

Hazardous levels of alcohol consumption identified in African hunter-gatherer group

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Masia, A Mbendjele forest camp. Credit: N. Chaudhary

The Mbendjele BaYaka are an Indigenous Congolese hunter-gatherer population, one of a number of "Pygmy" hunter-gatherer populations living in the rainforests of Central Africa.

Although traditionally primarily reliant on subsistence foraging, they are currently in the midst of a socioeconomic transition. Increased logging and local conservation initiatives have meant many Mbendjele BaYaka have moved to more permanent, sedentary settlements seeking alternative employment with an increase in alcoholism as a detrimental consequence.

Problems associated with [alcohol use](#) have long been identified as a major health risk facing Indigenous communities worldwide, however, research and data on consumption patterns and health consequences of alcohol use and abuse are virtually non-existent for African hunter-gatherers, most likely due to difficulties in working with dispersed communities in [remote areas](#).

In a new study published today in *PLOS ONE*, an international team of researchers present data demonstrating that the prevalence of hazardous alcohol consumption among transitioning hunter-gatherer populations such as the Mbendjele BaYaka is significantly higher than in other segments of the Congolese [population](#), highlighting an urgent need for targeted public health interventions.



A Bantu stall selling alcohol and cigarettes. Credit: Gul Deniz Salali

Senior author Dr. Nikhil Chaudhary, Assistant Professor in Evolutionary Anthropology at the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, said: "There has been considerable ethnographic work in the past which suggests the potential adverse effects of alcohol consumption in BaYaka people and other Indigenous populations. Our study at long last provides the quantitative data showing the actual prevalence of hazardous drinking and its specific impacts on the health and wellbeing of these communities."

"Our team studied three Mbendjele camps situated in Congo's Ndoki forest. We found that 44.3% of our sample had a hazardous volume of

alcohol consumption based on WHO standards. Our study has identified a number of mental and physical health harms associated with alcohol use in these communities—high rates of drinking during pregnancy and breastfeeding, alcohol-induced violence, [high blood pressure](#) and increases in the prevalence of diarrhoea, which represents one of the major causes of mortality among indigenous populations."

Commenting on next steps Dr. Chaudhary said: "Given the combined pressures of deprivation, exploitation and rapid acculturation that BaYaka populations are currently facing, this research is essential to provide an [evidence base](#) for programmes aiming to improve health and social outcomes."

"Crucially, it is essential that the communities are involved and empowered during the process of creating these health interventions. They must also be accompanied by wider changes addressing the BaYaka peoples' marginalised position in local and global socioeconomic systems as socioeconomic inequality is a fundamental driver of poor [health](#)."

More information: Quantifying patterns of alcohol consumption and its effects on health and wellbeing among BaYaka hunter-gatherers: A mixed-methods cross-sectional study, *PLOS ONE* (2021).

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