

Wood, Ivory, and Palm Nuts: A (Dis)Continuation of an Old Sengele Story

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Fig. 1: Collection: Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren; Object number: EO.o.o.2037-1; Name: Eoka, wooden mortar and ivory pestle; Place & Community Details: Sengele? Ngongo Basengele, DRC; Maker's Name: unknown; Materials: wood, ivory; Collector: Léon E. J. Van den Broeck, District commissioner of Lake Leopold II; Date collected: 1910. Collectie KMMA Tervuren; Photo J.-M. Vandyck © KMMA Tervuren.



The wooden mortar and ivory pestle were collected from Ngongo Basengele, Mai-Ndombe province. By recording their main function¹ and the local name of the mortar (*eoka*), the donor provided leads for what could be termed a Sengele story

1 There are different types of mortars among groups from the same cultural area with diverse uses, including crushing palm nuts and sugar cane, pounding cassava leaves, and kneading clay for pottery (see Hulstaert 1957, 583).

featuring three species: the *bososa* tree,² the African forest elephant, and the palm tree. In this text, we will use this object in order to discuss questions of exploitation and extinction, as well as affective relationships of care, especially in relation to gender.

The first part of the story, as it might have been told in the early 1900s, is connected to the three species, and more specifically on the preparation of the popular *mosaka* sauce made from oil extracted from palm nuts. Following earlier ethnographic studies,³ the mortar and pestle epitomise different components of Sengele society and the division of labour. Male labour would be visible in wood carving, elephant hunting, and climbing trees for harvesting palm fruit bunches. Women take up their roles in palm nut processing, food preparation, and distribution. As Vieira would put it in her ethnographic work on palm oil among the Yoóombe,⁴ the products shared within and among households – like *mosaka* sauce – entail relational flows involving affection and care. The fact that mortars and pestles belonged to women suggests their important role in providing such care to the community.

More than a century later, we propose the next chapter to this story. Though *mosaka* remains an important part of the Sengele diet, the ancient mortar and pestle no longer play a role in its preparation. External pressure on the Sengele community compromise access to the basic components that make up this mortar and ivory pestle. Since 2021, the African forest elephant has been listed as Critically Endangered on the Red List of Threatened Species of The International Union for Conservation of Nature.⁵ Apart from habitat fragmentation, the main factor behind its decline is the ivory trade, which intensified during the colonial era. Ivory featured among the three key resources – together with wild rubber and copal – extracted from Mai-Ndombe, which was listed as the private property of King Leopold II before being handed to Belgium in 1908. The international commercial trade in ivory was forbidden in 1989, so even if the forest elephant was still numerous, the Sengele community would not be able to hunt elephants or use ivory as a raw material.

Though also involved in the colonial trade, the fate of the palm tree is different from that of the elephant. In 1911, the British Lever Brothers⁶ and the Belgian Congo signed a convention that contributed to making Congo the first African ex-

2 *Bososa* is the Kisengele name for *Staudtia kamerunensis*, also known through its commercial name *Niové*. Species identification was performed on anatomical sections using an optical microscope by Sofie Dierickx and Kévin Liévens from the RMCA's Service of Wood Biology.

3 See Engels 1910, 468–477 and 482–484; Everbroeck 1961, 212; Vieira 2021, 228.

4 Vieira 2021, 237.

5 <<https://www.iucnredlist.org/>> accessed 28 Feb 2023.

6 It is worth noting that the current UNILEVER multinational was formed in September 1929 by merging NV Margarine Union and Lever Brothers Limited. This was described by the *Economist* as 'one of the biggest industrial amalgamations in European history'.

porter of palm oil in the 1950s.⁷ This led to the creation of vast plantations and thus large-scale deforestation. In the shadow of the colonial agro-industry aimed at export, national artisanal palm oil production had developed to nourish the growing population. With independence, the colonial agro-industry collapsed and oil export ceased at the end of the twentieth century⁸ while the artisanal sector remained active. Although the colonial administration did not select Mai-Ndombe as a priority area for palm oil development, the region was nevertheless influenced by colonial oil processing techniques. A new artisanal production system was born, named ‘*malaxeurs*’, which requires physical strength to operate it, thereby initiating a new labour organisation that intensifies the role of men in palm oil extraction.⁹ The commodification and commercialization of palm tree products impacted the underlying gender roles in the ancient production of *mosaka*. Vieira used a catchy formula to explain why palm nuts ceased to belong exclusively to the female cooking domain: because the triptych of palm tree, wine, *mosaka* has been joined by another one, namely palm tree, oil, money.¹⁰ Finally, the *bososa* tree that was used to construct the mortar might still occur in the forests customarily owned and managed by the Sengele land chiefs (*nkumu lè mbotu*), but access might be currently constrained by Wildlife Works Carbon’s REDD+ concession. Forests are protected through this scheme developed by the United Nations, providing financial compensation for the Congolese government and carbon project developers, but it conflicts with local needs for agricultural land and forest products. Since 2011, Ngongo Basengele has been resisting this forest carbon project, with several episodes of lethal violence.

This wooden mortar and ivory pestle would appear strange to a twenty-first century Sengele woman who buys palm oil in the market or processes her *mosaka* differently. However, through interviews¹¹ we know that some old models of the mortar remain part of the possessions that a few older women have inherited, though they are no longer used. As such, these few old Sengele women and the RMCA are the only ones with a link to this wooden mortar and ivory pestle. They are the keepers of the untold Sengele story; how external pressure on nature, rooted in colonial capitalism, disrupted the multispecies interaction that was at the heart of a Sengele delicacy. Hopefully it will feed the much-needed conversation about the future of the Sengele and their land, about ownership and nature conservation.

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7 Nicolai 2013.

8 Ibid.

9 AGRER S.A. & EARTH GEDIF. 2005–2006.

10 Vieira 2021, 254.

11 Marc Mputungolo, resident of Ngongo Basengele, personal communication, 22 July 2022.

Marc Mputungolo and Rachel Isomi from the village Ngongo Basengele; Julien Volper, Els Cornelissen, Jacky Maniacky, Hans Beeckman, Sofie Dierickx, and Kévin Liévans from the RMCA.

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