsions or twitching. Unlike other forms of Aka and Ngandu divination, the healer does not see any ancestors, spirits, or animals; everything is dark, their "eyes turn back," and they are very dizzy.

It takes several hours to recover from mbondo. It is important that the assistant have antidotes, such as *mbako* (home brewed alcohol), whiskey, palm wine, sugar, or *pina* (hot peppers) and water, to help calm the person after taking mbondo. Individuals rarely take mbondo by themselves; an assistant is needed to administer an antidote and aid in safe recovery.

My friend Mbalika died because he did not adhere to the basic protocol. His daughter was accused of sending an illness that caused the death of his granddaughter. He was very angry that she was accused and wanted to demonstrate she was not guilty, so he took mbondo. He did not know the dosage, drank too much, took it alone, in the afternoon, and did not adhere to any taboos before taking it. If he had had an assistant, the assistant could have provided one of the many antidotes. Unfortunately, he died within hours with blood flowing from his nose and mouth.

Healers said that they usually took mbondo for the first time when they were young adults, just after

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marriage with one or two young children. Only one Ngandu healer said he took it before marriage, when he was just sixteen. His father was a healer, so he knew how to take it. He was in the capital city, Bangui, and could not find his money he needed for school. He took mbondo and the assistant asked mbondo the questions: lost or stolen (mbondo responded to stolen), in house or out of house (mbondo responded to in house), who in house—person or animal (animal). Mbondo revealed that a squirrel took his money and buried it in the floor!

Aka and Ngandu healers often charge to take mbondo. The standard price is 6,000 CFA (Central Africa Francs or about \$12). Ngandu villagers frequently seek out Aka healers to take mbondo, but the reverse seldom, if ever, occurs. Aka do not hesitate to charge Ngandu or other villagers more if they think they can afford it. Government officials from the capital city come to the village seeking the assistance of powerful Aka healers, and the Aka will charge 10,000 CFA if they think they have money. Aka do not charge other Aka money; they may request an ax, machete, pot, dog, or net for the service.

Healers are more likely than others to take mbondo, but anyone can take or assist. Interviews indicated that men were much more likely to take mbondo than were women. Informants said mbondo is dangerous, can kill, could kill a fetus, and that women had to be very brave and strong to take it, and that menstruating women can give bad results. Mbalika is just one example of mbondo's ability to kill, and informants provided stories of several others who died from taking mbondo.

A survey of twenty Aka adults and twenty Ngandu adults in the village found that 20 percent to 30 percent of Aka and Ngandu adult males had taken mbondo and that 80 percent of Ngandu males and 50 percent of Aka males had assisted someone else taking mbondo. Only 5 percent to 8 percent of Aka or Ngandu women had taken mbondo, but 31 percent of Ngandu females and 5 percent of Aka females assisted in mbondo divination. Several of the Aka and Ngandu men in the survey that took mbondo were the sons of healers in their camp or village; they observed their fathers and started taking it on their own when they started healing on their own. Also, most of the women who said they drank mbondo took it when they were older, usually several years beyond the birth of their last child.

Male healers said they stopped or will stop taking mbondo when they get older, usually by age sixty, because they are not as strong and can die if they take it too often. This limited survey also indicates many non-healers take mbondo—about a fourth of men and 5 percent of women—and that an even greater percentage of people are knowledgeable about the process because they have assisted others. Local people are more likely to take it if they have been accused of sending an illness or if a family member is sick and they do not have easy access to a healer to take mbondo.

Finally, we asked healers if it was possible to administer mbondo to other animals, as is the case among the Azande. They indicated dogs could not take it because their hearts were not strong enough, but that it was possible to administer mbondo to a particular type of frog (*kokoyoko*) or chickens. An advantage of a human over the chicken oracle described by Evans-Pritchard is that the assistant can ask the mbondo several questions through the person whereas he can only ask a few questions of mbondo with a chicken because the chicken can die the first time it reacts.

Cultural Diversity

Several commonalities exist in Aka and Ngandu mbondo use, but their distinct cultures and life ways contribute to some differences. Aka were less likely to use mbondo to identify a molemba, but were more likely to use mbondo to identify natural illnesses and illnesses caused by eating taboo foods. They were also more likely than Ngandu to identify the treatment (medicinal plant) for the natural or food taboo illnesses, and were less severe, often dismissing molemba guilty verdicts. Lack of sharing or hunting success were common issues addressed by mbondo. Ngandu on the other hand were more likely to use mbondo for questions about sent illnesses, which led to more molemba accusations, and punishments for guilty molemba were harsher as described above. Jealousy about material accumulation was also a more commonly addressed issue by Ngandu taking mbondo.

A few brief case studies illustrate the differences:

1. An Ngandu man was a successful gold and diamond miner, but after some time both of his wives and his children left him. His cousin, who lived

next door, did not have a wife, children, or fields. Two people took mbondo for the man and found out that his cousin was jealous of his wealth and was responsible for the family leaving him. His cousin went to a molemba to solve the problems. The cousin was taken to the police.

2. An older Ngandu female was accused by her stepdaughter of taking and eating her fetus. The daughter thought she was pregnant, but then it disappeared. The older woman took mbondo without any reaction so she was innocent. The second time her own daughter said she was responsible for her not finding a husband; the mother was accused of using gundu to stop men from meeting her. She took mbondo again to show she was not doing this; the mbondo identified someone else.

3. One of the best Aka hunters killed a large game animal, but did not share it with this woman known to be a molemba. He got sick and died within three days. Another Aka took mbondo to find out cause of death and the woman was identified. She accepted, gave her saliva, but eventually the community accepted her.

4. An Ngandu merchant paid an Aka man a cigarette to capture a turtle for him to eat. The Aka found a turtle and left it at his house, but the turtle got away. The villager was angry, so the Aka man took mbondo to try to find out where the turtle went. Trembling from mbondo the Aka man pointed in the right direction and he found the turtle.

Conclusion

The poison oracle continues to be an important element of central African life. It is used to search for the truth for a broad range of issues confronting

central Africans—illness, death, poor hunting, theft, lack of sharing, and so forth. This is unlike the Azande who use the poison oracle primarily to identify witches.

The use of the poison oracle is influenced by culture, politics, and modernity. Aka and Ngandu asked different questions of mbondo, political history influenced the legal system that banned or permitted the use of mbondo, and new forms of accumulation have probably increased the frequency in which mbondo is utilized. While changes in the poison oracle have taken place over time, it has been culturally conserved and continues to be an important institution in the Congo Basin.

Study Question

How does the use of divination illustrate culturally specific understandings of power, illness, misfortune, and the causes of death? What accounts for the similarities and differences in Aka and Ngandu uses of mbondo poison?

Related Reading and Media

Evans-Pritchard, E. E.

1976 *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Classic account contributing terminology still relevant in anthropology. Originally 1937.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q9HlyONI_10

Full-length (52-minute) documentary about Edward Evans-Pritchard, the anthropologist noted for his studies of the poison oracle used by Azande. Originally aired on television in the 1990s and held by many university libraries, the entire film has been uploaded to YouTube.

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