

Key considerations: Engaging Twa communities in Équateur Province

This brief summarises key socio-anthropological considerations regarding ‘indigenous communities’ in the context of the outbreak of Ebola in the DRC, June 2018. Further participatory enquiry should be undertaken with the affected population, but given ongoing transmission, conveying key considerations for the response and immediate recommendations related to engaging communities in Équateur Province have been prioritised.

This brief is based on a rapid review of existing published and grey literature, professional ethnographic research with Twa and Mongo communities, personal communication with administrative and health officials in the country, and experience of previous Ebola outbreaks. In shaping this brief, informal discussions were held with colleagues from UNICEF, WHO, IFRC and the GOARN Social Science Group. Input was also given by expert advisers from the CNRS-MNHN Paris, Institut Pasteur, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, Réseau Anthropologie des Epidémies Emergentes, University of Florida, Tufts University, University of Wisconsin, Institute of Development Studies, Anthrologica and others. The brief was written by Romain Duda (Musée de l’Homme, CNRS-MNHN, who at the time of writing was deployed to the DRC by ALIMA, the Alliance for International Medical Action) and Lys Alcayna-Stevens (Institut Pasteur) with support from Juliet Bedford (Anthrologica). The brief is the responsibility of the Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform.

Overview

- **‘Indigenous communities’** – During the outbreak of Ebola in Équateur Province, and particularly during the current phase of the response, there has been renewed focus on engaging with ‘indigenous communities’. Given complex migration patterns (historically and more recently) and land rights issues, the concept of ‘indigeneity’ is often contested and highly politicised in the equatorial region as it is across sub-Saharan Africa more generally.
- **The terms ‘Pygmy’, Twa, Bantu and Mongo** – Historically, early explorers categorised around twenty hunter-gatherer groups in sub-Saharan Africa under the term ‘Pygmy’ or ‘Pygmoid’ (originally in reference to their short stature). Today the term is widely considered to be derogatory and stigmatising and is not used by the people themselves.^{1,2} In this brief we use the name Twa (plural, baTwa), to refer to the groups often described as ‘Pygmy’ living in the areas most affected by the current outbreak. The term Bantu is often used to refer to non-Twa groups and has pan-Africanist connotations.³ Strictly speaking, however, ‘Bantu’ refers to a linguistic family that includes Twa. In this brief, we refer to non-Twa as Mongo, which is the ethnic cluster of non-Twa groups in Équateur Province.
- **Southern Équateur Province** – The region of Mbandaka-Bikoro is inhabited by several ethnolinguistic groups. The Ngele’a’ntando (‘downriver people’ in the Lomongo language) or ‘Riverains/Riperains’ are fishermen. They are recognised by many other groups as the earliest inhabitants and therefore those with the strongest rights to land, particularly around the city of Mbandaka. Ngombe and Mongo populations, who are now more numerous, are thought to have settled in the area after the Ngele’a’ntando. Twa are considered to be indigenous mostly in the political sense of being marginalised (discussed below). Local histories and myths suggest that the Twa migrated from the northeast several thousand years ago and served as guides for the Mongo, taking them through the forests and searching for new hunting and fishing grounds. In this sense, Twa may have been the ‘first to arrive’ in the forest, but these interdependent relationships between Twa and Mongo are likely to have existed for millennia.^{4,5,6}
- **Bikoro Territory** – The two primary ethnic groups in Bikoro Territory are Ntomba (45%) and Ekonda (30%).⁷ Both are categorised under the broader Mongo ethnic cluster. There are also some Ngele’a’ntando (15%), who are typically fishermen along the Congo River and around the Lake Tumba. While Twa are noted to make up around 10% of the population, their number is difficult to determine as widespread discrimination may lead some to hide their ethnicity, and many may identify as belonging to the Mongo ethnic group with whom they are affiliated (sometimes calling themselves Ekonda-Twa or Ntomba-Twa). In one study, 97% of Twa households ‘belonged to’ the Ntomba, whereas 3% ‘belonged to’ the Ekonda.⁸
- **Ingende Territory** – The majority of the population in Ingende Territory are Twa (55%).⁹ The Mongo ethnic group living in this territory are Nkundo (45%). While the majority of Twa are thought to speak the language of the ethnic group with whom they have a relationship of interdependence, the 2015 Annual Report of this Ingende Territory suggests that some Twa also speak Lotshua.
- **Kiri Territory (Mai-Ndombe Province)** – The two primary ethnic groups in Kiri Territory are Ekonda (55%) and Twa (25%).¹⁰ These groups are the most populous in the sector of Pendjwa that borders directly with Bikoro territory. Further south, Lyembe people are the most numerous (19% of the total population). According to the 2016 Annual Report of Kiri Territory, the Twa language of Lotwa is spoken by 20% of the population, but most people speak Lokonda, the language of the Ekonda.
- **Language** – Most of the population in Équateur Province speaks Lingala (90%). Those without primary school education (e.g. Twa and some women) may be more comfortable speaking their natal language(s) such as Lontomba, Lonkundo, and Lokonda. People who have attended school often speak some French. Speakers of a Mongo language understand other languages in the Mongo language group even if they do not speak them, and people often communicate in different languages across ethnic divides.

Key considerations

- **Social structure, servitude and stigmatisation** – Twa and Mongo are tied together by long-established economic, social and symbolic exchanges and bonds. Twa lineages are embedded within the social structure of their neighbours: that is, each Twa lineage maintains a relationship of interdependence and 'fictive kinship' with a Mongo lineage.^{4,11,12} These relationships are often characterised by inequality and exploitation. There is almost no intermarriage, and while some Mongo men might marry Twa women, Twa men never marry Mongo women. Mongo people often refuse to eat Twa food, or to eat with Twa, whom they describe as 'dirty'. Members of the Mongo lineage may refer to themselves as the masters (*nkolo* in Lingala) of members of the Twa lineage, asking them hunt, fish, gather plants or work in the fields, and Twa are paid less than what a Mongo would expect for similar work. These relationships are not eternally binding, however, and an abused or upset Twa might leave his Mongo 'patron' and work for someone else, even if only temporarily. Reports have suggested that some Twa have long sought emancipation from their Mongo neighbours.¹³ Development programmes that have pushed the Twa to 'settle' and cultivate their own fields may also have contributed to their increased autonomy, although the social implications of such changes have not been well-documented. The egalitarian nature of Twa societies, which lack customary chiefs, makes it more difficult to immediately identify clear community leadership and representation.
- **Mobility and sedentarisation** – Before the colonial period (i.e. before 1885), Twa and Mongo families moved between larger, primary settlements and smaller hunting and fishing camps within the forest according to the season. Periodically, they also moved their larger primary settlements because of disease, misfortune, or poor environmental conditions. Neither Twa nor Mongo, however, were considered nomadic at the time of the first European settlers, even if the Twa were known for their higher mobility.¹⁴ During the colonial period (1885-1960), most families were resettled in villages along the main roads to facilitate administrative governance and tax levies, and were forced into labour in rubber plantations and to collect tree resin (copal).¹⁵ Nevertheless, a high level of mobility between villages continued and is also evident today (see below). Most Twa villages are found on the edge of Mongo villages (e.g. the Mongo village would be called Mpemba 1 and the Twa village Mpemba 2) and are governed by a Mongo administrative representative, or *Chef de Village*. Some Twa villages may be more independent and located at a greater distance from a Mongo village, either further along the road or in the forest.
- **Livelihoods** – Today, Twa continue to be highly mobile, often going deeper into the forest to hunt or collect products and moving back to villages in proximity with Mongo neighbours in order to exchange forest products for crops or money, or to work in Mongo fields. Twa may be more likely to move to the forest during particular seasons (e.g. rainy seasons for hunting, the dry season for dam fishing, or the caterpillar-gathering season from June-September) and either live in their own forest camps, or follow Mongo neighbours to fishing and hunting camps (*nganda* in Lingala).^{16,17} As hunters, the Twa are the main providers of bushmeat, often employed to source bushmeat for other groups or meat traders.
- **Stereotypes** – Because of their dependence on the forest and perceived expertise in navigating the forest and in hunting, Twa people are often considered by Mongo people (and non-Twa in general) to be more 'wild'. The Twa place great emphasis on maintaining harmonious relations with the sacred and 'invisible' or 'second' world. In some local representations, Twa are considered to be at the border of the human world, in the same category as spirits (*bilima*) and Ntomba and Ekonda sacred chiefs.⁴ This has both positive and negative connotations, but has often been used to discriminate against and marginalise Twa. Such perceptions, as well as stereotypes that depict them as 'mean-spirited' may lead Mongo to associate outbreaks of disease, including Ebola, with the Twa.¹⁸ In contrast, it has also been reported that some Twa think they are protected from contracting Ebola, suggesting '*Ebola is an invention of the Bantu. We do not feel concerned, we will never catch Ebola*'.¹⁸ Twa have a reputation as healers, and Mongo often visit them to seek treatment for ailments and illnesses.¹⁹
- **Rights issues** – Throughout the DRC, the imbalanced socio-economic and political relations between 'minority' groups (e.g. Twa, Mbuti/Sua, Aka, Efe) and majority groups (e.g. Mongo, Lese, Ngando, Luba) raise important human rights issues concerning forced labour, discrimination, violence and land rights. In 2007, the DRC signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Since then, however, no action has been taken to uphold Twa rights. Typically, Twa have no land rights, even if they are 'allowed' to hunt in their neighbours' forests.
- **Access to healthcare** – Studies have reported that only 37% of Twa access antenatal care compared to 94% of all Congolese women.²⁰ In a recent study of five villages in Bikoro, Twa reported avoiding rural clinics because of the contempt and discrimination they encountered from health staff, preferring to go to the general hospital in Bikoro where they are 'tolerated', despite being kept in wards segregated from non-Twa people.^{21,22}
- **Involvement in the response** – A recent anthropological field report highlighted that Twa felt they were not being employed in the operational response and were more likely to be mobilised for unpaid services (e.g. to chop wood, fetch water and deliver raw food to the kitchens).¹⁸ This has been confirmed by other recent fieldwork that reported there was only one Twa individual directly employed as part of the Itipo response teams. This may be a result of the fact that the main community entry points for the response have been Mongo *Chefs de Village* who, in facilitating community action, determine who is selected for paid and unpaid labour. The lack of engagement with the Twa is not specific to the response, however, for they are largely absent from normal (community) health structures. The report also suggested that some responders may be discriminatory and less inclined to employ Twa than Mongo community members.

Recommendations

- **Rethinking the term ‘indigenous communities’ and prohibiting the term ‘Pygmy’** – The concept of indigeneity is highly political in this region. Although it may be politically correct, applying the umbrella term ‘indigenous communities’ to refer to Twa may be problematic given the interdependent relationship and shared history they have with their Mongo neighbours. It would be preferable for the response to be more specific and refer to the Twa and Mongo, rather than ‘indigenous’ and ‘Bantu’ communities, although given the marginalisation of the Twa, this can also be a stigmatising identity. The term ‘Pygmy’ should not be used by the response as it is highly derogatory. Rather, attention should be paid to how people both identify and refer to themselves. The response should adopt these locally-appropriate names or terms when engaging with different communities.
- **Beware of culturalism** – Twa-Mongo relations are built on a long history of interdependence, the complexity of which should not be disregarded. Whilst the resulting inequalities are often discriminatory and may raise human rights issues, they must not be reduced to a simplistic binary relationship that lays blame on ‘dominant’ Mongo groups. If Twa were seen to be prioritised through positive discrimination, or if Mongo neighbours feel excluded, it could provoke strong social and political resistance. It must be understood, however, that the Twa and Mongo are not homogeneous groups and it should not be assumed that tensions between villages will always run along ethnic lines. Tensions between ethnic groups and between villages of the same ethnic group have not been well documented in the past and should be further explored particularly in relation to the distribution of resources by the response.
- **Intermediaries and patron-client relations** – Mongo should not be used as ‘gatekeepers’ or intermediaries between Twa and foreign response teams. Twa should be directly engaged without reinforcing the Mongo position of superiority. The response must also be sensitive to the ways in which men position themselves as intermediaries for female relatives. Sometimes, though not always, women will prefer to have a male relative accompany them or act as an intermediary. A balance must be struck between engaging people directly and working with and through existing relationships and social structures. A well-managed and transparent process will help reduce rumours associated with the cause or origins of the current Ebola outbreak and the intentions of response teams.
- **Engagement** – Responders should demonstrate the value and respect they have for Twa in three key ways: (a) by ensuring that Twa and non-Twa are equally represented in community discussions; (b) by identifying and including influential Twa people (e.g. family matriarchs) who might be reluctant to speak up during public meetings; and (c) by providing Twa with multiple opportunities to express opinions over time and in different settings. Particular attention should be given to engaging Twa women. Ideally, sessions should be held in their natal language and in a setting in which they feel comfortable seeking clarifications, which is not always the case in mixed-gender meetings. Engaging Twa, building their capacity and creating space for the community to contribute (e.g. as part of response teams for social mobilisation, safe and dignified burials, contact tracing etc.) would not only strengthen the response but develop skills for longer-term community-led surveillance and resilience.
- **Employment and a ‘whole of society’ approach** – International, national and local responders must not reproduce existing negative and discriminatory stereotypes which further entrench inequitable power dynamics. Rather, the response must adopt an equitable ‘whole of society’ approach. Responders should maximise Twa people’s access to information, healthcare, and jobs associated with the response and should not allow response activities to be further marginalising. Response activities should therefore be consistent regardless of ethnicity and be equal for Twa and non-Twa. No community actor should be asked to work without appropriate payment and Twa, both men and women, must be remunerated at the same rate as non-Twa, with payment being made directly and not through intermediaries. Through community consultations, each family group (both Mongo and Twa) could be asked to identify one person to be employed by the response, on rotation if necessary.
- **Taking mobility into account** – Twa are highly mobile, and the caterpillar-gathering season started this month (June). In addition to accessing settled villages, responders will have to enter the forest in order to reach the remote but densely populated forest camps (*nganda*) where both Mongo and Twa people may currently be living. As a result of increased stigmatisation because of the epidemic, some Twa may have moved deeper into the forest and are at risk of not being engaged with communication and public health control measures. Their mobility and more remote locations are also challenges for comprehensive contact tracing.
- **Bushmeat and hunting** – Risk communication about the sourcing and consumption of bushmeat during an Ebola outbreak must be clear. Communication must emphasise risks associated with consuming sick animals and those that are found dead, rather than all wild animals, and should highlight the need for consumers to be able to trace the source of meat.²³ As in previous outbreaks, a total ban on wildlife consumption is often counterproductive, raises suspicions and is likely to be rejected by the local population. The discourse around bushmeat and the attribution of blame for the outbreak may negatively affect Twa more than other groups given their dependency on hunting (in terms of both livelihood and access to their main source of protein) and risk communication must endeavor to mitigate against this ethnic bias.
- **Suspicion of the response and the need for dialogue** – Local communities may be distrustful of non-local responders (both international and national). This is true for both Mongo and Twa peoples, although may be magnified for Twa given their marginal status. Suspicion is usually based on real concern, and the root causes of any resistance should be carefully investigated and not dismissed as a community being difficult or causing problems. Although dialogue and communication must be done at scale, the response should be sufficiently agile to be sensitive to local specificities. It is essential that dialogue be fostered, so that information flows from the response to communities, and from communities to the response. The response must actively learn from the communities and different community actors it is engaging over time and must shape interventions accordingly. This is not only important during the response, but also afterwards during the recovery period, and for strengthening ongoing preparedness work ahead of the next outbreak.

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If you have a direct request concerning the response to Ebola in the DRC, regarding a brief, tools, additional technical expertise or remote analysis, or should you like to be considered for the network of advisers, please contact us.

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