

The Sakata Society in the Congo

Socio-Political and Religious Organizational Patterns

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Key words

Sakata society, matrilineal kinship system, socio-political organization, religious determinants, time-persistent patterns, changes

Introduction

The Sakata constitute a substantial minority of ethnographically recorded societies in the hinterland of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaïre, henceforth Congo).¹ It is of signal importance that research is conducted to further explore and reinterpret their original cultural identity and current experiences. This article provides an important opportunity to highlight the singularity of some salient socio-political and religious constructs that define and determine the Sakata in their present localities, and to forge a connection between these significant characteristics. Employing data triangulation at the micro-level of analysis, I hope, among other things, to demonstrate how time-persistent patterns of socio-political and religious life have been significant in identifying and preserving Sakata society, despite the changes brought about by colonialism, decolonization, neo-colonialism, state hegemony, urbanization and autonomization of social fields, as well as the spread of Christianity and global culture into the region between the nineteenth century and the present.

The synthesis draws on ethnographic data gleaned from two Congolese settings, namely the Mabie Chiefdom and Bandundu City, on various dates between 2003 and 2007; 2009

¹ The Sakata speak of themselves as *Basakata* (singular *Musakata*) and their language as *Kisakata*. However, I omit herein the prefix ‘Ba’, except in some instances of quotations, in the interest of simplicity. Studies on the existence or non-existence of the terminology *Basakata* in pre-colonial Sakata communities are too scarce to allow us to draw any definite conclusions from it. However, it is a valuable clue in our investigations that the ethnonym “*musakata*” or “*mosakata*” probably derived from the verb ‘*zaa boi*’ (to inhabit) and from the Lingala word “*kati*” (middle, centre). Given the prefix “*moba*”, its origin would be “*mosakata*” (plural *basakati*), meaning “inhabiting in the middle”, a formulation that would refer to the present geographical location of Sakata homeland (Bayens 1913-1914, IV: 160). Throughout this article, I have, on the basis of a great deal of valuable information, represented the Sakata as a matrilineal society. It would be incorrect, however, to claim that they are patrilineal society, as Tonnoir (1970) did, perhaps for lack of sufficient ethnographic evidence.

and 2015. For data collection, I chose these two field-sites because of my extensive experience of living and working in the region. The Mabie Chiefdom is home to approximately 50 small subsistence farming villages located in the Sector of Mfimi that belongs to the present-day Kutu District (Mai-Ndombe Province) in western Congo. Apart from the purely practical consideration of ease of access, it was typical for this case study because the Sakata formed the mass of the population. Bandundu City (headquarter of Kwilu Province) is located on the Kwango River, between the Kwilu and Kasai Rivers, about 432 km from Kinshasa (the national capital and largest city) in the central-west of the Congo. It is divided into three large administrative areas (Basoko, Disasi and Mayoyo) known as *Communes*. Within each of these communes there is a further geographical division into *Quartiers*. More recently, however, the city has continued to expand through new large residential and commercial developments. Its population is made up of about 20 ethnic groups speaking different Bantu languages. Christianity is the majority religion in the area, followed by Kimbanguism (officially “the Church of Christ on Earth” founded by the prophet Simon Kimbangu), and traditional religions. I chose this site because I noticed there a great number of long-term Sakata residents and more transient Sakata households. Interestingly, pilot research has shown that they have brought with them religious beliefs, therapeutic techniques, relic veneration, and social forms of the Sakata, using the cherished traditional resources to set going something local but something recognizably African.

Sixty-five Sakata households (45 in rural and 20 in urban settings) agreed to participate in the research and a total of forty individuals from these households participated in the interviews. Over half of the participants were male. These Sakata households were chosen because of the level of participation in various socio-political and religious activities and the importance ascribed to their historically recorded past and some changing social conditions in the present. Within this sample, specialist informants, who provided relevant points of view on the aspects researched, included the traditional political chief and village chiefs of Mabie chiefdom, and elderly persons of different localities. Regular informants, who have a far-reaching knowledge of local history and culture, included local officials, social workers, eminent academics, and persons representing the younger generation. Almost half of the participants had lived in the region all their lives. Sakata participants who engaged in subsistence farming accounted for almost three quarters of the sample. Given the nature of the research aims, I decided that participants should be over 18 years of age to assure meaningful responses.

The research was conducted in the Lingala and Kikongo languages (two of the four national languages spoken in the region) as well as in the Kisakata language and in French (the official language) as needs demanded.² Data collection was conducted in a flexible manner, within a multi-method approach (David & Sutton 2004; Axinn & Pearce 2006; Maxwell 1996; Russell 2006), in order to access different types of data so as to complete the

² Kikongo, Lingala, Kiswahili and Tshiluba are the Congo’s four national languages.

required ‘picture’ of the present-day Sakata society. At all phases I worked with four qualified Sakata research assistants (two from the Mabie chiefdom and two others from the Mbantin and Batere chiefdoms respectively). The two-hour semi-structured interviews focused on the socio-religious and political systems of the Sakata, and historical events that have befallen them. The opened-ended, unstructured interviews (Mattson & Stage 2003) were conducted in the home with single households and key informants together. The interviews were taped and transcribed for the purposes of analysis. In addition, two focus group discussions were held with women from different age groups. In the process, I scrupulously reviewed all the relevant data. Every year, during the period of the study, key informants in rural and urban areas were then re-interviewed to obtain additional information and to make comparisons. On some occasions, however, the country’s political unrest/turmoil and social insecurity which disabled means of transportation prevented my access to some of my intended interviewees. Secondary data were also used, whenever available, to contextualize the key outputs of the assessment. Data gathered through different methods therefore allowed triangulation of various datasets and contributed to the reliability of data analysis.

Within the sampling strategy adopted, I particularly tried to understand various aspects of their society and religion, perceptions and lived experiences from the members’ point of view—not merely analyzing them from a third-person perspective. The term ‘religion’ is used herein merely to denote ‘a covenant faith community with teachings and narratives that enhance the search for the sacred and encourage morality (Dollahite 1998:5). Three main integrated and interrelated themes surveying past and recent research drive the analysis forward. I argue that the matrilineal kinship ideology and religious forms constitute dynamic forces at the foundation of the Sakata culture. It is precisely in terms of this enduring interdependence between these two areas of their social and religious life that the Sakata have increasingly ensured the combination of adaptation and continuity in their present localities.

1. Ethnographic Background of the Sakata

1.1 Identification and Geographical Location

In his seminal work (1966a), Belgian Anthropologist Jan Vansina classifies the Sakata as part of the Lower Kasai Bantu-speakers found in the hinterland of the Congo. This heterogeneous group of Bantu-speaking peoples indeed forms what he calls the ‘Boma-Sakata cultural clusters’ (peoples sharing features of social structure, material culture and worldviews) which includes the Nku and several ethnic groups broken up into small political fragments. These diverse groups speak different though related languages and have different histories, socio-political organizations, cultural and religious practices (For further details, see Birmingham 1981:87-93; Vansina 1966b; 1992; 1994; 1995; 1999).

Within the Mai-Ndombe Province (Figure 1.1), the Sakata corporate land (Figure 1.2) is

precisely located in the Kutu District (19,237 km²). There it covers an area of roughly 180,000 km² bounded in the north by the Mfimi and Lukenie Rivers, and in the south by the Kasai River which flows into the Congo River, the second largest river in the World in terms of freshwater discharge (1457 km³ yr⁻¹).³ The vast area forms an isosceles triangle, starting in the west at Mushie District with a latitude of about 2.30°, at the confluence of the Mfimi and Kasai Rivers, and ending in the east at the Lukolela River with a longitude of about 17°, where the Sakata share borders with their neighbors, the Nkundo-Ipanga. The length of the whole Sakata homeland measures about 225 kms and the width distance between the Kasai River and Lukenie Rivers measures approximately 80 kms (Nkiere 1984:31; see also Bylin 1966: 31, 37-46; Denis 1935:481). A glance at the data in Figure 1.3 below shows that Sakata communities share borders with many Bantu-speaking ethnic groups, namely the Boma, Sengele, Ntomba, Nkundo-Mbelo and Nkundo-Mbindjankama in the north, and with the Nkundo-Ipanga in the east, as well as with the Yanzi in the south (on the left side of the Kasai River).

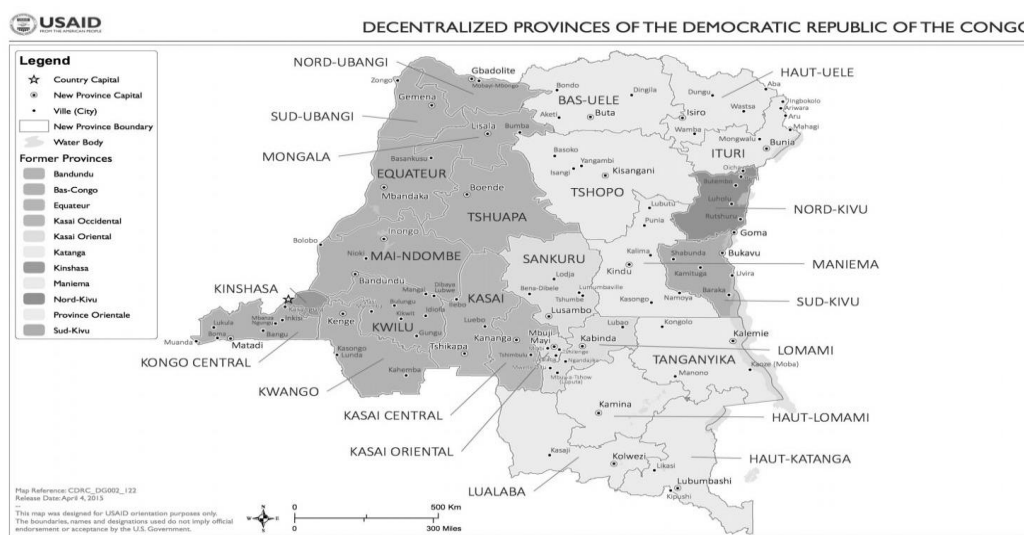


Figure 1.1 Map of the Democratic Republic of Congo showing Mai-Ndombe Province and Bandundu City mentioned in the text

³ From the socio-cultural anthropologist and social archeologist’s standpoint, it is interesting to note in the words of Patton (2014:89) that, like the Australian Aboriginal people, so too the Sakata’s utilization of their landscape (lake, rivers and land) is “mediated by long-term patterns of customary tenure and reinforced through rituals to maintain and negotiate boundaries and interfaces, and through these interactions, maintain individual and group identities”.

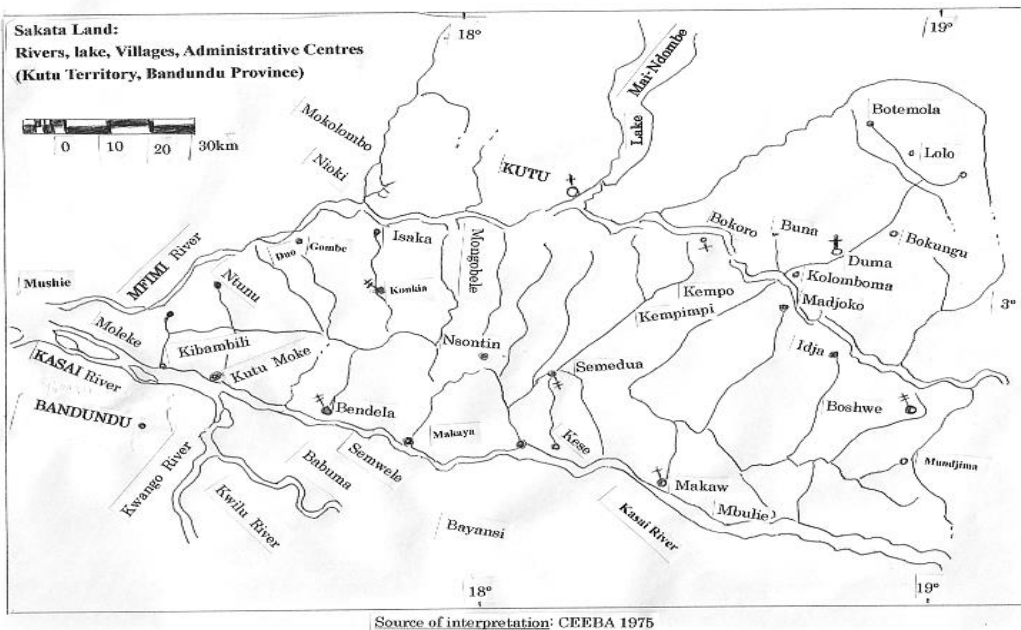


Figure 1.2 Map of the Kutu District showing Sakata Corporate Land and surrounding regions

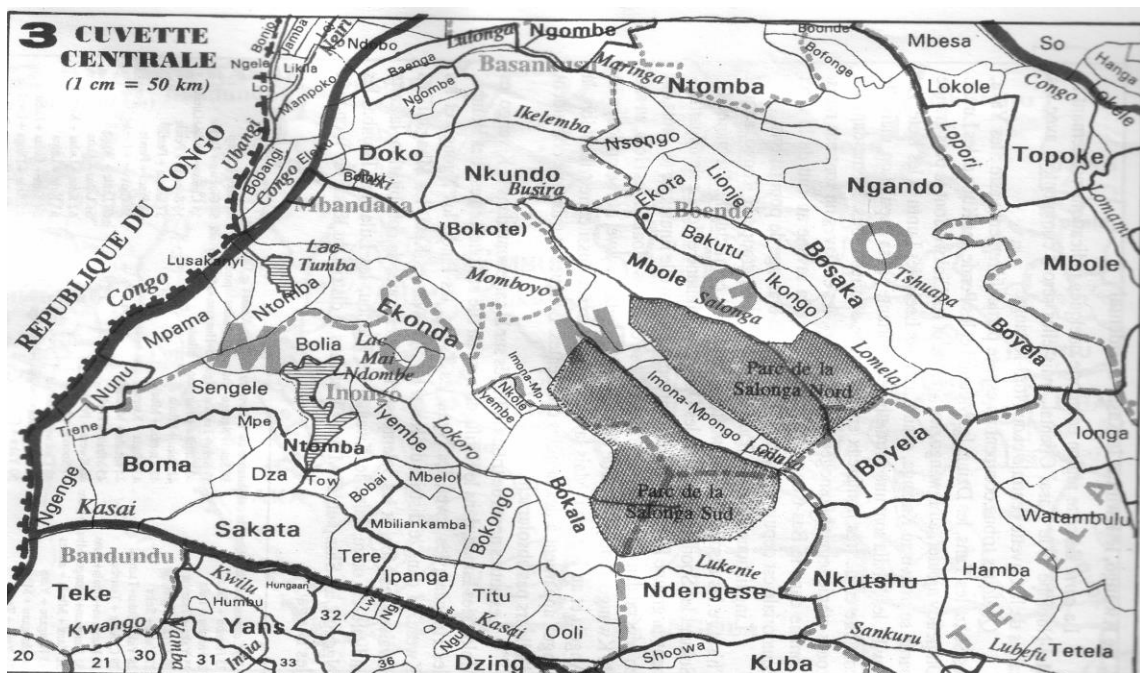


Figure 1.3 Ethnic Groups in Central Congo Basin
Source: De Saint Moulin 2003:108 (Carte 3, fig. 6)

The vast region exhibits a tropical semi-humid climate, with heavy rainfall. The vegetation is mostly savannah covered plateaus which are naturally cut by streams, springs, rivers and Lake Mai-Ndombe (120 kms long and as much as 50 kms wide at one point), as well as by pockets of thick and gallery forest every 20 to 50 meters, all along the

waterways. There is a further consideration: “In the north–eastern parts of the region can you also find the big National Park of Salongo. Oil has been found near the big lake (Lake Mai-Ndombe) some twenty years ago but no one has bothered to pursue this for many years, because of the collapsed infrastructure and problems involved in operating a company there” (Eriksson 2006:22). The huge river system has historically served as a primary means of transportation, and thus also of cultural diffusion and influence. The main means of transportation for the Sakata people are ferries, planes, and dugout canoes. Lack of jobs and better means of transportation is the most often cited barrier to employment among the Sakata living in rural areas. Equally the lack of road communication resulted to the isolation of the area from the rest of the country for a long time. Sakata populations living in urban areas continue their ethno-historic linkages and attachments to the area.

1.2 History

The following is a brief historical sketch of Sakata society. Note at the outset that I will not be interested in the past for its own sake, but only as it throws light on the present structures and social life of the Sakata.

1.2.1 Migration and Settlement

There is scarcely any scholarly material about the origins of the Sakata. The attempt to conduct systematic research in this specific area is a far from straightforward task. This is partly because the absence of early historical and archeological records makes it difficult to be definite about their pre-colonial society⁴. However, by comparing fragmentary oral evidence preserved through generations with the empirical and linguistic evidence so far available, ethnographers and historians have recently attempted to piece together the narrative of historical trajectories, early and late material, social and ideological processes of the Sakata in the region.

The intriguing question of when, how and why the early Sakata groups migrated to the region of Lower Kasai has prompted considerable debate (Tonnoir 1970; Cornevin 1963; Bompere 1958; Denis 1954; see also Van Everbroecker 1961; Focquet-Van Kerken 1924 quoted by Nkiere 1984:26), and not all research points convincingly into the same direction. However, the orthodox view, to the best of my knowledge, is that early Sakata groups probably migrated into their present homeland (Kutu District) around the ninth and tenth centuries (or even earlier) from the northwestern corner of present-day Cameroon and southern Nigeria (Tonnoir 1970:57; see also Cornevin 1963:27-28, hypothesis based on the 1957, 1958 and 1959 Carbon 14 dated by Naquin and J. Hiernaux). They are said to have

⁴ This observation is not surprising, partly because of the following widely acknowledged reason: “The study of history came late to Central Africa but is now developing rapidly. In the pre-colonial period it asks new questions about each facet of population growth, each economic innovation, each interface between the inner world and the outer world, each evolution of religious perception, each new mastery of political skills, each realignment of kinship networks” (Birmingham 1981:vii).

left those parts of Africa before the arrival of Europeans by crossing the Ubangi River. It might seem peculiar that this migration took place in different groups and periods (Figure 2).

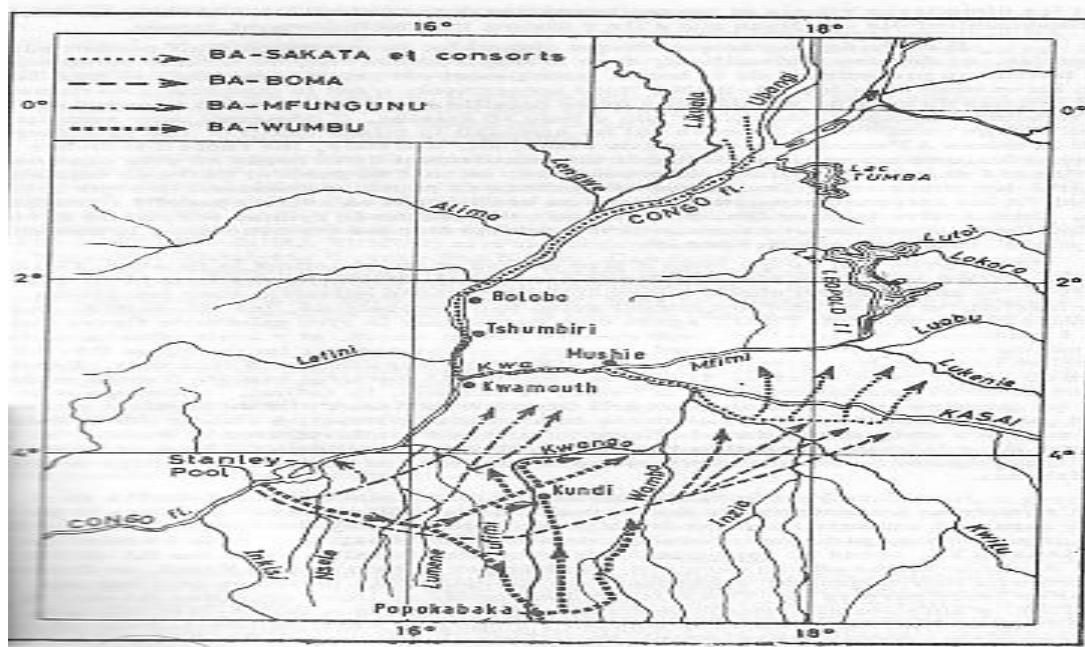


Figure 2 Map of Presumed migrations in 9th, 11th and 12th centuries

Source: Tonnoir 1970:44

Oral tradition that I recorded in 2003 from specialist informants and elders of the Sakata, for example, suggests that the ancestors of the Sakata migrated in large numbers in the middle of the second century. Overpopulation, draught and famine in their original locality could have been incentives of their migration into the Central African Republic, where they were called “*Basar*”, a descriptive appellation meaning “people from the Sahara desert”. From there they moved to Congo-Brazzaville, crossing the Congo River embarking on the coast at the present-day Bolobo village. Even though the land appeared unoccupied, they decided not to settle, but rather to continue the journey until they reached the coast of the present-day Mushie District, where the Mfimi River joins the Kasai River. At this stage, the large community of the Sakata split into two groups. The small group, which was afraid to continue the long journey, settled at the wells, and was then called Baboma of the north by others who saw themselves as courageous. The word ‘Boma’ means “fear, afraid” in Kikongo language, and literally Baboma (plural of “Boma”) would mean fearful people. Members of the large group then continued the journey until they reached the wells of Biboko, an Island that separates the Kasai and Mfimi Rivers. Later the remaining community of Biboko split again into two groups. The small group migrated towards the right bank of the Kasai River, where it connects with the Kwango and Kwilu Rivers, and finally settled in the Ombali village, on the opposite side from Bandundu city. This group was then called Baboma of the south. The large group that remained in Biboko land

occupied both the left coast of the Kasai River from Biboko to Dungu land (where the Sakata share borders with the Nkundo of the Kasai River), and the right coast of the Mfimi River, as well as the land along the Lukenie River, where the Sakata share borders with the Nkundo of the Mai-Ndombe Lake. Of great interest to this narrative on the earliest ancestors of the Sakata is the peculiar fact that their occupation of the Kimbali-Mayi land is attested to by the “great baobab tree” (*biboko*), in an excellent state of preservation today.

Not much is known about the distribution of the earliest forebears of the Sakata in the Kutu region. Nkiere (1984:30)’s evidence, however, indicates that they would have probably settled first in the present-day Lemvia-Sud (Mbanzankwi) chiefdom.

According to testimonies gleaned from my informants, the ancestors of the Sakata would have immigrated by clan groups. On their arrival in the region they currently occupy, each clan settled in unoccupied territory. It was in the present-day Lemvia-Sud (Mbanzankwi) chiefdom that these pioneers initially settled before experiencing a gradual dispersion due mainly to overpopulation. The rest of the country, in particular, the present-day Mabie chiefdom, was still uninhabited and was part of the two Lemvia [Lemvia-Nord and Lemvia-Sud] chiefdoms which at the time formed a single whole entity starting from Lukenie to Kasai Rivers. (My translation from the original French).

Already from their earliest forebears the Sakata had inherited a history of domination and power. Under the pressures of overpopulation, for instance, it is reportedly that the Sakata had usurped some neighboring ethnic groups and conquered their lands, leading to a social crisis. Nkiere (1984:30) aptly observes:

The dispersion of the clans throughout the country was not made without a blow here and there. There was sometimes a tradition of conquest. The best-known case concerns the country’s eastern region. A conflict between members of the same clan among the Batere [sub-group of the Sakata] pushed one of the members, the chief Mukamata, to cross the Kasai River and forcefully settle in Bagata territory. As a conqueror, he organized several clashes in Yanzi country and hence spread panic [and desolation in the area]. To make peace the Yanzi of the region had, by customary treaty, to give portions of land to the chief Mukamata. In addition, the sister of the Yanzi chief of the region was also given in marriage to the chief Mukamata. This union therefore cemented the ties between the two sides, fostering peaceful coexistence [in this specific region]. (My translation from the original French).

This becomes telling because one major finding of our previous study (Munsi 2008) is that many chiefs engendered antagonism in their own communities by unscrupulously

seizing upon their new-found authority as an opportunity for defrauding their people. Those conflicts affected the population rate and were one of the incentives for the practice of ‘secret societies’, sorcery and witchcraft as means of defense and protection of the families, lineages and clans, as well as the village communities and chiefdoms. One thing seems certain: If any organization existed in pre-colonial Sakata society, it was rather within the framework of customs which had been institutionalized over the centuries at the level of village communities, matrilineal lineages and clans, which I discuss further below. Since their settlement in Kutu territory, Sakata communities have been commonly known for iron arms and tools technology, arts of pottery and weaving, folkloric dance, and traditional medicine and health.⁵ The study by (Bekaert 2000) offers probably the most comprehensive empirical analysis of the latter theme.

1.2.2 *Exploration and Colonial Periods*

The encounter between the Sakata European navigators, explorers, conquerors, colonizers, merchants and missionaries had reportedly a two-fold aspect: immediate and practical. At both levels, much evidence indicates that conquest, colonization and trade led to modes of domination or coexistence and multi-faceted trans-cultural relationships. The following is a glowing review of it. From 1874 to 1884, during his third trip to Africa in the service of King Leopold II of Belgium, Welsh-born journalist I. Henry Morton Stanley opened the Congo River Basin and laid the groundwork for the Congo Free State, largely by persuading local chiefs to grant sovereignty over their land to the King Leopold II (1835-1909) of Belgium, after setting up 21 trading posts along the river. During the Berlin West Africa Conference—but not the Conference as such (1884-5)—convoked by the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the participants, representing fourteen European states and the United States of America, agreed to recognize King Leopold II of Belgium, as the sovereign of a “Congo Free State” (CFS) or *Etat Indépendant du Congo* (AIC). As a result, his government began a move to “imprint a Belgian character upon Christian missionary work in the Congo” (Reardon 1968: 85;86) That character was Belgian Catholic, the religion of their motherland, which was also a state supported church.

The first extended contact of the Sakata with Western culture took place between 1882 and 1888 when Henry Morton Stanley explored the Mai-Ndombe region, followed by Kund, Tappendeck and A.Delcommune (see Van der Kerken 1941:476; Van Everbroeck 1961:49, quoted by Nkier 1984:148). These explorers have reportedly gathered the most ethnographic history to date. Their studies included that of the social, political, economic, and religious aspects of the Sakata culture.

⁵ In the light of Maes’ empirical evidence (1930:88-90; 100-1), Rowlands (1973:594) for example, recorded that the Sakata metalsmiths in Congo are hierarchically ranked on the basis of the metalwork they can produce. Thus “the production of parade objects and insignia could only be done by the master-smith who also happened to be the village chief”.

There is a further aspect. Between 1885 and 1895 the Sakata territory was also attached to the District of Kasai, which then included a portion of Katanga, Kasai, the whole Leopold II Lake, and the whole Kwango region. In August 1895, however, the Sakata were detached from the Kasai District to be incorporated into Leopold II District, with the Centre Kutu as the administrative capital. On 9 August 1895, a large portion of the Sakata homeland fell under the patronage of the King Leopold II, in what was variously called either “*le domaine de la couronne*”, or “the crown domain”, which covered a total area of approximately 250,000 square kilometer (Barbara 1988:259). It is surmised that the colonial powers’ main source of income was the exploitation of rich rubber plantations and ivory resources (Anstey 1966:1-3; see also Greinker, Lubkemann & Steiner 2010:425), as well as copper and gold in the Congo. Consequently, Sakata populations were subjected to horrible atrocities during this time. Hands were cut off, people were whipped, and kidnapped, held hostage and many other cruelties were committed in Leopold’s search for ivory and rubber (For further details, see Hochschild 1998). In concrete terms this means that “[from] 1885 to 1908—the crucial years during which the Congo was opened up to European exploration and settlement—Leopold controlled its destinies. The Sovereign—who never set foot in his African kingdom—was very largely responsible for the way in which relations between Europeans and Africans developed there” (Slade 1962: iii). It should be noted in passing that European (especially Belgian) presence signified forced labor and relocation, but also availability of manufactured goods, services like health and education, and the introduction of cash economy.

1906 brought some structural changes to the Sakata homeland. Notable among them are the shift of the administrative centre from Malepie (present-day Kutu) to Inongo, the administrative headquarter of present-day Mai-Ndombe Province. The pre-existing seven large chiefdoms of the Sakata were officially recognized and integrated into the colonial administration by Belgian colonial authorities. With minor exceptions, the Belgian administration came to control the entire Sakata society through its prominent chiefs, leaving the internal organization of the society intact. These changes took place under the ‘colonial policy’ that was generally ‘paternalistic’ in tone and ‘indirect’ in administration.⁶ Local chiefs were used as pawns of the government; often they were removed from power if rumored to be anti-colonialist. Belgian colonial authorities played the role of tutor among local populations and controlled them through local traditional institutions. To reduce the power of the regional ethnic groups, the latter were all incorporated into a unified administrative system (Nkasa 2005; for historical review, see Fabian 2001). Even though the extreme violence of the state, which the Belgian monarch Leopold II held as his private property, led to a huge international scandal and obliged the Belgian parliament to annex it in 1908, it is assumed that this pre-independence Belgian rubber regime lasted until 1933 (Anstey 1966:67). Even now, the majority of long-time residents interviewed still

⁶ It might seem peculiar that the Belgian colonial administration affected local leadership by sometimes changing chiefs based on their willingness or lack of willingness, to collaborate with Belgian administrators.

remember those Belgian colonial atrocities.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century Christianity has been adopted by large segments of the rural Sakata population (Mputu 1999 among others). Major life transitions (such as birth, puberty, and death) were marked by religious ceremonies, many of which combined Christian and ancestral traditions. Thus far, many contemporary ethnographers, especially Congolese professor Nkiere (1984)—whose work features prominently in this paper—have argued that the spread of Christianity and urbanization, and urban development (as a result of the period of state hegemony and modernization), have, in many ways, changed some religious perceptions and attitudes of the Sakata. This reflects the acknowledgement that “[no] religious world can remain the same forever and in response to this traditions undergo transformation processes, answering to the needs of the community; new places, roles and powers gain recognition whilst old places, roles and powers gain new meanings” (Lawson 1984:9).

But the positive aspects of Christian (mostly Catholic) mission apply only to certain subjects, or in certain contexts. In other places, we are told that the misinterpretation of the Bible and Christian teaching instead led some ministers to destroy precious things such as statues that embodied the cultural heritage of the Sakata. It is reported for example that in a moment of desperation, a Sakata chief decided to give one precious statue to a vendor. Interestingly, this statue, which held within it the energy to support women in the birth process, was later displayed at the *Cultural Surviving Bazaar* held at the Prudential Center mall in Boston in 2009. A note was stuck to the statue with tape, written in red magic marker and read: “Congo, the last Sakata mask (original) 100 years old” (Figure 3), suggesting that all of the other remaining statues had been thrown into a fire by the Sakata in the insistence of a Roman Catholic missionary priest.



Figure 3 The probable last surviving Statue in a Sakata Village

Photo by Cultural Survival organization, 19 Dec.2009

1.2.3. Some Structural Changes in Post Independent Period

It is reported that the integrity of the existing seven chiefdoms in Sakata society has

continued to be preserved in the region since the creation of the Leopold II District (present-day Mai-Ndombe District) in 1960 and the reunification of the Dia and the Sakata in Kutu territory (present-day Kutu District) and later the attachment of the whole Leopold II District to the Province of Bandundu (present-day Kwilu Province) in 1970 (For further details, see *Mouvements géographiques* 1885:7732;1910:30 & 1913-1914: 4; *Profils du Zaïre* 1972:102-112; quoted by Nkiere 1984: 148-149).

Throughout the 1970s, the whole of Sakata society experienced changes brought about by the reorganization of provinces and districts, which resulted in the incorporation of the paramount chiefs into the structure of the wider Congolese administrative system. In a sense, a Sakata chief became the principal agent between his chiefdom or village community and the colonial authorities. In this context, however, it must be noted that Sakata society had to cope with all these external pressures without losing its internal autonomy. It can thus be submitted here that the great strength and tenacity of the socio-political and religious systems of the Sakata have remained evident throughout these stages of their historical development (see especially Bompere 1998; Nkiere 1984; Mave 1975). Viewed from the public domain, it is ironical that they have been displaying a kind of 'cultural conservatism', which should always be regarded as a good thing, rather than as liable to hinder the assimilation of their matrilineal society into the Congolese national society.

1.4 Population Growth (1970 -2012)

Sakata communities are mainly concentrated in the Kutu District, where they represent the majority of the population. However, Sakata individuals and families also have a substantial presence in various parts of the Congo and of the world, where their numbers have reportedly spiked in recent years. The 1970 census indicated that about 92,900 Sakata people lived in the region, while in 1972 the number rose to 144,718. The 1981 census estimated the number at 140,130 out of a regional population of about 209,513 (Monse 1987:10); in 2003, according to the Interior Provincial Division of Bandundu, the figure was 200,000 out of the total population of 450,930. Since the mid-1980's, however, the Sakata population has been increasing, with an average population density of about 5,16 persons per square kilometer (Nkiere 1984:34). This increase was due to a slight increase in the birth rate combined with a small decline in the death rate. Estimates range upward from 207,000 (see People Groups Organization 2016). The true figure of the core Sakata group's population is probably 300,000 Sakata individuals, excluding those who have permanently settled in urban areas.

Despite this, reliable figures for the total number of the Sakata are still unavailable. In 2012 the population of Kutu District was estimated at 405,796 out of 1,500,000 inhabitants found in the present-day Mai-Ndombe Province. We may estimate (very approximately, in the absence of precise censuses) that there has been a great increase in the Sakata population, due to the rapid increase in the regional population in recent years. In passing,

it should be noted that migration plays a part in population fluctuations. Experience shows that increased permanent or seasonal migration to cities or urban areas accompanied the country's economic development during the 1980's, but there is also significant migration between rural areas as people leave their places for more productive work or farm opportunities.

1.5 Linguistic Classification

The Sakata—united in the special type of kinship resulting from the matrilineal descent system—speak Kisakata (Kesakata or Keshaa), a Bantu language that the Turverer School (1867) classified into the category of B/B34 Zone languages within the phylum of the Niger-Congo family, whose varying degrees of similarity and dissimilarity have long been recognized.⁷ Knowledge of the spoken and written language of the Sakata is nevertheless scant, due to the small number of systematic studies. Given the size of the population and the territorial range of the Sakata, there is much dialectical variation in their language (i.e. *waria*, *kebai*, *mokan*, *kengengei*, *kitere* and *kintuntulu*), to the point that some dialects are barely intelligible mutually (Monse 1987; De Witte 1955). However, in education, government, trade (including expatriate business), and evangelization Lingala (one of the four national languages) and French (the official language) are preferred as a tool of communication. Practically, the Sakata residents of Bandundu city are also well acquainted with Kikongo (a national language). In practice of course, Lingala appears to function as a crucial element in local communities' political and economic development and ultimate regional integration.

1.6 Subsistence and Economic Activities

The Sakata, whom some ethnographers have accurately identified as hard workers and who value self-sufficiency, live in an area which is, by Sub-Saharan African standards, densely populated and agriculturally productive. For livelihood, they rely mainly on stable, ecologically sound, and efficient slash-and-burn type of shifting cultivation and a mix of fishing. Men are primarily involved in 4 to 6 months fishing expeditions, but heavy agricultural labor such as logging and cleaning fields also fall to them. Women are engaged almost exclusively in subsistence agriculture. Put differently, they are major agricultural producers. They farm the land above water-levels and hoe the weeds, but both genders do the harvesting together. The main food crops (old and new) include cassava the (main staple food since the nineteenth century), corn (maize), sweet potatoes, yams, beans, root

⁷ The linguistic foundations of Bantu migrations are discussed in two chapters in Collins, *Problems in African History*: Joseph Greenberg, "The languages of Africa," 78-85, and Thomas Spear, "Bantu migrations," 95-98. Vansina's evidence (1995) is also of greatest interest. More recently, however, it is reportedly that on account of the "lack of ancient written records, historical-comparative linguistics has grown to be an important way of accessing the early history of Africa. Within the realm of Bantu studies, ongoing internal classifications of the Bantu languages have not only led to changing hypotheses on their evolution and dispersion, but these linguistic theories have also incited and oriented archaeological and cultural historical research in this field of study" (Bostoen 2006:1)

crops, groundnuts and plantains, peanuts and other grain legumes, oil palm nuts, and rice.⁸ Other crops include coffee, fibers, rubber, vegetable crops, or wild fruits, hunting and domesticated livestock (ducks, chicken, sheep, goats and cows). Beside their contacts with Bobangi traders, the Sakata have increasingly been involved in a symbiotic network of regional exchanges and the high degree of specialization in fishing and commercial exchanges.

2. Socio-Political Organization

In this section I shall bring together material information gleaned from a variety of sources to determine how the influence of Kinship determinants in Sakata society is particularly reflected in the patterns of village settlements and in the socio-political structures, and why. In so doing, I shall also identify key features of how their dynamic interplay is construed, attempting a holistic account of Sakata society with its institutions. For analytical purposes, I shall deal separately with the social and the political while bearing in mind that the social and political systems develop asynchronously. I draw inspiration from a descent theory that follows Radcliffe-Brown's formulation and deals with actual relations between persons and lineages (Schneider 1965), and Bondarenko (2013; 2006).

2.1 Social Organization

My primary attempt here is to highlight the function of the kinship system of the Sakata in relation to their living arrangements, social classes and political structure, as well as norms and behaviors in different circumstances. Understanding the intricacies of their patterns of social structuring is "significant from a materialistic perspective because they reflect a society's adaptations to its social and material environments" (Keegan & Maclachlan 1989:618).

2.1.1 Living Arrangements

The rural settlement of the Sakata is in villages (officially referred to as localities)

⁸ Cassava (manioc), the most prevalent crop in the region, is classified among many other crops that were introduced by the Portuguese from the Western Hemisphere, while rice was introduced from the East coast of Africa by the Afro-Arabs in the nineteenth century (Meditz and Merrill 1993). Originally the "agriculture of the Lower Kasai was reportedly founded on sorghum and bananas, but these were gradually being supplemented or replaced by maize, and later by cassava, which became the staple food by the nineteenth century...Although it is clear that crops, agricultural techniques, currencies and material goods spread from the west into the Lower Kasai area, it is not clear by what means these influences spread, or at what periods. There is also much uncertainty about the social, political, linguistic and demographic changes which may be ascribed to the influence of western neighbours" (Birmingham 1981:88). Due to its ease and convenience, manioc cultivation would have extended along much of the Mfimi, Lukenie and Kasai Rivers and must have been easily accessible to most of the population.

generally fairly large in size, composed of fifty to a hundred rectangular wattle-and-daub houses. The village infrastructure includes churches and in some cases meeting areas for social activities and for the local *chef de terre* (land chief), a dispensary, and a school. Each village (*uleba or lebenge*) is traditionally headed by a local chief or *chef de terre* (*Mbe ne kyum, Ndza uleb*) issuing from the landowner matrilineal descent group (*Bambe*). Individual households are not interspersed evenly, but in clusters of closely kin-related compounds (sprawling structures). The practice of exogamous marriage serves to create an overlap between residence and kin.⁹ Inter-clan and inter-chiefdom marriage was encouraged. Post-marital residence is virilocal. A Musakata wife moves to her husband's village. She uses land that belongs to her husband's matrilineage and that will be inherited by his sister's children. Thus her children do not automatically contribute to the strength of the household, as they have their own interests to protect in their mother's brother's village. Although the virilocal residence naturally forces brothers and sisters to live separately, it is assumed that male and female members are necessary for the normal working of Sakata society. For this reason, there is always social activity devoted to overcoming the difficulty of the spatial separation inherent in the system.

From the structural point of view, there are two main axes upon which the cluster is internally created. The first is the parent-child relationship, which is a vertical axis. It is about continuity, in the form of developmental cycles and access to land for building houses. In practice of course, the relations between the father and children are carefully cultivated in individual Sakata families. As Schatzberg (1998:83) has commented:

For the matrilineal Sakata, the most crucial relations within the basic family are those between father and children. Compared to the maternal uncle, the Musakata father incarnates understanding, tenderness, and comprehension. The cash economy and spread of capitalist values and modes of production has accentuated the fundamental importance and influence of the father.

The point for consideration is that the father of the family has a definite role to play in the household affairs. However, according to the matrilineal kinship principles, his role is limited by the final word of the maternal uncle (*pipi or Ngonshi*) who holds more power in a given individual Sakata lineage. Thus, we could argue that the maternal uncle is the sustainer of their social, economic and legal interests.

The second aspect to be considered in this social interaction is the sibling set, which is a horizontal axis. It is primarily about cohesion, keeping things together, either through co-residence or affinity. Actually both of these axes are equally important, but they have

⁹ "Exogamous (substantive exogamy) "means marrying outside," and implies that marriage is forbidden within a specified group, usually though not necessarily a *clan*... A clan is usually a named group of people who believe themselves from a common ancestor in the remote past. Members of the same clan usually have special obligations toward one another" (Beattie 2002:1).

different roles in social organization and therefore are not opposed to each other. What this translates into is the observation that kinship and family continue to exist as the foundation of economic, social and reproductive behavior in the Sakata homeland, though the situation of urban areas indicates now the increasing importance of the nuclear family as an economic, residential, and psychological unity.

Why is this residence pattern still exactly and finely maintained? What does this signify to present-day Sakata individuals? Conceivably, this notion of physical proximity of kin-groups and family networks of sharing and reciprocity is essential to the psychological proximity required for stabilizing family units within the wider descent groups and maintaining at the same time people's closeness and their relations to the Sakata hereditary chiefs. If anything, the following points understate the case. Most notably, the house of the village headman (*Mbe ne kyum, Ndza uleb*), for example, is purposely located at the centre of the village, in order to assure the unity of individual households through his political, socio-juridical, economic and religious authority. Nearby are lined up the houses of his married children and nephews who claim a common founding ancestor (*Ngalela*). This matrilineal ancestor occupied a higher position among many other ancestors (*Bale e dzia*) who also lived on earth and have already crossed what is evoked in Sakata myths as the 'river of life'.

Equally important is the fact that the house of the traditional political chief (*Mudju*) is placed at the entrance of the village. And it turns out that there are a number of intriguing reasons for this specific location. One of the most important of these is the emphasis on the mystical security or protection of the village populations and their lands. This suggests that political and religious leadership among the Sakata consists of a series of features that are causally interconnected. One further example should suffice. Close by the house of the traditional political chief (*Mudju*) is found the 'palaver tree' (*nshima*). More usually, it is a place where family and village issues are discussed and resolution of conflicts takes place. Traditionally the Sakata have subscribed to the belief that this important 'palaver tree' was secretly planted in the village by former matrilineal religious priests through a series of rites called 'Placing the first stone to protect the village' (*eteka nshima n'uleba*) performed before settlement. Evidence is still incomplete as to when exactly this tree was planted. All we know is that during those secret religious ceremonies, they also buried two ceramic vessels endowed with spiritual powers with a twofold aim: first, to be in conformity with the will of the deities in the area, and second to protect the population from any misfortune (*usa*) sent by witches. This specific tree has therefore its practical aspect. Its sacredness justifies the strict prohibition against cutting it down.

My sense from the field is that the strict norms of Sakata kinship regarding authority and inter-generational relationship continually play an important part in maintaining the identity and cohesion of residential groups. In addition, there is also a simple realization, given people's mobility and the migration to urban areas, that the influential role played by the matrilineal kinship system even extends beyond village communities, whether through

marriages with other lineages or with kinsmen distantly related. An interpretation of the facts gleaned in Bandundu city, for example, reveals that many Sakata virtually live in a close-knit community and they look out for one another. A common thread linking these kinship networks is the deep-felt requirement to engage in social interaction with people of common cultural history and identity. The Sakata encourage their members to maintain traditional practices of obligation and reciprocity in a new environment. This set in motion a reciprocal, feedback relationship between Sakata migrants to Bandundu city and their circle of relatives in the new location.

Although the experience of the Sakata found in Bandundu city is not quantitatively typical, it is nonetheless characteristic. My sense from the field is that the Sakata extended families tend to nurture the virtues of extended kinship obligations, generosity, cooperation and hospitality. This reality also becomes clear when kinship distance is evaluated vertically and laterally or horizontally. Generational distance affects both intensity and mode (behavior) of social interaction. Laterally or horizontally, affinity induces extra distance, also both in the intensity and mode of interaction (avoidance of behavior). This finding purports to say how cultural background has a strong effect on Sakata migrants' likely choice of adaptive strategy in the new setting. This should not be surprising. It is widely acknowledged in many societies that social behavior, ritual occurrence, and legal action are for a large part governed by a tacit evaluation of kinship distance. One note, however, must be made here. While extended family networks remain extremely important in the maintenance of ethnic identity among Sakata residents of Bandundu city, non-kin networks developed through neighborhood community centers have also taken on a new role of increasing prominence.

Of greatest interest to us is the observation that some Sakata individuals living in urban settings are often engaged in circular migration from rural to urban and back again. Sakata individuals' interrelationship and their degree of cultural emphasis on kinship in a new environment might have facilitated the implantation of modern values into rural areas and the importation of traditional concepts (i.e. kinship ties, religious beliefs and practices and cultural celebrations) into urban areas by Sakata migrants. The impression that emerges is that the interactions among the Sakata residents of Bandundu city involve various kinds of knowledge sharing, the establishment of kinship networks and religious and cultural transmissions. It is evident that some of these Sakata migrants have been engaged in the web of relations and practices within urban institutions of development cooperation. By contrasting the results, we see that the kinship networks that have been transplanted to the urban areas apparently do not differ from the traditional rural networks. Conducting even limited studies would, however, satisfy the intellectual needs of anthropologists. The next step is to describe the matrilineal lineages and clans which represent the binding forces of Sakata society.

2.1.2 Matrilineal Lineages and Clans

The Sakata are organized into a number of structurally similar and functionally equivalent family segments which traditionally follow matrilineal descent patterns. These surviving segments are called lineages—localized communities composed of extended families, whose members trace descent to a known ancestor. These unilineal lineages thus constitute exogamous units, with distinctive facial marks, food taboos, and sets of names: minimal lineages (*mpare*); major lineages (*ipfunne*) and maximal lineages (*mapfunne*, also referred as *kenkare*). The lineages themselves are characterized by their being represented by certain members who are specifically related by their social and religious positions to the matrilineal figure from which the lineage descended (Nkiere 1984:46-48). Thus identity in the life of the Sakata is constructed in large measure through a concern for lineages. As corporate units in economic, political, juridical and religious respects, Sakata matrilineage lineages join together to form clans (*kenkare*), that is, a totem and exogamous community whose members are not allowed to intermarry. These matrilineal clans include all the closely related people in a particular subsistence village community and historical antecedents. Analysis has shown that members of a single Sakata descent group still maintain a high sense of community and a high level of solidarity, which are expressed through kinship terms, sharing practices, and a constant concern for one another's welfare.

It is important to note that these matrilineage lineages and clans are communities of both the living and the dead. The clan category is more appropriate than ethnicity in analysing the Sakata kinship system. The essential point here is that the matrilineal clans represent functional units. They are social entities in which individuals practically disappear in the midst of collectivity. Thus viewed, they constitute social or even socio-political units perfectly defined and customarily immutable, and hence continue to exist as 'the cornerstone of the total traditional fabric', fostering and sustaining Sakata communities linked by a shared culture and spiritual values. There are therefore clear indications that the matrilineal lineages and clans continue to be meaningful for the Sakata by reference to their social functions in relation to certain social practices such as exogamy and incest prohibition. Most notably, the influential role of the Sakata kinship system is seen in the upsurge in social stratification discussed below.

2.1.3 Social Stratification

The entire Sakata society is made up of three major matrilineal clans, which are themselves organized into three strata: the high-rank clan (*Badju*), the landowners (*Bambe*) who also preside over matters of land allocation, and commoner kin groups (*Nsane*) who form the majority. This segmented clan system has been presented as the foundation of Sakata society, and to understand Sakata politics, history and even culture, one merely has to look at their kinship and clan system. The interaction between these three strata is intricate. To date, these Sakata social groupings continue to serve as the most important instrument of social continuity in knitting human relations horizontally and vertically

through generations to demarcate and discharge social obligations with devotion and enthusiasm. Their potential impact is in evidence as societal coordination continues to be largely mediated through the kinship relationship. My understanding of the material thus leads me to believe that Sakata kinship constitutes the major bond for maintaining human relations between the aforementioned three social classes and for regulating ownership even in changing environments. However, it should be noted in passing that the social organization of the Sakata also appears to have functioned simultaneously as an incubator of forces of unity and conflicts, and the history of the Mabie chiefdom reveal valuable examples of this kind.

The above descriptions are of necessity simplified. In the Sakata lands, all social differences continue to be institutionalized as hereditary and inviolate, and social status finds its expression generally through matrilineal descent. Other things being equal, age requires respect, although seniority does not necessarily confer access to the office of highest status in the descent group or in the local community. Males have higher status than females in Sakata society, despite the presence of matrilineal descent groups and matrilineally based succession and inheritance. Moreover, the supporting material and cultural (including religious) base of local identity is inhibited, and class differentiation promoted. More usually, the social differences expressed by variation in Sakata society include community membership, residential group differences, occupational differences, and social ranking. The extent and degree of social inequality expressed by this variation is decidedly less certain in the present study and hence requires much further analysis. It merits remarks as well that lineage chieftainship is also an absolute, not a relative matter. Therefore, it is imperative to argue that without the dynamic elements we find in lineages, clans and social strata founded on the matrilineal system it would be impossible to explain the existence of Sakata society as we know it today.

2.1.4 Gender-Roles Divisions and Father-Children Relationship

The influential role of the matrilineal kinship system is also crafted from other roles, the responsibility of women and men within a specific social milieu defined by specific duties. On the basis of matrilineal descent, for example, Sakata women are the channels through which identity, titles, land rights, and property are acquired. Also understandable in this context is the fact that they exercise considerable influence over the conduct of domestic affairs, and even the allocation of use rights to land. Sakata men typically control the political and economic affairs in the public sphere and have ultimate authority over domestic decisions (a role not available to a woman unless her husband has died or can no longer support his family). However, evidence is accruing that shared tasks provide males and females with valued roles in Sakata society. The continued existence and vitality of the matrilineal kinship ideology among the Sakata is also evident in the area of political organization discussed below.

2.2. Political Structure

This theme also recurred throughout the dataset. Here I focus on Sakata society to more specifically consider the political system as only one of its integral parts. I also treat political culture as a natural part of Sakata culture as a whole, as a manifestation of its general pattern in the sphere of the political that is embedded in institutions, ideologies, legal norms, etc. In the light of the viewpoints developed by Bondarenko (2006:67-72), I therefore label Sakata society according to its more general, inclusive feature (the societal type; or culture pattern).

2.2.1 Territorial Divisions

The Sakata administer their society on the basis of organized kinship groups through social units by a system of decentralization. The results, as shown in Figure 4 below, indicate that the entire Sakata homeland is divided into seven large autonomous chiefdoms known as *Idju*, which have received official recognition since 1906. Traditionally these autonomous chiefdoms are considered as the third level of administrative subdivision, with their administrative centres in parentheses listed below: Mabie (Ndwakombe), Mbamushie (Mongobele), Mbantin (Kempa), Lenvia Nord (Mbaizakwi), Batere (Nsobie), Lenvia-Sud (Ikoko), and Nduele (Admin. centre Nselekoko). It is certainly with the descendants of the early occupants of Sakata homeland that the ethnonyms and toponyms of the chiefdom are associated. Analysis shows that these kinship-based permanent political entities, the framework of which is very old, draw their spatial and human structure from a logic that is clearly one of Sakata identity.

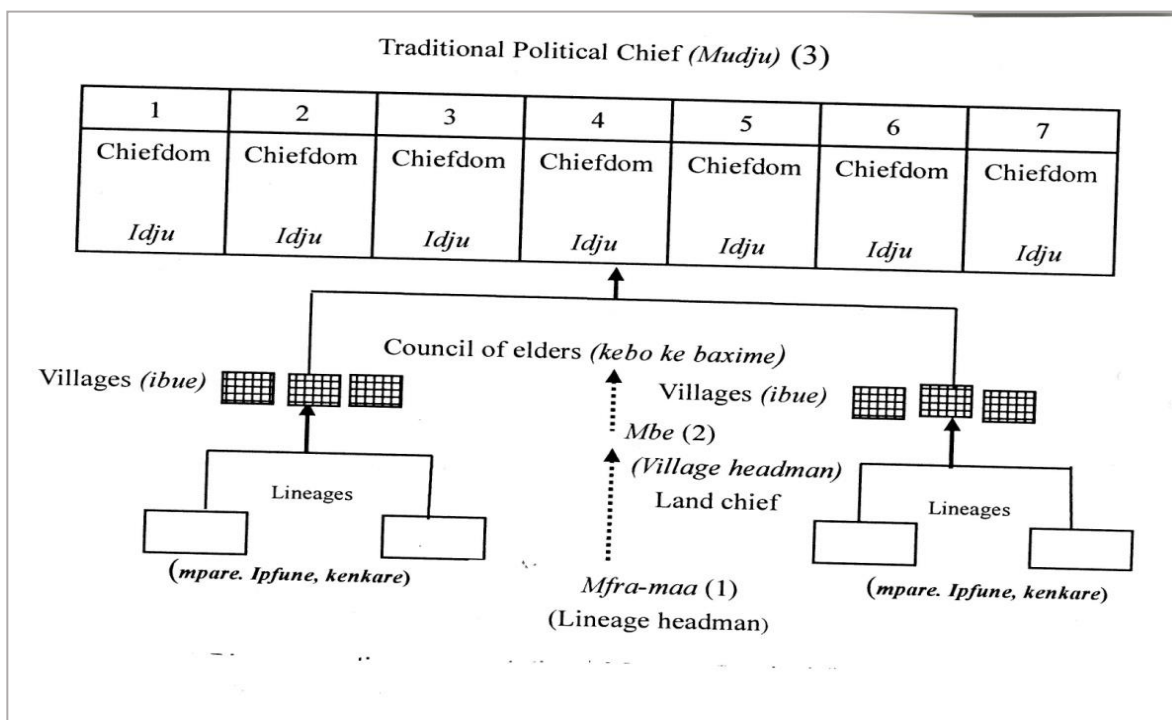


Figure 4 Diagrammatic Representation of Political Organization among the Sakata

Source: Author's Field notes 2003; 2015

More significantly, as can be seen from Figure 4 above, the whole socio-political construction's encompassment of the Sakata is from below, that is from the local community level, while the community itself is underpinned by matrilineal kin ties. The synchronic 'vertical axis' of the social organization represents a purely static aspect of the hierarchical order of social entities with all three categories of matrilineage lineages (*mpare ipfune*, *kenkare*) and their leaders (*mfra-maa*), village communities (*ibue*), each with its headman (*Mbe ne kyeum*), and finally seven chiefdoms (*idju*), each with its administrative centre. This suggests that each single Sakata Chiefdom (*idju*) represents an aggregate of social units: lineages, traditional homogeneous village communities (basic units of political structure) and sub-divisions organized by custom. Each of them is headed by a prominent political and sacred chief (*Mudju n'itsui*) issuing from the matrilineal line. After investiture, he is usually recognized and inaugurated by the provincial governor. Traditionally the Sakata have subscribed to the belief that the traditional political chief (*Mudju*) is the repository and guardian of the symbols and mysteries of their culture in his chiefdom. Equally, when viewed cross-sectionally, it is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that without relevance to the individual households and village communities that make up the socio-political and religious dynamics of a single chiefdom, the traditional political chief (*Mudju*) is not fully living up to his mission.

Moreover, a closely linked assumption has been that this political system of the Sakata, to a significant degree, displays similarities to that of the Mongo of the northern Congo. A possible explanation for this might be that "[the] interaction between the western Mongo and the eastern Teke apparently led to the creation of a new system of kingship with a strong religious core and hereditary court of secular administrators. This pattern of 'socialized kingship' seems to have influenced the Boma-Sakata peoples and led to the evolution of a more complex political hierarchy than existed south of the Kasai" (Birmingham 1981:89). This influence is also manifest in the monosyllabic and consonant terms *Kp* and *gb* found in the Kiskata language (Tonnoir 1970). All we can claim with some certainty is that the earliest ancestors of the present Bantu speakers in the hinterland of the Congo were preceded by the Pygmy inhabitants.

Defined as radically, politically, vertically and decentralized autonomous unit, a single Sakata chiefdom (*idju*) therefore conducts its own social and religious activities. Moreover, it carries on local welfare work among the cluster of villages or hamlets (which are made up of several families and lineages) and provides a meeting place for social functions. In practice, of course, it has its own functionaries (hierarchy of chiefs), whose duties, responsibilities, and rights have been formally allocated. The powers and prerogatives of these Sakata officials are defined by the customary law. This suggests that, for Sakata households and individuals interviewed, kinship is not only ideology but also the real socio-political background. Indeed the very existence and prosperity of the populace is believed to be guaranteed by the presence of the chiefdom (*Idju*) headed by a sacralized

ruler titled *Mudju*. It is also noteworthy that the *Mudju*'s privilege of being vested with titular dignity and the tinsel insignia of office did not prevent his authority being subject to constant interference. This leads us to consider more closely below some salient aspects of chieftaincy or coordinating structure in Sakata society.

2.2.2 Status and Legitimacy of Chiefs

The political organization of the Sakata is based on chieftainship which is linked in principle, and in fact, to the system of unilineal matrilineal descent groups that provides the basic sociopolitical framework of their society. The politically significant matrilineal descent groups are those localized in a single village or a cluster of related village communities. There are also clear indications that in all chiefdoms (*Idju*)—which continue to function more effectively and efficiently in the face of changing conditions—the matrilineal kinship system claims to rule through autonomous paramount chiefs (men and women) recruited from the female line. Until more recently, females sometimes used to inherit chiefly positions. During the period of the study, however, most chiefs I met in Sakata corporate lands were men.¹⁰ The fact that the Sakata's matrilineal kinship system has male leadership means that the clan or lineage segment will have to have both males and females born each generation. Experience of the ruling families in the Mabie Chiefdom between 1923 and 1987 has shown that where there is no male in the matrilineage, the role of lineage head is not assumed by one of the women, but rather, the unit merges with another matrilineage. This is a structural process that needs further investigation in the future, especially in light of labor migration, cash cropping and so forth. Specifically, the mechanism of power in the Sakata homeland is marked by a striking hierarchy of chiefs (men and women) whose secular authority considerably differs at any level. Let us consider now closely the status and legitimacy of these Sakata chiefs.

(i) Traditional Political Chief (Mudju)

At the apex of the pyramid of traditional authority is the office of the traditional political chief (*Mudju n'itsui*) selected from the dominant matrilineal clan of *Badju* and endowed with the power of decision making for a particular chiefdom. He lawfully accomplishes several tasks, such as (a) to assure the maintenance of social order by instilling in people the duty to observe the customary law; (b) to protect the whole chiefdom from any external attack; (c) to strengthen relationships between individual families, households and lineages within the village communities, and between the visible community of the living and the invisible community of the ancestors, deities and Supreme Being (*Nzaw*). Thus viewed, the Sakata consider the traditional political chief (*Mudju*) as a visible representative based on

¹⁰ In the past, certain eminent women seized the political opportunities afforded by the crumbling of male-dominated centres of power. Not only were there women chiefs and counsellors, but common women were permitted to take part in discussion. During the period of the study, however, there was apparently little information about newly invested woman chiefs in the Sakata lands. The reasons for this fact, according to key informants, were diagnosed as lack of observing the regulations and constraints related to the office secrecy.

the blood relationship between him and the ancestors of the clan. In fact, this link with ancestors is symbolized by the stool which the reigning chief occupies. This position as a political and spiritual leader both makes his office a sacred one and let him wield a considerable influence upon his local community. Traditionally, Sakata chiefs wore a red uniform as (Figures 5-1 and Figure 5-2).



Figure 5-1 A Mudju, Traditional Political Chief
in Sakata Society



Figure 5-2 Two Badju, Traditional Political Chiefs
in Sakata Society

However, Sakata history records that some of these chiefdoms were unstable on account of several conflicts. This happened as lesser chiefs or persons not qualified for chieftaincy tried to take power from higher ranking chiefs, or when one chief conquered another. In the chiefdom of Mabie, for example, I noticed at least three salient conflicts. The first was the conflict between the women chiefs Mudju Boshang and Mudju Mamonie. The second was between two men chiefs, Mudju Mbakala and Mudju Iluna. The third conflict occurred between the current chief Mudju Kenine Kenzo (Figure 5-3 & Figure 5-2) and Mvula Tazu (cousin of a chief). Analysis shows clear indications that all these conflicts affected the socio-political and religious organization of the Mabie chiefdom.



Figure 5-3 Mudju Kevine Kenzo Jean-Pierre
Current Traditional Political Chief of Mabie Chiefdom
Photo by the author, 20 August, 2012

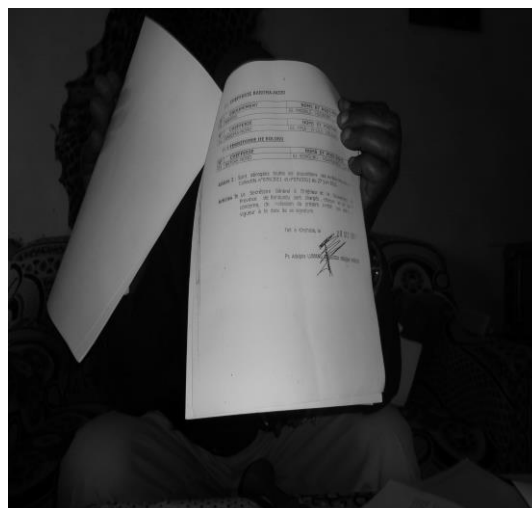


Figure 5-4 Mudju Kevine Kenzo Jean-Pierre holding
in his hands a document released by the Congolese
officials to end up the issue over leadership power
that occurred in the Mabie Chiefdom
Photo by the author, 20 August, 2012

(ii) Land Chief (Mbe)

Beneath the office of the traditional political chief (*Mudju*) is the office of the land chief (*Mbe ne nkeyun*). Lest we overlook the traditional value of the Sakata land chief (*Mbe*) and the authority he formerly had in the pre-colonial period, it is important to note at the outset the deep-seated change in traditional political structure in the history of Sakata society. In pre-colonial Sakata society, we are told that only chiefs issuing from the landowning kin-groups (*Bambe*) had the monopoly to fulfill the basic functions of both the chiefdom and the village. This dual role continued virtually unchanged until the colonial era when the Belgian territorial administrators replaced the office of the traditional political chief (*Mudju n'itsui*) with that of the land chief (*Mbe*) for purposes of control and taxation. What is significant for our analysis, however, is that this major change theoretically created two distinct offices in the Sakata homeland. Interestingly enough, this separation of powers still continues to be routinely applied today in the radically altered social and political scene of the Congo. Over decades it has been grimly reinforced by the initiative strategies that the Congolese State designed in the 1970's to adapt traditional systems of governance to modern urban management, and the political opportunities opened by the changes in State policy after the 2006 general elections.

Yet even in this context, analysis has nevertheless shown that the existing office of the land chief (*Mbe*) in Sakata society continues to effectively preserve the institutional form of land allocation. There is a further aspect. In practice, with hindsight one can see in the Sakata homeland that the relationship between the land chief (*Mbe*) and the traditional political chief (*Mudju*) is quite intriguing. As Riddell, Salacuse and Tabachnick correctly observe:

“The relation between the land chiefs and the political chiefs is an interesting one. The political chief *Mudju* is not a landowner. His entire lineage borrows land from a land chief. This is echoed in the following Sakata proverb: «*Mbe oni be leshaon, ujuu oni be leban*», meaning the authority of *Mbe* is limited to his village, while that of *Mudju* extends beyond the village. Each *Mudju* will have many *Mbe* in his chiefdom, one for each landowning lineage. Historically only two or three of these loaned land to the *Mudju* and his matrikin.” (Riddell, Salacuse & Tabachnick (1987:43).

It is also important to note that the *chef de terre* (*Mbe*) and elders (notables) are recognized locally but not considered part of the State’s administration hierarchy. The principal representative of the Congolese government is rather the local chief or *chef de localité* (*Kapita*). Almost all the villages have a local chief appointed by the public administration. The 2006 Constitution and the Law on Decentralization establish sectors as basic territorial entities. However, beyond the village level, and apart from sporadic visits from the sector-based authorities, the presence of the State is almost existent. This is unsurprising perhaps, as it tells us that each land chief (*Mbe*) is in charge of a territory (*imve*) and traditionally acts as trustee for his or her kinship group. In this respect, the land chief (*Mbe*) constitutes the strongest traditional authority in the village and appears to exercise significant influence over local populations through the control of land distribution for agriculture and of certain hunting and fishing activities. Additionally, he can, with the aid of the native courts, exercises power of adjudication in land disputes and expropriation for offences against the community, and regulates internal conflict or issues of immigration into the village. Immediately after the land chief (*Mbe*) comes the office of the independent land chief (*Mbianshu*). This is practically an additional structural relationship between land chiefs and political ones. This very special kind of land chief (*Mbianshu*) is the primary religious functionary in the society of the Sakata. In other words, his office is homologous with chieftainship, but oriented towards religious practices, including the funeral rites for the traditional political chief (*Mudju*).

(iii) Lesser Kin-Based Offices

The bottom of the Sakata political structure, finally, includes the less kin-based offices of village and lineage heads (men or women) whose villages or lineages lie within the limits of the chiefdom. The privileged status of all these hereditary rulers and their religious functions are chiefly explained in cosmologic myth and the myths of origins. Through conversations with various informants, I gained the impression that the authority of the village chiefs over their own people is absolute, and the village is the administrative unit. Each lineage is a political unit having its own head (man or woman) chosen by the adult men and women of the matrilineage

The essential feature of the Sakata system is that the local political chief (*Mudju*) has supreme authority and power in all executive and administrative matters and is authorized to specify the duties of all subordinate chiefs and officials selected from the matrilineal line. Moreover, all these authority figures, as an integral part of the machinery of administration, legally form what becomes the governing body or the council of elders (*kebo ke baxime*) with the mandate to assist the traditional political chief (*Mudju*) to rule. The council of elders meets on a regular basis in rural villages or towns to discuss topical issues in the community and to adjudicate local disputes, often relating to land use or ownership. Traditional justice mechanisms also exist in virtually every village in the Sakata homeland. Informed opinion indicated that the leaders and elders at this level have the longest-standing authority in customary matters, especially those relating to land. In this respect, they are thought of as being endowed with the power of decision-making for their particular village communities regarding social, religious, judiciary and political matters. For residents of isolated areas where a formal court is literally a day away by foot or boat, these councils provide a forum for communities to seek redress for property theft, land disputes, and other legal-level offenses.

In specific events, however, the above-mentioned political structure is supplemented by ritual officeholders, including diviners, shamans, herbalists/healers or medicine persons commonly called *Nga*, settlement heads, and even contemporary village presidents (*Kapita*) whose main role since colonial times has been to represent the political chief (*Mudju*) and to keep order. Traditionally the Sakata have subscribed to the belief that all authority figures constitute a secret religious society, having specific rites of worship and initiation. Thus they are capable of entering into the visible realm of sorcery and witchcraft. In particular, spirit healers are often consulted for herbal remedies that can help people with problems or health issues. There is a further aspect. In all instances Sakata hereditary chiefs may be thought of as unifying influences; and whether taken literally or symbolically they represent the collective property of the group and add to its cohesiveness and permanence. The obligation, indeed the mandate, of Sakata leaders, is primarily to make certain that the answers they give in the public sphere stand within the purview and under the auspices of ancestors' overall intentions for the families and communities. This recognition creates chances that the Sakata's religious worldview will find coherence and unity in a personal relationship with ancestral spirits. These patterns appear to illustrate the degree to which the rules and enforcement characteristics of social institutions of the Sakata still remain firmly in place, despite social and personal changes within their specific environments. On the question of genealogy, and clan segmentation and its relationship with politics, the two most significant facts concerning the Sakata are their belief in common ancestry which is at the root of their community solidarity, and their segmentation into lineage groups which holds one of the keys for the understanding of their politics.

The intriguing realization is that all Sakata hereditary chiefs play the role of mediators between the living and the dead. This translates into the observation that the matrilineal

kinship system has ‘given rise’ to a kind of priesthood which is dedicated to preserving the cultural values and customs of the Sakata. Thus viewed, it gives and preserves the hereditary chiefs’ position in spatial and institutional hierarchies. For all that, our interviewees told us repetitiously that hereditary chiefs (men and women) are responsible for a variety of tasks including divination, healing, navigation, weather control, and bringing about propitious events such as abundant harvests. It is therefore possible to argue perfectly validly, albeit somewhat simplistically, that frequent religious practice permeates the culture of Sakata communities. This is true whether people are practicing more localized, folk forms of spirituality or are affiliated with Catholic or Protestant Churches, which are strongly implanted in the region since the nineteenth century.

Concretely, our findings have shown that the matrilineal lineage set-up continues to exist as a strong unifying factor cementing the society of the Sakata as a whole, and passing on the Sakata religious beliefs and values about solidarity with the invisible world of its ancestors (*Bale e dzia*). As has become evident in our discussion so far and will be abundantly clear in the next section, the role of the matrilineal kinship ideology is embedded in specific social, cultural, and historical contexts, and within these contexts, social hierarchy represents the finite or defined resources from which individuals carved out their roles. The evidence would appear to suggest that the interpersonal dynamic of members within communities reflect the pervasive influence that the matrilineal line exercises upon members.

Much can be said on the factors accounting for this substantial influence of the matrilineal line, but for the purposes of the present analysis three factors in particular stand out. The first to be noted in Sakata society is that ancestors, as social model and collective conscience, form the basis of interaction through the symbolic power of rituals. A second important factor relates to behavioral patterns. The living individuals are united in solidarity in matrilineal kinship. Gerontocracy, the rule of elders, predominates because elders and ancestors are in close proximity. Figure 6 below is quite telling because it provides a concrete illustration of the way in which this position of elders is constructed in the Sakata lands. Figure 6 shows that both the relations between parents and the relations between lineage groups display a kind of pyramid whose bottom corresponds to ancestors while the top represents the elders. Finally and most importantly, it transpires that the communion with ancestors and deities of the land is expressed through the hereditary chiefs of chiefdoms, villages and lineages who are in turn regulated by the precepts of a matrilineal line. Further details of this analysis, and other aspects of the political structure of the Sakata, may be pursued in Nkiere’s work (1975), which serves as a good preliminary to his more prolific and insightful scholarship published in 1984. Having already dealt with the relationship between kinship and social institutions, a few words need to be said in the next point hints to land tenure, inheritance and succession in the Sakata homeland.

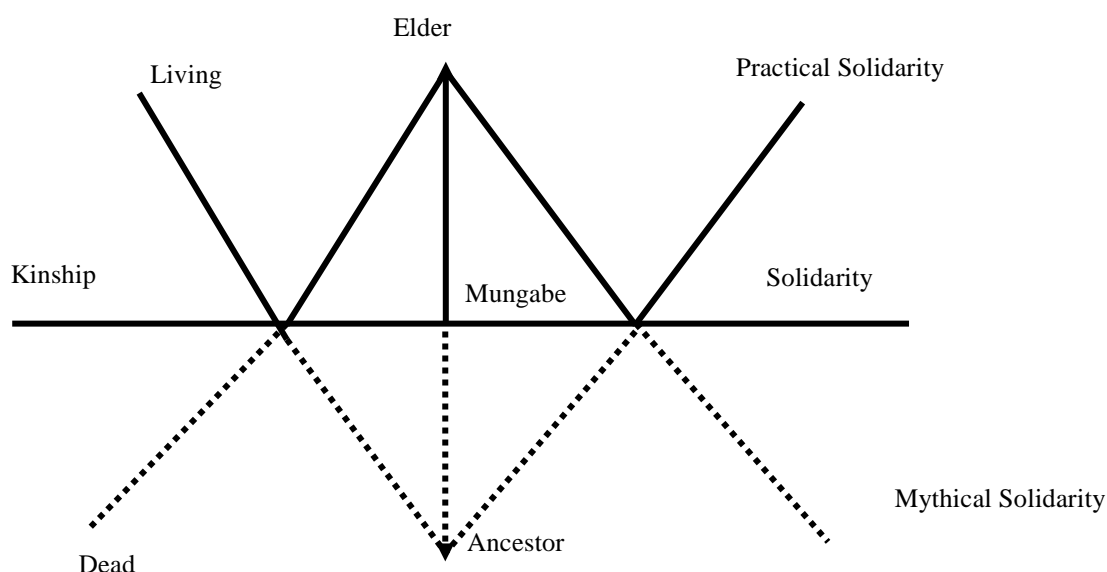


Figure 6 Diagrammatic Representation of the Kinship Order among the Sakata

Source: Nkiere 1984:78

2.3 Social Control of Land Distribution

The value of land is embedded in social structure and social history of the Sakata matrilineally related kin. This is because of a special relationship to their deceased predecessors and ancestors who are buried in their homeland. My sense from the field is that land tenure, social organization, political structure and history are all facets of the same reality as viewed from the perspective of unwritten customary law procedures. Traditionally the Sakata are organized into matrilineal lineages and clans that share rights to land. In other words, their unilineal system is based on the corporate property ownership and economic interdependence of lineage members. Indeed participants in focus groups demonstrate a strong attachment to the land and its resources, referring to the limits when talking about hunting and, in some cases, fishing zones.

It is generally considered in all Sakata chiefdoms (*Idju*) that legal and customary rights and obligations govern land tenure, such as rules and expectations that structure access to and transmission of use rights to land. According to local chiefs of my sample, the rights to use of the land (usufruct) as opposed to ownership are determined by a designated individual or group within the lineage (land chiefs—*Bambe*) with several goals in mind: (1) each family should have enough land for subsistence purposes; (2) the allocation should be equitable so that differences in quality are compensated for by adjustments of quantity; and (3) the land is not allowed to deteriorate but is instead allowed to life follow whenever there is a need to restore soil structure of fertility. More usually land chiefs (*Bambe*) have the right to receive gifts in exchange for their services that can include the promise of allocations from the annual harvests. Observations during fieldwork confirm that the right

to obligatory gifts from land users is one of the most important prerogatives of being a land chief in Sakata society. Usually the land chief (*Mbe*) regulates social control of land distribution. However, in a small number of cases, as Riddell, Salacuse and Tabachnick (1987:43) reported, this duty can be temporary entrusted to his assistant.

The land chief (*Mbe*) can assign his role to an assistant (*mami*), but in no way can this assistant be considered a real land chief nor does he have the power associated with the ancestors or the soil. A false land chief will be rejected by the ancestors who will withhold the fertility of the soil. Cases were related to us of plants not growing, droughts, and sickness all being visited upon villagers who had followed false claimants. Of course, it should be added that these stories were told to us by land chiefs.

There are also clear indications that in every chiefdom the ideology of the ancestors affects rights to land, and historical instances demonstrating that conquered people retained rights to land. It is nevertheless true that recent political and demographic factors have been affecting Sakata land tenure, including demographic expansion and dispersion of power over land among small social groups. Many observers conclude that the maintenance of traditional tenure may actually be one of the most important ways to ensure the survival of the Sakata rural population for the near future.

2.4 Inheritance and Succession

The regulation of property inheritance and status succession is a primary function of kinship structures in the society of the Sakata. Family property is mainly transmitted through the female line. Customs governing the inheritance of land, corporeal property, and certain skills or lore are owned by a corporate descent group, and usufruct rights are inherited upon birth or adoption into a matrilineal lineage. The succession of power follows the matrilineal line. On this point, however, Riddell, Salacuse and Tabachnick (1987:43) made some observations which still stand today.

[In case] it is impossible for a new line of land chiefs to be founded [in a particular chiefdom], it is often the eldest son of the eldest sister who becomes the next land chief (*Mbe*). If he declines or for some reason is incapacitated, it is his next-in-line brother who takes over. Women can and do become land chiefs but under what circumstances was never made clear. Even the frequency of this happening was impossible to determine.

It would be incorrect to infer that there has been no dispute over succession between the matrilineal lineages and clans. At any time a group may be divided among factions supporting specific claimants to the chiefdom (*Idju*). Most oral accounts I recorded in the

Mabie chiefdom, for example, report cases which show that disputes between those claiming individual ownership and those claiming usufruct rights through descent are not uncommon given the competing forms of ownership. Usually, serious “land disputes are taken to the *Mudju* [traditional political chief] of the chiefdom who then calls together the land chiefs in the disputed area” (Riddell, Salacuse & Tabachnick 1987:44). Again, it is on the basis of the matrilineal kinship ideology that Sakata customary formal legal codes and courts often handle these disputes and govern the disposal of property in cases of succession. The matrilineal kinship ideology requires vertical integration of the social hierarchy within matrilineal groupings. Many cultural forms and institutions developed by the Sakata bear little resemblance to the prototypes of their neighboring ethnic groups. This is not surprising, given the considerable heterogeneity of the populations of Mai-Ndombe Province and the conditions under which they had to survive from their pre-colonial settlement to the present.

3. Religious Beliefs, Practices and Experiences

The organizing principles of religious beliefs, practices, and experiences among the Sakata constitute an area that equally proves informative in regard to their relationship to the matrilineal kinship ideology. My specific focus here is limited to highlighting some of the varied ways in which religious commitments are experienced, organized and transmitted, and yet politicized in the Sakata lands. Issues related to the practice and meaning of traditional medicine or traditional health beliefs and practices, of which Bekaert (2000) has given an innovative semantic analysis, were not particularly prominent in the interview data. My argument is that daily strict respect in religious matters aims not only to maintain social cohesion, but also to define Sakata cultural identity.¹¹

3.1 The Hierarchical Triangular Structure of Sakata Traditional Beliefs

The ethnic religion of the Sakata is based on a system of spiritual beliefs, religious practices and faith communities that includes two interpenetrating worlds: the visible world of human experience and the invisible world of various spirits. Traditionally, they have subscribed to the belief that the invisible world enfolds a hierarchical triangular structure of spiritual order (Figure 7), with the Supreme Being (*Nzaw* or *Nzame*) at the apex, the divinities or spiritual forces (*nkyira*, *mekere*), the founding ancestor (*Ngalela*), remote and close ancestors (*Bale e dzia*), and the “living-dead” (*Bakapfa*) at the side. The latter concept denotes those who died recently and are still regarded as closer to the living and not yet assimilated into the rank of the ancestors. In addition to the above invisible ‘population’ are the clan protective deities (*Mungabe*), magic, sorcery and witchcraft

¹¹ Unless specifically referenced, this section includes information gleaned from Sakata communities in rural and urban areas. As I earlier mentioned, most of the interviews were conducted during summer vacation between 2003 and 2007; 2010 and 2015. It should be noted that, while one might be able to obtain an understanding of the traditional religious beliefs of the Sakata today, it is not possible to understand what those beliefs were generations ago or how they have been influenced by Christianity, Western oppression and favoritism exercised by colonially selected local leaders.

(commonly called by the single term *ilua*)), charms, amulets, and other personified forces at the base. Statements and references made in the immediately foregoing paragraphs indicate how the Sakata have traditionally subscribed to the belief that ancestors, spirits, deities, and genies of the earth permeate and cover every aspect of human activities and their impact is significant for orderly human behavior.

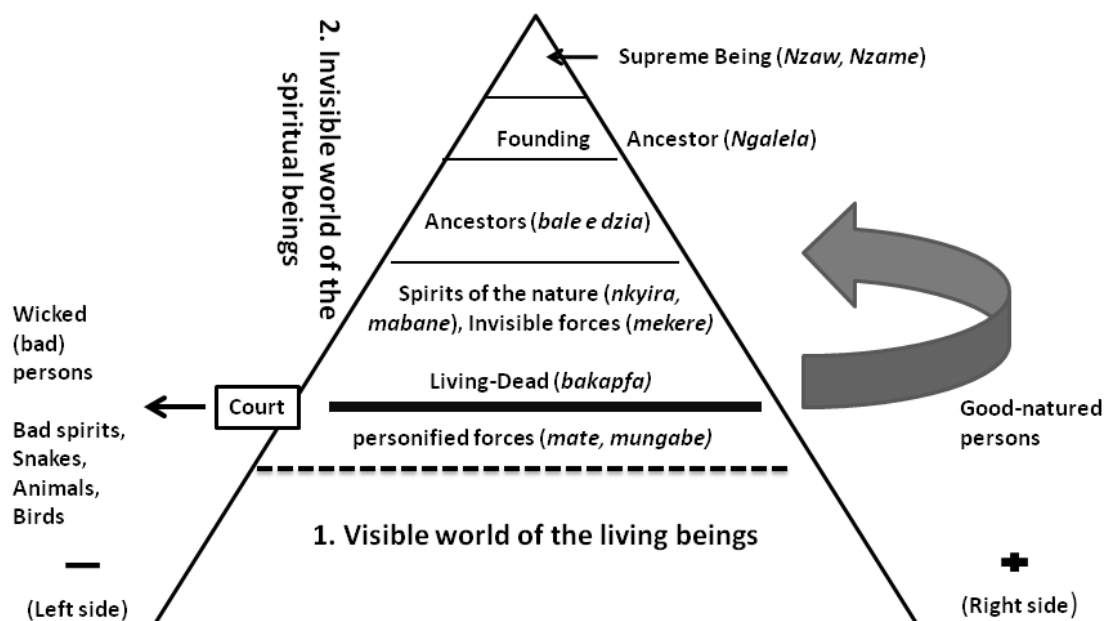


Figure 7 Diagrammatic Representation of the Hierarchical Triangular Structure of Sakata Traditional Beliefs

Other data from the above Figure 7 does require brief explanation here. The right and left sides reflect the duality of good and evil. The available insights of Sakata myths on death and the hereafter suggest that deceased persons always go through examination by a judge seating either near a river or near a large wood. Good people are sent to the right side (of the hierarchical triangular structure of traditional beliefs) to be welcomed into the abode of the living-dead and ancestors, while bad people are sent to the left side and become bad spirits, animals and birds. This ethical detail later becomes important for individual Sakata households and communities. The inclusion of Mbiti's concept of "living-dead" in the diagram underscores that traditionally the Sakata have subscribed to the belief that death is not the end, but a means of transiting from the inner world to the outer world. Mbiti (1991:32) says: "While the departed person is remembered by name, he is not really dead: he is alive, and such a person I would call the living-dead. The living-dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him [or her] in his [or her] life...so long as the living-dead is thus remembered, he [or she] is in the state of personal immortality". This subject is interesting for several reasons. Most notable is that it helps us understand the wider African sense of community that includes the deceased persons who

are still regarded as members of their respective families, lineages and clans due to the continuing influence upon the living.

I have spent much time looking deeply into the Sakata religiosity, and more generally into the hierarchical triangular structure given above. This structure is internalized individually and communally, and applied in many experiences and institutions. It also operates as a subtle, implicit way to relate to the invisible world. The Sakata believe that social interaction occurs not only among the living but also between the living and the spirits of the dead. Thus viewed, no semantic distinction is made within the matrilineage lineages between the living and the dead. Instead the apparent significance of this religiosity is reflected in the many collective socio-political and religious endeavors organized at the family, village or inter-village community levels, as Sakata practitioners strive to fulfill the sacred purposes suggested by their ancestral religion. It goes without saying that their ability to accommodate and adapt to secular society and cognitive constraints of modernity has to some extent allowed the development of their sub-cultural identity that in turn fuels their religious vitality.

The concept *mate*—the plural of *ote*—denotes personified forces made by human production. These are especially objects or ceramic vessels regarded as repositories for various genies. *Mate* are usually identified by the roles they play for individual families and communities (Munsi 2004). As reservoirs of spirits' powers, these vessels can be manipulated through human effort, ritual and sacrifice towards benevolent or malevolent intervention in the event of conflicting or diseased situations. The society must thus give always accounts to the spirits, guarantees of the proper identity and the historical construction of the group. The practice of *mate* as a recognized form depends on the preservation of the vessels. The very fact that there are so many different types of, and terms for, *mate* is an index of how widespread and important the religious phenomenon is. However, it should be noted that the use of these ceramic-vessels is not merely a religious practice limited to the Sakata and other people inhabiting the present-day Mai-Ndombe Province. It can also be found among the Take living around Bandundu city in the Kwilu Province and the Kongo in the present-day Central Congo Province (Bwakasa 1973) and among many other Sub-Sahara African ethnic groups.

Despite the adoption of Christianity, it is readily apparent that the majority of the Sakata still rely much on the above traditional religious patterns, including beliefs in magic, sorcery and witchcraft (*ilua*) that give a spiritual dimension to their daily lives. *Ilua* entails that certain people, including witches, sorcerers, shamans and witchdoctor persons have the ability to cast spells or harm others through indirect, spiritual means. These people use a range of strategies, including special methods of healing, rituals or ceremonies, and gift offerings to placate these potentially destructive forces. Yet the Sakata shamans have no room to rule over the social or even the religious life of the community. In this they are similar to the Turkish shamans described by Gungor (2002:777). Hence it is not possible to

call Shamanism a religion: it is rather a summation of ecstatic and therapeutic methods from the archaic ages on.

Early literature by missionaries, merchants, and ethnographers who had lived and traveled in the Sakata lands has supplied the most helpful references to the religious foundations of the Sakata, although their broader cultural context is for the most part scantily described. To date, a comprehensive survey of these beliefs and practices can be found in Mave (1975), Nkiere (1984), Bekaert (2000) and Colldén (1971a; 1971b). One of the more consistent findings is that the traditional religion in the Congo in general and in Sakata society in particular is characterized by six integrated and interrelated elements: the human as a spiritual being, the ancestors, nature spirits, the spirits of historic figures, practitioners of supernatural powers and the Creator, which have received separately a careful and thick description in Mukenge's work (2002:36-43). In the following analysis, however, I draw mainly on my own in-depth interview results and long-term field experiences to highlight some instrumental and expressive aspects of these religious forms in the particular case of the Sakata.

3.2 The Notion of the Supreme Being

Traditional beliefs and practices in the Sakata lands recognize a higher being or Sublime God (*Nzaw or Nzame*), viewed as the creator and the Absolute power. The sun, moon/s, wind, fire, water, vegetation and all other things which exist are His witnesses. Moreover, *Nzaw* is beyond birth and death. He is both merciful and compassionate. He is beyond fear and enmity. He is self illuminated. He is the Master of all the treasures. All our possessions are a result of His grace. *Nzaw* is referred to in myths and folklore that articulate cultural idioms of the Sakata (For further details, see Colldén 1979). One item demonstrates the structural role of religious practices in Sakata lands: Having created the world, the Sakata hold, *Nzaw* (God) no longer intervenes; he entrusts such intervention to the original human beings he created, who became the ancestors (*Bale e dzia*) of the present-day Sakata communities. The Sakata thus ascribe good fortune and power to the ancestors, on whom the organization of society and the destiny of their individual communities and families depend. The following field report expresses one aspect of this religious ethos extremely well.

Everywhere they travelled in the Congo State, Europeans were to find a belief in the existence of a Supreme Being who had created the universe. He was not of great practical importance in daily life, since having once created the world he left it very much to itself, and lived far away in a celestial village in much the same style as that of a Bantu chief on earth. According to the Basakata, he [God/*Nzaw*] had created a man and a woman, fixed a climbing plant between his village and the earth, and said to them: "Now go down to earth by this creeper and stay there. So far as I am concerned, my work is over." So it was not the Creator but rather the intermediary powers between God and man who were of immense practical importance for daily

living; that is, the ancestors, the spirits, the King, who to some extent participated in the life-giving force of the Creator, and who could increase or decrease at will the life-force of men living on the earth. Both the individual and the group had to placate these intermediaries, so that their influence would be beneficent, so that they would remember to nourish the life-force of man and of society, and would not allow it to decrease or disappear. There were two attitudes possible in face of this situation, the one religious, when men implored the higher powers for their assistance by prayers or rites, and the other magical, when the rites in themselves were thought to be efficacious. Of course the two attitudes could exist together in the same person; they were not considered to be mutually exclusive. Religion and magic played a very large part in Bantu life. Calamities which Europeans would have put down to natural causes were attributed to the intervention of spirits; thus there was a constant need to placate them, and to invoke benevolent ancestors or the divine authority of a chief as a counterbalance against these forces of evil. The sowing and the gathering of the crops, the initiation of a boy to adult life or the preparation of a girl for marriage, the making of a contract, all had to be surrounded with suitable rites which were the affair of the community rather than of the individual (Federation of the Free States of Africa 2007).

The upshot is that Sakata families and communities place ancestors in a position of greater importance than *Nzaw* (God). This invites us to consider the rather striking religious ideas of, first the nature of the concept of ancestors, and secondly, the nature of the communion with the ancestral spirits as needs demand.

3.3 Ancestor Ideology and Its Implications

The common belief among the Sakata is that God is best accessed through ancestors rather than by direct prayer. In particular, the veneration of these ancestors and living-dead continues to play a great role in the ethnic religion of the Sakata. Much speculation and symbolism focus on the belief that the founding ancestor (*Ngalela*) and the ancestors (*Bal e dzia*) intervene in the world of the living. The Sakata believe in the existence of spirits and spirit possession, and in the power of ancestral spirits to influence events. The ancestors manifest themselves in dreams and oracles and are responsible for good and evil in one's life experience. Interview results confirmed the importance of ancestor veneration for the Sakata and their sense of being duty-bound to conform their lives to the will of ancestors, whose help is prayed for in circumstances such as childbirth and illness.

Families and local communities often organize rituals to ensure good socio-spiritual relations with ancestral spirits. The lineage headman (*mfra-maa*) or village headman (*Mbene keyum*) is the one who traditionally performs rituals and offers prayers and sacrifices to intercede with 'living-ancestors'. The relationship with ancestors is perceived as a 'communion' with them rather than 'worship' of them—an observation that provides a

deeper understanding of the fact that in Sakata society, like in many other African small-scale societies, ancestors are not worshiped, but rather looked upon as spirits that continue to live in the world of the living.¹² Association with particular ancestors connects with the Sakata respect for the eldest in the community, and is a way for the community to respond to the traditional obligation to interact with the spiritual realm.

This communion with ancestors has psychological, sociological, functional and eschatological dimensions, still significant for the Sakata, varying only in degree according to the cultural context in which it takes place. Its psychological significance is that it focuses attention on the ancestor spirits and induces a contemplative response from them. The link to ancestors is perceived as a projection of the relation between father and son. The sociological aspect of this perception appears in the sense that communion with ancestors expresses, legitimates and consecrates the relationship between the living and the deceased parents of the lineage. It thus strengthens the vertical relationship between the descendants and the dead, and the horizontal relationship, such as friendship, rights and mutual duties of members. At the functional level, communion with ancestors both creates the unity of the whole family or community and encourages correspondence between the living and the dead, in order to perpetuate the unity of the Sakata ethnic group. Finally, in its eschatological aspect, communion with ancestors denotes a ceremony of collective consciousness directed against death in all its forms. From being the end of life, death becomes seen as a transition to the abode of the ancestors.

The places of veneration are varied: at the foot of a tree, a corner of a forest, a stone or in the clan worship house, at the graves or at the crossing of paths. What is evident, however, is that whatever the Sakata endure, they strive to maintain a loving experience of place and an understanding that guiding spiritual forces abide in all of these places. Respect for one's ancestors is part of daily life, and people hold a continual dialogue with their ancestors. The common idea in the region is that ancestors often bestow favors on the family. People prayerfully ask the ancestors to bring them good harvests, and ceremonies are held specifically for that purpose. However, if ancestors are displeased by offences such as lack of respect to elder, improper use of another stratum's status markers, incest and adultery, they may impose punishments such as mishaps or illness for people, or death for animals. Angry ancestral spirits looming around villages are offered sacrifices (of chicken or goat) and gifts to placate them. The guilty person must then prepare sacrificial offerings to beg forgiveness. Ancestor spirits are believed to punish 'sins' left unpunished by Sakata individuals in the interests of group solidarity.

¹² This notion of communion with ancestors also exists in many African societies. Kenyatha (1938:265-8), for example, neatly pointed it out when he discussed ancestors from the vantage point of Kikuyu culture. "In this account, I shall not use that term [worship], because from practical experience I do not believe that the Gikuyu worship their ancestors...I shall therefore use the term 'communion with ancestors'". Thus viewed, I amply agree with Kopytoff (2010:320) that "the selection by anthropologists of the phrases "ancestor cult" and "ancestor worship," in dealing with African cultures, is 'semantically inappropriate, analytically misleading, and theoretically unproductive'".

Rituals and ceremonies—which usually involve the Sakata matrilineage as a unit—are carried out to cure sickness and avert misfortune and to conserve the old age-old communion between the living and the ancestral spirits. Sacrifices meant to annul the social and cosmic disturbance brought about by a transgression may be viewed as the restoration of social distance or kinship. This religiosity is deeply entrenched among the Sakata and to some extent defies obliteration by modern social forces. When I asked informants the *raison d'être* of this deep and abiding commitment to promoting communion with the invisible world, some respondents said that “religious beliefs and practices give us a guide to what we must do to live a meaningful life in a senseless world, and to leave it better than we found it.” The majority of interviewees specifically indicated that “We must identify ourselves with others in the community, and do what we can to relieve their burdens—whether by passive means such as prayers and mourning (in case of funerals), or by active means of nonviolent protest and the sharing of our goods. They then reasoned: If the ancestral spirits and deities of the land are not calling out to us for justice, then to whom are they calling? If they are not sending us to bring peace, harmony and hence to show a strong sense of solidarity, then who are they sending?” In contrast, only a slight number of respondents said that they live without feeling such a strong social solidarity permeated by religious beliefs and rituals, though they often utter scathing criticisms of the ‘empty formalism’ of religious practices. The strong ancestor ideology (including shamanism—part of their religion) still pervades nearly every aspect of life, even for churchgoing Sakata Christians.

3.4 Matrilineal kin-Leaders as Ritual Specialists

The lines of Sakata community activity reflect historical links between political power—primarily embodied in kinship—and spiritual authority as represented by the land chiefs, namely *Mbe* and *Mbianshu*. Deputized in accord with rules of matrilineal line, these local leaders have heavily ritualized functions, and are vested with the power and authority to regulate the religious life in Sakata society. The source of authoritative religious knowledge, they are ritual agents even in situations where there are priestly guardians of communal shrines.

Matrilineal kinship ideology can be said to have ‘given birth’ to priest-like intercessors between the visible and invisible worlds. Evidence from the field is accruing that among the Sakata the matrilineal kinship ideology links village communities across established chiefdoms and reinforces ritual bonds. These features furnish prestige and stability to the society and personal status to the hereditary leaders. By performing religious activities, the matrilineal kin-ritual specialists serve as privileged intermediaries between the profane world of the living people and the world of ancestral spirits. On some occasions they fall into a state of trance in which the ancestors speak through their persona. In so far as they communicate with the world of ancestral spirits, they are supposed to have knowledge of the past, present and future. Unless some very special conditions apply, “their role is also to

find lost or misplaced objects, discern the causes of evils inflicted by an energy spirit and exorcise them.” They can handle such tasks partly because they are believed to have ‘magical power’ to control the evil spirits, a belief that holds also for other ritual power nodes—diviners, seers, herbalists/healers, and medicine persons—who frequently provide protective enhancement and destructive medicine, charms, and amulets. These patterns, which are similar to those of *Pōibo* and *Gyāmi* (Kiranti-Kōits words for ‘male and female shamans’) described by Rapacha (2009:18), give rise to the persistent phenomenon of sorcery (the use of medicine for evil ends—a conscious art that anyone can learn) and witchcraft (a psychic power, often hereditary, which may be unconscious).

Analysis of interviews shows that the primary position and the overall effectiveness of local prominent chiefs are prominent in people’s mindset and their expectations about chiefly authority and its responsibilities, since the chiefs are believed to be endowed with supra-human abilities and initiated into practices of sorcery and witchcraft (both called by the single term *ilu’a*) necessary for the responsibility entrusted to them (see Nkiere (1984:123-129) These ‘mystical activities’ or practices offer a clue to the Sakata’s systems of thought and related aspects of their social and political life. A ‘magical substratum’ influences positively the social, political, religious and ritual life of Sakata hereditary chiefs, who are to undergo certain occult initiations for attaining chieftaincy titles and membership in the ‘secret network’ of chiefs, sorcerers and witches.

At the bedrock of Sakata ancient culture is found the investiture of a chief (Figure 8) which is still conceived today as a secret, occult initiation performed for about nine weeks by a group of sorcerers and witches who maintain absolute secrecy. Powers of witchcraft are thought to be infused into the chief when he was in his mother’s womb. The initiation ceremony confirms these powers and renders the newly invested chief conscious of them. The ceremony, through miming, marks a sacred moment in his life and enables him to understand, experience, and embody the new way of life. The secrecy inherent in such specific rituals reinforced his dynamism and competence as a leader. Local communities really need active matrilineal traditional chiefs who are capable of invoking the founding ancestor (*Ngalela*), common ancestors (*Bale e dzia*), earth spirits (*Nkyira*), clan deities (*Mungabe*), and personified forces (*mate*) to meet needs and resolve problems of the family, lineage, clan, and community.



Figure 8 Illustration of the
Investiture of a Traditional Chief
Source: CEEBA 1975

As intercessors between the living and the ancestral spirits, the matrilineal kin-religious specialists are usually entitled to labor services from commoners as well as food shares. Such intercession is significant in that it aims to gain their blessing not only on key economic activities, such as cultivation, harvesting, hunting and fishing, but also on social events, such as birth, marriage and funeral ceremonies. In particular, the land chief (*Mbe*) is the representative of the clan of landowners, an indispensable personality for the accomplishment of rites associated with fishing and the fertility of the land and good harvest. One of the examples seems, appropriately, to be the fishing ritual related to women. At the opening of the women's fishing season in summer, as Figure 9 illustrates, the land chief (*Mbe*) used to perform a ritual which consisted of offering a goat to the genies of the earth. He mixed goat's blood with water from the river in a pot of calabash and sprinkled it on the faces and feet of the women by way of ablution. The belief was that this ensured the success of the fishing was assured, since the genies of earth now controlled this economic activity.



Figure 9 Illustration of a Ritual for the success of fishing

Source: CEEBA 1993:77

The above example may seem simple, but in fact it indicates how the seasonal rituals serve as reminders of the continuing ability of religious leaders to make their voices heard in the public square. Riddell, Salacuse and Tabachnick (1987:43), for instance, reported that the traditional political chiefs (*Badju*) of the Batere “were recognized as leaders by the people because they could perform the miracle of making cooked manioc produce a growing plant”. Specifically with respect to religious practices, the expectation is that hereditary chiefs with a name in the Sakata lands makes decisions about the disposition of fishing sites and hunting territories, but they also draw upon personal spiritual power to balance human relations to the natural world.

One aspect of hereditary chiefs' religious life that is even more veiled from the observer's eye than the rituals held on specific occasions is the relationship between the

‘services’ provided by the priest-like intercessors and the way in which they satisfy the ‘demands’ of the populations. It must further be remarked that hereditary chiefs have employed rituals to give themselves the best chance of success. Thus, no activity of any importance is undertaken without offering supplications for spiritual blessings. It is entirely possible, and likely, that the chief’s possession of ‘mystical powers’ and his better performance of the ceremony are seen by Sakata merely as functional prerequisites for successful economic activities.

During interviews with elderly men from the ruling class (*Badju*), it frequently transpired that hereditary chiefs have to be endowed with ‘magical powers’ and hence be able to respond to such social and religious demands if they are to maintain their standing within the structures of the Sakata. As far as these demands of power are concerned, research participants indicated that the tight interdependence of economic and social patterns in the Sakata lands is created by the way in which the history of the Sakata is remembered, narrated, and passed on. These traditions are regarded as crucial, given that religious practices in this context are intended both to achieve a higher standard of living and to ensure moral regeneration of Sakata communities.¹³ In what follows I outline concrete data that illustrate people’s perceptions and attitudes to religious ceremonies and rites as they now exist.

Through interviews I tried to gauge the extent of relief felt by people after religious practices, though some practices were unfamiliar and seemed odd to me. When asked why they attend religious activities (funeral rites, rites of blessing, rites of redress, dancing, ceremonies for the opening of the agriculture year), the overwhelming majority of respondents said, ‘religious activities meet our requirements and aspirations’, or ‘they enable us to fit into the society, since if we ignore these religious assumptions and practices, we may find it difficult to cope with issues of social life and structure’. Only a slightly higher percentage of respondents said that ‘we do not receive any striking input in these socio-religious activities’. Compared with previous informal interviews I conducted in 2003, I got the impression that in most villages and cities the proportion of the Sakata who show interest in socio-religious activities was increasing, while the number of those who dismiss them was declining.

It is illuminating that ceremonies and rites performed by local chiefs in particular appear to spur participants to break the border between the visible and invisible worlds. Charged since time immemorial with organizing religious ceremonies, hereditary chiefs continue to provide the means for the Sakata to conform to the conservative customs of Christianity while privately preserving their own religion, traditions, and worldview.

¹³ Among the offences that will warrant the destoolment of a chief in the Sakata homelands and surrounding regions are a chief that is mentally deranged, a chief that is found in an act of fraud and, as a result, arraigned before a court of competent jurisdiction and a chief that has amorous affairs with a married woman who is not his wife.

3.5 Religion in Public Sphere: Implications for Informal Education

Years of fieldwork among the Sakata impressed upon me the intriguing consideration that religious beliefs and practices have direct consequences for informal education in rural and urban settings. Two areas in particular stand out. First, religious support for education of the masses occurs in the aforementioned rites of intensification, which not only teach participants respectful, reciprocal relations that must be maintained between the living and the dead, but also affirm their kinship with the multiple forms of their homeland. Second, religious support for education is found in folk dance and music, performed in various circumstances such as the investiture of the chief, the birth of twins, weddings, mourning, funerals, and burial ceremony.

In the public sphere, however, Sakata folk bands generally perform the dance commonly known as *Moyene*. They sing various songs, both from the traditional Sakata repertory and popular songs inspired by the changing social conditions in their environments. All these songs convey significant messages for mass education. The tremendous contribution of the *Bana Nzoyi* folk band (see Mumsi 2014) shows how folk bands provide Sakata households and individuals with a broad picture of the Sakata worldview (ceremonies, protocols, teachings and knowledge of history) while ensuring the continued existence of their original identity in rural and urban settings. Substantial evidence has accrued that some of the Sakata songs pay tribute to or belittle people they know, characters who have lived among them and ultimately joined the collectivity. In that way, positive memories and connections are evoked and passed on through generations in eulogies or panegyric forms. The role of this music bears out the observation that, “although we normally think of tradition as something being handled forward from the past to the present, the appeal to the *authority* of tradition, something that is socially much more central, involves being handed back from the present toward an indeterminable past destination” (Bloch, 2005, 131).

Sakata religious patterns can also be experienced and learned as prominent dancers enthusiastically integrate into the dance performance the use of supernatural powers. The following excerpt from personal direct field observations gives striking examples of this.

In the initial summer of fieldwork (2003) in Bandundu city I also had the opportunity of witnessing the facets of the Sakata folk dance called *Moyene*. On two occasions, 4 April (Sunday afternoon) and 5 April (Monday afternoon) respectively in Bonkuku and Salaminta (the remote areas of Bandundu city), on a warm sunny day with puffy white clouds floating across the high blue sky, hardly one hundred people gathered in a large circle for the Sakata dance and music *Moyene*. The audience was composed of Sakata families and other urban dwellers from different ethnic households found in Bandundu city, as well as outside spectators. This well-known folk dance and music of the region was, in the guise of personified spirits, skillfully performed from 3:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. by a young

Sakata chief, healer, soothsayer and dancer (one of my key informants) named Joseph Monsengwo, alias 'Mongankolo' (a nickname inspired from Elima Ngando Mongankolo, a Sakata siren for protection), accompanied with other experienced folk dancers (seven men and three women) and three managers (two men and one woman).

Dancers first appeared in a queue before the congregation coming from a particular house chosen in advance where they had gathered for a short preparatory recollection. Following the tradition of the Sakata, they wore raffia cloth and the skin of wild animals, with hats of bird's feathers, and waists girded with loincloths. Their forehead was painted with black powder mixed with kaolin (*ngula*) and girdled with a disc of copper intricately tied with a heavy copper wire. Unlike in rural localities, their dancing style was then interspersed by circles, some songs from a tape recorder, spontaneous shouts and phrases, with jumping steps in accord with the rhythm of the drum and music, and the launching of spears at a short distance, as well as the invocation of supernatural powers.

In the third phase, direct observations showed that the Sakata folk dance *Moyene* came to be articulated under specific spiritual principles and criteria that elude ordinary understanding, and it climaxed in invocation and body shaking. It included many actions performed by the prominent dancer or the central figure, including climbing a particular tree (*ute*) and stepping on fire while dancing. Shaking his body in the rhythm of Sakata folk music, Mungankolo stepped forward from the main circle and took the direction of the chosen tree. At that specific time, as he explained to us, that particular tree became symbolically a 'mystical tree' in the forest and was surrounded by the protector spirits. As Mungankolo was dancing on the branches of the tree, suddenly a branch of it was cut off and he fell down with it on his shoulders. That this caused no injury he saw as confirmation that the dance was successful, and that the spirits had collaborated with him. After a brief moment of silent prayer, Mungankolo started dancing while carrying on his shoulders the same branch with green leaves that he had brought down from the tree. When he arrived in the middle of the wide dancing circle, he stepped on the branch several times.

Gathered in this space, other members of the dancing group stood in a wide circle surrounding some pieces of firewood. Three men stepped forward from the congregation and set fire to it while the manager of Mungankolo observed them carefully to ensure the spiritual security of his chief. Soon, a bonfire was blazing. Following the signal of his manager, Mungankolo then made a move toward the fire. After a brief moment of silent contemplation, he started dancing and stepping on the fire, without being burned, while holding a bell for invocation in his right hand and improvising shouts. At the end, some members of the dance group collected the burned pieces of firewood and stored them in a place that had been

prepared beforehand. People were strictly forbidden to use them lest misfortune occur in the near future. The congregation remained there for a while, observing the way in which members of the Sakata folk band started resuming their procession back into the house. To the whole congregation (with youths outnumbered adults), it was one of the most solemn social and religious occasions for learning by observation and practice.

More is going on here than simply the idea of setting a good example. The apparent significance of this narrative for social life is that specific cultural and religious techniques are used to highlight the facets of the *Moyene* dance, such as communicating with the supernatural forces by invocation, hymns, incense, copper bell, prescribed movements of hands, arms and legs, as well as climbing a tree and dancing on its branches, and dancing on the fire. Given the symbolic nature of this performance, every word, gesture and object here is important for both the performers and their respective congregation. Such embodied cultural performance, whether consciously learned or unconsciously absorbed, is a crucial means of instilling ideologies, beliefs, and values systems in the bodies of subjects.

Although local activities of a spiritual and religious nature are practiced all over the Kutu and Bandundu regions, the vibrant practice of the folk dance *Moyene* is quite distinctive in that it emerged over the past decades as an event that expresses key elements of Sakata identity. Informal education through ceremonies and dance is also a factor in the relationship between the matrilineal kinship system and religious forms. This sequence implies that the matrilineal kinship ideology has an impact on people's informal education which in turn has implications for the kinds of things that members of different households do in the public sphere.

3.6 Individual Psycho-Religious Representations

Our surveys included particularly questions on the reasons and purposes for which the Sakata continue to maintain their contact and communion with the invisible world of ancestral spirits. As noted above, religious culture and values are lived individually or as a group, and the two realities are implemented in the pattern of religious understanding and interpretation in the Sakata homeland. The strength of these findings is partly marked by the individual analysis pattern or the practitioner's overlapping religious motivation, validation and self-consciousness. Consider the following quantitative data.

As shown in Figure 10 below, when asked about attitudes towards communion with the spiritual realm, a surprising 65.4 % of youth, and 86.4% of adults, indicated that such communion was not only important but a traditional obligation for them. On the other hand, 34.6% of youth and 13.6 % of adults indicated that they paid only slight attention to the spiritual realm.

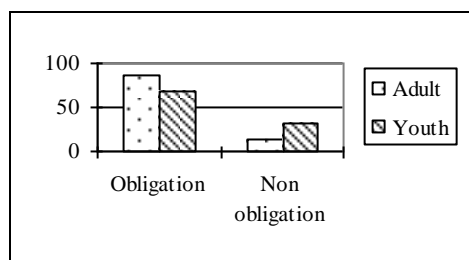


Figure 10 Characteristics of Ancestor Veneration among the Sakata

Moreover, when asked why communion with the invisible world of *Nzaw* (God) and ancestral spirits (*Bale e dzia*) was so strong in the local setting, multiple reasons were offered. Fully 83% of rural respondents and 80% of city residents indicated that they communicated with the spiritual realm to guarantee security of life. 78% of rural respondents and 66% of people in cities indicated that the intercession of ancestors, spirits and deities was the reason for the prosperity of their family, clan, territory or land (Figure 11).

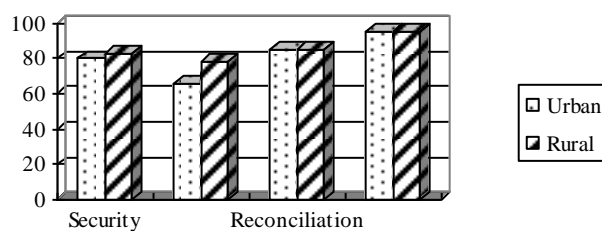


Figure 11 Reasons for communion with the Invisible World

However, these results should be balanced with consideration of whether security and prosperity were enough to justify ancestor veneration. To a large number of interviewees, the achievement of a sincere reconciliation between the world of the living and the spiritual realm stood as an important justification for these religious rites. Further investigation revealed that while religious practices had a greater following in rural areas than in urban areas, some urban household members still hold strongly to traditional beliefs and practices.

One further example should suffice. Findings outlined in Figure 12 below illustrate that the rate of religious practice was increasing steadily in 2003 and this trend has been maintained through to 2010. An analysis by household in rural areas and cities reveals that the increase is underpinned by the quest for security and purification. This communion with the invisible world through rituals is not simply one option among many. Rather it expresses and makes present the core reality of the religious and cultural identity of the Sakata in my research communities.

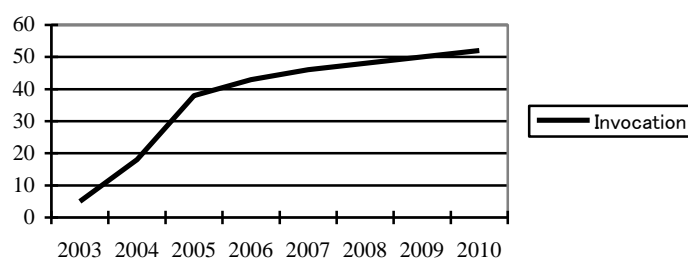


Figure 12 Rate of Religious Beliefs and practices between 2003 and 2010

From the above quantitative findings, one can garner some interesting information. We learn, for example, that over the past decades, the number of the Sakata who have interest in socio-religious realities or find it difficult to live without some form of religious support has increased significantly, while the number of those who remain inattentive to them has increased only incrementally. Beyond that, we notice that Sakata households' attachment to religious traditions is an essential part of the daily regimen. This spiritual experience, at the very least, has a force and effect on the psychology of the participants. It is a vital element in their lives; it heavily influences their thought and behavior. It is passed on from generation to generation. This point requires some elaboration.

Two realities or forces ensure the passing on of this belief as a unity comprised of the world of the living and the spiritual realm. The first force, which guarantees that Sakata tradition is preserved, is the matrilineal line. It continues to exist as a social set up which gives responsibility—a responsibility taken seriously—to certain of its members. A second important force is chiefly dependent on three factors: (1) cohesion of Sakata households; (2) solidarity and maintenance of the extended family; and (3) hierarchy, security and prosperity. True healing is intimately linked to these processes of interaction with the invisible world, which must be actively sought after. We have emphasized that in Bandundu city, for instance, various manifestations of all these rural-derived forms of life and beliefs in migrated Sakata groups demonstrate not only the retention of rural-based ethnic identity, but also how religious ideas basically determine their attitudes towards the social and the cultural sphere in urban localities.

Taken together, these findings provide a clear understanding of how precisely it is that socio-political and religious systems are instrumental within Sakata society. This is partly because these traditional institutions, more than anything else, continue to make matrilineal kin-leaders and local social institutions appear to be so much more relevant and meaningful to the lives of the Sakata. The intriguing reasons for this are varied. One of the most important is the peculiar fact that these social and religious forms are seen as a very conservative force because they are directed particularly to those ancestors—who are responsible for setting up the social structures of the Sakata—and to their demands and taboos. It is germane to suggest, in the words of Hendry (2008:144) that “[...] moral values and the ideas that [are] termed religious pervade social life so completely that neither can

be clearly separated from the rest of social interaction”. A more detailed consideration of these social rules and the various mechanisms for their enforcement can be found in Nkiere’s seminal work (1984:130-146). Remember, finally, that the kinship ideology and religious foundations of the Sakata are not independent areas of social life, but are closely related and both are indispensable to understanding the working of Sakata society as a whole.

4. Discussion

This ethnographic study presents a first step to understanding patterns of socio-political and religious organization of the Sakata. The first striking finding is that the matrilineal kinship rules of the Sakata continue to be the catalyst which enables the Sakata to further their social relations and to preserve structures that have existed since time immemorial. One can observe the continued effort of the Sakata to further locate themselves in social relations of kinship both with human and, through dream encounters, with the interactive spirits of their environment. In this kinship formation, solidarity and its reciprocal obligations constitute a real social imperative. The key to understanding this lies in the fact that solidarity—which is expressed in various circumstances, such as marriage, death, important decision-making—implies the threefold representative relation of three spheres: the world of the living, the symbolic domain or ritual, and the spiritual realm. Not surprisingly, the present-day Sakata tend to have a deep awareness of these social and spiritual experiences and on some occasions speculate about their significance and meaning.

The credit of having been the first to fully recognize the social significance and implications of this solidarity belongs to Nkiere Bokuna Mpa-Osu. In his seminal book, entitled *La parenté comme système idéologique chez les Basakata* (1984), he suggested that the ideological aspect of the Sakata kinship lies in the sentiment of solidarity which animates parents. Solidarity among the Sakata is also a system of prohibitions that has a twofold precondition: (1) social reproduction of people and perpetuity of clans, and (2) hierarchy of individualities, which finds its meaning through the preeminence of ancestors in relation to descendants, elders in relation to the young persons, and group in relation to individual (Nkiere 1984:15; for further details, see Nkiere 1984:78-103).

The kinship norms of exogamy are apparently more extended among the Sakata than among their immediate neighboring linguistic groups (Nkiere 1984:73). Still following Nkiere, we must add to this discussion the peculiar fact that these kinship norms of exogamy continue to determine patterns of settlement among the Sakata, without of course threatening the unity of matrilineal groups in their present localities. This evidence supports research undertaken by Holy (1996:105) who highlighted that empirically “[...] the matrilineal groups can remain vital and manage to remain localized in spite of residence rule which ostensibly hinders their localization...the coherence of the matricentric family

of a woman and her children, brittle marriage and high individual mobility thus make possible the drift of lineage members back to the village which is regarded as the traditional centre of their matrilineage and their concentration there in spite of the centrifugal effect of virilocal residence”.

Equally crucial to this discussion is the hereditary patterns of political organization. Structurally, if not socially or psychologically, speaking, the society of the Sakata continues to function, in large measure, according to its customary laws. I earlier referred to Sakata leadership offices as being hereditary, according to the matrilineal line. The matrilineal kinship system also gave birth to a kind of priesthood dedicated to preserving the way of life embedded in the matrilineal-based Sakata ethnic group. I have emphasized kinship strategies and relations of solidarity above. It is important to add here that the political dimension of the Sakata kinship is in fact the privileged instance of the logical articulation of the mechanism of the solidarity. Despite the hierarchical order found among the Sakata, our research reveals that in its complexity, the social organization of the Sakata can be grasped on the basis of its horizontal aspect marked by some differentiations and oppositions between spouses, fathers and sons, people and chiefs, between ruling clan and clan of the landowners. In this regard, the Sakata history records several factual causes of conflicts which give credence to the assumption that in many societies “individual chiefs compete with each other to secure followers and optimize their positions” (Hann 2004:117).

A further and important point has been the influence of the matrilineal kinship system of the Sakata in shaping their consciousness and helping them to cultivate a sense of individual and collective identity, or of “social membership and identity as individual configuration” (Moore 1994:30). Such patterns of biological, social connection and psychological binding are seen as potent means for the Sakata to maintain their ethnic identity in the face of modern changes. This empirical observation amply confirms Nkiere’s (1984) core assertion that the matrilineal descent system of the Sakata continues to exist within the process of modernization as a “guiding ideological system”. Yet the tradition of political organizing within chiefdoms (*Idju*) and village communities (*ibue*) has to be recognized as a living intangible heritage that is, I suggest, inextricable from the Sub-Saharan African perspective which to some extents houses the tradition of the present-day Sakata. Of course, such a vitality of the cultural specificity in a given Congolese ethnic group is not only found among the Sakata. Ethnographic data, mainly from other matrilineally organized societies in the hinterland of the Congo, have also shown this. Along with the work of Kopytoff (1964; 1965) among the Suku, the empirical study of the Buma carried out by Hohegger (1975) is a case in point. Theoretically, the above evidence for the role of social institutions of the Sakata is in line with ethnographers who forcefully argue that social institutions of every ethnic group possessed a remarkable internal dynamism and progressive potential which enabled them to cope with entirely new situations (For ethnographic examples, see Futurs

Africans 2003; Lewellen 2002; Shorter 2001; Van Binsbergen 1998; Magesa 2006; Mbiti 1991).

The second important result that emerged from this study is that religious beliefs and practices serve to preserve social relations and structures in Sakata society. Equally they dictate the arrangements of relations between the Sakata, the natural environment and the invisible world of God (*Nzaw*), ancestral spirits (*Bale e dzia*). The interactivity of those three is such that the Sakata also act upon the world they inhabit with nature and ancestral spirits. Preventing the natural world from devolving into a state of chaos is the goal of certain religious activities. Discretion towards nature and the ancestral spirits is essential, since they nurture human life. This finding reflects the conviction, to use Birago Diop's expression, that, "the dead are not dead" (Healey and Syberts 1996:212) and so remain in constant relationship with the living. Thus different rituals (especially rites of intensifications) and practices (more usually with ancient roots) that accompany and highlight religious experience are instrumental here in restructuring and revitalizing the society of the Sakata. This reflects the acknowledgment that "[in] establishing the society of the dead, the society of the living regularly recreates itself" (Hertz 1960:71-72) and "that single statement illuminates much about the nature and meaning of the processes and procedures which link the living and the dead" (Prior 1989:111).

Nevertheless, these sorts of religious concepts, ideas, experiences, and practices are not confined to the Sakata alone, but are extremely widespread. For instance, they can be found in many other ethnic-linguistic groups within the Congo, namely among the Zela (Boulangier 1974; 1982) and the Yanzi (Thiel 1972) and in many parts of the world. Another important example of a broad comparative synthesis comes from Gungor's (2002:777) recent evaluation of the traditional *Turkish religion*.

The tradition of honoring and presenting sacrifices to ancestors is one of the most important elements of the traditional Turkish religion. It is the sense of gratitude felt for the ancestors, which makes up the foundation of the cult of the ancestors. Not all ancestral spirits or graves become the subject of the cult but only the most respected reach that level. Because of this, it becomes necessary to differentiate "the cult of the dead" from "the cult of the ancestors".

How does then the triangle God, nature, man account for the present-day Sakata? In response to this question, Okolo (1978:2; 1996:177) makes a remark which I find confirmed in this particular case of the Sakata: The traditional sub-Saharan African is a religious person. "Religion is the main principle that dominates his life and sets a define tone in his relationship with nature and his fellow man. The triangle of God, nature, and man is inseparable because these supreme beings form one same reality. Religion is not, therefore, something extraneous to the African, a beyond in his experience". Indeed, the instrumental role of religious patterns as essential elements of social experience and their implications in

people's modes of life and social institutions has long been recognized (Durkheim 1976; Monaghan & Just 2000; Knighton 2005; Womack 2005).

The notion of communion with ancestors is the point to which would be surprising if that were not the case. Looking at interview results and direct observations, we realize that memory of the deceased predecessors is also at the core of their religion. This is partly because they Sakata pray to their dead and memorize them as if still closely attached to the living within matrilineal kinship networks. Memory and its ritual enactment transcend the separation between the living and the dead. Theologically, there is no divide between the dead and the living among the Sakata. This is an aspect of religious behavior that fits both the African worldview (Nkafu 1998:116-121) and African theological and ethical perspectives (Bujo 1998:17). Actually the meaning of such a communion with ancestors does not essentially differ from that of the communion of saints in Roman Catholicism. This is a conclusion recently drawn by Mpongo (2001:4, 6), who shows that the communion of saints in Roman Catholicism is the "transposition of the pagan funeral practices from the Mediterranean milieu into Roman Catholicism". Viewed in that light, considerable efforts have been made by the Catholic Church in the Congo (the dominant Church in the area since the nineteenth century) to integrate the communion with ancestors and saints into Christian worship. The first evidence we have of deliberate efforts to achieve a genuine inculturation of Christianity is the Congolese Rite for Eucharistic celebration which was officially approved by Vatican in 1989 (see Uzukwu 1985; Egbulem 1996; Moneley 1988 and Munsu 2007, Conference Episcopale du Zaïre 1989). This striking pastoral outcome no doubt highlights the responsibility of the Congolese Church to carry on a dialogue with the traditional African beliefs and values of the people. So it would be absurd to consider as 'superficial' or as complete superstition all these basic religious ideas and symbols.

Our study introduces into this discussion the notion of the eschatological aspect of the communion with ancestors as a ceremony of collective consciousness against death in all its forms. Viewing this notion of eschatology from the vantage point of African ethics, Benezet Bujo observes that the cult of ancestors in Africa contains both eschatological and salvation dimensions. He defines salvation as the "concern of both the living and the dead members of the community" and argues that the "eschatological dimension involves a participation in that other world where the dead live and where is to be found the key of the fate of the living" (Bujo 1992:24). Apart from the idea of present gain (pleas for safety of family and home, for success business, for freedom from illness and natural disasters, abundant life and harvest and catches of fishes and wild animals) found in the prayers of the Sakata and many other small-scale societies found in Congo and elsewhere in Africa, there is also a striving for salvation in the afterlife. This does not contradict Christian teaching, which stresses fulfillment in the next life but which also strives after happiness in the present world.

Closer reading and analysis of the social phenomena pertaining to mass education outlined in this study can also raise a crucial question. What really remains or survives in the transmission of knowledge and values from one generation to another, even if the

absolute is considered inessential? Elements are transformed and reactualized in different contexts, responding to circumstances, so that they appear to restructure themselves in the social regulation process. This kind of identity ‘constructs’ itself over time and from the vagaries of public space. This provides researchers with an exceptional opportunity to revisit the vibrant urban practices of Sakata folk dance and music. Usually, anthropologists describe, explain and interpret such practices in terms of human behavior, not as single raw ‘facts’ or ‘stereotyped’ behaviors but rather as social phenomena. It is possible, according to Legrain (2014), to argue –perfectly validly, if not somewhat simplistically– that these social phenomena serve as holders of expressed or latent intentions and values prized by a historical community according to certain standards of conduct promoting certain attitudes or execrating other different attitudes. Given that communities and individuals constitute all these values, it is important for researchers to acquire an accurate grasp of the ways in which the subjects being studied try to communicate themselves verbally and symbolically by organizing intelligible signs in their social world. In the case of the Sakata folk dance and music, the best recording methods would also include not only photographs of the performers, but also individual *in situ* visual observations, recording and photographs.

These findings from interviews, which revealed the depth of Sakata religiosity, were reinforced by quantitative data. Just as significant, from the psychological standpoint, is the fact that religious ideas and symbols are imprinted in the minds of the Sakata collectively by their material environment and social interaction. It is also evident from the contents of this paper that the fusion of religion and economic and political activities is seen in all aspect of the Sakata’s experiences and struggles. Many Sakata of my sample appear to be prepared to sacrifice themselves for their religious ideals. It is generally understood that conformity with the will of ancestors is shown by the observance of social mores that have been practiced from the distant past. Thus “the religious patterns of the Sakata significantly regulated socio-cultural values and generated conformity in order to direct their real impact upon the social model” (Nkiere 1984:19). Theoretically, these findings also reflect the psycho-social functions of religious beliefs and practices that have been acknowledged in anthropological literature (West 2007; Bowie 2003; Havilland 2002; Bennett 1996; Mathews 1994; Rappaport 1979; Middleton 1960). In general, therefore, it seems likely that the utilization of behavioral methods (Graves 2004; Bloch 2005; Greenwood 2005) in future investigations may help the researcher to depict the great variations inherent in the social and psycho-religious representations of the Sakata.

The last important point for consideration, which I have made several times in this paper, concerns with the continued existence and vitality of religious activity and beliefs among the Sakata. This interpretation subscribes to the view that religious practices and thought have not suffered severe decline in modern societies. Rather they “have continued to perform important functions for individuals and society as a whole” (Bilton et al. 2002:425; for further details, see Magesa 1998:16-40). I am fundamentally in agreement with Davie (2007:77) that “[...] religion is not something that disappears in modern societies, but

something which ebbs and flows in all societies over the long term”. The religious traditions of the Sakata continue to be deeply entrenched and to defy obliteration by modern social forces.

Bergson (2003 [1932]) thought of religion as being both a static and a dynamic reality. His view was that people can either preserve a system of beliefs, so that their religion will remain static, or they can abandon it. However, there is a third way, which allows the preservation and continuity of the external expression of their religion and rituals, but also allows a gradual transformation of the content of the beliefs. This evolution of religious thought is something dynamic. While their basic ideas of their relationship with God and the ancestors can change, for example with the adoption of Christianity, they can still retain mystical or magical elements from the traditional beliefs they have inherited. In conformity with this Bergsonian view, which applies to the Sakata, “scholars have argued for a perspective that recognizes the uneven quality of modernization and the ability of traditional values and institutions to coexist with modern ones” (Kilbria 1999:319).

Our study has found that matrilineal priest-like individuals/intercessors play a significant role in carrying out religious activities, which in turn allow Sakata individuals to preserve the age-old communion between the living and the dead (*Bakapfa*). This reflects Middleton’s (1960: v) empirical evidence gleaned from Lugbara communities in Uganda, whereby “[the] cult of the dead is intimately connected with the maintenance of the lineage authority. The exercise and acknowledgment of this authority are bound up with the cycle of lineage development”. It also matches the assertion that black African communities know “no distinction between individual, social and political life; but life can be enjoyed in its fullness when ancestors are remembered and honored” (Bujo 1992:23).

Conclusion

This article has proposed an understanding of the most salient socio-cultural and religious traditions that enable the Sakata of the Congo to retain their original ethnic identity in changing social environments. The study yields two important results: first, despite the social forces of modernization, the matrilineal kinship ideology and the religious determinants continue to form the centre of cultural life and identity for the Sakata. The second important result is that a significant positive correlation exists between the matrilineal kinship ideology and the religious forms. It is quite clear that such interrelationship is historically contingent and culturally determined, and hence holds one of the keys for the understanding of Sakata society as a whole. The matrilineal descent patterns of the Sakata play a decisive role in ordering and shaping their religious beliefs and practices. Conversely, their religious beliefs and activities can be said to ‘ensure’ the continuance of their matrilineal kinship ties that have existed from time immemorial. In general, therefore, the present study provides a refined interpretative tool for demonstrating how these two areas of social life function as a conservative force that enable the

matrilineal Sakata ethnic group to keep to this day its identity and coherence.

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