



Martin Gruber

**Traditional Beekeeping and Honey Hunting
in Central Cameroon. Ethnographic Film Research**

Study Report

**Department of Anthropology and Cultural Research,
University of Bremen**

Research Project BeeCultures: Anthropological Research on Human-
Honeybee Entanglements in Cameroon, Japan and Germany

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Abstract

The ethnographic documentary film “Gbaya. Beekeeping and Honey Hunting” (Gruber 2015) portrays practices of traditional beekeeping and honey hunting with local honeybees (*Apis mellifera adansonii*) in the Adamaoua Region of Central Cameroon. The film follows an accomplished beekeeper, Jean Sardi, on a beekeeping excursion in the Savanna landscape in the vicinity of the city of Ngaoundéré. Together with four adolescent family members, the main character demonstrates the manufacturing of a traditional beehive from palm leaves and grass, the harvesting of honey from such a hive as well as the salvaging of honey from wild living honeybees. In interviews and informal conversations, Sardi gives important contextual information on his practice and situates it as an important element of Gbaya culture, with which he identifies. Traditional beekeeping and honey hunting are presented as economically and culturally significant activities that afford a high degree of manual skill and embodied knowledge.

The archived material constitutes the entire video footage that forms the basis of this film.

1 Technical Data

Author:	Dr. Martin Gruber ¹ , University of Bremen
In cooperation with:	Mazi Sanda ² and Adamou Moïze, University of Ngaoundéré Dorothea Brückner, University of Bremen
Funding:	Eva Crane Trust, University of Bremen
Filming:	2015
Status:	Finished
Link:	Project Website: https://www.uni-bremen.de/en/kultur/research/research-projects/beecultures (Accessed: 20 December 2024) Multimodal Website on the sensory dimension of Grubers research: https://blogs.uni-bremen.de/beecultures/ (Accessed: 20 December 2024) Ethnographic Film “Gbaya. Beekeeping and Honey Hunting” https://doi.org/10.18450/ethnoa-medien/34
Data:	Audiovisual material, video footage
Software:	The footage has been edited with Final Cut Pro and has been annotated with ELAN ³
Country:	Cameroon, Germany

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³ ELAN (Version 6.6) [Computer software]. (2023). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive. Retrieved from <https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan>

2 Concept of the Ethnographic Film

2.1 Context

The ethnographic documentary film “Gbaya. Beekeeping and Honey Hunting” was commissioned by bee biologist Dorothea Brückner of the University of Bremen as part of her ongoing collaboration with Cameroonian bee biologists of the University of Ngaoundéré. The aim was to document locally specific practices and make it available to diverse audiences in the form of a documentary film. The filmmaking was implemented by visual anthropologist Martin Gruber of the University of Bremen together with bee biologists Mazi Sanda and Adamaoua Moïze of the University of Ngaoundéré. Shooting, editing and subtitling took place within six weeks in March and April 2015 in Ngaoundéré.

The film and its making were later incorporated into the wider anthropological research project BeeCultures investigating human honeybee entanglements in Cameroon, Japan and Germany. The ethnographic research during which the film was produced was the first of several field trips to the Adamaoua Region, resulting in a monograph (Gruber and Sanda 2019), a journal article (Gruber 2018) and several short films (Gruber and Sanda 2017c; 2017b; 2017a).

2.2 Research Questions and Aims

The aim of the research was to document locally specific practices of beekeeping and honey hunting in the Adamaoua Region of Cameroon and generate contextualising knowledge. The primary aim was to document the process of manufacturing traditional beehives as well as the skills and corporeal knowledges related to beekeeping and harvesting honey from both human-made hives and wild-living bee colonies. In addition, other contextual knowledge surrounding these practices should be generated and represented.

Research questions:

- How is beekeeping practiced in the Adamaoua Region?
- How is traditional beekeeping acquired and taught?
- Which materials and plants are being used?
- How is honey produced, distributed and consumed?
- What is the economical, cultural and social significance of bees and honey in the area?

The film was intended for bee researchers from the natural and cultural sciences as well as general audiences.

2.3 Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Beekeeping and honey hunting were investigated within the framework of multispecies anthropology (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). This concept is based on the view that we live in a "multispecies world" in which humans, animals, plants, microbes and things are interwoven in multiple ways (Tsing 2010). In contrast to human-animal research, which is concerned with examining the relationship between humans and a particular animal,

a multispecies approach focuses on the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations that include, but always also exceed, dynamics of predator and prey, parasite and host, researcher and researched, symbiotic partner, or indifferent neighbor ... this immersive approach is now also increasingly being applied to forms of liveliness that many, but by no means all, of us would consider to be nonliving: from stones and weather systems to artificial intelligences and chemical species. (van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 2016, 3–4).

Crucial for the *multispecies turn* was a departure from a clear separation between nature and culture, which can be traced back to Donna Haraway's concept of *naturecultures* (Haraway 2003). The realization that culture and nature cannot be thought of as separate entities is closely connected to the increasing environmental destruction and related phenomena such as climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the devastation of entire landscapes through extraction, urbanization, and other human-made phenomena. These developments have contributed to the emergence of the concept of the *Anthropocene*, the geological epoch in which man-made effects on the earth override the effects of other factors.

Following a multispecies approach, the focus of the film lies on the different plants that form the basis of the beehives, in addition to humans and bees. I treat honeybees and other species as well as objects and material as active agents in my research on human-honeybee entanglements as they interact with each other and have impact in the world. At the same time, I do not want to attribute a conscious focused communication with humans to the bees. I am sure that bees do have feelings and suffer (Haraway 2008). But to interpret the bees' behavior as conscious and intended interaction with humans seems too speculative and tends to be anthropomorphizing. I see this kind of agency rather in the way they impact in the world and not as intentional.

Ethnographic filmmaking as a means of anthropological enquiry has had a long history (Henley 2000). I practice filmmaking as a form of participant observation with the help of a camera. The multiple negotiation taking place when making a film contribute to the generation of anthropological knowledge which is represented in the resulting film. The filmmaking of the material discussed here is based on a mix of observational and more participatory filmmaking (MacDougall 2003). Moreover, it is informed by the idea to enquire about the research subjects' embodied knowledges (MacDougall 2006) and to convey the sensorial aspects of the research encounter (Pink 2009a).

The filmmaking was explicitly guided by Gruber's previous film on traditional beekeeping in Angola (Antónia et al. 2013) as this film served as a model for the one made in Cameroon. Unlike the Angolan film, which had been produced collaboratively with the research participants (Gruber 2022), the film in Cameroon was authored individually by Gruber, whereas Sanda and Moïze were important collaborators in the project. The protagonists of the film were included in the process of filmmaking through the manifold negotiations taking place in participatory ethnographic filmmaking and through their performances (MacDougall 1994). More generally, as a commissioned work, the project can be situated in the field of applied visual anthropology (Pink 2009b).

3 Research Process

3.1 Access to the Field and Acquisition of Research Participants

Fieldwork was supported by Dorothea Brückner's long-standing Cameroonian research partner Tchuenguem Fohouo Fernand-Nestor of the University of Ngaoundéré who gave his general advice and support of the project. Moreover, he invited two of his PhD students to support filmmaking: Mazi Sanda and Adamou Moïze were constantly present during research and shooting and contributed with their expertise, with their language skills and with their contacts to local beekeepers.

The main protagonist of the film, Jean Sardi, was proposed by Sanda and Moïze as a primary research participant at the start of the research because he was known to them as one of the most experienced beekeepers in the area. When asked if he wanted to participate in the filmmaking, he agreed. We told him that we were interested in documenting the activities related to traditional beekeeping and honey hunting and he proposed to go to the area in which he had placed his beehives in order to do so. As usual during such excursions, he took along four young family members to help with the activities. Two of them were minors, two adults. The shooting took place in three consecutive days in March 2015.

3.2 Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

It is important to note that the film was a privately commissioned work that was formally not produced by the University of Bremen. Only later, when Gruber was employed by the University of Bremen and started his research on humans and honeybees, the video footage and the resulting film became part of formal academic research.

The research was guided by anthropological research ethics (Pink 2009b) and ethical guidelines (AAA 2011; Perry and Marion 2010). The approach of ethnographic filmmaking as anthropological research was explained to Sardi before the start of the actual filming. He was told that the material would be edited into a documentary film intended for academic and other non-commercial contexts. Sardi asked to be paid a monetary compensation for the time he invested in the filmmaking and since he lived mostly from subsistence farming, we agreed to pay him an amount that was approximately the equivalent of three day wages of a farm worker.

Sardi gave his consent to conduct the research and to use the footage orally before the collection of any research data.

When Sardi told us that he wanted to take his adolescent family members to take part in the filmmaking we told him about the implications of working with minors and asked him to give his consent as their legal guardian. Moreover, we explained the four young participants the process of filmmaking and the potential uses of the film. All of them agreed to take part in the filming and to use the material in the described contexts and gave their consent orally.

In 2023, before the archiving of the material, the research participants provided written consent for the archiving and further scientific use of their personal data.

4 Data

4.1 Description of Data

The video footage shows beekeeper Sardi on a beekeeping and honey hunting excursion with three of his children and his daughter in law. In the following, I will describe the content of the material in the chronological order of shooting. First, the footage shows the preparation of the excursion at the main protagonist's homestead during which the necessary tools and provisions are packed on two motorbikes. Then, the group leaves the household and drives to the protagonist's traditional hunting ground which is situated about an hour away from the homestead. On their way, the protagonists stop to harvest palm leaves, which are necessary materials for making traditional beehives. These are only available in certain habitats. After their arrival at the hunting ground, the group sets up camp. This is followed by a detailed documentation of the process of manufacturing a traditional beehive. It starts with the processing of the palm leaves, during which their soft inner fibre (later used for the hive's lid) is separated from their hard skin, which is used for weaving the hive's basket-like inner structure. A major part then depicts the manufacturing of the hive: Firstly, the inner framework of the hive is woven. Secondly, the construction is wrapped with large plant leaves and long grass, which are tied around the inner structure with the help of liana. This is followed by the manufacturing of a lid with which the opening of the conic hive is closed. The lid is reinforced and sealed with mud. After its completion, the hive is baited with a mixture of plant extracts and propolis. Then the hive is attached in the branches of a tree high above the ground.

In the next part of the video footage, two approaches of harvesting of honey from human made hives are documented. On the one hand, from a hive that is situated in a tree (this material is also used for the edited film). On the other hand, from a hive that is lowered to the ground before the actual honey harvesting (this material has not been included in the film). The following footage shows two different approaches of salvaging of honey of wild living honeybees. On the one hand, from a bee colony that is situated in the lower parts of a tree trunk, by chopping open this cavity with an axe. On the other hand, the honey of a colony that can't be reached by the honey hunters from the ground, which affords the felling of the tree. The final parts of the material show the group's return home from their honey hunting trip and the processing, packaging and selling of the honey.

Throughout the entire footage, the protagonist explains what he is doing, either in informal conversations or in interviews with the filmmakers. The protagonists primarily speak the local Bantu language Gbaya. The film is produced in the local languages Gbaya (primary language) and Fulfulde, a lingua franca in the area that is sometimes used in addition to Gbaya.

4.2 Methodological Approach

The shooting has been implemented within three days in March 2015 in a rural area near Hangloa approximately 45 km West of Ngaoundéré. The filming was done with a Canon FX100 HD Camcorder, a Sennheiser directional microphone and a Sennheiser radio microphone with a TRAM Lavalier Microphone. We were filming as a team of three persons: Gruber operated the camera and directed the filming; Sanda operated the boom with the directional microphone; Moïze who was a Gbaya native speaker like the protagonists interpreted from Gbaya to French and vice versa during the shooting.

Filming was mostly done in an observational style without any rehearsals or re-takes. We discussed the activities to be filmed roughly and then just followed the activities with the camera. In the beginning of the shooting, Sardi constantly explained what he was doing. After a while, I asked him to stop this as I realised it would complicate the editing. We conducted a number of formal interviews during several brakes.

The film's editing was implemented during roughly two weeks at the end of March 2015 in Ngaoundéré. Moïze was interpreting the dialogues simultaneously during the editing process and both Sanda and Moïze gave contextual information and feedback regarding the storyline.

4.3 Selection of Research Data for Archiving

From the abundant audio-visual material produced in Cameroon, it was decided to archive the footage that was the basis for the film "Gbaya. Beekeeping and Honey Hunting" as this would allow interested parties not only to analyse the footage used for the film, but also to compare the edited film and the footage.

5 Potentials for Secondary Analysis

The film and the archived footage were produced by a multi-disciplinary team of bee researchers from the cultural and natural sciences. It was commissioned by a bee researcher from the natural sciences and is aimed at diverse academic and broad audiences.

It was decided that the archival material would be processed and annotated by members of the same multi-disciplinary team that produced it. The tagging was thus implemented by Martin Gruber (anthropologist) and Mazi Sanda (biologist).

The data have the potentials for secondary analysis for some of the following research topics:

- Entomology with a focus on *Apis mellifera adansonii*
- Traditional beekeeping (in Cameroon / Africa)

- Behaviour Ecology
- Multispecies Anthropology
- Gbaya Language / Culture

6 List of Films Produced During Research in Cameroon

- Film based on the archived video footage:
 - Gruber, Martin, dir. 2015. *Gbaya. Beekeeping and Honey Hunting*. <https://doi.org/10.18450/ethnoa-medien/34>
- Film partly based on the archived video footage:
 - Gruber, Martin, dir. 2015: *Beekeeping Honey Hunting Ngaoundéré*. <https://doi.org/10.18450/ethnoa-medien/35>
- Films from the same field site that were produced later – from different video material
 - Gruber, Martin; Sanda, Mazi, dirs. 2017a: *Honey Hunting from Earth Nests*. Adamaoua Region of Cameroon. University of Bremen. <https://doi.org/10.18450/ethnoa-medien/37>
 - Gruber, Martin; Sanda, Mazi, dirs. 2017b. *Improved Traditional Beekeeping*. Adamaoua Region of Cameroon. University of Bremen. <https://doi.org/10.18450/ethnoa-medien/38>
 - Gruber, Martin; Sanda, Mazi, dirs. 2017c. *Research on African Honey Bees *Apis Mellifera Adansonii* in Cameroon*. University of Bremen. <https://doi.org/10.18450/ethnoa-medien/39>
- The entire collection “Humans, Bees, and Honey in Cameroon” is available here: https://hu.berlin/ethnoa_cameroon



ethnoa_cameroon

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