

Proposition One

– BAKA EGALITARIANISM

and GENERATIVE CONCEPTS OF BODYING

What do we actually mean when we say social or being in community? For most of us, being social still has a lot to do with the physical proximity we share with people around us, unless we are communicating online via social media (which has of course been greatly impacted by the COVID pandemic). Being social in the UK, where I grew up, meant going to the pub with your friends, and having a good time. The *Baka*, a Central-African linguistic and cultural group, certainly love a good party, but social to them also means clearly sensing and feeling each other's ways of being and what is happening in the community, being actively sensorially connected with each other. This kind of sensing is strong in many tight-knit communities, but with the Baka what is special is how this way of relating and communicating is central to their egalitarian social system.

What does being social mean for you?

Baka egalitarianism means that the equality of wealth, power and status is not a given, but is continuously acted out, created, composed, and maintained through levelling mechanisms. In this kind of egalitarianism, there is economic and political equality, rather than merely the political equality at the centre of much of today's debate on the topic. For the Baka, what matters is *organizing sensitively in relation to what others are doing, without the existence of explicit leadership*. It is impolite to tell other people what to do! Having lived and experienced this with the Baka, this quality of social relation continues to guide my curiosity and research work. It has influenced my understanding of what

we mean when we say ‘body’, what a body *bodying* can do, and the importance of bodies singing-dancing together. Studying *fascia*, our bodily connective tissue, deepened this journey into our capacities for being social, by connecting social theory with our bodily ways of relating. A greater emphasis on systems thinking is advocated as crucial to responding to contemporary political, economic and environmental issues.¹ Interweaving systems thinking, social theory, and neurophysiology highlights that the real urgency of our times is that we cannot afford to not include more actively our moving-sensing bodies in considerations around our futures. Responding to critical issues, may become easier and more applicable not only through systems thinking, but through a nuanced and deeper systems *thinking-perceiving*, which combines cognitive knowing with the information we receive relating with other humans and the more-than. This is much easier than it sounds, and we can start by coming to understand and deepen awareness of our own bodies as nested ecosystems, which resonate with other or larger ecosystems in processes of *Tensional Responsiveness*. Nested here addresses the limits of bodying, not in the sense of bodyings as being contained *within* something, but as co-created, shaped and delimited through the continuity of processes of tensional responsiveness.

Working with the egalitarian Baka meant swirling with time-old questions of how to understand relations between individuals and groups, of belonging and exclusion. Many theories on society and its organization centre around or follow the divide between the individualism of *societas* and the holism of *universitas*. Diverging from these debates on ‘society’, the term ‘sociality’ refers to the human *capacity for the social*.² *Sociality* describes how people organise their social lives through a *quality of focusing attention* rather than by referring to rigid structures.³ Sociality dynamics are guided not by strict societal boundaries, but by listening, attuning, responding to emergent, generative qualities of short-, medium- or long-term relating. Sociality aims to incorporate the polarities of individualism and holism, collectivity and subjectivity, norms and practices. Egalitarian groups are not just free, lawless societies. To maintain social cohesion, egalitarian groups place great emphasis on interweaving individual autonomy and group connectedness. Levelling mechanisms, singing and dancing together, and the important, invisible, sensorial

1 Meadows & Wright 2009, Rockström et. al. 2009

2 Ingold 1999

3 Wilson 1988:50

qualities, are all part of making this moving-sensing sociality work for everybody. Baka' capacities for the social include a particular gentleness in sensing-communicating and organising in active relation to others, in ways which engender *independence within interdependence*. As anywhere else in the world, Baka groups also experience quiet disputes and loud open conflicts, stemming from lovers' quarrels, long-term family feuds, or many other reasons. Conflicts are acted out within the groups in visible or invisible ways, which again is the case not only with the Baka but everywhere. However, Baka egalitarianism challenges to move away from 'happy-flower' ideas of perfect social organisation and conflict resolution, by looking at how pressure and tension activate together with communicating sensitively and organising non-violently in relation to others.

Recent medical discoveries around fascia, the bodily connective tissue-system just beneath our human skins, give embodied depth to how tension is an active part of social organisation and process. Fascia tissues are continuously shifting-sliding in response to how we move through the world, and to the different kinds of tensions we are faced with. Drawing together fascia as one aspect of our neurophysiologies with capacities for being social, opens up to appreciating how these topics are not separate. At a deeper level, this also emphasises how detrimental it is to deny (eco)systemic and bodily impacts of social tensions, which side-lines strain and rigidity into individual and collective shadow spaces. Said another way, if we are not aware of and actively working with tension and pressure, we cannot develop capacities for the social, considered as organising sensitively and non-violently in relation to what others are doing.

Moving from the middle of these observations, allow me to introduce you to the Baka, and the magnificent forests of the Congo Basin in Central Africa.

Congo Basin Forests and Baka Groups along the River Ivindo

The Congo Basin is a mosaic of lush tropical forests, savannas, rivers and wetlands, and with a total of 3.7 million square kilometres is the second largest tropical region in the world. It is also named the Green Heart of Africa, with approximately 10,000 tropical plant species of which an estimated 30% are unique to the region. It is home to a fascinating diversity of life, including forest elephants, gorillas, chimpanzees, buffaloes, hippos, over 1000 species

Figure 1 - Map of Western Central Africa, showing Gabon, parts of the Congo Basin and the approximate regional expansion of Baka groups.



Source: Doerte Weig

of birds and 700 species of fish, and humans, too, have formed part of this biodiversity for millennia.⁴ Nowadays the Congo Basin spans across six different countries, and is home to more than 40 million people, coming from approximately 250 distinct ethnic groups.⁵ The Baka, together with the *Aka*, *Mbendjele*, *Mbuti* and other similar groups, are the descendants of an ancient

4 www.wwf-congobasin.org
5 The countries are Gabon, Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea.

hunter-gatherer lifestyle, which has been in existence for at least 30,000 years and maybe even up to 70,000 years.⁶ Living in intimate interweaving with mosaic forests was key to survival. At a global level, Congo Basin' forests act as the planet's second lung and counterpart to the rapidly dwindling Amazon. They form part of global processes of photosynthesis, meaning that these tropical forests also affect rainfall across the North Atlantic.⁷ The Basin acts as a huge carbon sink and is crucial to policies concerning future climate stability.⁸ When I arrived in these magnificent forests in 2010, I simply fell in love with the stunning beauty of the region. The earth pulses in a way I have experienced in no other part of the world. These vibrations are powerful, seductive, and irresistible.

Baka Groups along the River Ivindo

The Baka are one of the Central African linguistic and cultural groups, who have long been recognised and studied for their mobile way of life in rain-forests.⁹ Overall, there are about 50,000 Baka in the forests in the border regions of the three Central African countries Gabon, Cameroon and the Republic of Congo.¹⁰ I lived with Baka in north-eastern Gabon along the River Ivindo. Gabon, or in her official title *La République Gabonaise*, sits on the equator, and is one of the smallest countries in Western Central Africa.¹¹ About 80% of Gabon is covered by tropical forest and only just under 2% of the land are cultivated. What you see flying overhead is a sheer endless expanse of green, ranging from the canopies of the tallest trees to savannah grasslands and gnarly mangroves. The climate is humid and tropical, defined by wet and dry seasons. More than 40 different ethnicities make up the Gabonese population estimated at about 1.5 million, and the official language of Gabon is

6 Verdu et. al. 2009, Grauer 2011, and see Power 2017:180–182 for a detailed discussion on shared population genetics with Khoisan groups dating back around 75–100,000 years.

7 Myers 2016

8 Hubau et. al. 2020

9 Crampel 1890, Bahuchet 1992, Weig 2013

10 Paulin 2010:61

11 Gabon is bordered to the north by Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea; by the Republic of Congo (to be distinguished from the Democratic Republic of Congo, known for extreme colonial abuse and current civil war atrocities) to the east and south; and the western limit is 885 km of Atlantic Ocean.

French.¹² The country is run by an oil-rich elite, whilst at the same time approximately 80% of the population live in poverty.¹³ What struck me was that whether rich or poor, people speak about being in the 'forest', not about living in the jungle. The tropical 'jungle', perceived as wild, dangerous and impenetrable from a (European) distance, becomes a 'mere' forest from close up. The forest is seen by people as a fluid space, a place without borders. What I loved most during the initial phase of arriving in Gabon was how people listened and shared in whatever was going on in that moment, or as one Gabonese woman summarised the different dynamics, 'we have time – you have the watch'. The caring, the taking an interest, the warmth at heart made for a different kind of witness. This intensity of life can be both serenely beautiful and sometimes nothing but unbearable. The physicality of being involved, touched, made to feel welcome, was something I was not used to in that way. After some time, I realised it is about becoming *Zen* not through being silent and still, but through being in the midst of a cacophony of sound and touch.

Officials in the Gabonese capital city Libreville were not necessarily aware that there are Baka people living in the eastern border zones of the country.¹⁴ As I documented through my research, there are approximately 300 Baka living along the River Ivindo in north-eastern Gabon, and I use the term *Ivindo Baka* to refer to them.¹⁵ They used to enjoy a nomadic life as forest foragers and hunter-gatherers, but nowadays live predominantly settled lives in very small forest villages, which is where I spent most of my year researching with them.

Travelling to meet these Baka whom I hoped to work with, was a wonderful adventure. I had heard that small groups of Baka live around the village Adjab, which lies about 3 kilometres from the border between Gabon and the

12 In comparison with many other African countries, *La République Gabonaise* has enjoyed relative peace ever since its independence from France in 1960. Gabon is rich in natural resources, but there is practically no home-grown economy, and nearly everything on sale in Gabon is imported (Pourtier 1989).

13 Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) 2011

14 On September 4, 2002, at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, the late Gabonese president Omar Bongo Ondimba had announced that about 11% of the Gabonese territory were to be turned into 13 national parks. Ivindo Baka groups live around one of the Gabonese national parks, namely *Minkebe*.

15 Weig 2013:62

Republic of Congo.¹⁶ To get to Adjab, you start out driving from the provincial capital Makokou, a city of 12,000 inhabitants, and then continue along the River Ivindo in a dugout canoe. Trees or large plants often fall on the roads overnight, so if you are the first to travel the road in the morning, it is best to have a four-wheel-drive and strong men with you to clear away the 'natural' road blocks. Once at the end of the road, which at some point turns from bitumen into a dirt path, you continue your travel by dugout canoe to reach the villages like Adjab further along the Ivindo. The distance from Makokou as the crow flies is about 80 km, but the actual trip from Makokou to Adjab easily takes a whole day. The village Adjab is a small forest clearing in this distant area of eastern Gabon, and, in 2010, consisted of a collection of mud-walled houses, with no infrastructure such as electricity, running water, or network coverage (see Annex II for the village plan of Adjab).¹⁷ More importantly, Adjab is the (current) home of around 30–40 of the Ivindo Baka and was unusual in that only Baka lived there. In most other villages, Baka live together with other ethnic groups. These neighbourly relations can be very conflictual when opinions and practices of hierarchical, sedentary farmers clash with those of egalitarian, nomadic hunter-foragers. At the same time, these neighbourly relations are deeply interwoven and manifest particular forms of caring and friendship, extending into interregional networks, which many ethnic groups form part of.¹⁸ Adjab, with only Baka living there in 2010–11, was simply a beautiful and unique spot in the midst of the immensity of the magnificent tropical forests of the Congo Basin. On my first trip, I had arranged to travel to

16 In a 2009 genetic study, a map of the Baka population in Cameroon, Congo and Gabon referred only to the population around the town of Minvoul in Northern Gabon, not indicating the Baka in Makokou or along the Ivindo (Verdu et. al. 2009). This fact stands in contrast to cultural and linguistic ancestors of the Baka being the very first to be "discovered" by the Europeans in the nineteenth century (Bahuchet 1993a:76, my translation).

17 See Weig 2013:94–103 for details of Baka dwellings.

18 Academic assessment of relations between Baka and similar groups and their neighbours, has often been simplified into binary classifications based on (presumably) opposed economic subsistence strategies, meaning farmers vs. hunter-foragers, and conflicting modes of political organisation, meaning hierarchical vs. egalitarian. More recent assessments and my research emphasise how these groups currently are and mostly always have been strongly interacting with and also caring for each other, rather than maintaining strict ethnic divisions. For an example of a study on Baka and others involved in interfamilial, interethnic, and interregional networks, which are social, economic, ritual, and political in nature, see Rupp 2011.

Figure 2 – The image shows the canoe landing site for the village Adjab on the River Ivindo, Gabon.



Source: Doerte Weig

Adjab with help from the Gabonese national parks organization. The assistant of the head of the national park obviously considered me a welcome source of income, a ‘walking Euro’, and quoted me an outrageous price to make the trip to Adjab with me. Concerned about my research budget, I then took a decision, which I still marvel at today: I decided to travel together with two Baka individuals, brother and sister, who were at that time living in the provincial capital Makokou. In 2010, the Baka were still not officially recognised as Gabonese citizens, so that a single White woman travelling alone with two Baka broke with all social norms. People were at a loss to find the right words to gossip about this. And so I entered the world of the hunter-gatherers of today.

Inspirations from Hunter-Gatherer Studies

Exotic myths as much as negative clichés continue to surround the term *hunter-gatherer*. For example, the apparently unsophisticated ways of thinking of our ancestors, are used to underline arguments about advanced modern economic rationality and decision-making. Seeing examples of this also after my time with the Baka,¹⁹ impressed on me the importance of shaking up such stereotypes. *Hunter-gatherer studies* began with the idea of finding out more about human origins and searching for what at the time were believed to be linear traces of human evolution from primitive bands to advanced civilizations. In the 19th century, hunter-gatherers were often romanticised as *Noble Savages*. At the same time, many of the first accounts of hunter-gatherer lives were transmitted or written by European settlers or explorers. These settlers were sedentary, running agricultural or livestock farms, and they were simply biased against nomadic practices such as hunting and foraging. They viewed the lives of hunter-gatherers as short, harsh, and poverty-stricken.²⁰ This image of hunter-gatherers as primitive and impulse-driven, as something to look down on, remains strong even today. Alternatively, they are glorified as 'indigenous', living in remote locations untouched by civilization, as something to protect as a precious relic of ancient human history. It is important to move beyond this simplifying binary. Given the diverse ecological challenges we face today, it can only be beneficial to shift thinking about hunter-gatherers as a single, exotic category of people. We can instead begin taking into account the considerable differences in 'hunter-gatherer situations',²¹ meaning that amongst hunter-gatherers groups, across space and time, we find huge diversity and ingenuity.

Research from around the world has brought to light the diversity amongst apparently similar groups of hunter-gatherers even within the same type of environments, as well as their deep adaptive capacities and different types of specialised knowledge.²² Following many years of scholarly debate,

19 See, for example, Dobelli 2011.

20 One notable exception is the Bleek and Lloyd Archive on |Xam in South Africa: www.cca.uct.ac.za.

21 Widlok 2016

22 Kent 1996, Lee & Daly 1999, Reyes-García et. al. 2016

it is now commonly accepted that hunting-and-gathering or foraging, can be defined as 'subsistence based on the hunting of wild animals, gathering of wild plant foods, and fishing, with no domestication of plants [or animals]'.²³ This means that hunter-gatherers do not intentionally plant and cultivate crops, and that they do not domesticate animals, except sometimes dogs. The reverse way of saying this is that there is an '*absence of direct human control over the reproduction of exploited species*'.²⁴ Another way of distinguishing between group livelihoods is the classification into so-called *immediate-return* and *delayed-return* societies, which concerns, as the terms imply, the immediate or delayed timing of food consumption, and the impact of this on social organisation and notions of private property.²⁵ Moreover, ethnographic fieldwork showed that not all hunter-gatherer groups live as nomads. There existed large semi-sedentary settlements from which people foraged for wild foods. This also means that past and present groups can be divided into more than just simple and complex hunter-gatherers, whereby 'simple' equalled equality and 'complex' involved having a political hierarchy resulting in inequalities. For example, some of the groups in Northern America, which you may know through the practice of *potlatch*, would alternate between different egalitarian or hierarchical modes of social organisation, depending on the season.²⁶

By the 1970s, it had become clear that all the neat, clear-cut boxes for hunter-gatherers were inappropriate and inadequate, if you acknowledged the actually existing diversities. This included especially classifications of 'man' as hunter, and 'woman' as gatherer. At the time examples where woman hunt too, such as the *Agta* in the Philippines, turned the strict evolutionary typologies on their heads. The division into 'man-hunter' and 'woman-gatherer' came to be seen as a misnomer, influenced also by the emerging feminist debates of that period. Research has since consistently shown how women, including Baka women, engage in subsistence hunting too, albeit in different ways than men.²⁷ Another transformative effect of hunter-gatherer studies came in 1968, when research by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins showed that hunter-gatherers spend less time on 'work' than farmers or modern office employees, leading Sahlins to introduce the notion of 'the

23 Lee & Daly 1999:3

24 Panter-Brick, Layton & Rowley-Conwy 2001:2, emphasis in the original

25 Woodburn 1982

26 Wengrow & Graeber 2015

27 Reyes-García et. al. 2020

original affluent society'.²⁸ This more creative view of our gatherer-hunter ancestors, and the necessary change of perspective, was introduced to a large audience also through the bestseller *Sapiens*.²⁹ In his book, historian Yuval Noah Harari stresses how studies of hunter-gatherers have shown, how hunter-gatherer lives are generally far more diverse than that of the average reader today, in terms of food intake and how people spend their days. Our daily diets are poor in comparison with those of our forager ancestors. With our work rhythms focused on efficiency and project milestones, we miss out on enjoying many distinct, entertaining activities, which they had time for. Doing different things, and emphasising fun and enchantment (not force) as modes of engagement helped our forager-hunter ancestors develop and maintain physical dexterity and sensorial ecosystemic awareness. Today, people still living like hunter-gatherers or at least in part like foragers, make up about 1% of the world's population. Within this 1% of people, there seems to be a higher variation of social organisation than within the rest of the world's population.³⁰ That means, that a European manager and an Untouchable from the Indian caste system potentially have more in common with each other than two persons from distinct hunter-gatherer groups.

One of the aspects which continues to fascinate me most, is how (our) ancestors adapted and changed their social organisations throughout time and as needed. Research by archaeologist David Wengrow and anthropologist David Graeber looks at what they called *Palaeolithic politics*. This emphasises the ability of hunter-gatherers to alternate – consciously and deliberately – between contrasting modes of political organization.³¹ *Palaeolithic politics* concerns the period between 40,000-10,000 years ago, and the term 'institutional plasticity' indicates how various hierarchical and egalitarian forms of social institutions existed alternately, and with full political consciousness of the people involved.³² Moreover, the changes from one form of social organisation to another, could occur *within* one group, as groups would come together, or disperse, in relation to seasonal considerations. Generally speaking, groups would live dispersed into smaller family units during one season and come together for large gatherings during a different season. However,

28 Sahlins 1968

29 Harari 2015

30 Kelly 2013

31 Wengrow & Graeber 2015; drawing on the work of Lévi-Strauss 1967, Mauss & Beuchat 1979 [1904-5], Lowie 1948, and Clastres 1974.

32 Wengrow & Graeber 2015:606

as Wengrow and Graeber document from their analysis of archaeological and ethnographic data, there is no universal pattern to relations between social organisations and seasonal periods. Different groups adapted their social structure in different ways. Within one group, for example the *Kwaikutl*, individual family units would live in a loosely structured way during one season, to then submit to a central authority during seasonal gatherings with other families from the group.³³ Whereas, with other groups, for example the Arctic *Inuit*, or the *Nambikwara* in Brazil, during times of dispersion, families would be lead and controlled by the man and father, but who would then have nothing or less to say during seasonal gatherings organised according to more egalitarian principles.³⁴ Sometimes the intricate adaptations of social structure and seasonality would be specifically related only to ritual practices.³⁵ As Wengrow and Graeber conclude, the continuity between these different ways of doing things ‘resides precisely in the fact that this shifting back and forth [between authoritarian and levelling types of social organisation] allowed mature and self-conscious political actors to be continually aware that no social order was immutable’.³⁶ What we see here, is that our ancestors were acutely attentive and responsive to the fact that everything about how we organise and relate as humans was and is potentially open to negotiation, subversion, and change.

Baka Egalitarianism: Independence within Interdependence

Baka Sociality and Livelihoods

Baka sociality is based on an egalitarian social system. This understanding of egalitarianism means there is a striving for an equality, which eliminates all distinctions of wealth, power and status, other than those between the sexes.³⁷ No-one is allowed to stand out unnecessarily. This equality of wealth, power and status is not a given, but is continuously acted out. It is created and maintained through continuous efforts and levelling mechanisms such as humour and mocking. Attempts at standing out of the crowd are frowned upon,

33 Mauss & Beuchat 1979 [1904-5]

34 Mauss & Beuchat 1979 [1904-5], Lévi-Strauss 1967

35 Lowie 1948

36 Wengrow & Graeber 2015:613

37 Woodburn 1982

and people will make fun of you until you stop doing whatever is setting you apart from everyone else. This form of egalitarianism is an ongoing movement of balancing on a 'fine line between autonomy and connectedness'.³⁸ Sharing is a foundational practice for the Baka. Goods are shared immediately and equally on demand, and there is no developed concept of private property. So in this kind of egalitarianism, there is economic *and* political equality, which brings with it its own set of advantages and challenges. This type of egalitarianism is at least 40,000 years old, but most certainly much older, with some research suggesting that moral communities striving for egalitarianism can be traced back 6 million years.³⁹ Singing and dancing together is how egalitarian societies continuously regulate the only pronounced difference which is that of female and male powers. The male-female dynamics also form the distinction to *acephalous*, meaning headless, societies, which describe social organizations characterised only by the absence of top-down leadership or centralised power structures, and which lack relative gender equality.⁴⁰ The different energies of men and women in egalitarian societies are understood as gender complementarities and carefully expressed and managed through ritual practices. These aspects are often side-lined or ignored in discussions around the relevance of knowledge on egalitarian societies to debates of today.

The contemporary Ivindo Baka way of life is diverse, including the subsistence practices of hunting, foraging and honey collecting as well as actively managing their own plantations in the forest. Baka also take on waged labour such as acting as trackers for wildlife conservation projects, and they work in artisanal gold-mining. Therefore, classifying the Ivindo Baka as 'hunter-gatherers' is incorrect, and they can be considered as 'post-foragers' or 'forager-horticulturalists'. The term forager-horticulturalists evades the drawbacks of the term post-forager. As with any other use of the 'post' prefix, there is the assumption of a prior condition,⁴¹ which in the case of the Baka refers to all the stereotypes around being the first inhabitants in Central Africa.⁴² The lan-

38 Finnegan 2013:701

39 Boehm 1999

40 Townsend 2018:2

41 Frankland 2001:248, Blench 1999:42

42 In common parlance, the Baka are considered to be the descendants of the first inhabitants of Africa, also termed 'pygmies'. I set the term 'pygmies' in parenthesis to document that it is a 'social construction of Euroamerican researchers, and does not necessarily reflect ethnic or social identities as expressed or experienced by the peo-

guage the Baka speak is also known as 'Baka', and the majority of Baka women and men are at least bi-lingual, if not tri-lingual or more. These extensive language skills are useful and necessary in order to be able to communicate with the various neighbouring ethnic groups along the Ivindo and further afield.⁴³ Baka multi-linguism may be due to their exceptional oral and auditory skills, which especially the Baka men learn as they imitate animal sounds when hunting in the forest. I experienced this not only in the forest, but also during English lessons I offered in Adjab. The Baka participants imitated my English accent perfectly, in a way which was like hearing myself speak. If they ever needed to appear sophisticated during a formal English dinner in the UK, it would not be for lack of language skills.

Along the Ivindo today, some Baka like to enjoy the benefits of town life in Makokou, whilst others remain deeply rooted in village life in Adjab. With the money they earn, Baka participate in the cash economy and acquire personal material possessions, such as hip-hop style clothes, radios, food, and alcohol.⁴⁴ Baka of all ages love using their mobile phones as cameras, showing each other pictures of family members and especially new-born children – one is tempted to say just like everyone else in this world. In dealing with rural-urban diversities, Baka populations are experiencing challenges and changes and, in many ways, what is fashionable in town, is

ple [] themselves' (Rupp 2003:54). Explorers to Africa documented the existence of small people or 'dwarves' in Angola, Gambia, and Gabon as early as the seventeenth century (Battell, 1906: HSP2:6. p.56, quoted in Knight 2003:86), but nobody had spoken of 'pygmies' (Bahuchet 1993b:162). It was only in 1871, when the German explorer and botanist Georg Schweinfurth travelled to Central Africa and encountered the *Aka*, who are considered to be one of the 'pygmy' groups, and pronounced that he had found the *Pygmäenrassen*, the 'pygmy race', that the two became connected (Schweinfurth 1874). Schweinfurth is therefore accredited with being the person to confirm their general existence, and since then the terminology and its (derogatory) reference to short-statured people has remained. The ethnic groups generally classed as 'pygmy' today include the Baka, the *Aka*, the *Mbuti*, the *Twa*, the *Efe*, the *Asua*, the *Koya*, the *Bongo*, and the *Kola* (Bahuchet 1993a). Nowadays, Baka are deemed patrilineal (meaning descent is traced through the male line), but ancient Baka society was possibly bi-lineal (male and female descent) as lexical studies indicate matrilineal (female descent lines) elements, suggesting a 'matrilinearity undergoing mutation' (Paulin 2010:204).

43 Baka forms part of the Ubangian language family, namely the group *sere-Ngbaka-mba*, which includes 12 languages (Paulin 2010:33). Along the Ivindo the predominant fluency is with Baka and *Bakwele*, the language of the largest neighbouring ethnic group, in addition to which there is knowledge of *Fang*, *French*, and *Kota*.

44 Köhler 2005, Weig 2015c

frowned upon in the village. A classic example concerns women's attire: in the provincial capital Makokou, women wear jeans or skirts as they please; in the forest village Adjab, wearing trousers is disapproved of and women (including myself) were mocked for doing so.

Even with all the changes, what continues to fascinate is how music and dance play a central role in maintaining egalitarian dynamics. It is a more than powerful experience to be swept away by polyphonic singing at night surrounded by and in the middle of nothing but tropical forest life. Polyphonic singing brings bodies into resonance in a way, which is central to gender balance and group harmony, health, and enjoyment. This has been termed 'socio-somatic' as it involves the entire social body.⁴⁵ With regard to Baka and similar Central African hunter-forager groups, *somatic* is understood not simply in the general understanding as referring to body or corporality, but equally to 'the life that animates bodies', and specifically to 'activities that bring the body into resonance'.⁴⁶ The respective polyphonic sounds and dance movements of women and men are a dialogue composed of bodily, sounded and felt, exchanges. The process is a listening to, a feeding off and responding to others' sounds or movements, all of which results in a 'visceral inter-sexual conversation' between male and female energies.⁴⁷ This dynamic becomes and is non-violent political expression. It is grounded in how sensitive but powerful ritual activity has 'the capacity to churn up and circulate social power',⁴⁸ as I describe more in Proposition Three. By keeping power circulating, egalitarian socio-somatic bodying challenges and inverts relationships of power, dominance, and authority, in fun and enchanting ways.

Independence within Interdependence

Researching on Baka mobility and migration, I learned how group focus wins out over individual concerns. Participating, observing, and sensing with the Ivindo Baka,⁴⁹ I continued to be intrigued by the inherent attention for and of the group preventing a detrimental development of individual self-importance. Sometimes, Baka individuals would come to me, bitterly complaining

45 Rouget & Buckner 2011

46 Rouget & Buckner 2011:111

47 Finnegan 2013:705

48 Finnegan 2013:701

49 Laplantine 2015:2

about something they considered important only for themselves, but then when it mattered, they would put group dynamics first. During interviews, people would say 'I', although it was only very exceptionally a single individual. 'I' always referred to at least 2-3 persons, if not a larger group of more people. At the start of my time with the Ivindo Baka, all this was wildly confusing, especially as it is completely opposed to (our – depending on your situatedness as reader) capitalist ideas of competitive behaviour to win out over others. This focus on the group means organizing in relation to what others are doing, *without* the existence of explicit leadership, in a continuous effort, required from all members of the group.

Can you imagine nobody ever telling you what to do? And that nevertheless you would always make sure that your actions resonate with the most coherent energy in that moment in the group situation?

This kind of social organisation exists, and it demands a very special form of communication; a communication which often takes place without words.

**Communicating in an egalitarian way is
an attuning to, a sensing, aligning, tuning into
what others are doing and how they are moving.
It is all about organising oneself in relation to others.**

During my research work, this meant that in the morning we would discuss plans for the day. The Baka would tell me the different activities they intended to pursue; only for everybody to then end up doing something different, sometimes a mere five minutes later. Place yourself in the position of a researcher with a research design and time schedule, and you can imagine my initial frustration. After a while and many moments of disappointment, vexation, and even tears, I began to tune into the Baka way of communicating. On the one hand, I realised I was dealing with classic bias - they were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. At the same time, I saw how decisions formed and things happened as part of group dynamics. This mostly occurred without any grand discussion, and slowly I learned to relate to the felt sensoriality with which people organise themselves. I began grasping how to co-compose in the network of Baka reciprocal, responsive messaging to become part of the 'invisible' flow of communication. This was intensified by the fact that even after many months with the Baka, I had not mastered the Baka lan-

guage to a level of complete fluency. Baka is a tonal language, like many Asian languages, and, for example, the letter combination 'so' can be pronounced in many differently sounding ways meaning different things. I continued to struggle with these minute distinctions of sound, and the Baka and I often laughed at my funny expressions. However, when I noticed that I was able to communicate in relation and sensitive response to the system and network of people I was living with, to feel the flows of decision-making, and to vibrate, resonate, move with them - this showed me that I had mastered Baka 'language' in a completely unforeseen way.

Baka have an understanding and terminology of space, time and sociality as interrelated. Space is not conceived in relation to units of time. Instead, there is no differentiation between space and time, distance and duration are merged, and words often have both a spatial and temporal meaning (See Annex I).⁵⁰ Truly inhabiting their perspective, Ivindo Baka egalitarianism is an ongoing co-composition of qualities of ecologically grounded spacetime and nested sociality.

Especially those Baka who were helping me with my research on Baka migratory histories and contemporary mobilities, walking with me in the forest to, for example, document former villages or old burial sites, would really make an effort to stick with my planning. Sensing how important these (strange for them) activities were to me, they would try hard to adapt to my way of organising. And yet ... time and again we 'failed', entering into a beautiful experience of not being 'efficient', when it just wasn't the moment to 'work'. Instead as group dynamics and a larger intelligence took over, we would start to dance and have a party in the middle of the day, which sometimes lasted only one hour, or it might continue on into the night. I started to love these impromptu parties, noticing how each time I would return to my research activities refreshed. One or more bodies moving and/or singing together, resonating with socio-somatic energies, always restored a sense of balance and harmony to the entire group. Afterwards, research activities would not feel like 'work' so much, but became more creatively integrated into and moving from the middle of the people present. Activating the intelligent wisdom

50 For example, the Baka word *tie* means place or time; *ndanda* refers to place, location or moment; and *belebele* (which is the doubling of *bele* meaning forest) means always or everywhere (Leclerc 2001, Weig 2013:92). Also, for Baka living in forest environments there are equivalences between social spaces and mythical spaces. See Annex I for detailed information.

emerging through attuned co-presence, the 'extra', the excess, meant things got done in an organic way, and exactly as they needed to be on that occasion.

It was the many small moments of this kind that opened up the big windows of understanding. This is part of the magic of any ethnographic field-work, but for me the added layer came when occasionally my thoughts would return to my corporate office days, and I visualised people standing by the coffee machine, desperately grabbing a few moments of freedom from work pressures and power plays. These moments when my lived experiences overlapped left me wondering ...

whether in regard to questions of how to live together without destroying human habitats, giving more attention to the diversity and situatedness of hunter-gatherers could be valued differently? And especially whether or how the existence of people living and abiding by egalitarian values could be of greater interest?

Tension

Importantly, this line of questioning is neither about exoticizing or glorifying 'tribal' life, nor thinking in terms of maximising the economic efficiency of homo oeconomicus. Being able to articulate how the existence of people living and abiding by egalitarian social values could be of greater interest, has been a process gently percolating into my daily life and ecosystem. What remains unique is how intensity and tension pan out in Baka egalitarian sociality, and how that relates to and emerges as sensing, communicating, and organising in active relation to others. Tension or intensity here are not moral or emotional qualities. They are neither good nor bad. Tension simply describes the existence of connections, which can take on many different qualities and intensities, for example, from strong to weak, from beautiful to scary. Attuning to the tension, is acknowledging qualities of interconnectedness, of being always already interwoven, of humans never separate from their surroundings. This form of co-presence or co-sociality is always more-than, meaning it involves non-human qualities and elements. The co-presence is premised on and generated through qualities of sensitively and non-violently relating to others. This differs from analyses conducted around similar phenomena in dance or systems studies. Qualities of sensitivity and non-violence shape and ground not only the context for artistic research or analysing an economic question from a systems perspective, but *all* aspects of the egalitarian social-

ity. Most of all, the difference lies in how 'structurally non-violent societies'⁵¹ manage to make being present with tension and complexity a mostly fun process. Recognising and attuning to the tension and connectedness, and the pleasurable mode of life that can come with it, is based in an unbounded and integrated understanding of human bodiliness. Living this non-violent tensional co-presence, necessitates shifting perceptions of what we mean when we say 'body'.

From Body To Body-ing: Fascias and Microbiomes

Our human relations, and how, why, and where we relate and move in the world, involve our physical bodies. Whether we are hugging or ignoring a person, the gesture originates from a bodily presence. Whether we are walking on foot through forests or traversing city centres in autonomous vehicles, we are capable of doing this through the physicality of our human bodies. There are many explanations and theories of what we mean when we say 'body', but within this complexity two central but contrasting points of view stand out. The first emphasises the separation of mind and body, termed *Cartesian* following the philosopher Rene Descartes. This entails a notion of body or person as individualistic, measurable, quantifiable. The second view of 'body' speaks of the fundamental interconnectedness with and inseparability of a person or being from their surroundings. Such permeable and pervasive environments include other humans, ancestors, animals, plants, atmospheric phenomena such as sound or rainfall, and much more, nowadays also summed in the term 'more-than'.⁵² Groups like the Baka as well as many others, for example, the *San* in southern Africa, the *Kaluli* in Papua New Guinea, or the *Arawete* of the eastern Amazon, adhere to this second view. For the Baka the forest is alive, and they are permanently communicating with the forest, also through polyphonic singing. Trees, animals, Baka persons, and other beings are all co-constituted as and through living social relations, as permanently becoming socialities. This sense of deep interweaving is commonly associated with "indigenous" groups. However, it is important not to stop there and fall back into exotic stereotypes that prevent appreciating how all humans live in such webs of inseparability, whether we are aware of it or not. The work

51 Finnegan 2015:87

52 La Puig de Bellacasa 2017:2

of biologists and geoscientists reveals how current technologies are transforming humans 'from individuals into specialised parts of a global more-than-human being'.⁵³ These transformation processes transcend (human) linear understandings of time. At the same time, these research fields underline how the technologically-enabled 'metahuman being is inextricably bound to the much older biosphere, from which it arose'.⁵⁴ Both modern science and long-standing wisdom traditions evidence the non-linear interconnectedness of human bodyings with their surroundings.

My understanding of what is 'body' has been shaped through my scientific research as much as my passion for dancing, through all of which I learned that studying body is intimately intertwined with studying movement. This starts with embryology and infancy, and studies with infants have shown that the capacity to move and the capacity to experience are related.⁵⁵ We begin learning how to relate, how to move and be social, in the socio-cultural environments of our childhood. There is vast diversity in human movement styles, as ways of bodily movement are socio-culturally distinct and gender specific.⁵⁶ As adults, we continue to live in conscious or unconscious resonance to this socio-cultural diversity of people we move with, and also in ongoing and multi-sensorial resonance to the architecture and infrastructure of our daily lives.⁵⁷ Productions of sociality and how we feel for example belonging, happen also through culturally inflected notions of movement, which are directly related to our bodily physicality and awareness. After many years of investigating what bodies can do, with different groups ranging from hunter-gatherers to contemporary dancers and body therapists, for me, it has become impossible to think and feel one without the other: Body and movement go together as do capacities for bodily presence and socio-political-cultural context.⁵⁸ This perspective is further influenced by the field of somatic studies. Generally speaking, *somatic* is another way of saying body or physiology. The difference is that in comparison to the *body* as seen from the outside, so from a third-person perspective, *somatic* refers to a first-person perspective of the body's internal workings.⁵⁹

53 Margulis & Sagan 2000:27

54 Margulis & Sagan 2000:27

55 Sheets-Johnstone 2011, Stern 2010:7–8

56 Mauss 1979 [1934], Manning 2007

57 Pallasmaa 2019, Hedley 2019, Zardini 2005

58 See for example: Weig 2019, Weig 2018, Weig 2015c, Weig 2015b

59 Hanna 1970

The conceptualization of 'body' put forward in this book is then not Cartesian, fixed, bounded, measurable. 'Body' is understood as emergent, ontogenetic, more-than, permanently moving-sensing-vibrating.⁶⁰ Using the verb *body-ing*, rather than the noun body, underlines how the 'body continually transforms itself and is already not, at the moment when I speak of it, what it was a few seconds ago'.⁶¹ The work of critical philosophers Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, and others, accentuates how a 'body' is not something that exists and is somewhere in space or time, but is a process of constant composition, affect, movement, becoming. Manning's work especially highlights how (human) bodying is always about 'movement-moving', and the combination of moving and sensing, of *moving-sensing*, as co-composite practices.⁶² Processes of moving-sensing with sensations such as sound, smells, joys, and pains, at the same time characterise what makes the body *excessive*. When I cry out, ululate maybe, I am co-composing, extending into space and at the same time being shaped by what the sound emerging with my bodying does with the space. In all the physiological and physical nuances of the co-composition of the sound being made and reverberating with the space, there is something extra and excessive, indicating those invisible, sensorial aspects which cannot be captured or clearly named, and which carry a potential for shape-shifting.⁶³ Research on neurophysiology, and especially the latest studies on the *fascia* tissue-system, emphasise this permanent becoming, vibrating, shifting-sliding in resonance with impulses from the qualities of our environments.

The Amazing Fascia Tissue-System

Fascia is our bodily connective tissue, which extends from the outer epidermis through all skin layers into the depths of our bodies. Fascia tissues envelope muscles, organs, bones, and nerves, thereby forming 'a continuous tensional network throughout the human body'.⁶⁴ This extensive interconnectedness results in a fascinating three-dimensional network, a living matrix, which forms a bodily support structure, an internal 'soft skeleton'. At the same time,

60 Manning 2007

61 Laplantine 2015:13

62 Manning 2016

63 Serres 2008, Manning 2007:51, Wulf 2007:126

64 Schleip 2012:xv

it transmits information inside the body as a communicative continuum. Said another way, fascia is the ‘white stuff’ in between layers of meat (think of skinning a chicken), or the fibres separating segments of citrus fruits. Anatomists used to cut away the fascial tissue, the ‘white stuff’, as useless. They were focused on the muscles, adhering to a medical view of the body as composed of 600 muscles.⁶⁵ Following intense research on fascia during the last 10-15 years, this view has been challenged and shape-shifted. Studies revealed how fascias are vital to a person’s sensing and movement capacities. Rather than pure muscle power, research has shown how fascial sliding is key to movement, and for example, the kangaroo’s leap is a release of fascial tension, not just muscular force.⁶⁶ The fascia tissue-system is now considered as our largest sensory organ, as for example, the fascial element of the muscle is innervated by approximately six times more sensory nerves than its muscular counterpart.⁶⁷

The development of fascial tissues precedes bone development in an embryo, during the so-called gastrulation or embryonic folding in weeks 2-3, and together with blood, it may be seen as the ‘organ of innerness’.⁶⁸ In analogy with a tent, the fascias are the tent material, which is later shaped by the bones, the tent structure. Together with the nervous system, fascias form a body-wide mechanosensitive integrating signalling system.⁶⁹ Most importantly, the fascia tissue-system is an amazing viscoelastic continuum with *both/and* qualities. Viscoelasticity means fascia is both viscous, so resistant to deformation, and elastic, so able to adapt and resume its shapes after being stretched or compressed. *Both/and* means fascia combines qualities commonly perceived as opposites, as it is, for example, both liquid *and* solid, made of fibre *and* fluid. Fascias are predominantly composed of fibroblast cells and the extra-cellular matrix (ECM), of collagen fibres and watery, fluid ground substance and interstitial fluid.⁷⁰ Collagen is the main structural protein, and it is the collagen which enables fascias’ quality of tensile strength. Type I collagen (there are 15 in total) is stronger than steel.⁷¹ The incredible diversity of

65 Kuriyama 1999

66 Lesondak 2018:128. The (in part humorous) question asked by fascia researchers was: Are there really 600 muscles or only one muscle in 600 fascial pockets?

67 Schleip 2017

68 van der Wal 2017

69 Langevin 2006

70 Lesondak 2018:6, 8

71 Lesondak 2018:9, quoting Lodish et. al. 2000.

types of fascia tissues keep everything both separate *and* interconnected, and which is why it is also termed 'fascias' in the plural, continuously defying any singularising definition.⁷²

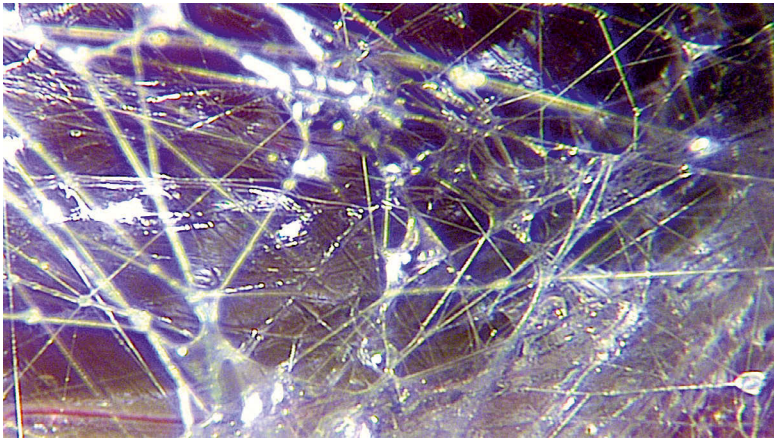
Fascias are intelligent-adaptive and respond to the way a person lives and moves by becoming more or less permeable or solid. Healthy fascias are juicy, fluid and 'wet', moving, sensing, stretching and sliding back and forth. Imagine wearing a jumper or jacket which does not sit right, and which you have to pull at and to adjust so that it fits with your body shape, and you feel comfortable wearing it. Fascia tissues are permanently making similar adaptive movements, just below your skin. In specialist terminology, fascias are relevant to *interoception*, the sensorial relationship people have with their own body, and *proprioception*, meaning how a person senses where their body is in space. Understanding fascias' unique qualities of shifting-sliding tensional responsiveness opens up new medical treatments, for example, for cancer and back pain.⁷³ In this view, it is not the spine, but fascias which hold up and connect the body parts, including the vertebrae. The both/and qualities, so not separating, but – in a healthy body – always interconnectedly sensitively shifting-sliding, is how fascias are continually becoming in *Tensional Responsiveness*.

Words cannot describe or do justice to the fasci(a)nation of seeing and attuning to fascias. Take a look at Image 3.1 on the next page. This photo shows you the web-like texture of the tissue-system. The image is of the fibrillar network around the muscle and flexor tendon in the forearm. Each time you move your hand and bend your finger, the fascia tissue-system as you see it here is shifting-sliding in tensional responsiveness in the movement. The second image (3.2) offers you an impression of the quality of how the fascia tissues envelope and interweave muscles, organs, bones, and nerves, thereby forming a continuous tensional network throughout the human body. To get a sense of how fascia tissues are permanently moving just beneath the outer

72 The outermost layer is known as the hypodermis or 'superficial fascia' and has a spongy quality and yellow colour. The second level is the filmy and 'membranous fascia' which is like gauze with stretchy, wet, slippery, gelatinous qualities. The third layer is known as 'deep or dense fascia' which is both elastic and grid-like, stable like strapping tape and white in colour. These descriptions were presented by integral anatomist Gil Hedley at the *British Fascia Symposium*, Worcester, June 25-26, 2016. See also www.gilhedley.com, and an interview I conducted with Gil about fascia: Hedley 2019.

73 Langevin et. al. 2016, Schleip 2012

Figure 3.1 – The web-like texture of fascia tissues in the human hand and forearm.



Source 3.1 – EndovivoProductions, Jean-Claude Guimberteau

layer of your skin, try accessing some of the documentaries about fascia available online. Firstly, *Fascia In Movement: The Essentials Preview*, is a great clip by one of the leading fascia specialists, Tom Myers, which explains the properties of fascias in an entertaining way with everyday household objects. A next step would be the seminal documentary *Strolling under the skin*, made by plastic surgeon and fascia specialist Claude Guimberteau, when camera technologies became small enough to enter the fractal realms of fascias.⁷⁴ *Strolling under the Skin* explains the medical revolutions around fascias, and Guimberteau shows how the fibres of living connective tissue remodel themselves, moment to moment, based on the tensions of the surrounding structures. The documentary takes the viewer into the microscopic details of how fascia tissues are interconnected and permanently shifting-sliding (but beware, if you are squeamish). Try accessing these or similar moving images of fascia, which will hopefully allow you to get an impression of the textural micromovements and the particular rhythmic qualities of this amazing tissue-system under your skin. You can hopefully come to appreciate fascias' incredible *both/and*

74 The documentary *Strolling under the skin* was made in 2005 by Claude Guimberteau, a hand surgeon and former President of the French Society for Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery.

Figure 3.2 – Fascias forming a continuous tensional network throughout the human body.



Source 3.2 – With the kind permission of John Sharkey, Clinical Anatomist 2007.

qualities: to how the shifting-sliding fascial layers *both* maintain tension and structure, *and* allow for responsiveness and change.

The term *technogenesis* describes the understanding that humans evolved with their technologies. Said another way, our original technologies, *techme* in Greek, are our senses, our sensorial capacities. Types and practices of sensory perception are socio-culturally distinct and cannot be understood or defined universally.⁷⁵ For example, the five senses model (touch, taste, smell, sound, sight) dominant in Europe, Northern America and other parts of the world, is not universal. Most cultures have more than five senses, and cultures can have up to 29 senses,⁷⁶ including for example the above-mentioned proprioception and interoception, or a distinct sixth ‘sense of balance’.⁷⁷

New information around fascia not only contests the dominant medical view of the body focused on muscle power, but, as our largest sensory organ,

⁷⁵ Classen 2012

⁷⁶ Howes 2004

⁷⁷ Geurts 2003

as one of our technologies, our techme, fascia further challenges how and what to think of as senses. Fascia research has evidenced the importance of bodily connective tissues, and the newly emphasized responsive shifting-sliding qualities of fascias can expand existing theoretical models and research methodologies.⁷⁸ It is timely to ponder how best to play and invent with fascias' both/and complexities. It has been suggested to theorize fascia as a social network metaphor,⁷⁹ but the viscoelastic qualities of bodily connective tissues, which are always moving-adapting and never the same, precisely deny being turned into a model or metaphor. As I suggest, both with regard to scientific research methodologies and fluid ontologies, and with regard to lived life, the fascial qualities of *shifting-sliding* and *tensional responsiveness* can become a deep, quotidian, processual inspiration, especially when asking *what if* and *what else*.⁸⁰

Microbiomes

Fascias are only one amazing aspect of many in our neurophysiologies, and it is also microbial ecologies which cast a new light on how we can think about 'body'. Studies undertaken, for example as part of the *American Gut Project*, have shown that, given the 39 trillion microbial cells in our bodies, in the volume which we normally think of as our 'body', only about 46% of that is human.⁸¹ The rest are various bacteria, viruses, and other cellular microorganisms, which make up who we are, or think we are as this entity which we refer to as the 'I' or 'self'. From the genetic perspective, human microbiomes are actually only 1% human, and 99% other.⁸² The 99% are other beings, living in the stomach, intestines, eyes, under toenails, or in the ear. This line of research has given rise to Donna Haraway saying that 'we have never been human', evidencing that throughout the entire existence of *homo sapiens*, we have always been 'more-than', co-composing with a mind-boggling quantity and quality of different organisms. This awareness occasions biomedicine shifting towards a 'molecular configuration' which conceives body or organism as an 'open-ended network whose boundaries are in constant flux and

78 Weig 2020

79 Barcan 2011:140

80 Weig 2020

81 Knight et. al. 2017

82 Knight et. al. 2017

negotiation with its environment'.⁸³ In other sectors, mind-body dualisms remain firmly in place, but research from fields such as neurophysiology, fascia studies, and microbial ecology are helping to shift towards a holistic understanding of bodies as processes. Towards an understanding of bodyings as co-composing multitudes intimately involved in processes of growing and perishing, as ecosystems actively living and attentively weaving life into creative, generative becoming with larger ecosystems. For example, the research demonstrating our gut as 'second brain' also documents how most choices towards maintaining our lives do not engage the 'conscious brain'.⁸⁴ As microbial processes form part of what is considered human decision-making, the research evidences that when 'we' make decisions, it is indeed always a 'we', an 'us', never a lone 'I'. I introduce this aspect also because during my stay with the Ivindo Baka, my capacity to sense the quality of foods became highly developed. If not by sight or smelling, then always in that moment just before placing a food item in my mouth, I immediately knew whether it was still good to eat, or better not to. I was never sick during my time with the Baka (something the tropical disease specialists still find hard to believe), apart from once when I swallowed meat which had a bluish-green shimmer, smelt funny, and which every cell in my body and the Baka women were telling me not to eat.

From Body to Bodying

The diversities of cellular and material compositions of bodies, as evidenced, for example, through fascia and microbiomes, emphasise that the human body is not singular.

We can come to appreciate our bodyings as permanently co-composing ecosystems of human and non-human matter.

Replacing the noun 'body' with the dynamic verb form *bodying*, or even using the plural *bodyings* as the new noun, are clear ways of acknowledging and activating new knowledge around fascias and microbiomes, and how bodying is always a process. The term *bodying ecosystem* attempts to combine these different constituents and ongoing movements, in what we normally think

83 Sharon 2014

84 Wilson 2015, Kahneman 2003

of as the human 'body'. *Bodying ecosystem* draws together how the body is not fixed, but is a co-composing system in permanent movement. Importantly, even these *bodying ecosystems* are not singular as they are always nested in and with larger ecosystems. In the complexities of lived life, (human) *bodyings* are always co-composing, shaping, and shifting-sliding with and in response to other ecosystems. This idea has been termed *holobiont* within the field of microbial biology. Holobiont refers to how a host and many other species living in, with, or around it, together form a discrete ecological unit.⁸⁵ Holobiont derives from another term, namely *holarchy*. Holarchy is a word coined by the philosopher Arthur Koestler to express the coexistence of smaller beings in larger wholes, and in which the constituents are not merely parts, they are *holons*, meaning wholes that also function as parts.⁸⁶ Koestler's aim was to move away from the concept of 'hierarchy', and the notion that the constituents of a unit or system must necessarily always be bound up in dependent and hierarchical relations of control. The notion of *bodying ecosystem* is indebted to holobiont and the ways the concept has been developed. However, as the emphasis of the writing here is on the interrelations of bodily movement, somatic awareness, and socio-political-economic context, I use the term *bodying*. Using *bodying*, the verb form of body, aims to join up holobiontic microbial activity and other ways of how the body is continuously shape-shifting-sliding, with somatic experience and socio-political co-presence, as continuously emerging processes.

**Shifting-sliding from the fixed body to ecosystemic bodying,
opens up different perspectives into what and how are capacities to be social.**

This awareness of bodying as process and potential, further supports joining up verbs into compositions such as moving-sensing and thinking-perceiving. We cannot move without sensing, and we cannot think without perceiving. There is nothing 'in here' or 'out there', other than to understand our bodyings as occasions of energetic concentrations; as resonant sound vessels; and most importantly as tensionally responsive to even the slightest impulse or shift. Joining up thinking and perceiving touches on debates from philosophy and in particular phenomenology,⁸⁷ which question whether there must be an 'I', a subject, which does the thinking and perceiving. When I write of thinking-

85 Margulis & Fester 1991

86 Margulis & Sagan 2000:9

87 See for example Spinoza & Curley 1985

perceiving as conjoined, I aim to emphasise how thinking and perceiving, as two qualities of knowing the world, are looped and inseparable.⁸⁸ At the same time, the philosophical debates critically draw attention to how the nuances in these processes of looping cannot be adequately reflected in language. This concern has a broader context evidenced by the work of biologist and evolutionary theorist Lynn Margulis and others, whereby 'life is distinguished not by its chemical constituents but by the behaviour of its chemicals' so that 'life on Earth is more like a verb. It repairs, maintains, re-creates, and outdoes itself'.⁸⁹ So, let's keep playing around with the everyday language and terms we use, and invent new vocabularies and grammars to reflect and refract our bodies as bodying ecosystems, and give voice to the ongoing shifting-sliding and co-composing of human and more-than-human. In co-generating new vocabularies, we can draw on how Baka terminologies emphasise the inter-relatedness of space, time and sociality. Through the process of this writing, it seems particularly relevant to co-invent more terms and process-oriented verbs to express, for example, sensitive resonance; organising sensitively in relation to what others are doing; independence within interdependence; tensional responsiveness; or non-violence. Maybe, just as Eskimos famously have many words for different types of snow, we can co-invent more words for expressing the diverse types of sensations of tension and response that may emerge in daily lives.

Living and being with the Baka was equally the experience of the limits of resonant bodying, the limits of sharing life and lived space with people. To a certain degree this is obvious, as I am a person who has spent at least half their life in built-up environments, shopping in supermarkets, with daily habits and (travel) opportunities shaped by the rights, privileges and limits of a White woman educated in Europe. These practices differ from Ivindo Baka bodying, shaped by the intense qualities and challenges of tropical forest life, predominantly hunting and gathering for wild foods; where knowledge is not about what you learnt at school; and, most importantly, where attempts at standing out of the crowd are frowned upon or even punished. So the moments, where I sensed a deep resonance, where my 'I' disappeared, where I felt attuned with Ivindo Baka bodying, responsive to the rules and openings of Baka social dynamics, these moments were profoundly precious. This

88 Ingold 2000:165 quoting Clark, A. 1997. *Being there: putting brain, body and the world together again*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

89 Margulis & Sagan 2000:14

growing awareness of bodying as lived process, brought out the specificities of how are the qualities of ongoingness constituting Baka social organisation, as much as its limits. Playing your independent tune-part in this interdependence means continuously generating and fine-tuning the potential for responsive bodying. This potential negates any sense of self as bounded, impartial subject. The capacities for such ongoing, deep, resonant intensities are this hum, gently vibrating, waiting to be lured or triggered to co-compose with other humans and more-than-humans; into co-creative social dynamics and bodily politics; into socio-somatic playing, sounding, enchanting, dancing, laughing.

Capacity-Building for Tensional Responsiveness: Beyond Breathlessness and Eco-anxiety

... Which brings me to draw together the strands of this first proposition to ask whether or how knowing about groups like the Baka can shape-shift what we mean and feel when we say 'social' and 'being in community'. We already know that you cannot 'build' community, that you can only ever create opportunities for community to happen. Irrespective of the Baka egalitarian nuance, experiencing true community is organic and concrete, or as Martin Buber has emphasised qualities of immediacy and co-presence, 'community is where community happens'.⁹⁰ A separate term for expressing when the experience of group or community outweighs or negates individual experience, is *communitas*. *Communitas* has many definitions and hues, one of which is the 'pleasure of sharing common experiences with one's fellows'.⁹¹ *Communitas* is a favourite and long-standing anthropological research topic, as it is said to occur mainly in situations of ritual, when people lose the sense of having a clearly structured, socially acceptable self. *Communitas* is also another term or aspect of this idea of bodying as potential, of capacities for the social humming away, waiting to be activated into different intensities. Living independence within interdependence with the Baka and becoming immersed in polyphonic singing at any time of day on the Ivindo, I experienced how is this potential hum of *communitas* as an ongoing quality, not as something limited

⁹⁰ Buber 1947

⁹¹ Turner 2012:1

to distinct ritual times. This continuity of potential awaiting activation, is paralleled by all the (new) information coming out of neurophysiology, molecular ecology and critical sociology research, from which, if we take it seriously, we know that the fixed, identitarian body as such is our human construct.

Agonies around being social and in community, around identity and belonging, are age-old human queries. Experiencing non-violent Baka egalitarianism enables to think-perceive these topics also as *intensities of relating*. Whether we feel connected or somehow separate from those around us, is strongly dependant on our *capacities for relating* and whether or how we can enjoy and revel in, or only just about tolerate, the intensities which necessarily spring from direct human interactions. Such capacities, like everything else, are shaped and fostered by the personal and socio-cultural frameworks in which we grow up and live our lives. Certainly, the Baka are not the only ones who have a non-individualistic, non-binary understanding of 'social'. The notion of the *dividual* is applied in philosophy and anthropology to describe and conceptualise how persons cannot be understood apart from the social relations they are a part of and formed by; *devisable individuals* become *dividuals*.⁹² "I am you - you are me" was the shortest explanation given to me of how in Balinese Hinduism each and every member of a group is considered to be in relation with one another, and with everything else. The popular south African *Ubuntu* philosophy from the 19th century asserts that 'I am because we are', based in an understanding of humanity where 'a person is a person through other people'.⁹³ Critics of the individualist focus of present-day psychoanalysis have advanced concepts of 'collective subjectivity' moving us towards 'a new gentleness'.⁹⁴ Nowadays, dividual refers also to the increasing division of individuals into fragments of data which can be processed.⁹⁵

The notion of *Palaeolithic politics*, as outlined above, also takes us back to ancestral capacities for relating with different intensities. As Wengrow and Graeber suggest, the seasonal alternations, between times of collective intensity and pragmatic, individualistic dispersal, are a general feature of human societies. Even more clearly, they give voice to how 'simply put, we are incapable, psychologically and emotionally, of living in constant awareness of our *full social universe*'.⁹⁶ Traditionally, Baka mobility practices also allowed for

92 Deleuze 1992, Strathern 1988

93 Eze 2010

94 Guattari 1989

95 Deleuze 1992: 5

96 Wengrow & Graeber 2015:611, my emphasis

getting away, when things got too tense. As I witnessed, the change to predominantly sedentary lifestyles, which means everybody in the same space most of the time, causes considerable social pressure. On a different note, despite today's increasing global material wealth, mental health issues are on the rise.⁹⁷ This suggests that - at least some - contemporary humans in industrialised and tech-dependant societies also struggle with being aware of and present with the 'full social universe'. During the many years in which I have attended and researched on different types of courses and methods for movement, meditation, or somatic practice, there were only few instances, where we were actively reminded to consider those around us or the more-than-human, the 'social'. It is not easy to learn to relate in an on-going, non-violent, sensitive, interwoven manner, and many approaches teach yoga or other movement and meditation techniques by focusing predominantly on the individual, the one person, self, ego. I know it is a great leap to take, but maybe the challenges that come with being continuously fully present with the full social universe, are a bit like a herd of great big elephants in our shared room of contemporary humanity.

The institutional plasticity involved in *Palaeolithic politics* shows how our ancestors adapted and shaped their socio-political organisations, shifting between contrasting hierarchical and egalitarian modes of relating as needed and in accordance with seasonal demands.⁹⁸ So, as humans, we have always had this capacity and power to adapt our ways of relating to each other to best suit what was necessary and/or possible at the time. What is preventing us from activating this power of change with regard to our current challenges? Importantly, this is not about drawing a direct, linear connection between archaeological ancestors and living people. It is an example of activating the 'what else', of thinking-perceiving-with the concept of *Palaeolithic politics* as a way to generate a curious response and a qualitative change. It is an example of employing speculating and fabulating as techniques, as ways of encouraging 'speculative fabulation',⁹⁹ to ask what can or does this information on cyclical adaptations of social organisations do? European and Northern American social thinkers from the 17th century suggested we could realise human happiness and fulfilment through establishing ideal social systems. However,

97 Cunsolo & Ellis 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/10/overwhelming-and-terrifying-impact-of-climate-crisis-on-mental-health>

98 Wengrow & Craeber 2015

99 Haraway 2016: 10, Manning 2016: 223

this pursuit of ideal societies is bounded by environmental determinism, as human happiness remains dependent on outside (environmental) factors including the realisation of the ideal social system. On the other hand, many different systems and religions emphasise people's inner transformation as the highest priority, arguing that social change can only be initiated by human beings who are not controlled by outside environmental factors. In today's societies, happiness has often become equated with consumerism, resulting in possessive secular individuals taking dependencies on outside factors to new extremes.¹⁰⁰ What these approaches seem to address insufficiently is how what we need to be happily relating, is not always one and the same thing; it shifts-slides in relation to the human and the more-than-human beings and qualities co-present on that occasion.

Are we truly capable of appreciating ourselves as part of larger ecosystemic cycles? Can we activate capacities for the social in ways that enable and encourage shifting-sliding towards ways of relating with tensional responsiveness, with human and more-than-human? Can this then enable cyclical adaptations of socio-political organisations and socio-economic value systems?

The dialogical framework towards considering these questions, as it presents itself following my various research strands, is that we cannot think the future of societies, of education, work, mobility or any other aspect of what we do and how we relate, without taking into account more the qualities and intensities of moving-sensing bodying ecosystems. The challenge should no longer be to overcome mind-body dualisms, but to theorise and act from a position of knowing that *we have never been separate*; that (our) societies are always a co-constitution of the minutiae of shifts of the volume body, together with the rules and norms of the social system in which that bodying is moving-sensing its daily life. Our ancestors were, necessarily, far more aware of and embedded in the ecosystems they nested in. They did not have the material possibilities to separate themselves in ways that are available to urban city dwellers today. Although the (urban) individualism appears to be real, research in neurophysiology and other fields negates this separation, opening up instead to how the constitution of the volume body is always a co-constitution with qualities of more-than. This suggests that in considering

100 Berlant 2011

challenges and threats as serious as the possible extinction of humanity,¹⁰¹ bringing unconditional awareness to this (new) knowledge which evidences body as nested bodying, is key to interweaving micro and macro perspectives. Our ancestors will have felt and known such intertwinings, and now there is even scientific proof to validate such ways of knowing and sensing.¹⁰² This enables further interlinking indigenous knowledge traditions with scientifically established knowledge in the search for ways to grow from humanity's predicaments. It is a question of growing human *response-ability*, as Donna Haraway has written.¹⁰³ The idea of *response-ability* emphasises a capacity to not simply react, but to *respond* to whatever is happening, to listen carefully and attune to which type and quality of action is called for on that occasion. Living in community in a globally connected world, is the challenge to generate capacities for the social and maintain social cohesion; based on approaches and systems-thinking-perceiving which focus not on one part but move from within an overall, holistic perception and appreciation of continuity; and the acknowledgement of how we are always already moving-sensing, shifting-sliding in tensional responsiveness. So how and when is this moment we construct ourselves and the separate other, negating the pleasure of sharing experience in community?

Acknowledging Invisibility and Fear

Shifting from body to bodying, is also the process of appreciating how the limits of sharing life are not always visible. This more-than includes qualities and beings invisible to the human eye, beings which endure unasked, come unwanted, or to which we actively pray for help. It seems the aliveness of this invisibility has fascinated and scared humans throughout time. Apparently, many of us are (still) petrified of spiders, because our ancestors could hear, see or sense large animals coming, but were unable to defend and protect against small, potentially deadly creepy crawlies. The first time I placed my foot inside that of a gorilla footprint, my foot was just so tiny in comparison with the gorilla's imprint in the muddy forest floor. I was glad the gorilla was no longer around, and yet sensing the traces of this impressive animal gave me a unique sense of aliveness and connectedness. And I could thoroughly

101 Berardi 2018

102 Margulis & Sagan 2000

103 Haraway 2016

enjoy this sensation, as I felt perfectly safe in the presence of three trusted Baka friends.

Today, as seemingly in palaeolithic times, one of the strongest 'invisibility factors' of human bodying is the love and fear of other humans. Modern psychology and other types of therapy advocate addressing such fears, which can result in a healing process, or in externalising these feelings as mistrust, betrayal or deceit.¹⁰⁴ In the latter case, a possible response is to create the 'other' as political group, race or nationality. However, as Sara Ahmed and colleagues have shown, what we think of as the 'other' or 'stranger' is not in existence as ontologically prior, but is constructed through social relations and as part of self.¹⁰⁵ Mostly, we are unaware of this, and this fear of the 'other' is aiding in and governing the current rise of neopopulisms. Franco Berardi, together with other critical thinkers, has advanced the argument that experiencing bodily limits to connecting beyond our known worlds is a strong contributor to contemporary neo-nationalisms.¹⁰⁶ Many people turn their frustrations into rejecting that which they could not connect with. Frustration and rejection become the new glue binding together groups around (old) topics of belonging, furthering exclusionist and divisive political actions.

How can new awareness around neurophysiological movements be activated in ways which offer deeper insights into what it means to be social? How can such moving-sensing knowledge and bodying as potential be activated with regard to current societal challenges, such as neo-nationalisms and eco-anxieties? How can we shift education and politics towards sensitive, embedded ways of relating?

Realms of invisible human perception also include gods, witches and other beings that we either honour or fight. In Gabon and other parts of Central Africa, they speak about and fear being eaten by bad spirits, known as the *vampire*. Pronounced in French, the term sounds something like 'voampiiir' to other language ears, and bears no relation to beings from Transylvania with fangs and long black overcoats. The fear of the *vampire* is a tangible, bodily reality that has the power to shape social order. Speaking to my closest Gabonese friends about this, I was surprised to learn that although we share an equal

104 Berardi 2015, Levine 1997

105 Ahmed 2000

106 Berardi 2015

level of university education, they were wary of the *vampire*. They were conscious and respectful of how the (fear of the) *vampire* could impact day-to-day life, their own and that of their families. These invisible qualities shape the ways in which we body through our daily lives as much as social norms. Hidden realms are intensely affective in influencing and governing both bodily processes and group dynamics. Importantly, this is the same whether in the Central African *vampire*, German Catholicism, Balinese Hinduism, or large-scale political manipulation via *Facebook*. The notion of the invisible proposed here then bridges and embraces what we commonly think of as the distinct entities body - society - environment. Thinking-perceiving in terms of capacities for the social and bodying as social potential, 'invisible' includes what we think of as (un)conscious psychological factors in equal terms to psychosomatic factors and our physiological capacities to move-sense in tensional responsiveness.

Alive with Tensional Responsiveness

Discovering and experiencing how the invisible fascial layers at the same time maintain tension and structure, *and* allow for responsiveness and change, in what fascia research terms *tensional responsiveness*, enables to think-perceive more deeply how tension and tenderness are active parts of social process and social organisation, everywhere. Fascial tissue-system plasticity, excites to be creative with the intensities and proximities of sensitively relating, and to generate novel capacities for the social around what is individually and collectively visible and invisible, from physiologies to fears. The notion of *bodying as potential*, as the capacity for sociality and for balancing out conflicts and re-establishing group coherence, continues to inspire when thinking about the challenging 'full social universe' (and the invisible herd of elephants). This clarity comes also through the setting of Adjab: living, being, experiencing, becoming in this forest clearing with hardly any human-made infrastructure. Opening into the immediacy of sensing the intensities of Earth, the beauty, magnificence, and sacredness of the forest, communicating and relating with tropical plants, animals and all other beings. And learning how the egalitarian dynamic keeping everybody together *alive*, in the sense of energetically co-present, must be actively maintained. And that our human capacities for creating or deepening social relations can be activated or left idling, at any moment, in any occasion.

It is the shared practices of working, cooking, and living together, as much as singing and dancing, celebrating and doing ritual together, which activate our capacities for relating. Taking pleasure in the *sharing of experience* is what creates togetherness, community, *communitas*. Whether in the intensities of daily life or ritual times, becoming aware of our social universe in a healthy way comes with entering into socio-somatic resonance and joint, joyful bodying. Attuning to the potential of relational intensity in each occasion, enables transcending individual concerns and harmonising group relations, also with surrounding forests or other ecologies. It is an attuning to the more-than. All the co-composing beings are vital to enduring socialities, in which conflict, tension, and tenderness are equally valid qualities, emerging with different intensities in the tensionally responsive social relations of that occasion. Such processes necessitate cultures of trust not based on monetary values. Egalitarian social systems function without the existence of explicit leadership, exactly because of the demand of people to participate not only in the visible sharing of material goods, but in the invisible ongoingness of sensitively relating to and sharing in the liveliness, vibrancy and richness of what can be co-constituted on that occasion with all that are present. This generative co-composition transcends distinctions of individual and society to include the more-than-human, to involve all the manifold and molecular qualities which make up this thing we call life. Whether we are talking or conceptualising body, community, or environment, this means activating bodying as potential for the social.

The proposition offered is to

**perceive our bodyings as vibrant potential for being social,
for living in sensitive, embedded community with humans,
and with all beings and qualities beyond-the-human.**

The proposition is to become bodying ecosystem not in relation to external signs, but by listening to qualities which transcend inner-outer quantifications; by activating capacities for being social through listening to intensities of tensional responsiveness. *Tensional responsiveness* refers to the adaptive viscosity which the fascia tissue-system allows for. True to its ever-moving shifting-sliding nature, fascia is not to be used as a one-to-one model or metaphor. Its vibrational fractal qualities rather enthuse a non-identitarian, non-binary, processual mode of, what we might call, *both/and presence*. From a theoretical perspective, fascias inspire moving beyond mind-body dichotomies and to-

wards ontological fluidity.¹⁰⁷ Fascial sensing teaches that tension need not relate to dichotomous, judgemental poles of, for example, good-bad, or stasis-mobility. Tension is present precisely because there is no separation of individual parts, because all types of tissue are interwoven. From within this quality of interconnectedness, tension is foremost simply a quality which asks for, demands, necessitates a response. A response in touch with the shifting-sliding movements of the entire (eco)system. A response to shifts in weight, pressure, sound, or other qualities. From this perspective, social cohesion is less about happy harmonies and ideal social systems, and more concerned with simply moving-sensing in response and accountability to the tensional qualities inherent in the socio-somatic bodyings of any actual occasion. Moreover, appreciating bodying as capacity for the social carries the potential for co-composing beyond class, gender, or racial constructions.

Non-Violence and Non-Separation

The fractal, non-binary, both/and fascia tissue-network offers endless lines and qualities of possible movements for moving-sensing from sensations of tension. The quality of relational engagement and response that are activated can be anything, from violent to non-violent, from nasty to tender, from rejection to living embrace. Acknowledging and attuning to the depths, varying qualities, and shifting-sliding intensities of this ongoing, incessant, complex relating and co-composing between humans and more-than, is what is associated with the notion of *Alive with Tensional Responsiveness*. Adding *Aliveness* suggests a sense of vibration, a bubbling, ever-ready hum, in meeting sensations of tension. Shifting-sliding towards ongoingness and continuity invokes more strongly qualities of tenderness and non-violence. References to violence or non-violence here do not chiefly indicate harmful physical force or abuse, or the lack thereof. Violence is mainly used and understood as referring to responses and practices which emphasise separation, and which deny or withdraw emotional or socio-somatic connection. Refusing to activate such rupture, withdrawal, or separation, can be refusing a core mode of violence. Attuning movement choices to ongoingness opens up non-violent, generative connectedness. This approach is supported by studies on the intricate connections between receptors embedded in fascial tissues, emotion, and self-

107 Weig 2020

recognition. The research opens up how physical and emotional awareness are connected, including through fascia connective tissues, in that 'the physical response to emotion is through the soft tissue. The fascia is the emotional body'.¹⁰⁸ This concept, which the authors term 'meta-anatomy', shows how emotions have a physical component in that 'body-emotions travel through the fascial web. We then interpret the physiological sensation as anger, affection, love, interest and so forth'.¹⁰⁹ My curiosity remains with whether we can give more attention to this physical-emotional skill of shaping-shifting-sliding in relation to sensations of tension?

Can we start listening to complexity and develop deeper intimacies with ourselves and what we think of as our 'environments' – until we cannot but make decisions by thinking and perceiving with the more-than? Can this kind of deep and ongoing sensitive relating and communicating be acknowledged as socio-political and socio-economic forces? Would all this change what we mean when we say 'social' into bringing relations between human and more-than-human into generative, tensionally responsive, creative resonance?

Taking two steps towards this perspective would mean to, firstly, truly appreciate that humans are ecosystems composed of human and non-human qualities and genetic material. To leave behind ideas of fixed and bounded human beings, of rational homo economicus striving for the optimal social system. The second step would entail learning to grasp and move-sense with the knowledge that 'we', all our microbes and the bit that's actually genetically human, are always already nested in and with other ecosystems. Joint moving-sensing comes also through breathing not only for ourselves, but for and with each other, to *con-spining*.¹¹⁰ Appreciating oxygen as a gas which knows no boundaries, breaks down differences and distances between 'environment' and 'individual', between what you think of as your body and that of the other. We are always already connected through breathing, through the global systems permanently transforming carbon and oxygen, including the tropical forests of Central Africa or your local forests.¹¹¹ This, challenges also human life as the pinnacle of creation. Through the inevitability of breathing together,

108 Schultz & Feitis 1996:49

109 Schultz & Feitis 1996:49

110 Berardi 2018

111 Myers 2016

of con-spiring, we are always already potentials ready to be activated in novel social co-compositions.

A practical way of playing with these ideas could be to, for example, use the term *bodying* instead of *body*. You could experiment with what happens, if each time you say *body* or something with a similar meaning, you replace it instead with verb forms, like *bodying*. You can apply this also to other nouns. After a period of one or two years, take a moment to see whether or how the perception of your 'self', 'body' and the world have, or have not, changed. Maybe this technique can help to develop an awareness and resonance between the both/and qualities of fascia, which underlie and are inherent to every move we make, and forms of social organisation which enable and generate independence within interdependence. Emphasising processes of *bodying* would then not result in searching for harmonious, everlasting equality, but instead open up to acknowledging the tensional ongoingness in shaping sensitively attuned capacities for the social.

Which would be your favourite activity to approach...

organising sensitively in relation to what others are doing?
 moving-sensing-resonating within dynamics of tensional responsiveness?
 actively working with the intensities of ecosystemic tensional qualities?

The *Four Sparks towards Enchantment*, in the final pages of the writing, from page 167 onwards, offer some practical ideas to initiate explorations and experimentations around tensional responsiveness.