



ancestral art
of gabon



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In addition to numerous articles, maps, films and exhibitions, the work of Louis Perrois in regard to the ethnography and anthropology of African art has culminated in several publications: "La circoncision Bakota", 1968, "Gabon, culture et techniques", 1969, "Chronique du pays kota", 1970, *La statuaire faï*, 1972, "Art traditionnel du Gabon", 1977, *Arts du Gabon*, 1979.

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previously published
Masques d'Afrique
Art of the Solomon Islands

future publications
Art of New Guinea
Art of the Ivory Coast
Black Gold

louis perrois

ancestral art of gabon

from the collections
of the barbier-mueller museum

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Directors' Foreword

The extraordinarily diverse sculptural arts of the West African nation of Gabon vary in style from two-dimensional, highly stylized works to three-dimensional, relatively naturalistic ones. All, however, reveal an intense connection with the invisible world of the spirits. Among the Fang, Bakota, and other peoples, for instance, ancestor and nature spirits are believed to influence fertility and prosperity and invoked for advice and assistance. Works of art are therefore a vital means of communicating with and appeasing omnipotent supernatural forces. They serve to channel ancestor and nature spirits and to make their power visible to the community.

Most of the statues, masks, reliquary figures, jewelry, and weapons presented in this book and exhibition were collected by Josef Mueller before World War II, although some were acquired recently by Jean Paul Barbier in order to fill certain gaps in the museum's collection which totals more than 4,000 pieces from cultures throughout the world.

In the brief period since 1977 when it became a public institution, the Barbier-Mueller Museum has become internationally recognized in the display, documentation, and publication of ethnic arts. An important part of its program is the touring of exhibitions drawn from its collections. *Ancestral Art of Gabon* is the second such exhibition to travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Dallas Museum of Art. (A third, *Power and Gold*, will tour the United States, including Los Angeles and

Dallas, under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution).

We are pleased to be able to present this exhibition, which consists of a selection of sculptures chosen for their aesthetic qualities and reproduced here in full page color plates. The author of this impressive catalogue, Louis Perrois, Director of Research at the Institut Français de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement en Coopération (ORSTOM), spent a decade in Gabon. He has written several books on the country, but this catalogue on the arts of Gabon is the first overall study to appear in English.

We are deeply grateful to Jean Paul Barbier for the discerning taste and skillful administration which he brought to the planning and implementation of this exhibition, and to Monique Barbier-Mueller and the Barbier-Mueller Museum for their generosity in sharing these exotic treasures. We appreciate as well the dedicated attention of the Barbier-Mueller staff, especially Iolanda Jon, director of the traveling exhibition service.

Harry S. Parker, III
Director
Dallas Museum of Art

Earl A. Powell, III
Director
Los Angeles County
Museum of Art

*For you, Sophie
So blond but African in heart
Who already has left us
This work in which art, life
and death are so intimately
mixed*

preface

In 1978, when I had the opportunity to see the African art which Josef Mueller of Switzerland had collected before World War II during his residence in Paris from 1929 to 1942, I did not know that the collection was of first-rate quality. The objects from Gabon, which comprise the core of this collection, are exceptional in Europe, and having received little detailed study, seem destined to hold the attention of specialists and amateurs alike.

Enthusiasm and taste were clearly demonstrated by Josef Mueller, not only for African art but for many other aesthetic expressions as well. Fortunately, these qualities were perpetuated through the initiatives of his followers, especially in the founding of the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Geneva and, still more notably, in the publication of a number of catalogues and studies dedicated to traditional art of all kinds, Oceanic and Asian, in addition to African.

I will not discuss in detail here what I have published previously concerning the arts of Gabon, particularly the systematic presentation of all the styles. Instead, the present work will be a transcript of comments made during a visit to the collection. My research of ten years in Gabon informs the comments on the details of each object as well as the more general reflections and remarks pertaining to the stylistic problems of art from Equatorial Africa. Thus, to be exhaustive is not the purpose of this catalogue since all of the styles of the Ogowe Basin and their variations



1. Josef Mueller in 1967 (photo: Monique Barbier-Mueller).

Mr. A. Moris	
1937. Kente ans Torja	250.-

25 Janv. 1939. Pahouin cone	1.200
Grd. Pahouin noir à bol	1.000
Grd Tête Bieri (Pahouin)	1.200
	3.400
7 Févr. 2 pots à feu pirogues	500
Versense Théobaldine 17 ^e bronce	500
	1.000
22 Févr. Grd Pahouin	1.000
Petite Tête " Bieri	600
Coiffure - marque Kodoi à femme	700

22 Févr. 39. Bakola-enfant à la melle	350
Boudier en cuir Abymnie	75
2 pipes enrobées de fil métallique	75
Petite calabone Cameroun à paroles	50
Hameçon en os, Salomon	—
	2.850

27 Août 39. Tabouret à têtes, Cameroun	1.000
3 petits fétiches Pahouins	1.200
4 grands " "	4.000
	6.200

are not represented here, even though the objects, for a private collection, appear remarkably diverse. The objects will be viewed in their social and stylistic context, then placed in the aesthetic dynamic of which they are part.

Questions might be asked about Josef Mueller's criteria in assembling a coherent and representative collection. The manner of creating a personal collection can differ significantly from the methods applied by a museum curator. It seems, in fact, that Josef Mueller had always insisted on the absence of "method". His taste for art alone pressed him to create a collection. He liked Rouault and thus bought about thirty of his paintings without trying to elucidate the œuvre of the painter with his collection.

He liked the Pahouin as well as other major African groups, and he "gathered" objects of any type which pleased him, according to his disposition, occasionally without seeking to know exactly their provenance. As his carefully but, alas, briefly kept notebooks (for about two years) attest (see fig. 2), his acquisitions were made by the pleasure of windfalls at the galleries of Parisian dealers — Delcourt, "le père" Moris, Ratton, Garnier, Ascher, Vignier, and others (see figs. 3 and 4) — all a function of his singular taste for beautiful objects.

One senses, nevertheless, a particular passion

2. For about three years, Josef Mueller recorded all his purchases in a systematic though not very detailed manner. Here, an excerpt from the pages devoted to one of his most important dealers, "le père" Anthony Moris.

for Pahouin figures, and it is understandable. The notebooks indicate that a number of Fang objects were acquired in “lots” of five or six units, confirming comments by Charles Ratton who told me that he had to select the best pieces of exotic souvenirs in the bids of sale made by weary colonials. Today, of course,

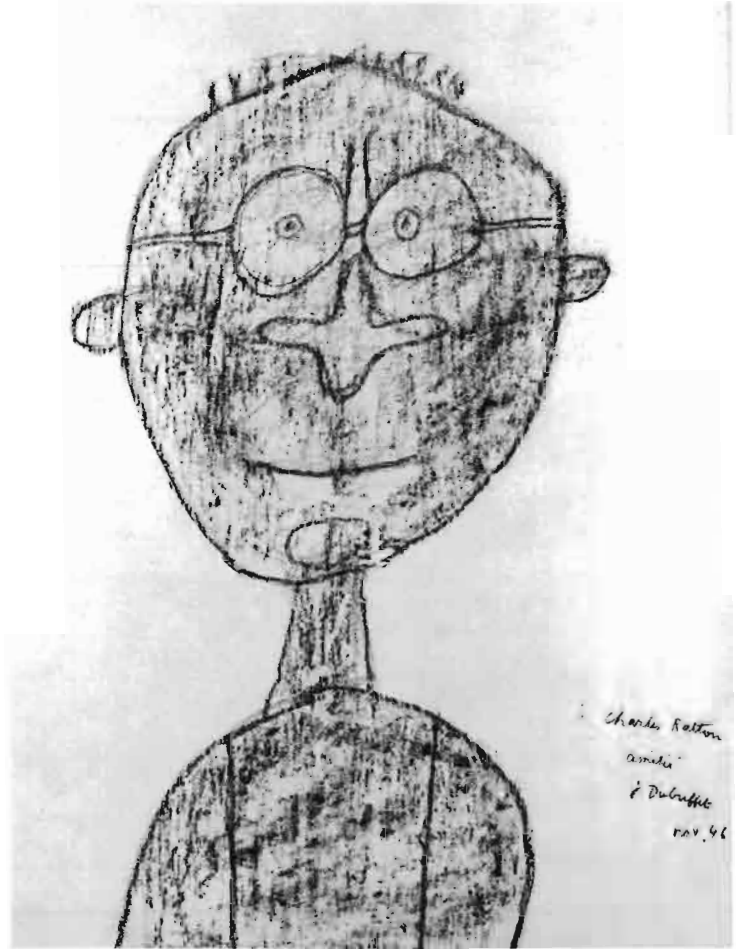
3. Gallery owner Ernest Ascher and his friend, Pablo Picasso (Barbier-Mueller Archives, unpublished).



the least Pahouin piece is worth a considerable sum.

Josef Mueller and a few others had a presentiment of the great aesthetic value of these figures described as “crude carvings” by all the travelers, missionaries and even ethnographers of the beginning of the century. It is not that there

4. Charles Ratton. Drawing by Jean Dubuffet (Ratton-Ladrière Archives, unpublished).



were no roughly carved African objects, but rather that they were spurned and confused with the masterpieces which have since been discovered.

It was this limit that few esthetes had crossed in that period.

5. Photograph taken by Charles Ratton around 1939 at "le père" Moris. Recognizable in the center are a Kota reliquary figure and Punu bellows (Cat. Nos. 11 and 28) acquired by J. Mueller (Ratton-Ladrière Archives).

Josef Mueller was one of those discoverers and his success was not confined to Gabonese art. Corresponding to the trends of the time, Pahouin art is well represented in his collection, yet other virtually unknown art styles are also present – Vuvi, Kwele, Lumbo, and others. In the end, the approximately fifty pieces forming the basis of the Mueller Collection, completed by the acquisitions of his son-in-law Jean Paul Barbier, provide an entirely general view of Gabonese art.



Today, when the question is often raised about the return of cultural artifacts to their country of origin, what is one to think about such a private collection? I think that without the collectors of “Black art” of the 20th century – now virtually anonymous if not completely forgotten, and without the passionate interest of some connoisseurs, the knowledge of these styles would not be what it is today. It should be borne in mind that the evolution of these traditional societies

and their ineluctable exposure to the West was at a point where these primarily ritual arts were condemned to rapid extinction. The objects were practically never “snatched” from their context, but the single fact that Whites were immediately interested in their production made the surprised villagers want to sell them. Those of actual

6. In 1957, Josef Mueller loaned several hundred masks, figures, seats, etc. to the Museum of Solothurn, his native city, for a landmark exhibition.



ritual importance were the exception, for example, the *Byeri* reliquary boxes of the Fang. Moreover, there were few examples of them and hardly ever paired with the corresponding figure.

Collections of exotic art were a secondary and nearly accidental consequence of the political, economic and moral process of colonization. They have fully preserved, for Africa and all humanity, works which could have been forever forgotten by virtue of their ephemeral and interchangeable character and thus, fragile role in society.

When a *Byeri* figure or mask was pitted by termites or accidentally broken during a ritual, it was not a catastrophe; another one was carved. Any villager who was inspired and more or less deft with his hands could carve figures, masks, drums or spoons. Some artists, however, were known for their talent and had a larger repertoire, but they were always rare. Living in relative isolation in the middle of the forest forced groups to be self-sufficient in every domain. This included the production of ritual sculpture, its diversity of forms and qualitative differences in execution.

Of course, it is perhaps thought that the collector's viewpoint and taste orient his choices in creating collections aesthetically valuable to the Westerner. But the Fang, like the Bakota, also know how to distinguish beautiful objects from the rest. Research on Kwele masks by Child and Siroto demonstrates this, and I personally

noticed it during my investigations. Moreover, the existence of well-carved figures and masks, which are also well decorated and finished (in terms of patina, for example), proves this concern for the "beautiful object." It should be remembered, however, that the objects are always made to serve some purpose, never to be simply contemplated or admired. Art for art's sake does not exist in these societies. It would be good to think about whether it exists even in the West. The object is both symbol and tool. The conception and perception of it is essentially spiritual.

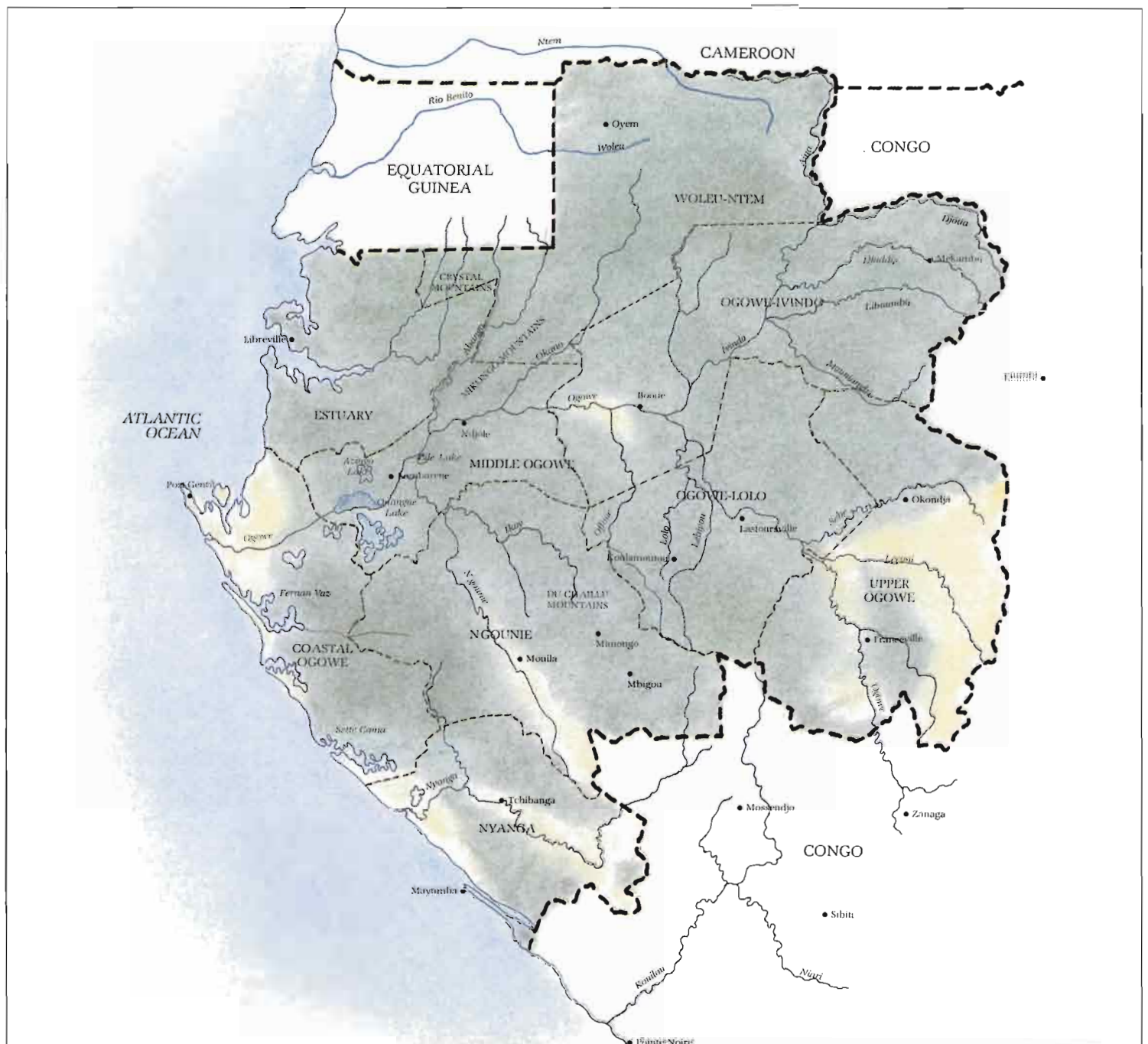
What is the magical power of these ancestor figures and spirit masks, the symbol of the dead? Perhaps it is for us, the Whites, the foreigners, to reach across the mysterious chasm of aesthetic taste.

The Fang and a few other ethnic groups of the Gabonese coast have the custom of saying in their myths that Whites are actually their lost brothers who have returned rich and powerful from beyond the oceans. Perhaps it is not surprising then that they are interested, sometimes with equal passion, in Black culture and its masterpieces!

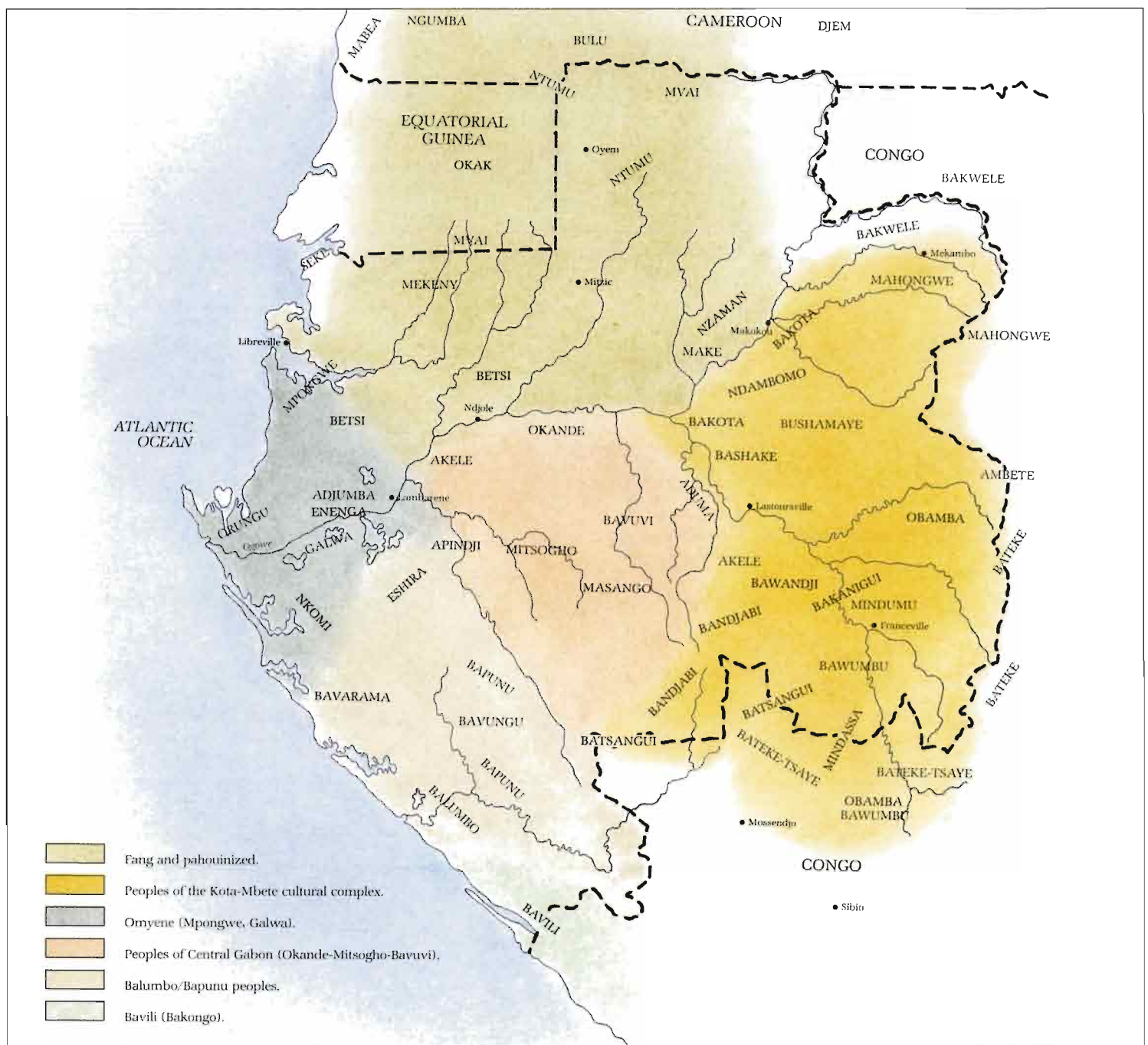
7. Born in 1887, Josef Mueller began to collect paintings at a young age. When 24 years old, he acquired a major painting by Cézanne, the portrait of Vallier, "the Gardener", and before 1918, an entire set of Cubist works in addition to other Cézanne's, Renoir's and Hodler's. In the twenties, he bought a complete series of paintings by Miró and Ernst, Rouault and Léger (the latter are partly visible on this photograph taken in the 1960's). In 1923, he was away for six months to the French Congo and from that began his interest in African art.



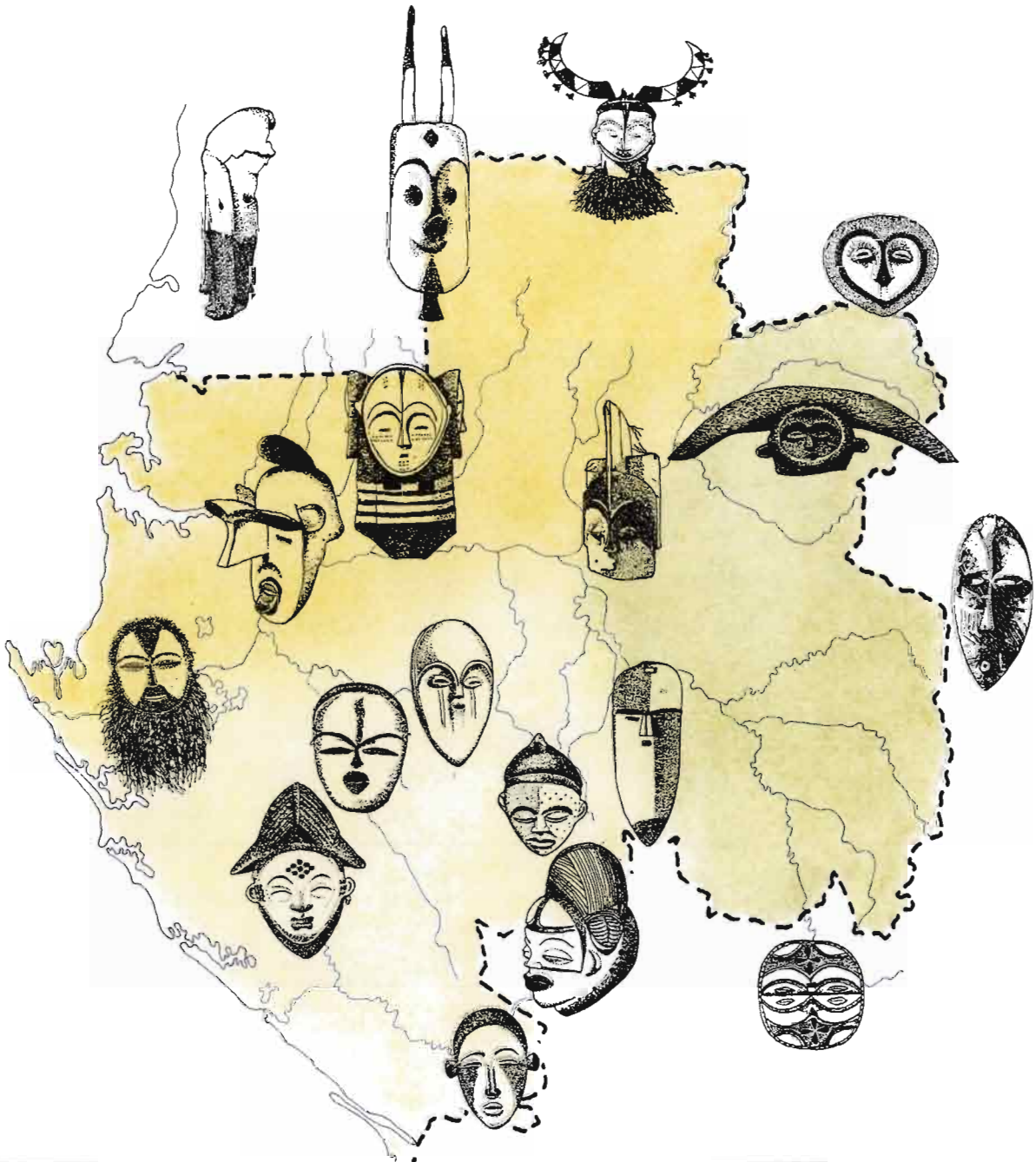
general map



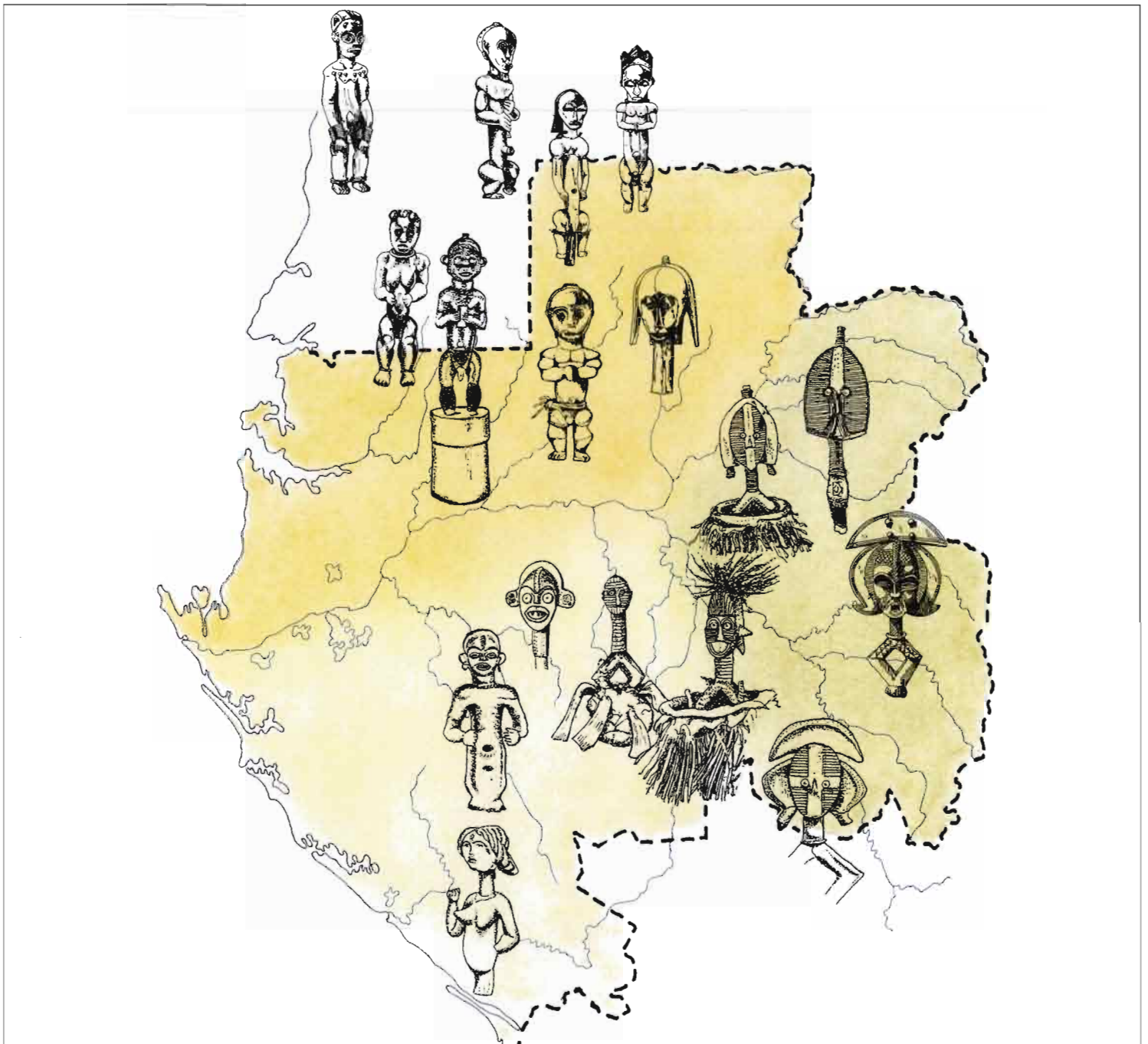
map of peoples of gabon



map of masks



map of reliquary figures



In the collections of the Barbier-Mueller museum are more than 80 objects reflecting the diversity of traditional art style of a vast region centered in Gabon and extending into contiguous areas of Equatorial Guinea, southern Cameroon, and the People's Republic of the Congo.

On the map of masks (p. 16) one represented two celebrated objects from the collection which are often reproduced in publications devoted to Gabon although they are originally from the Congo: at the bottom, the round Teke-Tsaye mask which belonged to the painter Derain, and on the right, the mask that Jean Laude compared directly to the "Demoiselles d'Avignon" by Picasso, formerly owned by the Museum of Modern Art of New York. The first belongs to a style identified exclusively as Congolese (although certain Teke groups, farther northeast, are Gabonese). The other mask was discovered by the administrator Courtois in the small locality of Etumbi in the Congo. Considering the present state of the literature, nothing warrants its attribution to the Mahongwe as occasionally proposed.

Whether specifically as effigies of the ancestors or generally as the cultural baggage of the "ancients", these sculptures constitute particular links between modern Africa and its still misunderstood ancestral patrimony.

introduction

Gabon is essentially a country of dense forest. Located at the bottom of the Gulf of Guinea on the west coast of Africa, and crossed by the equator, the Republic of Gabon has a surface area of 267,667 square kilometers for a population of approximately one million.

The geographic uniformity of Gabon (e.g. relief, hydrography, climate, vegetation) is attributable to the fact that the basin of the principal river, the Ogowe, occupies approximately three quarters of the country. The Gabonese can therefore be referred to as “people of the Ogowe Basin”.

In terms of relief (see map, p. 14), the country is divided into three large zones: coastal plain, central mountains, and plateaus (in the north and east). The Ogowe originates from Congo-Brazzaville. Rather tumultuous and broken up by rapids and falls, the river reaches the Bateke plateaus (fig. 8), which border it in the west. Beyond Franceville it crosses a zone of crystalline plateaus up to Booue (fig. 9), where the Ivindo, the “black river”, meets it coming from Bakota country in the north.

In the middle region, from Lastoursville to Lambarene (fig. 10), the Ogowe widens, clearing a path across a range of small mountains — the Du Chaillu Mountains in the south, the Crystal Mountains in the north — and hills (the Okanda Gorges).

After Lambarene, the Ogowe becomes a vast expanse of water dotted with islands. It divides into many channels, feeding numerous lakes (the principal ones being the Onangue, Azingo, and

Abanga), where hippopotami and pelicans abound. Finally, it reaches the ocean through the flat and sandy delta in the Port Gentil region.

From west to east, we find first the coastal region domain of the mangrove tree, with its lagoons and lowlands (fig. 11), and then a short distance into the hinterland, the savanna (fig. 12). Curiously, this country which is quite accessible and convenient for travel (by stream) is sparsely populated, except presently in Libreville and Port Gentil.

Farther east are the “mountains”, if these reliefs that do not reach even a thousand meters, can be called such. It is a zone of very difficult access, of deep valley, escarpment waterways, and mountain tops covered by trees of thirty meters in height. These are the Crystal Mountains (fig. 13) in the north, up to Medouneu, and the Du Chaillu Mountains in the center, in Mitsogho country. Since the 19th century, at the earliest, these regions of splendid countryside, although very removed from normal means of communication, have served as a refuge to several ethnic groups exposed to the pressure of stronger groups and then to colonization. In the southwest the Mayombe mountain range, which extends up to the Congo, is also an obstacle.

To the east of these mountains are several plateau zones, from the Woleu-Ntem in the north (Fang country) to the Kota country of the Upper Ivindo and up to the sandy and nearly desert plateaus of the Bateke country to the east of Franceville. It is not unimportant to know these geographic elements insofar as they have a bearing on the spa-



tial distribution of Gabon peoples through the centuries and the cultural relations from group to group.

The climate, oceanic equatorial, is hot and very humid in the west. More variable in the east, it can be described as "continental equatorial." The temperatures vary from about 15 to 30 degrees, cold and fog particularly in central Gabon. Precipitations are in the order of 2,600 millimeters on an average with maximums of 4,000 millimeters on the northwest coast and divided into two principal seasons: the rainy season from November to April, and the dry season from May to October. The relative humidity always ranges between 80% and 95%.

This is dense equatorial forest ("rain forest"), dominating almost the entire country (fig. 14), with a multitude of species (more than 700) of perennial plants. In certain areas there are consistently humid savannas. By dint of the very early occupation of the country by man, more or less everywhere, areas of man-made savanna were created, particularly near the coast (fig. 15).

THE PEOPLES OF GABON

The history of Gabon peoples is essentially a history of their displacements insofar as we have to deal with groups which are not nomadic but highly mobile and have to subsist in hostile envi-

8. *The Bateke plateaus in southeastern Gabon near the Congo border (photo: Louis Perrois).*

9. *The Ogowe River at Booue (photo: Louis Perrois).*

ronment. Through the collection and study of oral traditions of groups now settled, we have been able to elucidate the “history” of these ethnic groups up to the 18th century. Any earlier in time, we are still in the realm of the hypothetical.

From an overall viewpoint, three broad periods in the history of Ogowe peoples can be distinguished:

- The early migrations, poorly known and only by myths telling of them, drove the present groups of western Gabon from the Sangha and Upper Ivindo to the Ogowe and the coast.
- The Kota and Mbete migrations, beginning in the 16th century, pushed an entire cluster of generally related ethnic groups from the confines of the Oubangui (Central African Republic) to the Upper Ogowe and southcentral Gabon.
- The Fang migrations of the 18th and 19th centuries unfurled from Cameroon (Sanaga region, south of the Adamawa) into Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. They were stopped only by the colonial authorities at the Ogowe latitude.

Everywhere the Pygmies (Babongo, Bakola, Akowa, Bekouk, et al) preceded the “tall blacks”. These small groups maintained an economic

10. Canoes on the edge of the Ogowe in Lambarene (photo: Louis Perrois).

11. Mangrove trees along the northern seaboard (photo: Louis Perrois).





rapport with the newcomers. Similarly, the Bakele of Kota linguistic stock came before the others and were dispersed into a large number of isolated bands (Bakele, Ntombili, Mbahouin, Mbississiou, Bongomo, et al). In addition, a southnorth migration current, the aggregation of the Bavili, Balumbo and Bapunu, came from the confines of the Kongo kingdom.

It would be too lengthy to discuss here the traditions of every Gabonese ethnic group. It is possible, however, to indicate briefly that the coastal peoples, the Myene in particular, have been settled in their present location for several centuries. Of Okande stock, these groups were the first to settle after the Pygmies. The Eshira settled around the lower Ngounie a little later.

THE DISCOVERY OF GABON BY THE WEST

While the only “historical” materials from before colonization are the memoirs of oral tradition which give us an idea, however imprecise, of the early history of Gabon peoples, other documents and archives retrace the period of discovery of this country from the first early experiments in maritime travel until the Portuguese expeditions of the 15th and 16th centuries.

Hans Otto Neuhoﬀ in his book, *Le Gabon*,¹ gives

1. H. O. Neuhoﬀ 1970.

12. Savanna in the Franceville region, Upper Ogowe (photo: Louis Perrois).

13. Waterfalls in the Crystal Mountains, northern Gabon (photo: Louis Perrois).

a very lucid account of these explorations. An excerpt of his well-organized chronological table can be found in the Appendix.

OUTSTANDING CULTURAL TRAITS OF THE PEOPLES OF THE OGOWE BASIN

The study of the peoples of Gabon, through the anthropological literature and in the field, leads one to think of all these groups as one culturally related entity when they are compared to others from western Cameroon, Adamawa, Central Africa, or Congo-Brazzaville, for example.

It has been demonstrated that the great majority of these peoples are of northeastern origin with the notable exception of the Bapunu and Bavili of the Ngounie. The great equatorial forest, a veritable jungle difficult to penetrate, is a constraining environment that homogenized the cultural elements of all the groups which had to find refuge there over the course of centuries, having been pushed by aggressive ethnic groups. The principal means of travel was still by river.

The occupation of the forest reaches back to a remote past. Proof of it lies in numerous archaeological discoveries, zones of “secondary” forest (grown up again after being inhabited) (fig. 15), and man-made savannas.

All Gabonese villages look alike: rectangular



14. Small river and primary forest in the Middle Ogowe region (photo: Louis Perrois).

15. Example of secondary forest, less dense because of exploitation by man (photo: Louis Perrois).



houses with a two or four-sided roof line both sides of a path in a wide courtyard (fig. 16). If the present arrangement corresponds to colonial documents, it was not much different than at the time of G. Tessmann's field work in 1907. This indicates the age of the village street plan: the main house in front, the "kitchen" and outhouse in back, and the farm plots surrounding. Similarly, the presence of communal houses, *corps de garde*, reserved for the men (warriors) of each important lineage.

Rural life in Gabon is governed by a constraining environment hostile to any truly expansive culture. This environment, we have seen, is rather uniform. It is dense forest, still primary in some places and secondary everywhere else. Although the villagers now have coffee and cacao farms, it can be described as a rural subsistence economy. Hunting, fishing, and gathering are still important although wild species are becoming more and more rare.

Another common point of the Gabonese is the social and political structure at the village level which is very similar all over the country. H. Deschamps describes it as follows: "without government, without actual unity beyond the village [these small anarchic societies] succeeded by a game of compensation to maintain customs, relative peace between families and, to



16. Tsogho village in the Central Gabon region, south of the Ogoe (photo: Louis Perrois).

17. Dignitaries of the Bwiti cult among the Fang of the Ogoe Estuary (photo: Louis Perrois).

a large degree, equal conditions of great individual freedom.”²

The system of kinship is classificatory. In other words, the parents are classified by level of generation. Matrilineal or patrilineal, descentance is determined either by the woman (importance of the maternal uncle), or by the man (importance of the father, uncle and eldest brother). In addition to this division into clans and lineages, these societies are organized into initiation associations which are essentially therapeutic and judiciary in purpose. The most well-known is *Bwiti* or *Bwete* (fig. 17), which exists primarily among the Mitsogho.

Bwiti is essentially a male society. It is entered by an arduous initiation in which *iboga*, a hallucinogenic plant, plays a major role. This is accompanied by an apprenticeship wherein the candidate and initiate acquire by degrees knowledge of the nature of man, the living world, the cosmos and everything involved in the functioning of society.

In *Bwiti* there are three categories of initiates: the *povi* or masters of the temple who preside over the sessions and initiation ceremonies; the *nyi-ma-nakomwe*, the regular initiate; and the auditors, who after eating *iboga*, assist only during the rituals, or *banzi*. The rituals usually take



2. H. Deschamps 1962.

18. Reconstruction of an ebandza cult house (Tsogho country) in the Museum of Libreville (photo: Louis Perrois).

19. Tsogho country: Bwiti ebandza cult house. View of the exterior and one of the anthropomorphic posts (photo: Philippe Guimiot).



place in the *ebandza* temple (figs. 18 and 19), always profusely decorated, particularly the sculpture.

There are still other associations which are somewhat analogous in terms of their role and structure: *Ngil* and *So* of the Fang of northern Gabon; *Mwiri* of the peoples of southern Gabon, including the Masango; *Mungala* and *Ngoy* of the Bakota; *Njobi* of the Mindassa and Obamba.

Likewise, women are grouped by their role as mother and spouse as well as for protection from the brutality of men. It is the *Njembe* among the Mpongwe of the Estuary and the Myene of the Lower Ogowe, *Ombwiri* among the peoples of southern Gabon (fig. 20), and *Lisimbu* among the Bakota. The initiation is especially an apprenticeship for sexuality and maternity. Moreover, these associations play an important role in therapy and protection against witchcraft.

We will see in the following pages that all these groups use ritual paraphernalia that are often decorated and occasionally carved (figures, incised panels, decorated handles, etc.).

Lastly, it is necessary to account for the tremendous importance of the cult of the dead. It appears both at the family level and in associations: the relics (crania, fragments of human bones) served in ceremonies of propitiation, expiation, and often in rituals connected with anti-witchcraft (secretly with black magic). This cult employed a complete statuary which is one

20. Member of the female association, *Ombwiri* which has therapeutic and divination purposes (photo: Pierre Amrouche).

of the most beautiful expressions of art in Gabon: *Byeri* figures of the Fang, *Mbulu Ngulu* of the Obamba and their relatives, and *Mbumba* of the Masango.

The Gabonese were deeply religious and ingrained with the idea that man had to maintain a constant dialogue with the Beyond and the dead. As a being of flesh and spirit, he participated fully in the cosmic complex of which nature, or the world from below, is only one of its aspects.

This need for religious belief explains in part the circulation of mask types, cults, symbolic motifs, and even languages (the *Bwiti* syncretic cult of the Fang retained the sacred language of the Mitsogho).

The sacred is virtually everywhere, occasionally banalized but always symbolic. Nothing is left up to chance, neither birth (i.e., reincarnation) nor death (i.e., withcraft). Familiar spirits, spirits of ancestors or frightening monsters from nature, phantoms of the unfulfilled dead, or even doubles of the living, "people of the shadows", are omnipresent in the world of the living.

Art, particularly sculpture, is involved fully in this mysticism that is constantly renewed. It is one of the privileged, symbolic underpinnings of these beliefs, as are music, dance, and oral literature.

ART IN DAILY LIFE

In addition to figures, masks and carved and decorated objects that are strictly ritual, the art

of Gabon encompasses a number of objects from everyday life, attesting to a certain aesthetic preoccupation on the part of their makers. There are, among other things, drums, canes, fly-whisks, goblets, plates, spoons, banana knives (wooden), basketry, musical instruments, architectural elements (e.g. houseposts, doors, shutters), jewelry and ornaments, pipes, coiffures, knives, rings and weapons.

As forest people, the Gabonese were destined to work primarily in wood and various fibers. The Pygmies were provided with metal utensils by the "tall Bantus" late in their history but had a highly developed understanding of the technological resources of the forest: e.g., impermeable leaf habitations, traps, weapons, utensils made of vegetal materials.

The documentation of Reverend Grébert indicates the forms of objects used on the Ogowe, all small in size. Among his drawings is a stool (fig. 25, p. 30) very similar to the one shown here (Pl. 3, p. 65) which is embellished by the application of copper; it is no doubt reserved for a chief.

Wicker and wood objects were generally produced by their users. Metal objects, conversely, were made by a blacksmith (fig. 21) who, in the acephalous societies of Gabon, was quite important.

All the early documents on iconography indicate an abundance of personal portable objects: necklaces, anklets, pipes, assagaies, spears and shields.



Iron

According to the region, Fang or Kota for example, the exploitation of iron ore is entirely free and personal or associated with clan land ownership. The Gabonese have always been both smelters and smiths.³ The surface (or near surface) lodes of Boka-Boka in the Kota region are well known and are going to be the location of modern mining projects (very hard ore).

The traditional high furnaces were provisional installations of vegetal materials but very well constructed. The operation of smelting ore was planned far in advance and surrounded by rigorous ritual prohibitions. The “medicine man”, or *nganga*, presided over these works. The *Akom* dance of the Fang precisely mimes the movements of iron production.

Among the Bakota the roles of smelter and smith were distinct. The former was the coordinator of an immutable rite, the latter a creative artisan who could give free rein to his imagination.

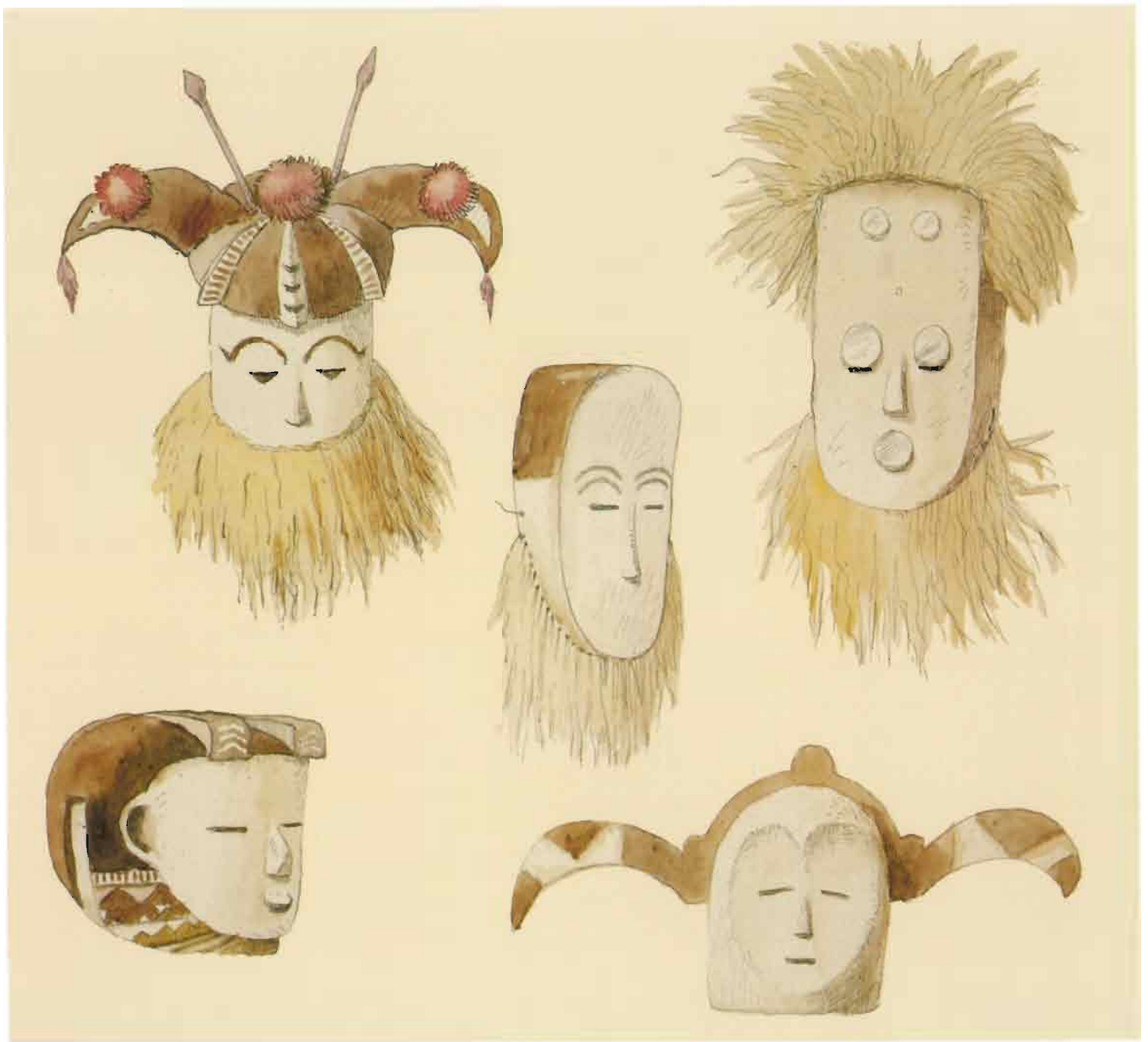
The technique of iron manufacture among various Gabonese ethnic groups owe more to the presence of ore lodes in their areas than to specific technological understanding.

3. G. Collomb 1977.

21. Fang blacksmiths of the Oyem region (drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert, sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).

22. Early photograph representing a Fang woman with filed teeth wearing brass and copper jewelry (Centre d'Information Missionnaire, Paris).

23. Different types of masks (drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert, sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).





The iron obtained by the usual smelting process is not directly usable by the smith. It must be cut, each piece heated at high temperatures, and worked with a hammer on the anvil to remove any remaining impurities. The work of the blacksmith is the production of metal objects, and evidence of it is virtually ubiquitous in Gabon.

The blacksmith's tools are stone and iron anvils, maul, hammers, burin and scissors, pliers and temporary handles, and bellows. Ironworking is today often limited to the production of spear tips, articulated harpoons, and agricultural tools such as axe-hatchets and hoes. Formerly, weapons were the primary products of ironworking: glaives, sabers, swords, warspears, knives and throwing knives. In Gabon, only one form of throwing knife is known from the Upper Ogowe in the Woleu-Ntem – the *musele*, in the shape of a toucan head (see Pl. 2, p. 63). A combat weapon, the knife is also an attribute of important persons. It is used in every initiation ceremony and especially for the *Mungala* dance where the dancer struggles with the masquerader armed with the knife.

Lastly, the blacksmith produced ritual bells: single gongs with separate mallet having a handle ornamented in the form of a human head

24. *Player of the Fang harp. These musical instruments are known north and south of the Ogowe. They are often ornamented with one or several small carved heads (photo: M. Huet, Ag. Hoa-Qui).*

25. *Different types of stools (drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert, sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).*



(Cat. 33 and 34); double gongs; clapper bells with metal handle.

COPPER AND BRASS

In addition to iron worked wherever it was found, Ogowe peoples used imported copper and brass as an element of body adornment (fig. 22) and especially as currency.

Coppersmiths disappeared more than a century ago, the shoddy goods of the explorers having quickly replaced the “manillas” and “neptunes” used until the 19th century.

There are copper beds in the Niari region of the Congo and many farther into central Africa, in Katanga, but according to human memory, actual use and diffusion of it in Gabon is not known. Copper and brass were introduced by European traders from the factories on the coast in the form of small bars, rolls of wire, and bowls called “neptunes” (*umbumbu* on the Upper Ogowe). On his expedition of 1883 Brazza carried close to 5,000 copper neptunes (fig. 27), intended as payment for services rendered en route (e.g. with canoers and in exchange for local products).

Indigenous techniques of working these metals were very rudimentary: open-air molds or

simple wooden matrices. Curved objects such as necklaces, rings, and leg armor were shaped by hammering on the anvil, then carefully finished and chased.

In the 18th century, copper and brass were considered precious metals, metals of the Whites, and replaced iron as money and decoration. They were valued as much as gold was elsewhere.

The choice of copper as the principal decorative element of ancestor figures, relics of the dead, and certain ritual objects (e.g. stools, Pl. 3, p. 65) was directly linked to its great value as currency.



26. *Inhabitants of Cape Lopez* (English engraving from the 17th century, Musée de l'Homme, Paris, negative: 6.6.817).

27. *Arrival of Brazza in a Duma village* (Le Tour du Monde 1888). This engraving shows the copper dishes serving as currency, which in this period were becoming the preeminently privileged material for the production of Kota reliquaries.



chapter one:
eastern gabon



PEOPLES OF EASTERN GABON

The problem of localizing the peoples of eastern and southern Gabon is still rather poorly resolved. I fear that it may remain this way, for who now could better inform historians and ethnographers? If they are Gabonese or Congolese, a few holders of tradition born around the time of the beginning of colonization (1890-1914), they are probably so old as to be at death's threshold.

Schematically, Ivindo and Upper Ogowe peoples are divided into three principal groups: Kota proper, Mbete (also called Mbede and Obamba), and Duma-Ndzabi. It is impossible to compare these groups directly to each other, especially on linguistic grounds. They arise, nevertheless, from one and the same cultural stock, usually designated by the name "Kota," in spite of the risk of confusion.

Marie-Claude Dupré vigorously contested this "Kota-Obamba-Ndzabi" designation in a recent rescission of the work of A. and F. Chaffin (*L'Art Kota*). The title of their work in her eyes does not recover the matter despite their reference to the denomination of reliquary figures from eastern Gabon traditionally admitted in the West.⁴ The specialists' use of this name is not as reductive as M.-C. Dupré supposes, and it seems to be a false problem.

Bibliographical analysis and personal field research (1965-1974) have led to the following

ethno-historical summary. There are three regions populated by approximately fifteen peoples⁵:

- Ivindo Region: Bakota, Bushamaye, Mahongwe, Ndambomo, Bashake
- Kelle Region (Congo) and Okondja Region (Gabon): Obamba, Ambete (of the southern savanna and northern forest), Bateke (of the plateaus)
- Franceville Region (Gabon), Mossendjo (Congo), Komono (Congo): Obamba, Bakani-gui, Mindumu, Bawumbu, Akele (still called Oungomo and Mbamwe), Mindassa, Aduma, Bandjabi, Batsangui, and Bateke-Tsaye.

These peoples can be placed within several large ethnic groups, categorized generally by linguistic evidence:

Kota Group: Northern peoples like the Kota proper, Mahongwe and Bushamaye and two southern peoples, the Mindassa and Bawumbu.

Mbete Group: The Obamba, Mbete, Mindumu and Bawandji peoples, as many from Gabon as the Congo.

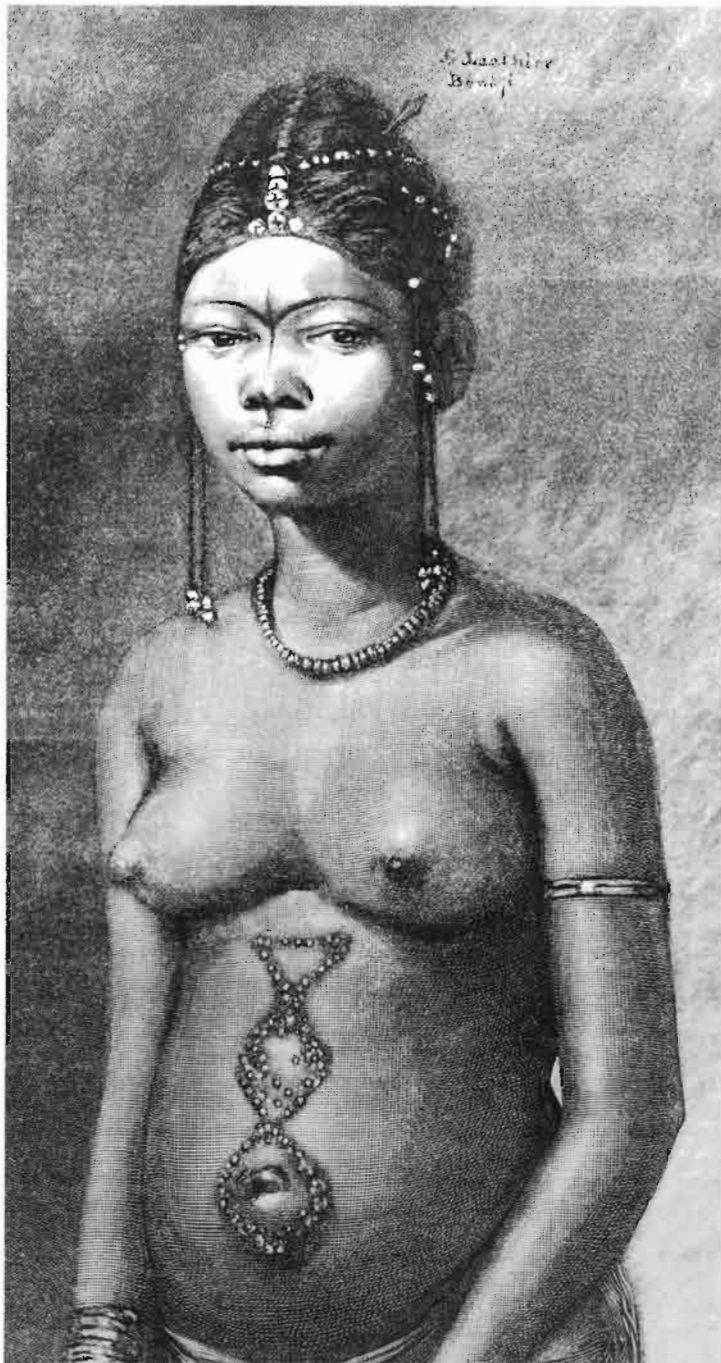
Duma Group: Aduma, Bandjabi, Batsangui peoples.

Akele Group

Teke Group: Tsaye and Laali peoples.

4. M.-C. Dupré 1980.

5. Peoples cohabiting a region may be related, like the Bakota and Bushamaye, or belong to different cultural and linguistic families, like the Ambete and Bateke.



The first three groups are included in the Kota area. The last two are often closely associated with the contact zones (i.e., Okondja and the northwestern border of the Bateke plateaus, Lastoursville, Upper Ogowe Valley). It goes without saying that this ethnic imbroglio, as M.-C. Dupré correctly emphasized, possessed “the same fetishes⁶,” and were “tall hunters and warriors, banana-eaters.” They fought against the Fang to the northwest, the Bateke to the southeast and the central Gabonese peoples to the west. Although they cannot be properly spoken of as a large homogeneous “ethnic group,” they might at least be viewed as an actual and coherent cultural constellation which can be perfectly identified in comparison to the neighboring groups, particularly from the standpoint of sculpture. This being said for the convenience of the reader, I think that this complex entity can continue to be designated “Kota,” for lack of another more precise name.

The Mindumu of the Upper Ogowe (called “Ondumbo” by the explorers), who settled along the Mpassa River, were exposed to incessant attacks from the Obamba (Ambete) at the beginning of the 19th century. The Obamba were themselves warring with the Ba-

6. A propos of this, it should be stated here that some of the tribes of the first three groups did not necessarily produce metal-plated reliquary figures. Although we know definitely that the latter were located among the Mahongwe, Bushamaye, Obamba and Mindumu, it is not clear whether the Bandjabi or Batsangui knew them. (The Baduma produced figures of another type.)

28. *Duma woman from the Lastoursville region, formerly Boundji (engraving from Tour du Monde, 1888.2, p. 13).*

teke (Guiral 1889; Barrat 1896; Payeur-Didelot 1899).

If it is accepted that the Obamba and Ambete are one and the same people inhabiting both the Middle Congo and Gabon, then detailed study of their traditions indicates that several distinct groups must be identified, at least among the Gabonese of the Okondja-Akieni region at the foot of the sandy Bateke plateaus.

Monseigneur Adam, the only specialist of the Obamba, distinguishes several groups of clans, veritable communities, known as the Ngutu, Ampini, Andjinigi and Asingami. The Ngutu came from the region of the Ngutu plateau near the Mounianghi River and mixed more or less with the Bushamaye. In the distant past, the Ampini (i.e., “Blacks” or “those of the forest”) had alliances with the Bateke, from whom they were separated, and also, the Asingami. Certain linguistic elements are shared between these peoples. They stayed in the forest while the Bateke left to settle the semi-desert plateaus of the southeast, towards the Alima.

In 1968, in the middle Sebe region, I recorded oral traditions recounting two currents of the Obamba-Mbete migration:

- The Obamba of Sere or Sete came from the Mambili valleys and Lecona (tributary of the Likuala) by following the foot of the Teke plateaus (west-south-west itinerary).

29. Obamba warrior encountered by Brazza during his exploration of the Upper Ogowe (engraving from *Tour du Monde*, 1888.2, p. 41).



- The Obamba of Ngwali came directly from the Congo by the interfluvium between the rivers Mounianghi and Sebe (southwestern itinerary).
- The Mbete of the Congo, also natives of the more northern regions near the Sangha River, were halted in their north-south migration toward Lecona by staying north of the Bateke.

Not much more is known about them since there has been no field research conducted in this region. M.-C. Dupré presents what little information there is: “The Teke influence on the language is observed by E. Ponel before 1886 when he visited the Mboschi, neighbors of the northern Obamba (indicated as Ambete on the map in *L’Art Kota*; also, the Mbete are more southern). This detail is picked up by R. Avelot in 1906 [...]. Another Swedish missionary, the linguist K. Laman, who jettisoned the basis of his manuscript dictionary, ‘Svensk-Teke-Kuta-Ngunu,’ in the Sibiti and Mossendjo districts in the 20’s, notices that the Obamba language underwent a strong Teke influence. This information, which seems to be inaccessible, was cited by E. Andersson.”⁷

Most authors, Monseigneur Adam, Miletto, Guthrie, and Raponda-Walker place the Ambete and Obamba in the Mbete group. Certain oral traditions mention, moreover, a connection between the Obamba and the Bakongo of Niari.

In 1877, Brazza again traveled up the Ogowe River where he had the first encounters with “Kota” peoples, who from that point onward are more or less geographically stable: Bakota of the Lower Ogowe (a group which had advanced as far as Ndjole), Bashake, Bakota of Boundji (Lastoursville), Mindumu (Ondumbo) of the Mpassa (Masoukou, former name of Franceville), Bawumbu, Mbahouin (Akele) and Obamba (Ambete).

The sculpture of these broadly Kota peoples⁸ consisted of anthropomorphic figures associated with box or basket reliquaries called *Bwete* or *mboy*, depending on the region (fig. 30). These wooden sculptures are covered with sheets or thin strips of copper or brass. Their style is consistently highly abstract and generally two-dimensional as opposed to the Fang and Tsogho traditions of three-dimensional sculpture.

The reliquaries were assembled by large lineages or clans in a small shed for ritual use situated near the side of the village or occasionally in the village proper. They were arranged on a tray to be sheltered from profane and impure eyes, resting in semi-darkness propitious for respect and meditation. Each reliquary was accompanied by a form considered to be a symbolic image of the ancestors whose bones were preserved and a guardian of magical efficacy. These objects were carefully maintained, the

7. M.-C. Dupré 1980.

8. Curiously, the metal-covered reliquaries were not, it seems, used among the Bakota proper, the Bakota living south of Makokou (see map, p. 36).

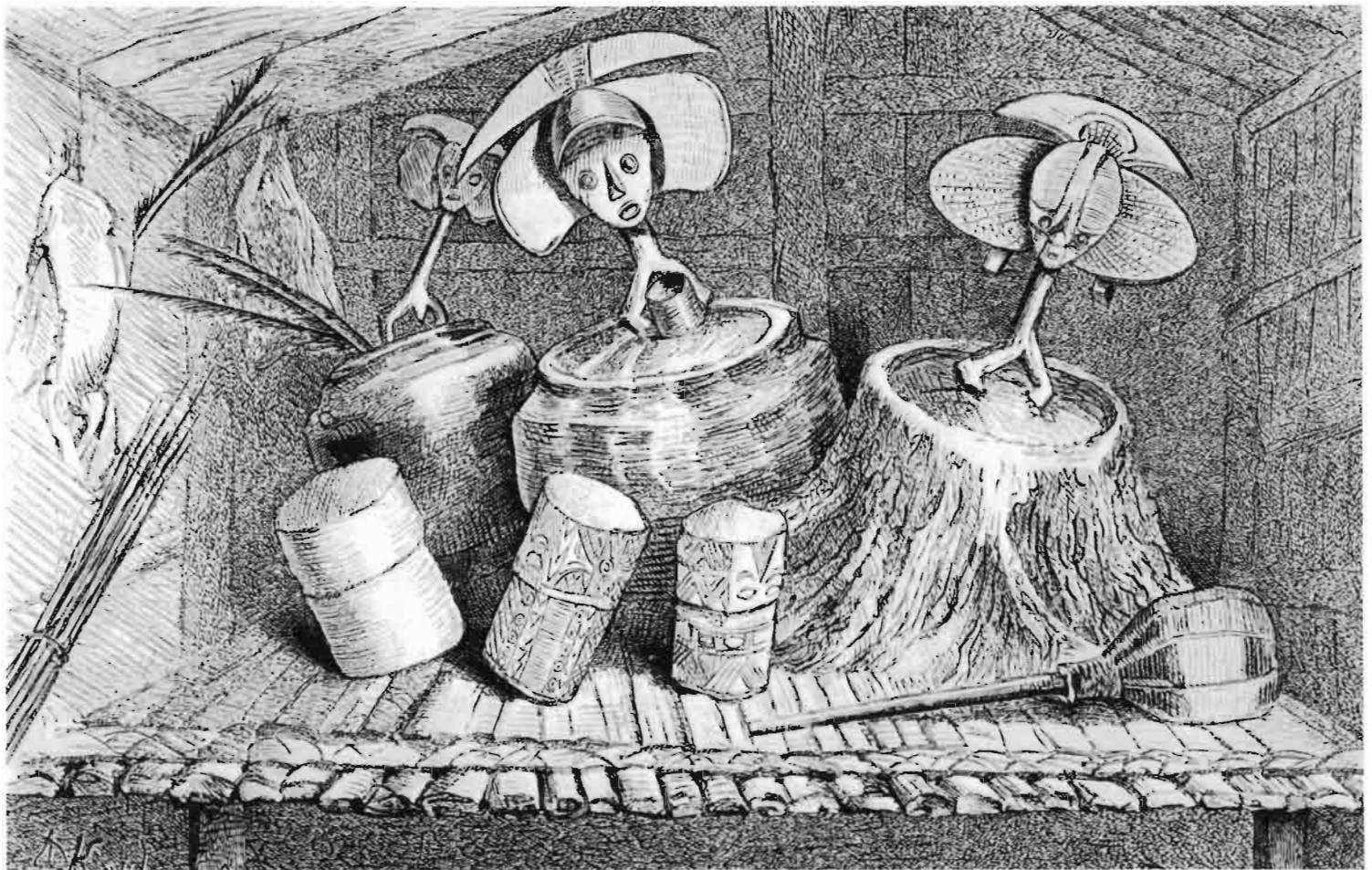
metal scrubbed often with sand to bring back its luster.

The first representation of this sculpture, which immediately struck the explorers as highly “decorative,” is in an 1888 issue of *Le Tour du Monde*. The sketch was made according to the specifications of Jacques de Brazza, who in the company of A. Pecile in 1885 completed the first exploration of Kota territory from the Ogowe to the Ivindo.

KOTA RELIQUARY FIGURES

To contextually place objects of the Barbier-Mueller Collection, it is useful to briefly delineate the stylistic classification of metal-plated reli-

30. Reliquaries seen by Brazza in Pongo village among the Ondumbo (now called Mindumu) on the Mpassa River. Note that as among the Masango (see illustration, p. 122), the baskets containing the skulls surmounted by copper-plated figures coexist with bark boxes also containing relics but without a figure (engraving from *Tour du Monde*, 1888.2, p. 50).



quary figures. The following classification of styles was established by A. and F. Chaffin⁹:

- Mahongwe Style of the Ivindo River: (ogival face, metal strip covering).

Mahongwe proper.

Shamaye.

- Shamaye-influenced Obamba Style: (metal strip covering).
- Styles of Southern Gabon and the Congo: (sheet metal covering).

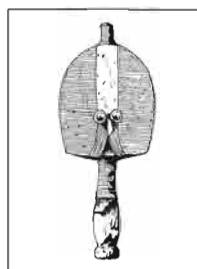
Region southwest of Franceville

Moanda-Mounana Region.

- Zangha-Mossendjo Region: Obamba, Mindassa.
- Sibiti Region.

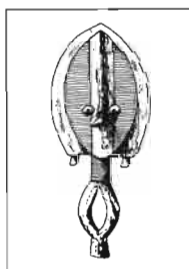
This outline, the fruit of long iconographic analysis and field research, is interesting but not completely reliable in terms of ethnic and geographic identification. It seems possible to delimit Kota stylistic geography much more closely with deeper stylistic research in the field based on a sampling of sculpture considered representative of total production since the end of the 19th century. In anticipation of this research development, it is necessary to morphologically classify the objects to obtain a descriptive inventory of forms.¹⁰ The first group described is the only one

for which there is any certainty of ethnic origin: it concerns the famous reliquary figures formerly attributed to the Ossyeba, and later correctly attributed to the Mahongwe.



Category I Ogival face; horizontal metal strip covering (Mahongwe).

There are two categories of objects. The large *bwete* reach 60 to 80 centimeters in height, whereas the small ones do not surpass 30 to 40 centimeters. The geometric balance of these two types is not the same; the eyes and nose are placed much lower on the small *Bwete*.



Category II Foliate face with encircling coiffure; covering of metal strips on the face and sheets on the lateral parts (Bushamaye).

These objects are very few in number and of

9. A. Chaffin 1973 and A. and F. Chaffin 1980.

10. For all the details of this morphological classification cf. L. Perrois 1979.

clear relation to Mahongwe forms and to those of the south (partially plated covering, cylindrical side pendants, base.)

All of these objects originate in the northern region, the valleys of the Ivindo and its eastern tributaries, the Liboumba and Mounianghi. The boundary between Bakouaka and Okandja remains unclear.

When, in 1966 during my ethno-historical research among the Bakota and then among the Mahongwe of Mekambo, my informants spoke of reliquary figures (*boho-na-bwete*) that could be found in certain villages in the surrounding area, I did not know that I was going to rediscover a style that all the catalogues of the period attributed to the Ossyeba, the people whom Pierre de Brazza had met in 1873 at the mouth of the Ivindo, “the black river,” towards the waterfalls of Booue, more than 300 kilometers from there. One evening a family chief brought me, well wrapped in leaves, a fragment of the face of one of these famous figures. He wanted to rid himself of it because of the belief that these objects bring misfortune when employed outside of the proper cult. I had a chance afterwards to find several more of these figures in funerary caches located deep in the forest. They now belong to the National Museum of Gabon in Libreville. A short scientific note was written about the figures when they were found. It drew the attention of



31. and 32. In August 1971, a fragment of a face of a Mahongwe reliquary figure was discovered near the village of Makatamangoye in the environs of Mekambo (photos: Louis Perrois).



Jacques Kerchache, who in 1967 discovered one of the wells in which missionaries of the 1930's jettisoned any ritual object suspected of serving in sorcery or the abusively assimilated ancestor cult. Approximately thirty of the figures were set in sunlight, the majority badly damaged by their interment, but all of them still quite beautiful in terms of form.

Only a few specialists such as the administrator Millet in 1949, and later, Leon Siroto, discovered that the art known by the name Ossyeba was in fact Mahongwe or Kota. The Ossyeba or Bocheba, an ancient tribe from the northeast, were successively jostled by the Bakwele and Fang before being completely absorbed by the latter at the end of the 19th century. Today, the Ossyeba are called Make or Mekina by virtue of their custom of beginning their sentences with the expression, "I say that."

The Ossyeba met by Pierre de Brazza controlled the entire sweep of the Ogowe between Booue and Boundji (present-day Lastoursville). Apparently, *Bwete* figures are found simultaneously among the Mahongwe (in Gabon and the Congo), Ndambomo and Bashake (the last two groups dwell respectively in the south and southwest of the Mahongwe). These sculptures have often been compared to carvings of heads surmounted by a *naja* snake. It is hastily assumed

33. *Reconstruction of a complete Mahongwe reliquary. The small wicker basket holds the relics (bones and sundry objects). The base of the sculpture, embedded in the basket, is kept upright by a strip of bark (drawing: Louis Perrois).*

that the flat, ogival form of the sculpture was directly inspired by this model. My informants never mentioned this resemblance although they know this reptile which is common in their area.

For sculptor and villager, the *Bwete* figure is a symbolic portrait, at once abstract and decorative, reflecting reality but never copying it. It is an amalgamation of symbols that is understood by all the initiated.

The Kota-Mahongwe style is impressive in its uniformity when compared to other Kota styles (Ivindo and Upper Ogowe peoples). Although the figures are not identical, they were produced by similar structural design and carving techniques. The most notable exception to this uniformity is the division between the two categories of large and small *bwete*, the former being the most numerous, and the latter playing an accompanying role when there are several figures for a single reliquary.

The large *Bwete* are wide and majestic, reaching 60 to 65 centimeters in height. The face is typically covered with thin strips of copper or brass horizontally juxtaposed, neatly and regularly, to create a smooth surface. The hair is styled into a cylindrical bun tied with a string of twisted copper. The eyes, always made of demi-hemispherical cabochons, are placed in the middle or at a third of the height of the face.

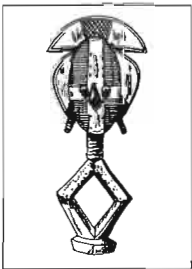
In addition, a metal band plated onto the wood backs the eyes as well as the nose. Under the eyes

are two series of vertically arranged metal cords, contrasting with the horizontal strips. On the back the central rib, a sort of wooden braid, is profusely decorated. A few rare *Bwete* have an ovoid or triangular face, but most are ogival (Cat. No. 4).

The small *Bwete* present more variety. They are 30 to 45 centimeters in height and 10 to 15 centimeters in width. The structural proportions change in length in that the eyes are placed slightly lower in relation to the whole. They do not have a hairknot and the facial covering is often more varied — e.g., metal strips arranged on the bias and/or horizontally, in a curve, or meandering line.

These two variations seem to be distinct. It must be borne in mind, however, that they are not true sub-styles, because of their solidarity in time and space.

The sculptural principles which seem to be those of the entire Kota group are pushed to the extreme by the Bakota-Mahongwe. The abstraction of their figures, far from being “primitive”, is a prodigious sculptural achievement, particularly in this culture where aesthetic preoccupations appear superfluous. The genius of the artist lies in the handling of the facial curves — the ogival outline and concave profile — and in the knowledge of how to be creative with them. The morphological solution of many Mahongwe objects offers a completely unexpected harmony, satisfying to the eye looking for sculptural beauty.



Category III Oval face, predominant metal strip covering and curved lateral headpieces (Obamba).

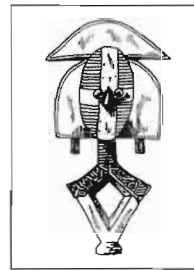
The distribution of this sub-style remains difficult to determine in the field, but it is possible that these objects are specifically Gabonese, from the Sebe Valley of the Upper Ogowe, thus from among the northern Obamba.

There are six groups of objects in this category:

1. Curved lateral headpieces with slanted pendants; narrow transverse coiffure; oval or almond-shaped concave face covered with metal strips.
2. Same type of lateral headpieces but includes an oval concave-convex face with overhanging forehead.
3. Encircling lateral headpieces without a crest (comparable to Shamaye forms).
4. Curved lateral headpieces with slanted pendants; coiffure of a transverse crest joined to the lateral headpieces; horizontal or diagonal metal strips.

5. Curved lateral headpieces; small flat face in relief; coiffure replacing the forehead; inordinately large transverse crest; sheet metal covering; reduced lozenge base (objects typical of Otala village, south of Okondja).

6. Almond-shaped concave face; median band forming the forehead and nose; curved lateral headpieces with slanted pendants or terminal volutes; sheet metal covering.

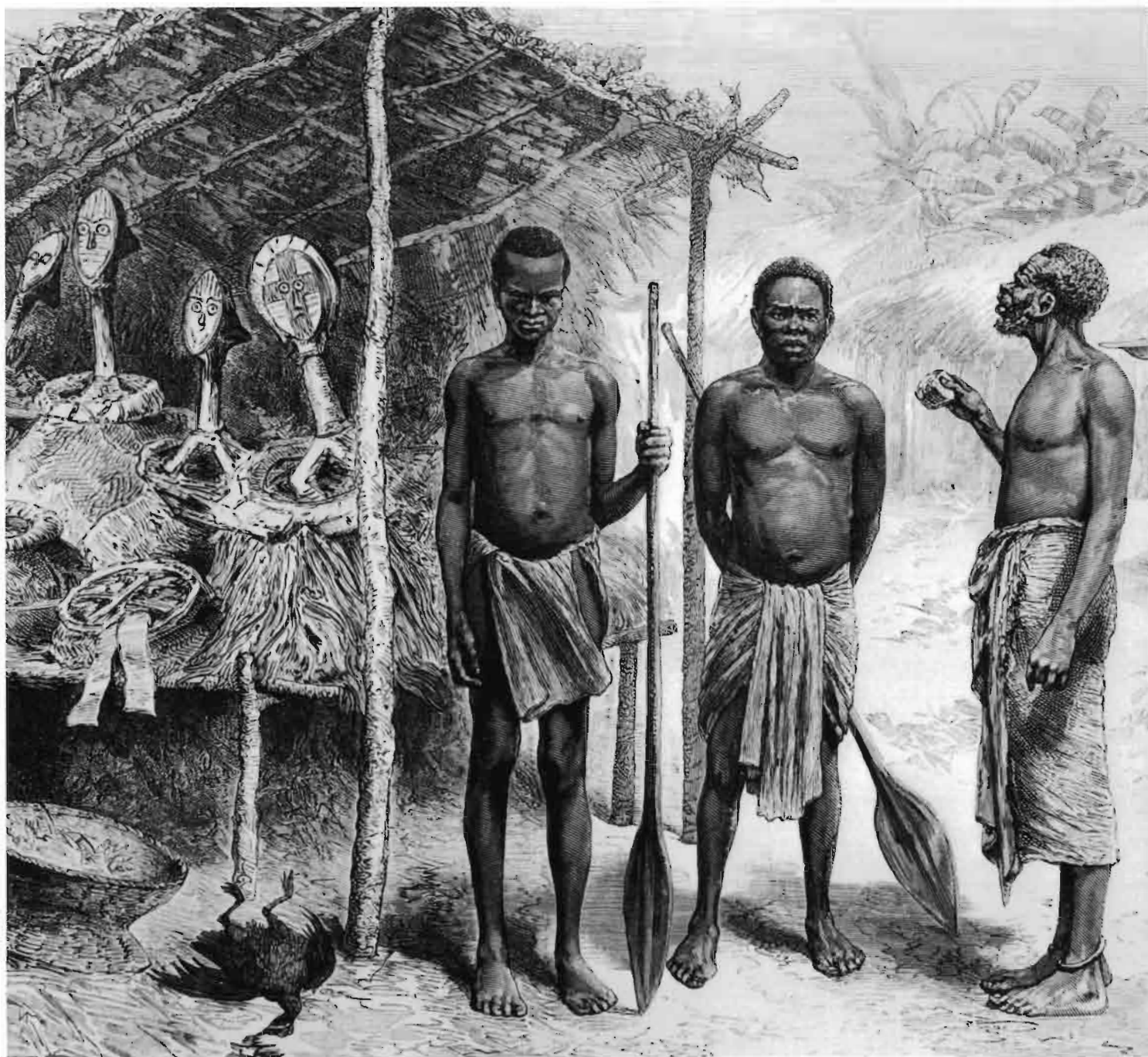


Category IV Oval face, predominant transverse crescent coiffure and lateral headpieces with truncated rectilinear base; vertical pendants.

This is the classic Kota style which seems to originate in the Franceville region.

The majority of the objects known arise directly out of this style, but there are numerous variations (e.g., covering of metal strips, plating of

34. *Shed containing reliquaries seen by Brazza among the Ondumbo (Mindumu) at the Mpassa River, tributary of the Upper Ogowe. Note the presence of reliquary figures with small faces similar to those discovered among the Masango and Aduma living farther west (engraving from Tour du Monde, 1887.2, p. 328.).*



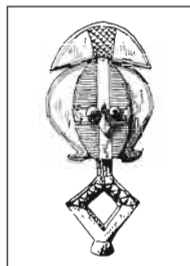
formed metal strips, flat plating, etc.), some of which can be considered older (metal strip covering).

The concave face and the concave-convex face coexisted, although the more abstract concave forms could be earlier than the others with naturalistic faces similar to certain Tsangi and Lumbo masks.

Gender determined by the concave or convex face is not consistently applicable.

1. Transverse crescent crest coiffure; curved lateral headpieces with truncated rectilinear base; concave face; metal strip covering (or formed metal), vertical cylindrical pendants.
2. Same general form as above but with a covering of smooth sheet metal; cruciform decoration on the face.
3. Same general form as above but with an oval concave-convex face; forehead hanging over recessed cheeks; eyebrows like a rectilinear visor (reminiscent of certain Duma and Sango masks of the Ogowe, the *mvudi* masks).
4. Janus-faced figures of the three preceding variations. According to our informants, these Janus-faced figures always had more importance and ritual value than the others. Multi-faced objects are common in Gabon. They relate more to magical or religious efficacy than to a distinction between male and female sides

(as among the Mitsogho and Masango where figures are paired.)



Category V Oval face, predominant short lateral headpieces with terminal volutes (Upper Ogowe, northern Gabon).

The terminal volutes of lateral headpieces are perhaps the morphological transformation of the vertical, and especially slanted, cylindrical pendants of Category III.

The ethnographic research of E. Andersson leads one to believe that the objects of this group are located in the south near Mossendjo in the Congo.

1. Transverse crescent crest; curved lateral headpieces with terminal volutes.
2. Janus-faced figures (opposing convex and concave faces, back-to-back); curved lateral headpieces with terminal volutes.
3. Curved lateral headpieces with terminal volutes; very narrow, encased crest on top of lateral headpieces; concave-convex face with

protruding forehead; very reduced lozenge base.



Category VI Figures without a crest (Upper Ogowe).

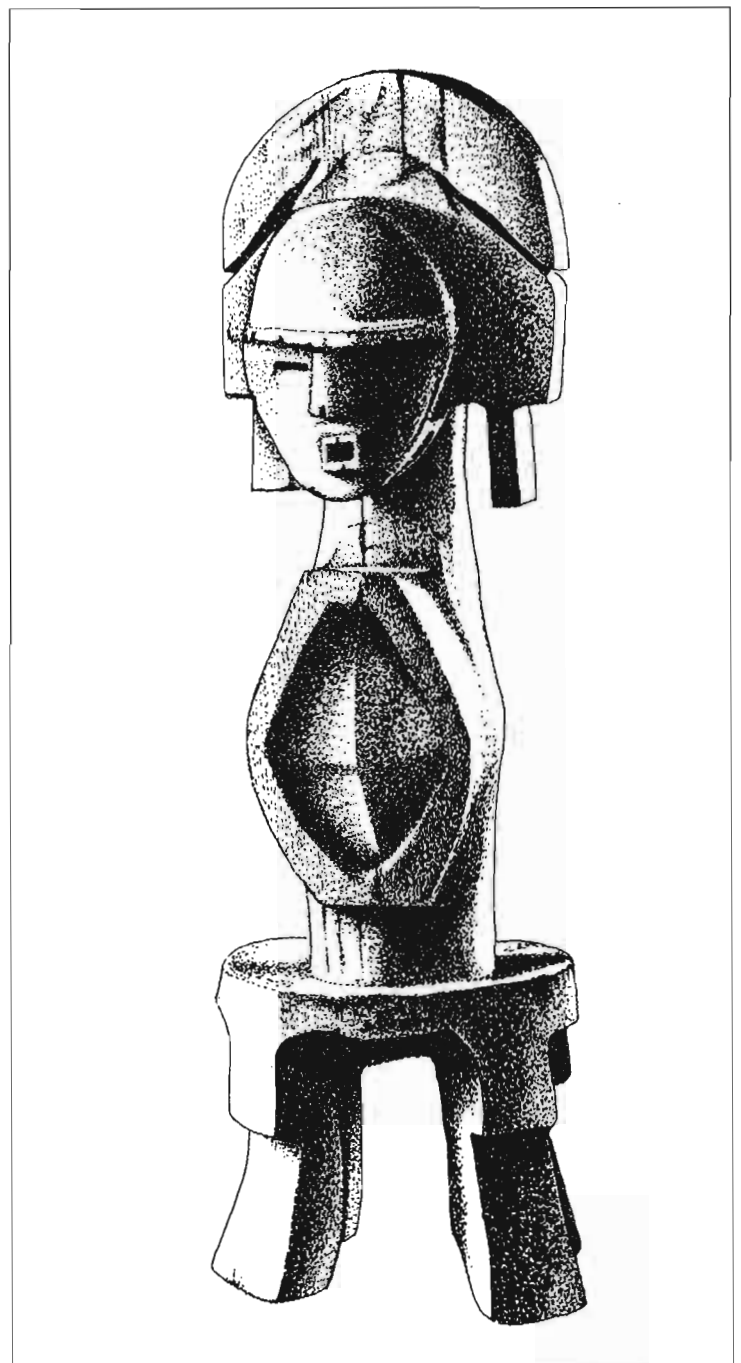
Curved lateral headpieces (encircling coiffure; covering of metal strips or formed metal strips).



Category VII Narrow form with elongated face; round cranial extension (Upper Ogowe).

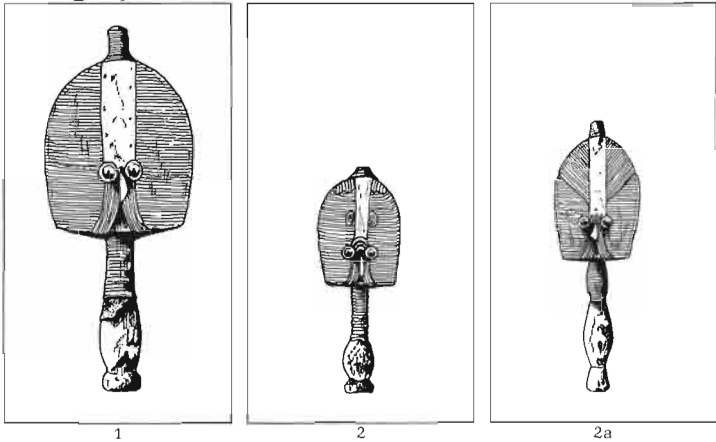
Slightly over-hanging forehead; metal strip covering (reminiscent of Sango and Duma forms. Certain pieces in this style are attributed to the Ondumbo-Mindumu of the Ogowe and Mpassa.)

35. Kota sculpture of which the stylized arms form a lozenge and the base a seat form. The face is similar to crested reliquary figures (drawing: Domenico Terrana, from a photograph of the work in the Philadelphia Museum).

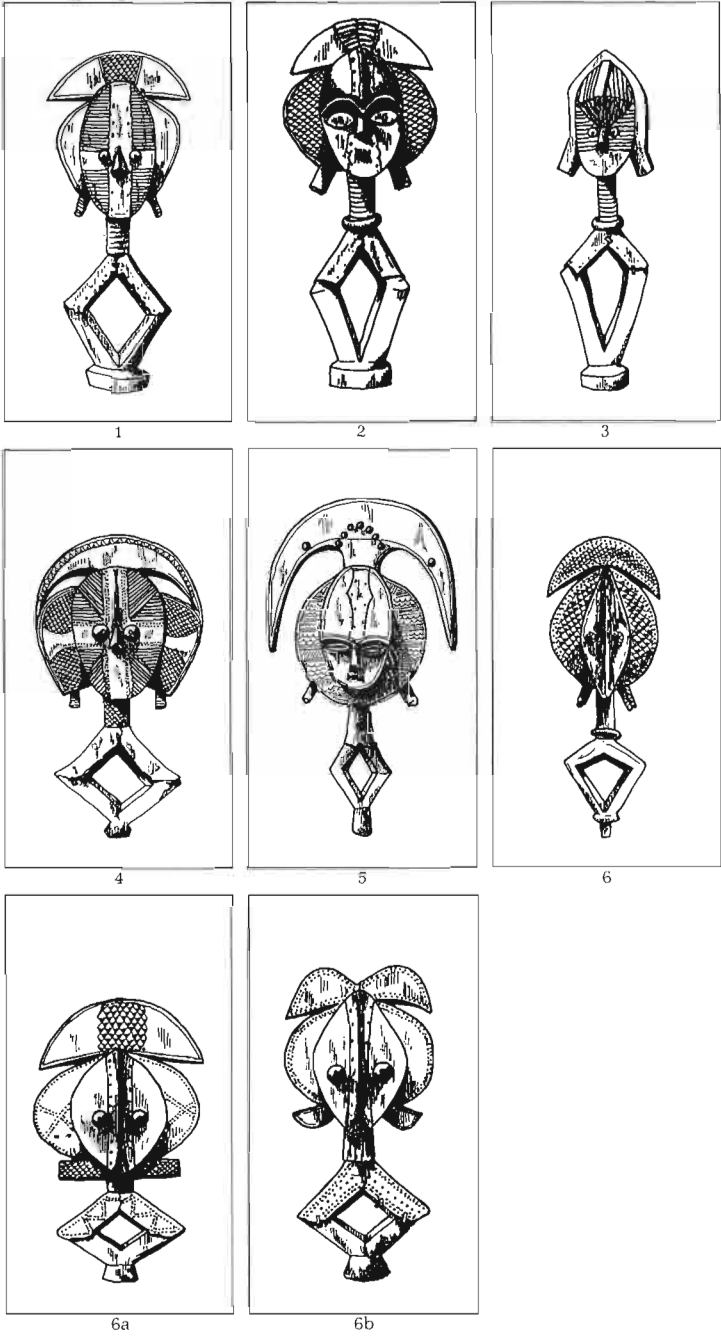


kota styles

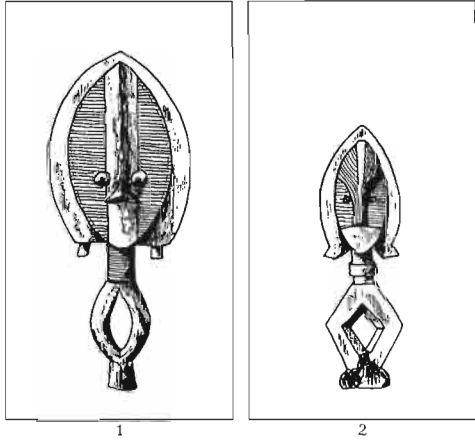
Category I (see p. 42)



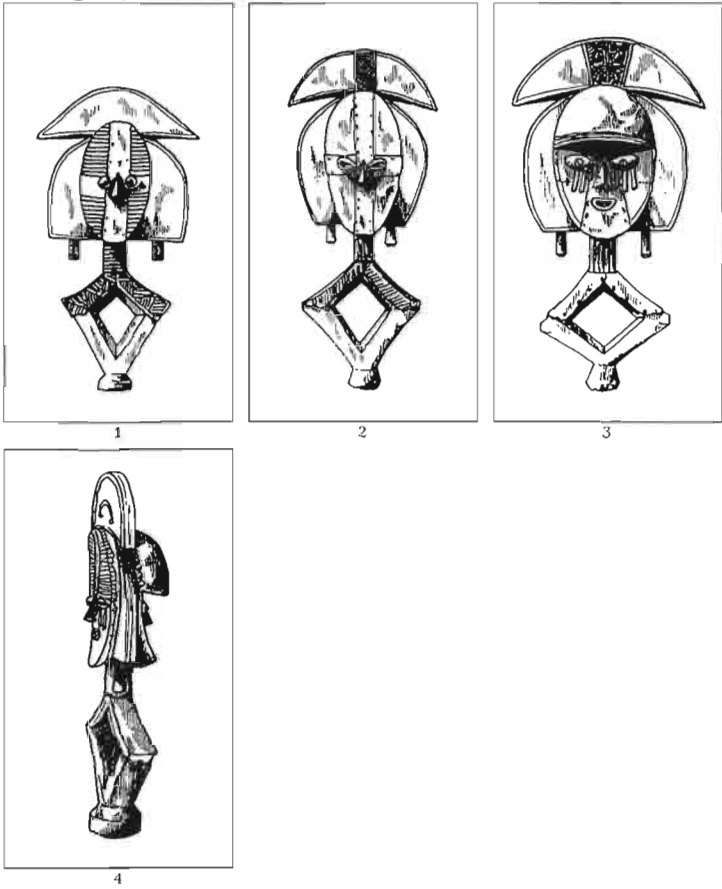
Category III (see p. 46)



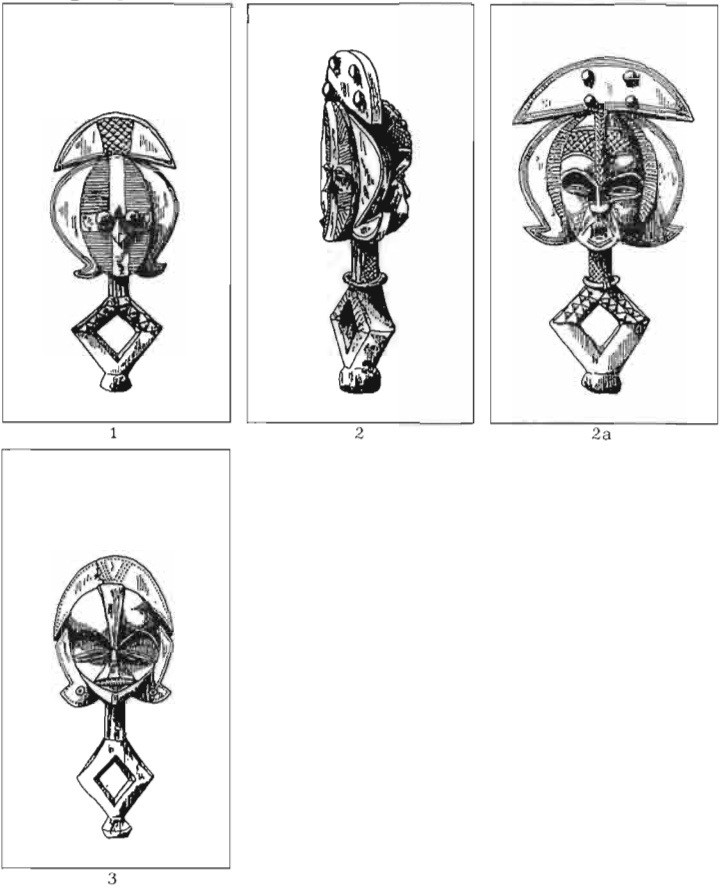
Category II (see p. 42)



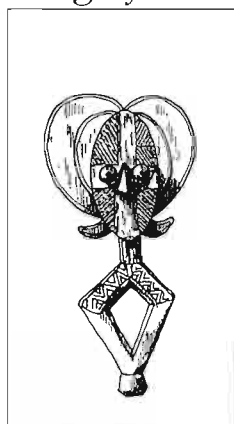
Category IV (see p. 46)



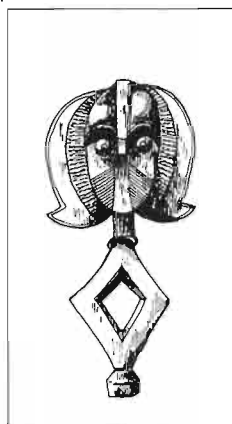
Category V (see p. 48)



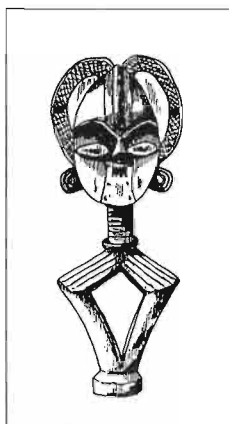
Category VI (see p. 48)



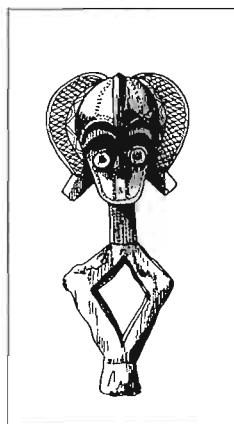
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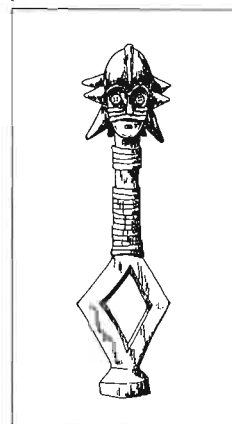


4

Category VII (see p. 48)



1



2

KOTA FIGURES

In addition to the reliquary figures destined to guard ancestral relics, the Kota and related groups are known for figures carved in the round, bringing to mind the Tsogho and Sango styles of central Gabon but covered entirely with copper or brass sheeting. The sculpture is angular and highly geometric. The faces are related to Ndumu and Duma forms.

MBETE FIGURES

(FIGURES, HALF-FIGURES, HEADS)

The Ambete of the Congo are the eastern neighbors of the Obamba, but their style is different. The ancestor figure itself constitutes the reliquary. The back of one figure is apparently used for this purpose. Occasionally, the body of the figure is fitted with a relic box. In such cases, only the head is carefully and naturalistically carved by the artist. The body remains crudely fashioned, the arms barely carved out as are the legs and feet. Mbete sculptures have a characteristic face: full, overhanging forehead; flat face recessed below a rectilinear eyebrow arcade; nose as a vertical “nosepiece”; eyes simply slit; rectangular, half-open mouth; very typical coiffure of bivalve shell forms cascading from the top of the head to the ears; the central shell sometimes forms a sagittal crest (cf. northern Bakota *emboli* masks. See below.)

This style, seen at its best in Tsogho and Sango carved faces, evidences links between sculpture

styles from the Atlantic coast to the Congo, the heart of one large group.

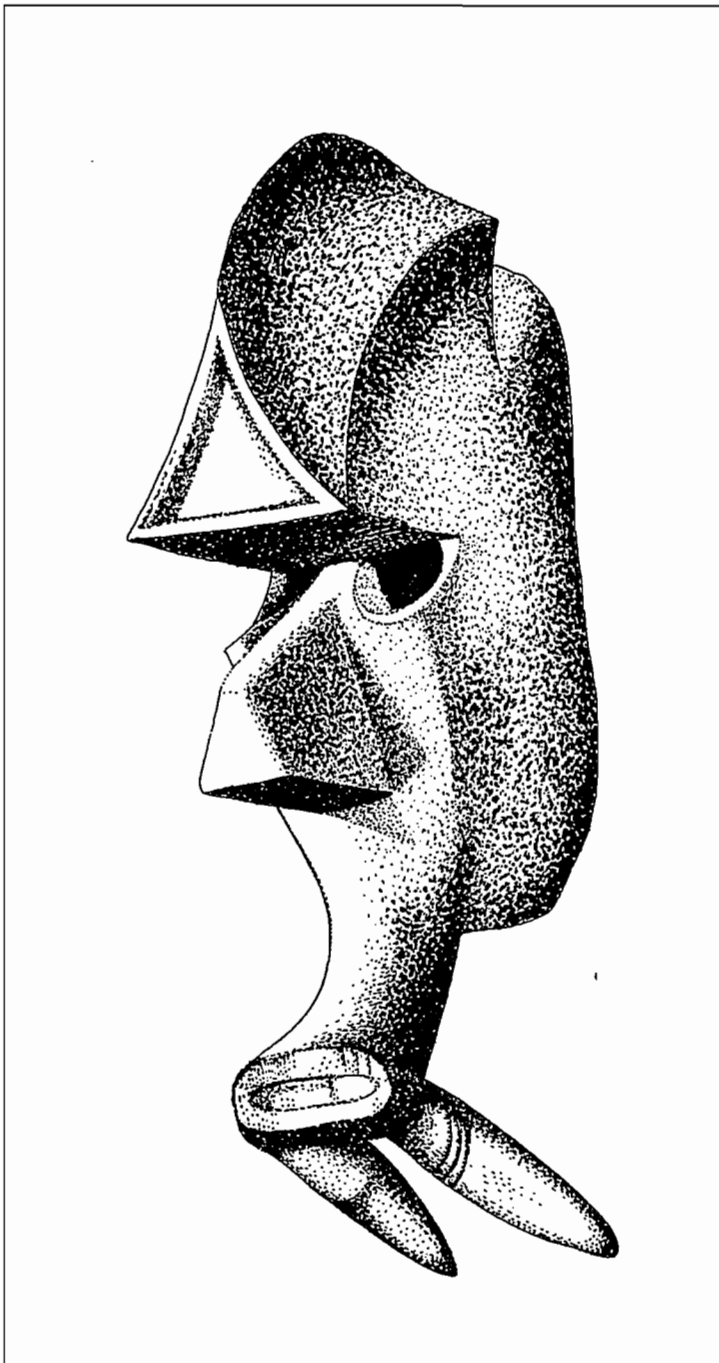
Generally, in this regard, it is important to note that the three most visible stylistic currents or expressions remaining today in a relatively homogeneous Bantu world are contained within the boundaries of the Ogowe River. With the current of the Loango for several centuries came migrations from the Kongo Kingdom as well as its white masks and refined figurative sculpture (e.g., Lumbo, Punu). The current originated in the northeast, from the Sangha River, encompassing first the Myene and Okande (Mitsogho, Masango, etc.), the Akele, and then the entire Kota group in several distinct waves. Finally came the Pahouin current including the Fang and its diverse tribes but also all the northern Pahouin – Bulu, Ewondo, Beti and tribes “pahouinized” along the way, the Maka and Ngumba. That these three worlds coalesced is proven by their sculpture which remains today, through its subtly combined or transposed forms.

KOTA EMBOLI MASKS

Little is known about the ritual usage and symbolism of Bakota masks and of other small related ethnic groups such as the Bushamaye and Ndambomo of the Ivindo Valley and middle course of the Ogowe. Moreover, only a few examples of this mask type are extant. Two

36. Janus-faced mask of the Mwesa type being danced in the Mekambo region in Kwele country (photo: Louis Perrois).





from the Barbier-Mueller Collection have the rare quality of being Janus-faced (Cat. Nos. 16 and 17).

In the Makokou region, these masks are named *mboto mwa empoli* or "the figure from Empoli." They are called *emboli* or *m'boli* in the Mekambo region and worn in witch-hunt rituals. (Witchcraft has maintained an important role in village life over the last few decades).

Most have a white background strewn with red, black, and ochre dots, imitating panther markings. They are also worn at certain ceremonies of the *Ngoy* (panther) association during the *Satsi* initiation cycle (circumcision).

In the Ogowe-Ivindo region, multi-faced masks like the Fang and Bakwele *Ngontang* or the Bakota *Emboli* serve not only in initiation rituals where the secrets of the initiates are revealed to young graduates but also during socio-religious performances for uncovering village witches.

The sagittal crest invariably surmounting these masks is analogous to the form of a gorilla skull. The gorilla is a common animal in this zone. Certain Kwele masks are, moreover, hardly reinterpreted from the head of the gorilla with his crest, wide pug nose, upper orbital visor, and enormous fangs (*Gon*). It is interesting to note that, until the time of the decline of witchcraft in Kota and Mahongwe country, monkey, chimpanzee, and gorilla skulls were commonly preserved.

37. Kwele mask representing a gorilla (drawing: Domenico Terrana, from a photograph of the work from Musée National des Arts Africains et Océaniens, Paris).

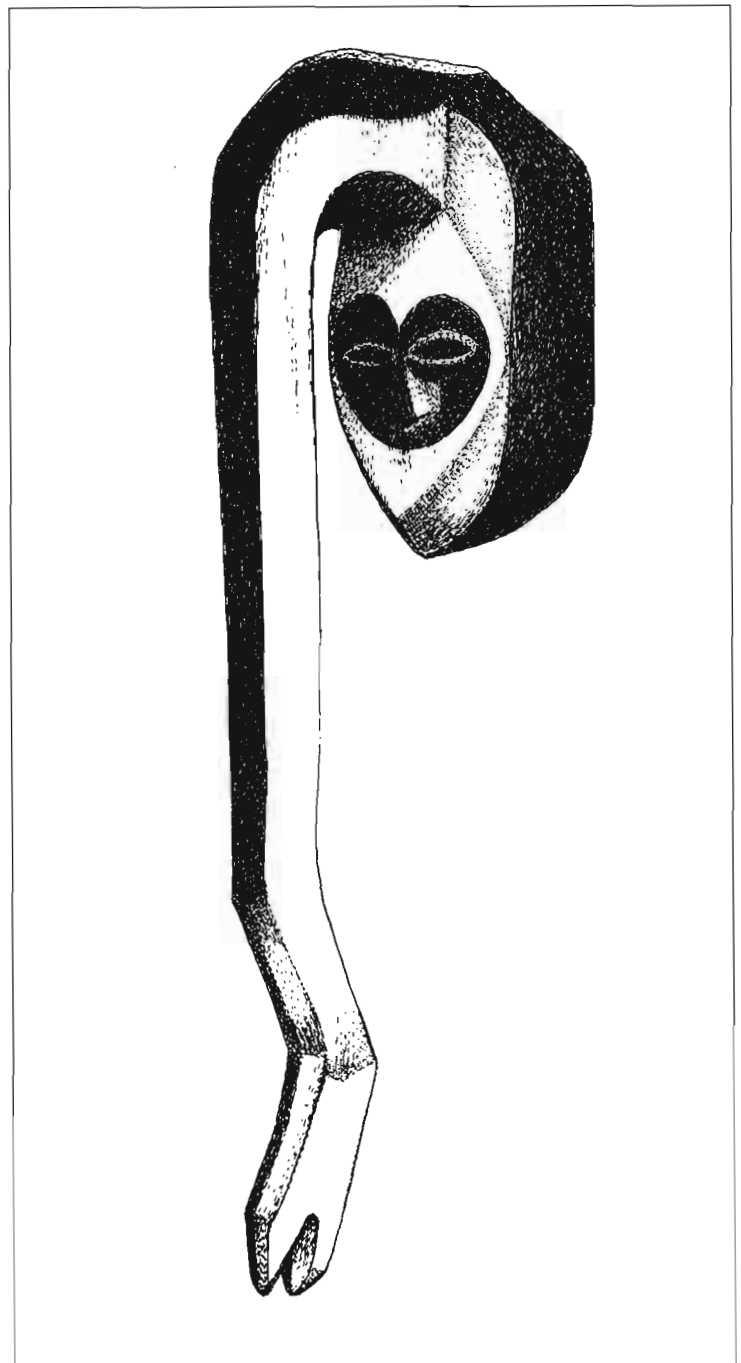
From a stylistic viewpoint, it is clear that Gabonese masks of the Ogowe region (e.g., *Ngontang*, *Bikereu* and *Ekekek* of the Fang, *Oso* of the Mitsogho) have essentially the same design construction: helmet mask or, in any case, a large encasing mask with a bell-shaped upper skull cap; dynamic carving determining the volumes and geometric planes in the perpendicular upper position; reinterpreted anatomical details: eye cylinders, headband for eyebrows; usually contrasting colors – white, black, ochre, red – with a studied effect in the arrangement of color boundaries, sometimes in desired disharmony with anatomical features.

It is difficult to determine the age of *Emboli* masks. Those known were collected rather late between 1920 and 1930 and do not appear to be old when compared to *Bwete* ancestor figures, for example. Furthermore, the dating problem is not as great for masks because they were easily remade whenever necessary. This genre of sculpture does not have sacred value outside of its ritual context. It will become clear that it is different from *Bwete* figures which are given much more attention and the best conservation.

KWELE MASKS

Kwele style is characterized by a heart-shaped concave face which stands out in white against a black background (on strictly ritual objects, furniture, seats, musical instruments, doors, etc.). It

38. Kwele mask representing an elephant (drawing: Domenico Terrana, from a photograph of the work in the Metropolitan Museum.)



also has narrow eyes, often stretched into a gentle arch, and curved in relief against a flat background or slight concavity. The supplementary decoration of a Kwele mask at the Metropolitan Museum in New York consists of a three-dimensional motif representing pairs of obliquely arranged eyes, a pure and expressive design. Pierre Meauzé, a sculptor, made note of this in his book, *Art Nègre* (1967): "A technical element is common to all of these flat sculpture types; the eye generally rests on the surface of the wood, and its form is disengaged by a sort of depression carved around it."

The most numerous masks with human faces are of the type illustrated on page 80 (see Cat. No. 19) called *pibibuze* (i.e., man).

Kwele animal masks are equal in number, especially those of antelopes (Pl. 11 and 12, pp. 81 and 83) (Charles Ratton Collection, Cannes: 1957; Museum of Göteborg; British Museum, ill. p. 82) but also of elephants (Metropolitan

Museum, fig. 38) and gorillas (Musée National des Arts Africains et Océaniens, fig. 37). These animals are easily recognized, despite the fact that the masks are an amalgamation of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms, more or less idealized and often completely reconceived. For the elephant mask, the sculptor privileges the trunk, but carves a human face below. For the antelope mask, there are horns, and for the gorilla mask, a sagittal crest and canine teeth which become veritable fangs. Human or animal, most Kwele masks were hung in the cult house and never worn. In fact, they are usually devoid of attachment holes and pierced eyes. This is not, however, the case with the two Kwele masks in the collection of Josef Mueller (Cat. Nos. 18 and 20, pp. 195 and 196).

The culmination of extreme stylization, Kwele art is not without formal ties to certain Fang objects, particularly *ngontang* helmet masks. Examples of composite morphology were found between Aina and Djoua, north of Mekambo.

plates
of chapter I

Plate 1

Bakota. Anklet (*djokelebale*).

Diameter: 10.5 cm. See Cat. No. 1, p. 187.

Illustration

Bakota women wore many ornaments made from copper and brass. This drawing, taken from one of the first accounts of travel on the Ogowe (Compiègne, *L'Afrique Equatoriale française*, 1876) proves the fact.





Plate 2

Bakota or Fang. Ritual throwing knife
(*musele*, *osele*: Kota, or *onzil*: Fang).

Height: 33.5 cm (blade: 38.5 cm).

See Cat. No. 2, p. 187.

Illustration

The *musele* knife, used by some of the ethnic groups living on the banks of the Ogowe, has sometimes a longer hilt than weapons meant for throwing (drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert, cover of *l'Almanach des Missions*, Montpellier, 1929).

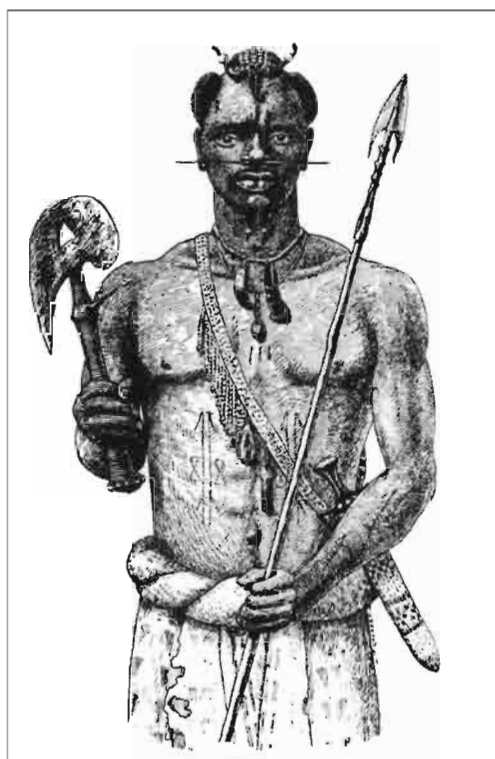




Plate 3

Bakota. Stool (*kwanga*).

Diameter: 36 cm. See Cat. No. 3, p. 188.

Illustration

A Fang woman is depicted sitting on a stool with curved legs, identical in concept to that of the chair reproduced opposite.

Thus this concept is widespread beyond the boundaries of the Kota cultural area (drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert, sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).





Plate 4

Mahongwe. Reliquary figure.
Height: 38.2 cm. See Cat. No. 4, p. 188.

Illustration

This engraving, taken from *Colonies françaises* (Cahiers d'enseignement No. 70) depicts a Mahongwe reliquary figure in armor. It is the oldest known representation of this type of object, apart from the plate published by Rätzl in 1887.





Plate 5

Obamba/Mindumu. Reliquary figure (*Mbulu Ngulu*).

Height: 42.8 cm. See Cat. No. 7, p. 190.

Illustration

This photograph was taken during a colonial exhibition (unidentified) held in France in 1931. The reliquary figure reproduced opposite is to be found on the bottom left-hand side (Barbier-Mueller Archives).

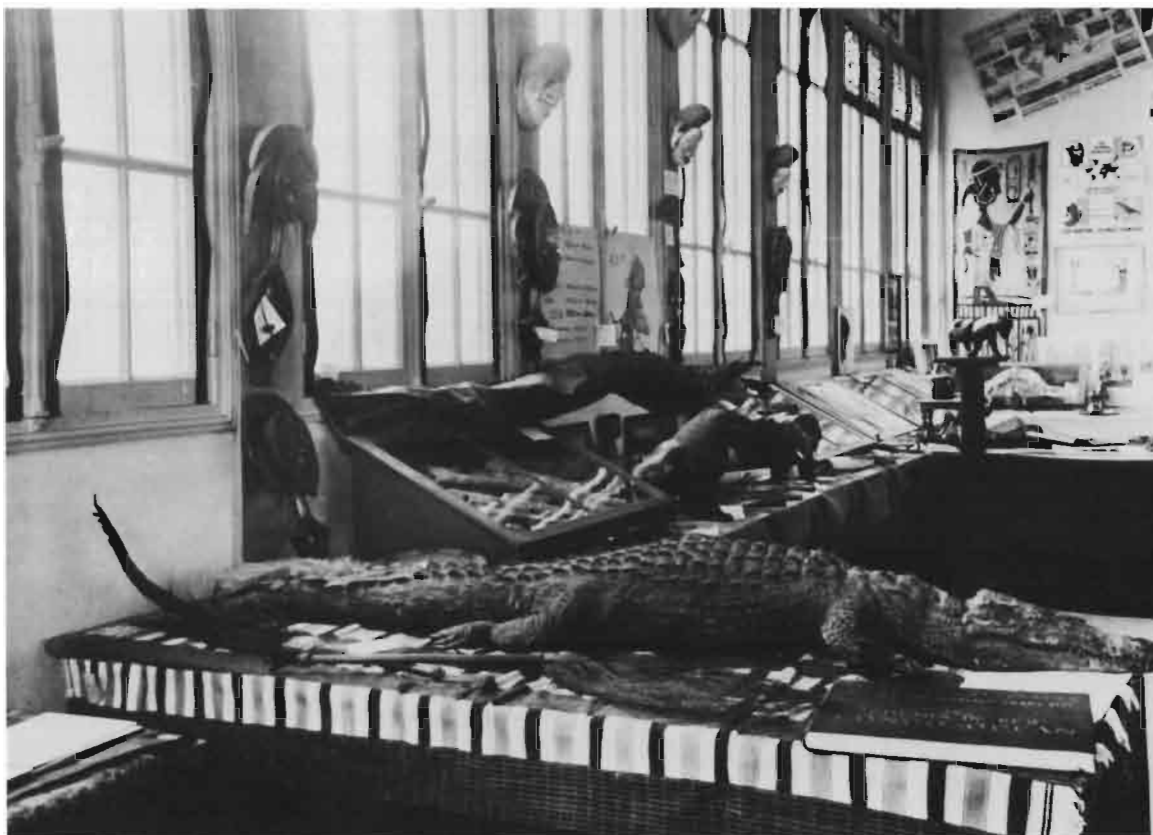




Plate 6

Obamba/Mindumu. Reliquary figure
(*Mbulu Ngulu*). Height: 47 cm. See Cat. No. 8, p. 190.

Illustration

Presentation of Obamba ancestral skulls without their reliquary box,
probably dating from the beginning of the century
(from S. Chauvet, *L'Art funéraire au Gabon*, 1933,
published in L. Perrois 1979, p. 43).





Plate 7

Obamba/Mindumu. Reliquary figure.
Height: 41 cm. See Cat. No. 10, p. 191.

Illustration

View of the back part of the reliquary figure opposite,
whose worn state testifies to its age. The row of holes
in the middle of the lozenge had feathers set in them originally.





Plate 8

Obamba/Mindumu. Reliquary figure.
Height: 63 cm. See Cat. No. 11, p. 192.

Illustration

This reliquary figure with a convex forehead and a concave face strongly resembles an object which S. de Brazza saw among the Ondumbo (Mindumu) of the Mpassa River (Upper Ogowe).

This ethnic group was continually at war with the Obamba in spite of the fact that they were related to them
(*Tour du Monde* 1888.2, p. 50).





Plate 9

Mindassa/Bawumbu. Janus-faced reliquary figure
(*Mbulu Viti*). Height: 54.2 cm. See Cat. No. 12, p. 192.

Illustration

Both faces of this Janus-faced reliquary figure
are a good example of those objects which belong to Category V
(see p. 50).

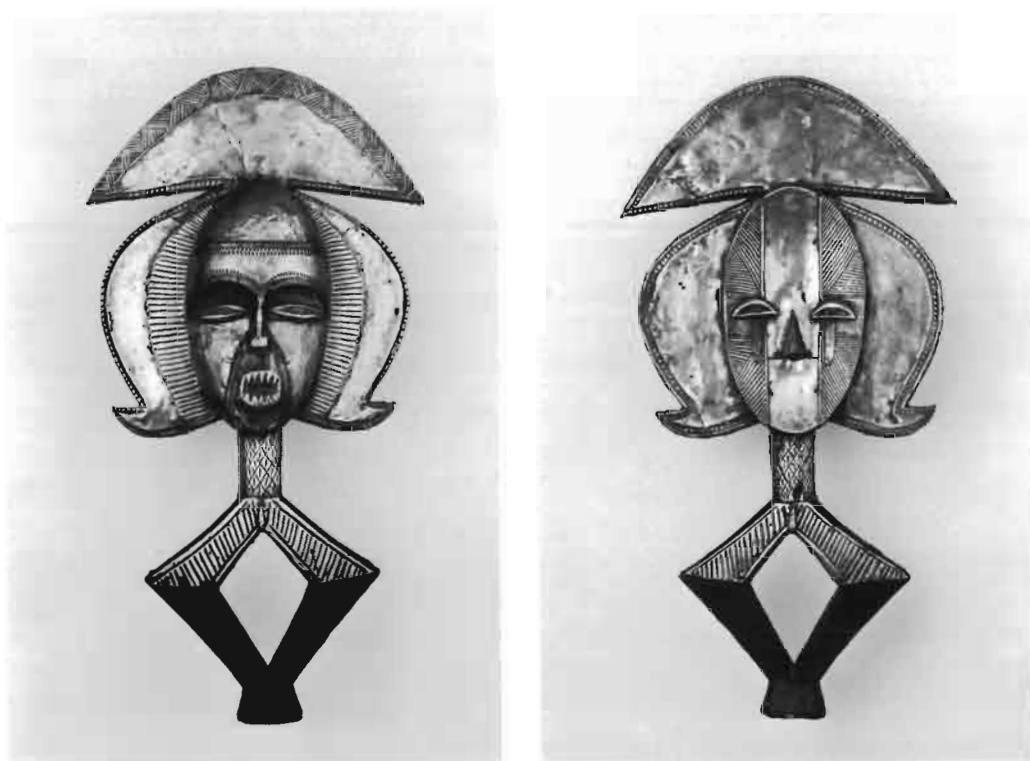




Plate 10

Bakota. Helmet mask (*Embolî*).
Height: 63.7 cm. See Cat. No. 15, p. 194.

Illustration

This masked Kota man, probably photographed in the sixties, illustrates how local traditions which had undergone pressure from Western civilizations, resisted
(photo: Marenthier, Ag. Hoa-Qui).



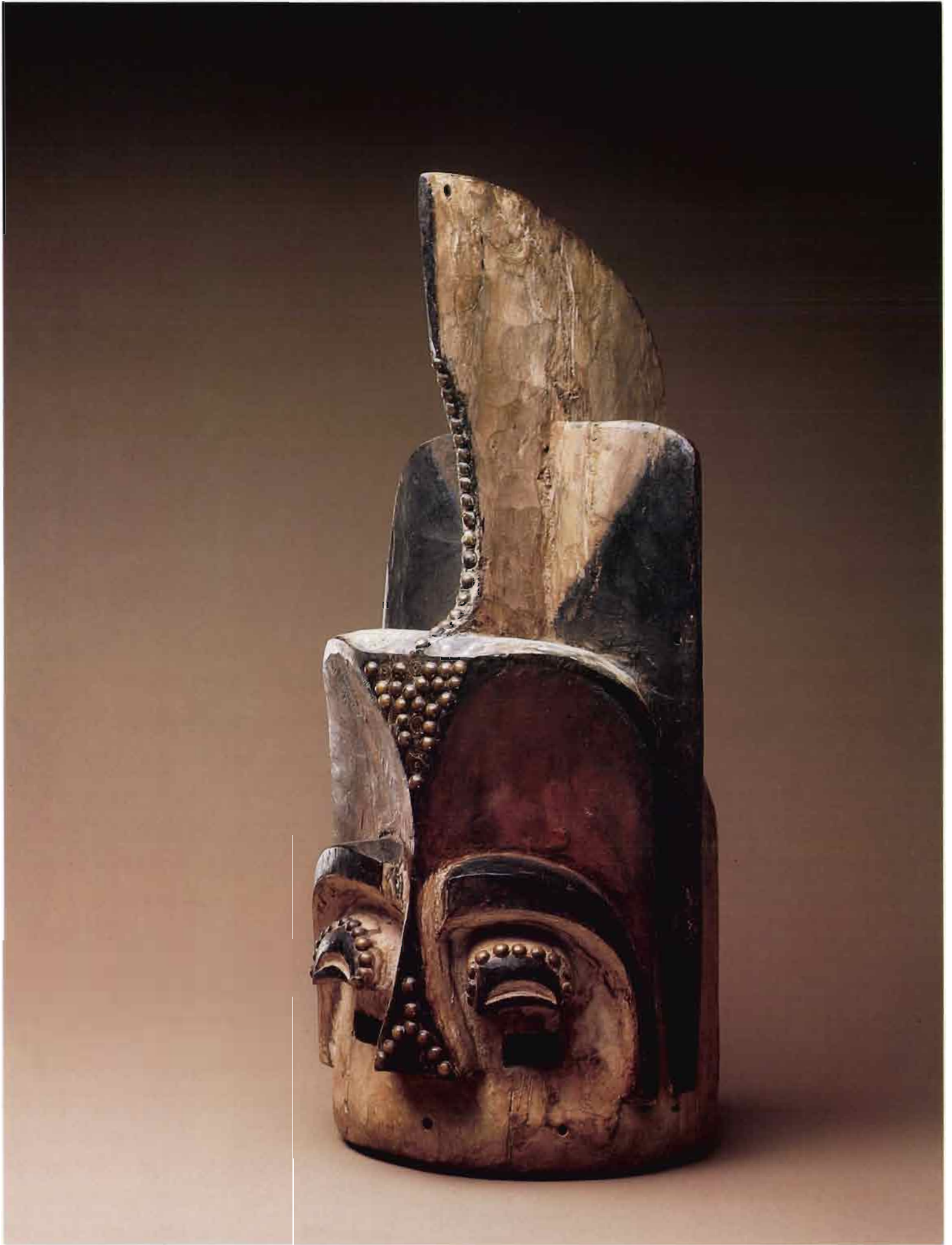


Plate 11

Bakwele. Horned mask with pierced eyes.
Height: 42cm. See Cat. No. 18, p. 195.

Illustration

The mask reproduced below, representing «man» (*pibibuze*), enables one to understand the work process of the Kwele sculptor. The creation, which is extremely bare, shows a face in the form of a heart, created by the carving out of a flat surface on each side of the nose (see Cat. No. 19, p. 196).





Plate 12

Bakwele. Antelope mask.

Height: 38 cm. See Cat. No. 20, p. 196.

Illustration

Kwele masks representing antelopes are very rare.

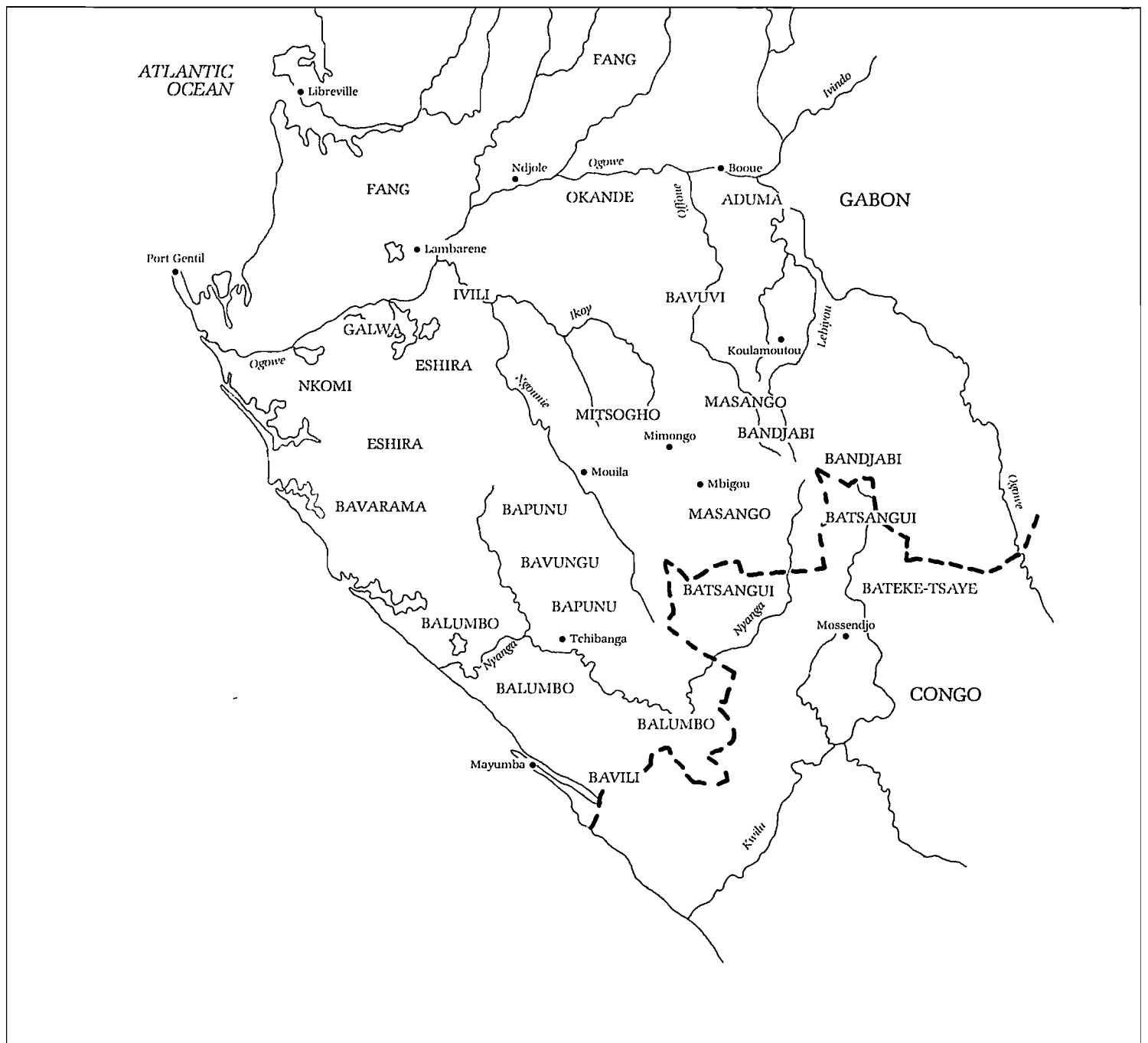
Shown below is an example in the British Museum.

One should note the softened, rounded forms, in contrast with the mask shown opposite, which is much more angular (drawing: Domenico Terrana, from the photograph of the work in the British Museum).





chapter two:
southern and central gabon



PEOPLES OF SOUTHERN GABON

The art of the Balumbo and Bavili peoples of southern Gabon and the coastal region of the Congo, between Gabon and Pointe Noire, is still poorly understood on a stylistic level. Older pieces in this style, nonetheless, figure prominently in collections due to contacts between European travellers and natives as early as the 16th and 17th centuries. In fact, these regions were the treading grounds of migrations from the Loango Kingdom. The displacement of populations occurred from south to north, from the Congo to the Ogowe, the Bavili, Balumbo, Bapunu and related peoples coming face to face with the Okande and Myene masses which had come from the east.

The Bavili, like the Balumbo (or Balumbu), call themselves *Fiotes*, meaning black in the Kikongo language. This name was coined in opposition to the surprising skin color of the first Europeans who disembarked about 1485, a short time after the discovery of the mouth of the Congo River by Diego Cao. The Bavili, unlike the Bayombe of the Mayombe mountains, quickly realized their commercial vocation, acting as intermediaries between peoples of the interior and European traders. As vassals of the Loango king, who allied himself with the Kongo king, the Bavili saw their land progressively diminish with the fragmentation of the kingdom over a period of about a century and a half. Their most north-



39. Vili fetisher (nganga) accompanied by his musicians (postcard, Raoul Lehuard Archives).



ern groups are found in Gabon near Sette-Cama and Mayumba, where they coexist with the Balumbo.

In Vili and Lumbo religion, God is called *Nzambi*. He, as the following proverb indicates, created *Bakisi* and human beings:

"Nzambi vandji liyilu i siuvaga bakisi i bantu lu monio."

(*"If Nzambi Mpungu is the creator of all things, remote and inscrutable, demiurge of all the Bakongo, Bakisi (sing. nkisi) are the guardian spirits or "inferior" gods".*)

*"Nkisi is the divinized spirit of the ancestor who first occupied and set the boundaries of clan lands. It is honored by a sacred grove of variable dimensions of the same name as the temples (tchibila), where it is kept. Access to the tchibila is prohibited to the fumu ("prince"), to menstruating or parturient women, as well as to individuals having had sexual relations the preceding night."*¹¹

FIGURATIVE SCULPTURE OF SOUTHERN GABON

The figurative sculpture of southern Gabon in the coastal zone is essentially religious and magical.

11. F. Hagenbucher 1973, p.31.

40. This tall figure (Cat. No. 22) represents a "genie"; it is called sinkhosi (see p. 89). Its provenance is uncertain. It should be noted, however, that it has mirror-encrusted eyes, which is a particularity of the Bayombe and Bavili (photo: Pierre-Alain Ferrazzini).

Manifesting considerable formal homogeneity, it may be directly linked to the “white mask” styles of the Ngounie. Noticeable among the details, however, from north to south, are significant variations, from a highly sober, graphic quality, occasionally stereotyped and virtually fixed, to others more naturalistic.

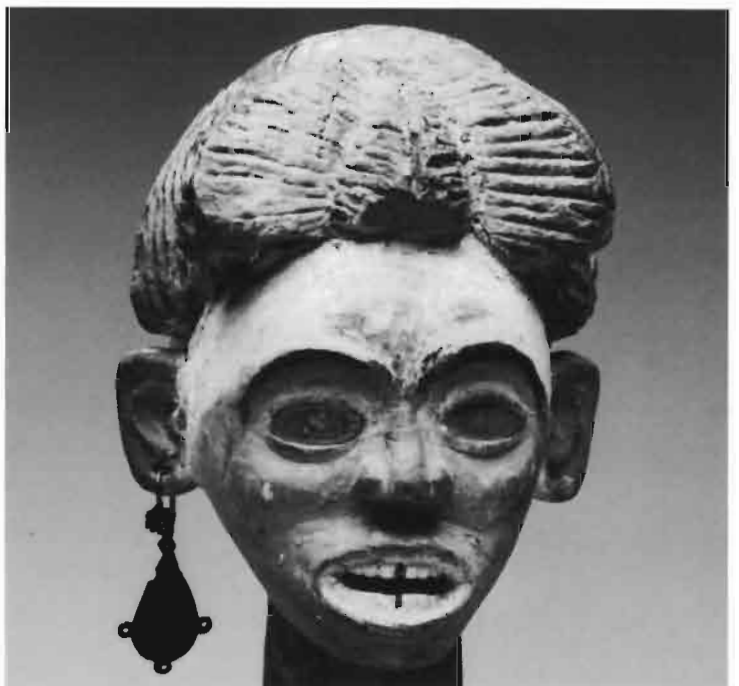
Reliquary figures are still numerous today in southern Gabon and towards the Congo in Lumbo and Vili country. These are *sinkhosi*. In the 18th century, missionaries were impressed by their number and importance in daily life:

“They have figures which are bigger [compared to amulets and pendants] and sometimes of normal size (cf. the figure already cited, cat. No. 22) which do not appear to have been in a public, regulated cult [...]. Some of these idols are placed in remote places where the blacks sometimes go on pilgrimage, especially when they want to marry or to take charge of a ward. There the ministers of these idols function as oracles forbidding these pilgrims throughout their life the use of certain foods and clothing.”¹²

12. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

41. The face of this nail fetish of Yombe origin (People's Republic of the Congo) is stylistically analogous to the face of the Vili sculpture reproduced below (drawing: Domenico Terrana, from a photograph of the work at Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren).

42. Head of the Vili figure reproduced in Pl. 13, p. 107. The Bavili, settled astride the present border between Gabon and the Congo, were the dominant ethnic group of the former Loango Kingdom. They were culturally very close to the Bayombe and other groups of the Kongo Kingdom. The Kongo political center was at the mouth of the river of the same name (present-day Zaire) (photo: Pierre-Alain Ferrazzini).



F. Hagenbucher thinks that “the portable ‘idols’ incarnate *muti* (sing. *buti*) [...]. living beings composed of a body and a spirit but unable to be assimilated into talismans, although they are materially represented by objects which are their support in the physical world.”¹³ The largest figures are the *sinkhosi* of *bakisi basi* or genies. These figures were possibly also associated with a sort of ancestor cult.

Generally, the carved wood figure representing the divinity is placed in the middle of the *tchibila*. Frequent libations and offerings of kola, ginger, wild pepper and other pungent herbs are made in front of the figure at certain times of the year, especially before fishing trips and harvests.

In the Nyanga region, the Balumbo carved small figures from 8 to 12 centimeters maximum. They were usually female representations (see Cat. Nos. 24-26)¹⁴, made to protect their holders from all witchcraft machinations to which they might fall victim.

The style of these objects presents certain morphological constants: extremely brilliant patina (first manufactured, then by intensive use), rough carving of the body (except for the always carefully represented scarification), but very elaborate carving of the face and coiffure: coffee-bean eyes with arching eyelid folds, wide short nose, puckered lips, protruding forehead and

ears, bivalve shell coiffure (often a full single shell pulled back to form a hook).

These small objects are certainly among the most beautiful and elegant of the art from Central Africa, where miniature sculpture is common (Tsogho, Sango, Bembe and Pende, et al). As early as the 18th century, a missionary observed: “Most of them [people of Loango] wear a small idol hung at their side. It is for the ordinary person, a human figure, roughly worked in wood or ivory...”¹⁵

Miniature and large figures from the region south of the Ogowe are generally attributed to the Bapunu and Balumbo. But to these two peoples it is necessary to add the Bavungu, Bavarama, and the Ngove of the coastal zone. Nearly all produce female figures representing fecundity. (The *Okuyi* mask type is also reputed to be female.)

Punu and Lumbo figures, although considered elements of the ancestor cult as among the Mitsogho and Masango, are ancestor-mothers in a matrilinear context. In contrast to masks, these small figures are often patinated by use, like utilitarian objects. Among the latter are diverse objects such as blacksmith bellows, stools, eating and serving plates, canes, flywhisks, and architectural elements. All of the people of southern and central Gabon have a pronounced aesthetic sense in this regard.

Although living in a difficult environment, in close contact with nature, preoccupied with

13. *Ibid*, p. 33.

14. There are also representations of musicians, particularly drummers.

15. J. Cuvelier 1953.

material subsistence and spiritual survival, the villager does not denigrate art which may seem gratuitous and without direct connection to the powers of the beyond. The motifs are diverse — woman, maternity, musician, animals — and the form of these objects, especially spoons (Cat. No. 21) or stools, demonstrates the attention given to the beauty of the object, its volumetric balance, geometric perfection, and surface finish. The sculptor's

mastery of wood is fully expressed in this way.

PEOPLES OF CENTRAL GABON

The mountainous region of central Gabon, the Upper Ngounie, and Lolo Valley (1020 meters at its highest point) is streaked with water currents

43. *Lagoon north of the Loango* (engraving from F. Rätzl 1887).





and covered entirely by the great equatorial forest. The climate is cooler than in the coastal zone with fogs in the dry season.

It is the region of a group of peoples from the east, the Okande group, comprised of the Mitsogho, Masango, Okande proper and Bavuvi. This group has a strong relationship with the Aduma and the Bawandji (see p. 93).

All the oral traditions of these peoples tell of an early migration begun in the Upper Ogowe and a savanna region called *Motove*. The Pygmies were there before them, as throughout Gabon. The displacement caused fractionalization of the original group into several sub-groups. Some went toward the Middle Ngounie River near Mouila, others to the upper valleys toward Mimongo, and still others more toward the south, and are now mixed with the Masango. The Mitsogho and Masango are related by the fact that they both assiduously practice *Bwiti*, the initiation cult which has gradually spread to the Fang of the estuary region during the past half-century.

The Masango are related to the Eshira of the Lower Ngounie and to the Bavarama, Bapunu, Balumbo and Bavungu. The Okande of the Middle Ogowe, famous for their ability to navigate the river rapids, are today quite few in number. They are said to be relatives of the Mpongwe of the Estuary. It was among them and the Aduma of the Ogowe Loop that Brazza saw for the first time reliquary figures, probably in the Ondumbo and Sango (*Mbumba*) style.

44. Dignitary of the Tsogho Bwiti cult (photo: Philippe Guimiot).

The Aduma are probably of Kota origin. Oral traditions about their origins mention the Mount Ngouadi region in the Ivindo Basin, a zone of congregation and diffusion of several Kota ethnic groups. They also practiced the cult of the dead and preservation of ancestor relics. Their sculpture, masks and funerary figures, is characterized by a narrow face with a visor-like forehead.

The Bawandji and Aduma of Kota culture (Ngoy, Mukulu, Lisimbu, Mungala, and Njobi associations) are in contact with the Tsogho-Sango group and thus with the Punu and Lumbo styles of the coastal zone. In this regard, stylistic integration in their figures is significant (i.e., three-dimensional volumes and sheet metal application).

The Bavuvi of the Offoue, relatives of the Masango, are an intermediate group between the groups of the coast and central Gabon on one hand and the Kota groups on the other. Their spare, stylized and decorative style is also highly symbolic as seen in their masks, house elements, and doors.

Having been in contact for centuries, these groups exchanged many cultural elements. This renders a geographical picture of sculpture styles which, like language, is minutely indicative of a complex social mentality.

45. These masks are still worn among the Bavuvi, as shown on this photograph from 1977. They are characterized by a flat face, with the features indicated in very faint relief (see p. 103; photo: Pierre Amrouche).



FIGURATIVE SCULPTURE OF CENTRAL GABON

The Tsogho figurative style is characterized as much by the treatment of the head, and especially the face, as by the carving of the shoulders and arms. Like Fang figurative sculpture, Tsogho art is sculpture in the round with carefully pro-

duced curvature. It is difficult to identify reliably Tsogho and Sango forms since they are closely related and intermingled, occasionally in the same villages.

The Masango are located to the east of the Mitsogho in the middle valley of the Offoue toward Koulamoutou. They are extremely prolific sculptors. Being fervently involved in traditional *Bwiti*, they carve masks, architectural elements of the

46. *Sculptures gracing the interior of a Tsogho temple, an ebandza house (photo: Louis Perrois).*



sacred temples, housedoors, ancestor figures, etc. Their culture is very similar to that of the Mitsogho and Bavuvi.

Among the Mitsogho and Masango of the Upper Ngounie of central Gabon, *Bwiti*, the male initiation society is the center of social and religious life. The cult house, *ebandza*, serves not only *Bwiti* rituals but also those of other associations such as *Kono*, *Ya-Mwei* and *Ombudi*. The *ebandza* symbolizes man in the cosmos; each of its parts corresponds to a body member or human organ. It is not possible to describe here all the decorative elements which appear in the ritual life of the Mitsogho and Masango. Any object is a pretext for symbolic decoration, from the common banana knife in wood to the most formidable *Mbumba* ancestor figure, guardian of the bones of dead lineage members. Tsogho spirituality is truly evinced by artistic expression in many forms – sculpture, music and oral literature.

MASKS OF SOUTHERN AND CENTRAL GABON

William Fagg has suggested grouping all of the sculpture-producing peoples of southwestern Gabon into a cultural entity which he calls “Eshira-Punu.” Field studies by Sallée, Gollnhofer, Sillans, Perrois, Andersson and Collomb conducted throughout the southern region of the country from the coast to the sources of the



47. Central post of a Tsogho *ebandza* house (photo: Louis Perrois).



Ogowe show, however, that these ethnic groups are very distinct, despite the fact that their sculpture and music styles are related and occasionally clearly intertwined.

In fact, the stylistic heartland of what are usually referred to as “white masks of the Ogowe” is extended because the forms are more or less derived from each other from the lacustral region of Lambarene in the north (Galwa, Enenga, Adjumba, Fang, Apindji, Ivili of Zile Lake) to southern Congo (Balumbo, Bavili of Kwilu, Bapunu, Batsangui). Toward the east in the interior this style is found far into the Ogowe Upper Valley, encompassing the Mitsogho, Masango, Bandjabi, Batsangui, Bavuvi, Aduma and Bawandji as well as the Bawumbu, Mindassa and Mindumu of the Kota groups.

Among the Bavili, the polychroming of the masks is interesting from our point of view in that it recalls certain very old Punu/Lumbo masks polychromed in the same way (British Museum, 1904; Historisches Museum, Bern, 1898).

The white color of *Okuyi* masks, evident on the majority of extant examples, is perhaps not as uniform as it at first seems. This is possibly the result of a stylistic evolution of which Vili masks

48. “Bogyman having fun on the 14th of July in Loango”. This is the caption of an old postcard from the beginning of the century showing a masked Vili dancer (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Caen).

49. Bapunu dancer wearing an Okuyi mask (photo: M. Huet, Ag. Hoa-Qui).





(see Pl. 22, p. 125) would have been one of the avatars at the crossroads of cultures of the forest of central Gabon and the Congolese savanna.

The seven *badunga* masks of Bwali, of which no vestige remains today, incarnated the spirits of seven kings who “died on the throne.” F. Hagenbucher uncovered, during his field research among the Bavili, information on four of these masks:

- *Mavala:na:ga*: This Janus-faced mask represented the king and his nephew;
- *Nvuduku sa:la*;
- *Tchitomi i mbata*: “The priest and the slap.” This expression refers to the spiritual solidarity of Vili priests; an insult or slap inflicted upon one of them is resented by all;
- *Ntumbu nsoni*: Symbol of power. Young shoots of this grass wound even elephants.

Returning to the subject of “white masks of the Ogowe,” it should first be said that it is difficult to establish a precise ethnic classification based on a study of forms (e.g., coiffure, face, scarification, color, etc.). These minor characteristics cannot be identified with specific ethnic groups due to the complexity of stylistic and cultural data.

50. *Galwa Okukwe mask* (see p. 99) (Cat. No. 40).

51. The man, who here wears an Okukwe type mask, is described by the author of this photograph (Reverend Trilles, 1903) as a “Ngil sorcerer”. Ngil is a Fang society which spread along the Ogowe in the Lambarene region. To the west are the Galwa who made this mask (Musée d’Ethnographie, Neuchâtel).

It is possible, nevertheless, to determine the provenance of a few large sets of objects which are stylistic variations of a unique type of mask, a privileged ritual instrument of the *Okuyi* or *Mukuyi* society.

These masks were for a long time attributed to the Mpongwe of the Gabon Estuary because of their vaguely Asian appearance. More precise research has shown that in fact none of these masks could be of Mpongwe origin because their only masks are made for *Okukwe*, a society of judicial character wide-spread among the Myene from Libreville to Port Gentil and Lambarene. The principal initiation society of the Mpongwe, *Indo*, was reserved for men while women participated in another association called *Ndjembe*. *Okukwe* masks are a special form of “white mask”, morphologically different from Punu and Lumbo masks. More flat and oval, they exhibit clearly recognizable painted decoration of black inverted triangles, one on the forehead, the other on the lower part of the face (among the Galwa, see fig. 50). A. Walker describes several types of *Okukwe* masks: *Ndomba*, *Okukwe* with a large face; *Ekungula*, *Okukwe* with the thunderous voice from the Glass district in Libreville; *Migembo*, multicolored *Okukwe* also from Glass; *Ngadina-digala*, “the thunderbolt which strikes in the heart of the village” from central Libreville; *Tsenge-gebamba*, “the land of the White” *Okukwe* of Louis village, etc.



52. *Okukwe* dancers, Middle Ogowe (Centre d'Information Missionnaire, Paris).



The visit of the mask to the village was always an event if not dramatic then at least socially imposing in the sense that the masked man, an *Okukwe* initiate, knew all the village rumors and disclosed them publicly to the great embarrassment of the interested parties who hurried to carry him offerings. This is also a function of *Ngil* and *Mwiri* (fig. 51).

One can ultimately refer to my book, *Arts du Gabon* (1979), for details of studies made on "white masks" by L. Frobenius (1898), Hall (1927), Peissi (1951), Lavachery (1954), D. Paulme (1956), Himmelheber (1960) and W. Fagg (1965).

In the southern and southcentral regions of Gabon (Ngounie and Nyanga Valleys) funeral ceremonies were animated by masks called *Okuyi*, *Mukuyi* or *Mukudji*, according to the place. These masks consisting of a kaolin whitened face of soft wood are commemorative portraits of male and female ancestors. Executing impressive acrobatic feats between houses of the village, the dancer exhibited himself on tall stilts with the mask over his face and his body concealed under a wrapped cloth of woven raffia or cotton (fig. 49 and 53). Although he could be seen by everyone, women and children preferred to stay hidden from him. Men pretended to be afraid of the *Okuyi*, gesticulated while threatening and chasing it, throwing rocks and pieces of wood.

53. Punu dancer on stilts wearing an *Okuyi* mask (photo: M. Huet, Ag. Hoa-Qui).

The oldest known *Okuyi* mask is in the Oxford Museum (see fig. 54). It was collected from the Ivili of Zile Lake (Lambarene) in 1867 by Bruce Walker, an English traveller and merchant, father of Reverend André Raponda Walker, the illustrious and erudite Gabonese nonagenarian, now deceased. The mask was acquired in 1894 by Pitt Rivers and published by Frobenius in 1898. It is a sober carving, highly polished with a stylized oval face. It has large, highly arched eye sockets, split coffeebean eyes with a tiny almond-shaped opening, puckered lips, naturalistic ears, and typical visor-like coiffure projecting forward from the forehead. The mask is colored with whitish kaolin on the cheeks and eye sockets and red ochre on the forehead and coiffure.



These visor masks are among the oldest, along with handle masks (carrying handle fitted to the bottom of the face) and glued hair masks (truncated “mortar” coiffure, covered entirely with glued hair). All are rare and quite beautifully carved.

The most prevalent *Okuyi* masks, some of which are also very old, are those with a “bivalve shell coiffure” (fig. 55). From a morphological standpoint, the following “shell coiffure” mask types can be distinguished:

- high and narrow central shell



54. *Okuyi mask collected in 1867 by Bruce Walker (see p. 100) (drawing: Domenico Terrana, from a photograph of the work in the Pitt-Rivers Collection in Oxford).*

55. *Typical Okuyi mask acquired by Josef Mueller between 1935 and 1940 (photo: Pierre-Alain Ferrazzini, Cat. No. 41).*



- wide but streamlined central shell
- central shell with lateral braids (“fishscale” scarification on the forehead and temples)
- double or multiple central shells
- doubly narrow headdress
- shells and linear cheek and/or forehead scarifications
- black.

Some of the masks in Punu/Lumbo style but polychromed (black, white, red) form a transition between the Duma and Ndjabi styles of the Ogowe-Lolo and Upper Ogowe. In addition to “white masks,” the Masango have polychromed masks called *Mvudi* or *Bodi*. They are found throughout the Upper Ogowe, as far as the plateaus east of Franceville, among the Bateke where they are used after circumcision in the initiation ceremonies. This type of mask is characterized by a forehead protruding over a rectilinear face, an enormous, schematically carved nose, and a tiny mouth. The stylized expressionism is directed only at the overall effect of the dressed mask when the face is barely visible under the mass of raffia. In contrast to the minutely detailed figurative sculpture of the coast, Sango art is abstract and decorative (Cat. No. 46).

Comparison of a large number of masks from southern and central Gabon reveals stylistic



56. *Mvudi mask of the Aduma and Bandjabi (photo: Louis Perrois).*

57. *Mowe (death) mask of the Mitsogho (photo: Louis Perrois).*

constants, particularly the white color of the face and split coffeebean eyes. Also noticeable is a stylistic gradation, as it were, involving an unfolding of mask volumes, from the coast where convex, curved forms arise out of three-dimensional sculpture, up to the mouth of the Ogowe near Lastoursville and Moanda where masks become completely flat and correspond to a work in bas-relief. With respect to this point one should remember that the current of Punu/Lumbo civilization comes from the Loango Kingdom, from the Bavili specifically, and that the idealized naturalism of their masks developed from the well-known Kongo carving style. Contact with the Eshira-Mitsogho-Masango and then the Bandjabi-Bakota transformed Punu/Lumbo masks from a highly naturalistic mask-portrait to an extremely abstract mask-symbol.

In central Gabon the Mitsogho produce many types of masks, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic (e.g., gorilla, mandrill, chimpanzee, bat, buffalo, and diverse birds), for the rituals that they still practice today, particularly *Bwiti*, *Ya-Mwei*, and *Kono* (see fig. 57, p. 102).

The variety of Tsogho forms strongly contrasts with the stylistic homogeneity of mask styles of the Eshira-Punu-Lumbo and even Myene area.

Concerning Bavuvi masks P. Sallée states in his 1975 article on Tsogho masks:

“To the east, on one hand, the Bavuvi and Masango produce masks of which the third dimension is flattened to create a more symbolic conception wherein the characteristics of the

face tend to become pure signs; these are nearly planar faces. Two arches joined by a triangular appendage (resembling a stylized fleur-de-lis or a backward omega sign) represent the eyebrow line and the nose. This motif is occasionally taken to be an initiation sign or decorative element (*Mwiri* or *Ya-Mwei* emblem).”

Vuvi sculpture (also Pubi or Puvi) is the stylistic opposite of Punu/Lumbo. Their completely graphic sculpture, the details of which are no more than signs in bas-relief, anticipates the abstraction of the sculpture of the Obamba and Bakota (see fig. 45).

Most Vuvi masks have similar forms. Each mask probably had its own name and personality which the chant of the mask could delineate. This is described by P. Sallée in *Art et Artisanat tsogho*:

“The beginning of the chant is sung by the leader of the game who specifies the personality of the *moghondzi* (ghost) after the drums have requested the attention of the participants returning and on the verge of appearing in the uncertain reddish light of the resinous torches lining the night. Music and oral literature give life and meaning to these apparitions and occasionally also lend a supernatural voice¹⁶.”

16. P. Sallée 1965.

plates
of chapter II

Plate 13

Balumbo/Bavili. Female figure with ventral reliquary (*nkhosi*).
Height: 36 cm. See Cat. No. 23, p. 198.

Illustration

Bavili sculpture, which spread northwards, as far as southwestern Gabon, is sometimes very similar to that of the peoples who belonged to the Kongo kingdom, like the Mayombe. The latter produced the nail fetish shown below (Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren). It may be compared with the Vili fetish opposite.



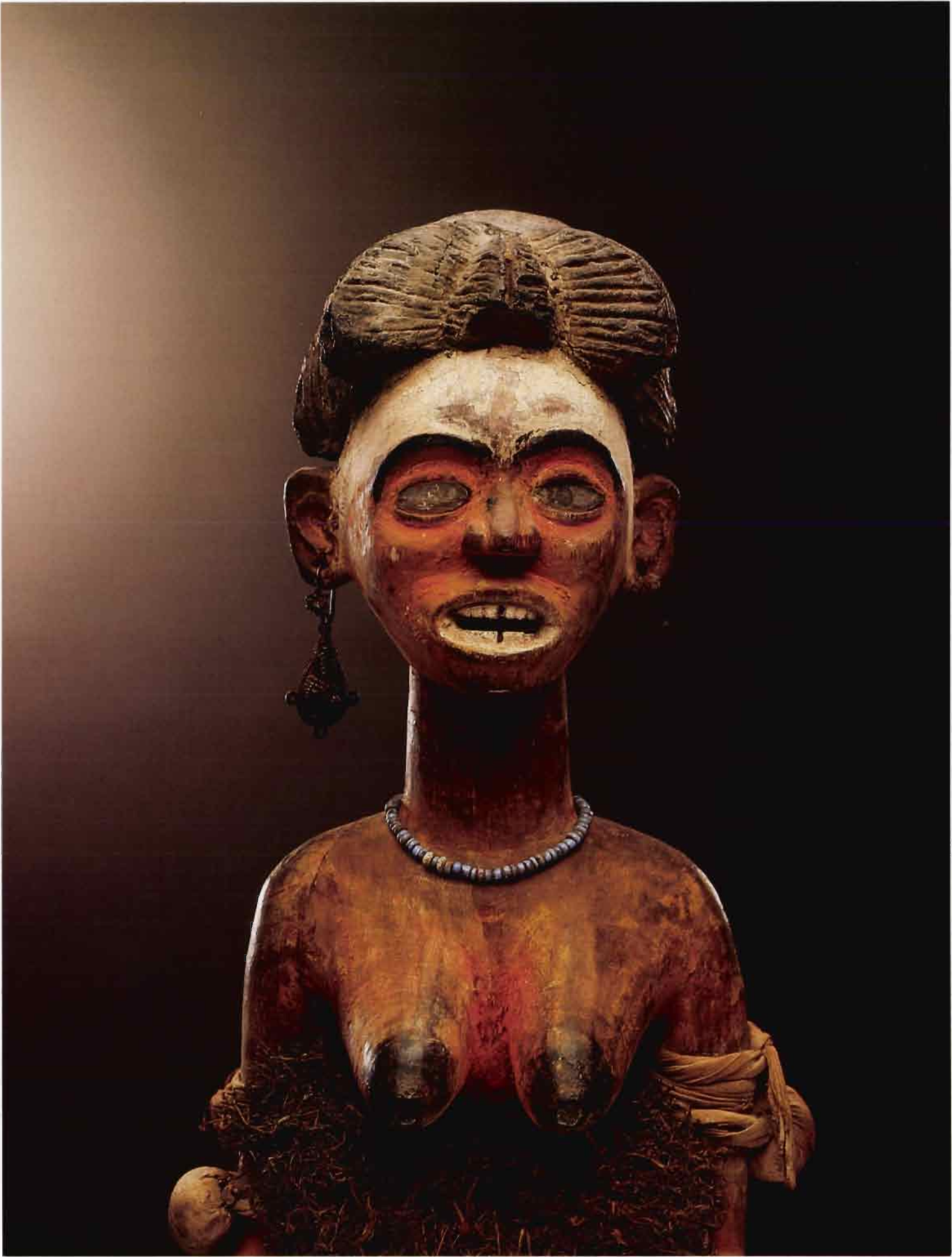


Plate 14

Bapunu/Balumbo. Female figure ("mother and child").
Height: 35.5 cm. See Cat. No. 24, p. 198.

Illustration

Full view of the figure represented on the opposite page.



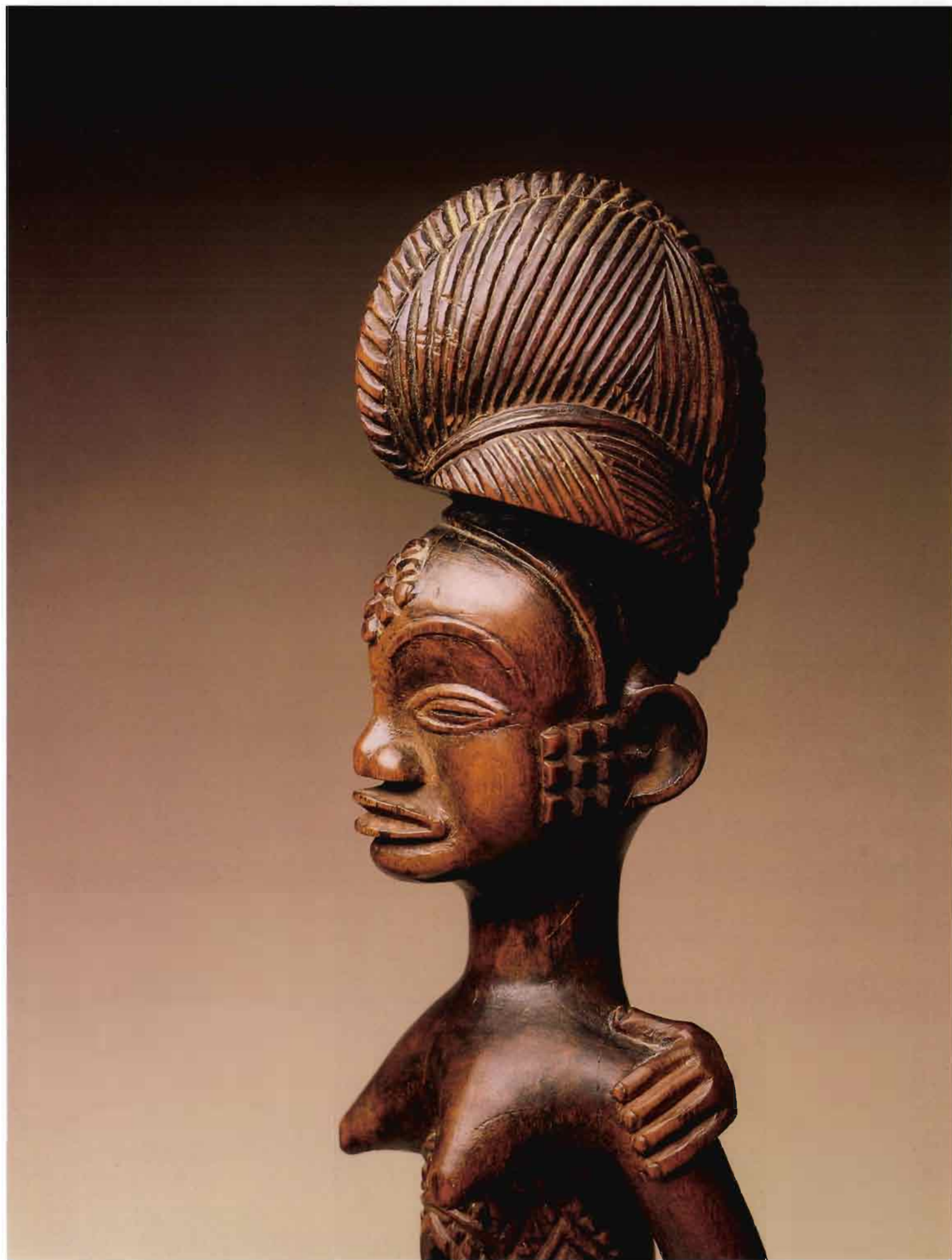


Plate 15

Bapunu/Balumbo. Pendant.

Height: 9 cm. See Cat. No. 25, p. 199.

Illustration

Woman carrying a basket on her back with a liana band across the top of her head, in 1954 in a Pygmy village near Kribi (Cameroon) (photo: Furst, Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva).





Plate 16

Eshira/Bapunu. Bellows.

Height: 62 cm. See Cat. No. 28, p. 200.

Illustration

Detail of the upper part of the bellows reproduced opposite
(see fig. 21, p. 28).



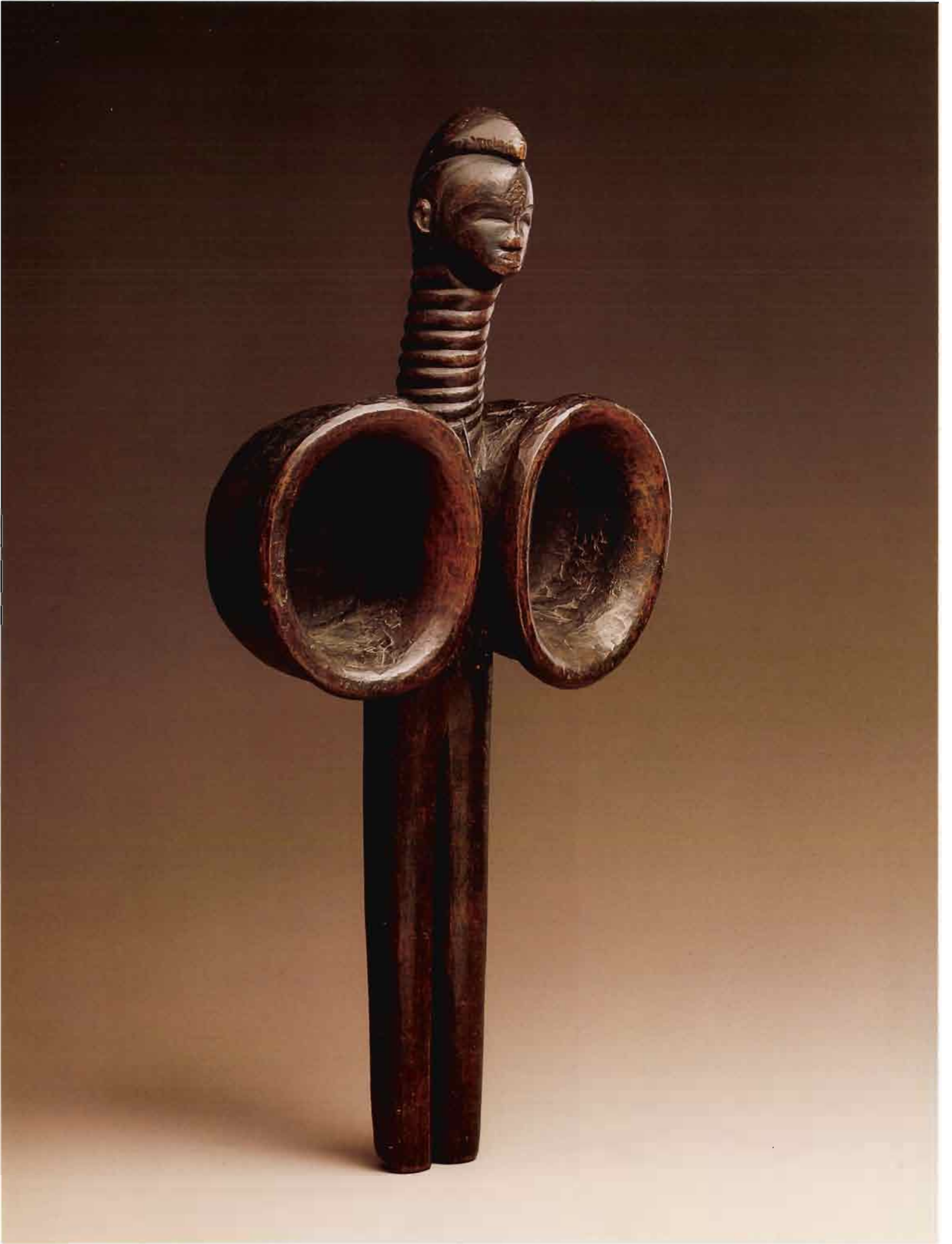


Plate 17

Mitsogho. Reliquary head (*Mbumba Bwiti*).
Height: 30.8 cm. See Cat. No. 29, p. 201.

Illustration

This Sango reliquary figure, with its basket of bones, is in the Libreville Museum. The metal application on the forehead prefigures the more eastern styles of the Mindumu and the Obamba.





Plate 18

Mitsogho. Reliquary head (*Mbumba Bwiti*).
Height: 36.8 cm. See Cat. No. 30, p. 201.

Illustration

View of the front part of the Tsogho reliquary head
reproduced opposite with its typical hairstyle.





Plate 19

Mitsogho. Ancestor figure (*gheonga*).
Height: 53.4 cm. See Cat. No. 31, p. 202.

Illustration

This post in a house of the Tsogho cult proves the coherence
of this ethnic group's style, in comparison with the figure opposite
(photo: Pierre Sallée).



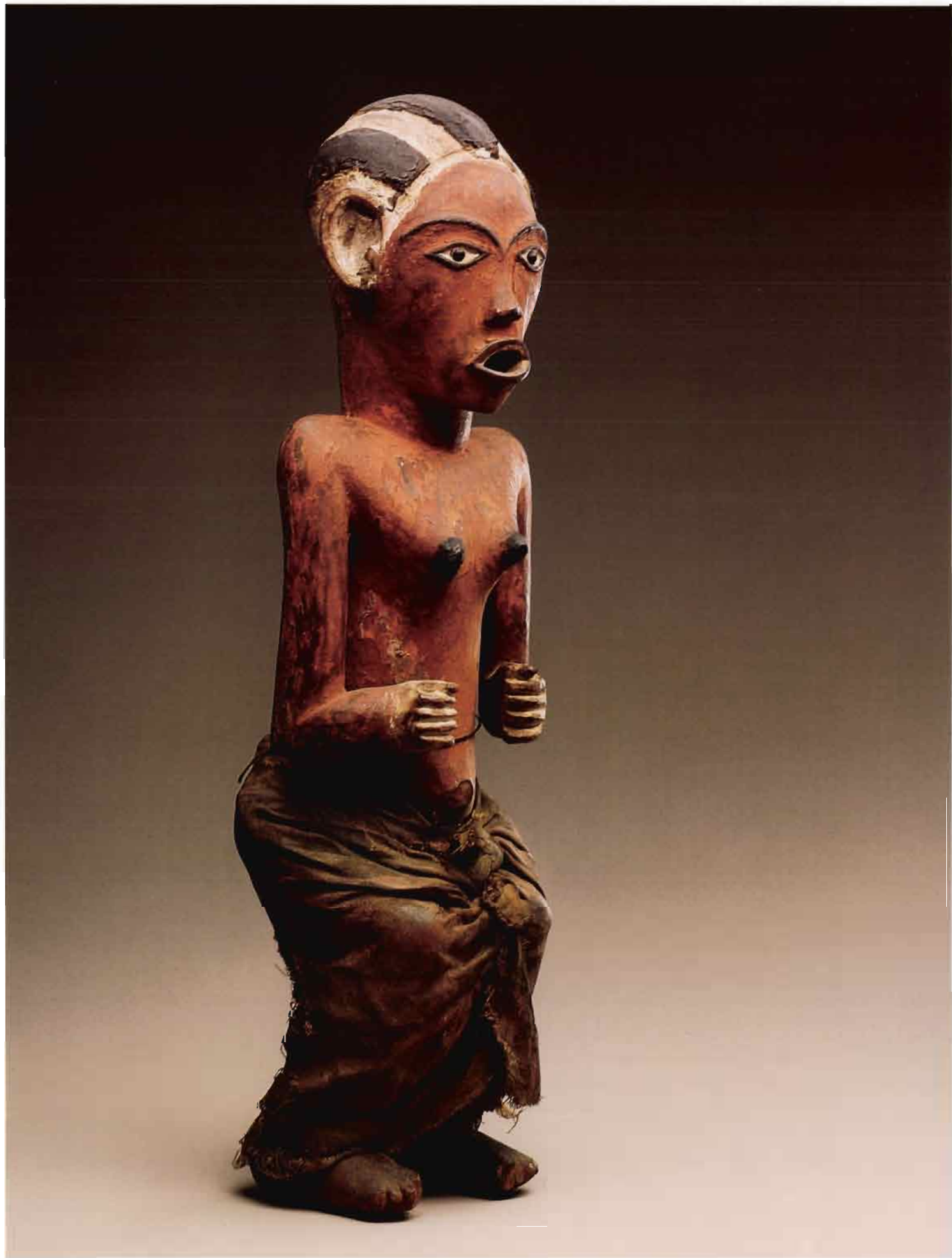


Plate 20

Masango. Complete reliquary (*Mbumba Bwiti*).
Height (sculpture): 28.5 cm. See Cat. No. 36, p. 204.

Illustration

This extraordinary photograph, taken by Mgr. Augouard at the beginning of the century, depicts a Sango *nganga* (healer) with various reliquaries. The bones are either contained in boxes made of bark or in baskets covered with strips of hide (missing from the example shown opposite).





Plate 21

Masango. Complete reliquary (*Mbumba Bwiti*).
Height (sculpture): 30 cm. See Cat. No. 37, p. 204.

Illustration

Full view of the reliquary shown opposite.





Plate 22

Bavili. Dance mask.

Height: 28 cm. See Cat. No. 39, p. 205.

Illustration

Front view of the mask reproduced opposite.



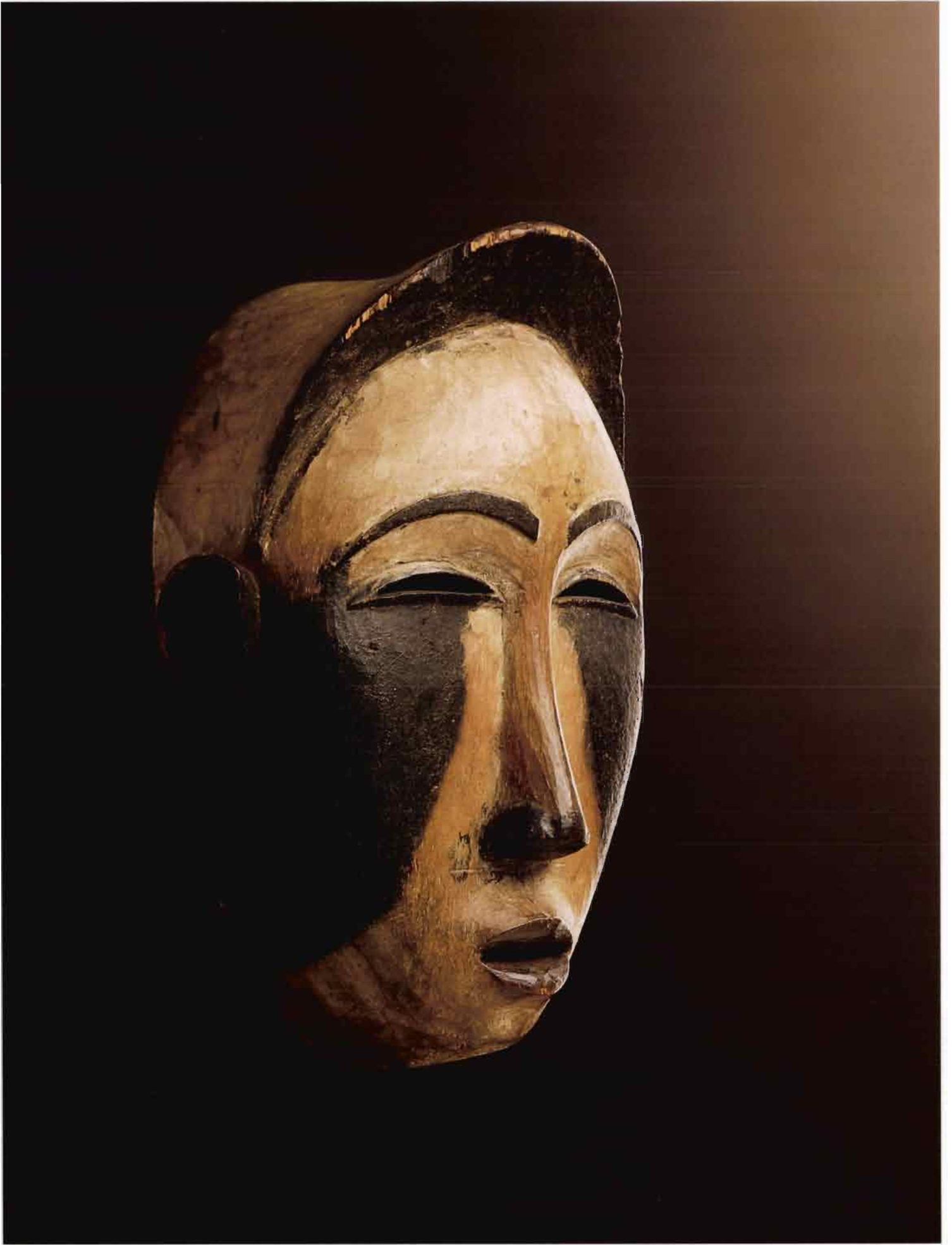


Plate 23

Bapunu/Balumbo. Dance mask (*Okuyi*).
Height: 28 cm. See Cat. No. 41, p. 206.

Illustration

The wearers of the white masks of the Ngounie perform on stilts,
thus lending an acrobatic character to the dance
(photo: M. Huet, Ag. Hoa-Qui). See also fig. 53, p. 100.





Plate 24

Batsangui (?). Dance mask (*Okuyi*).
Height: 29 cm. See Cat. No. 42, p. 207.

Illustration

White masks with traces of scarification on the cheeks belong to the Batsangui, a neighboring ethnic group of the Bapunu.

The example below (Cat. No. 43) is especially typical of the Tsangui style, as well as the mask shown in the opposite plate.



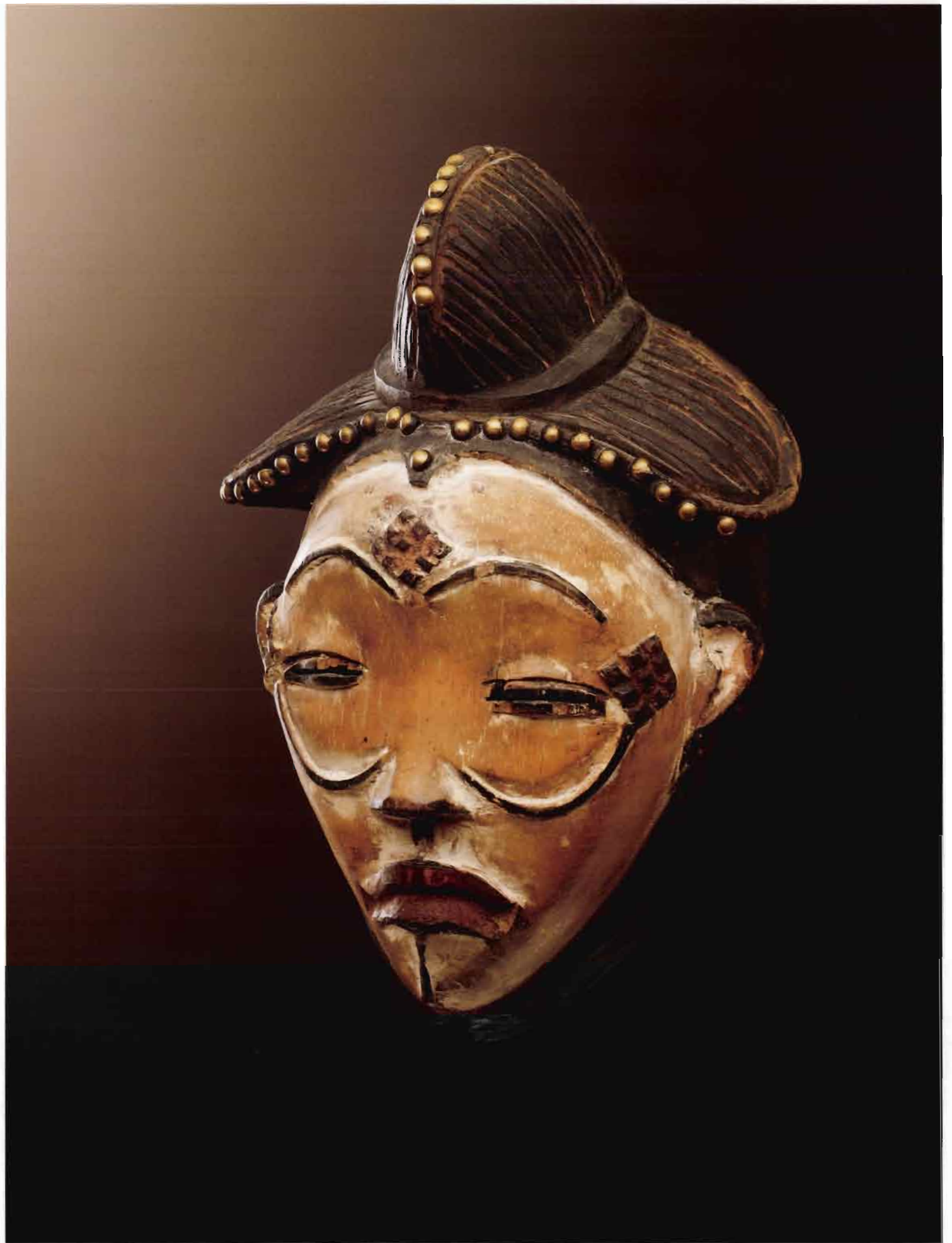


Plate 25

Bavuvi. Dance mask.

Height: 34 cm. See Cat. No. 45, p. 208.

Illustration

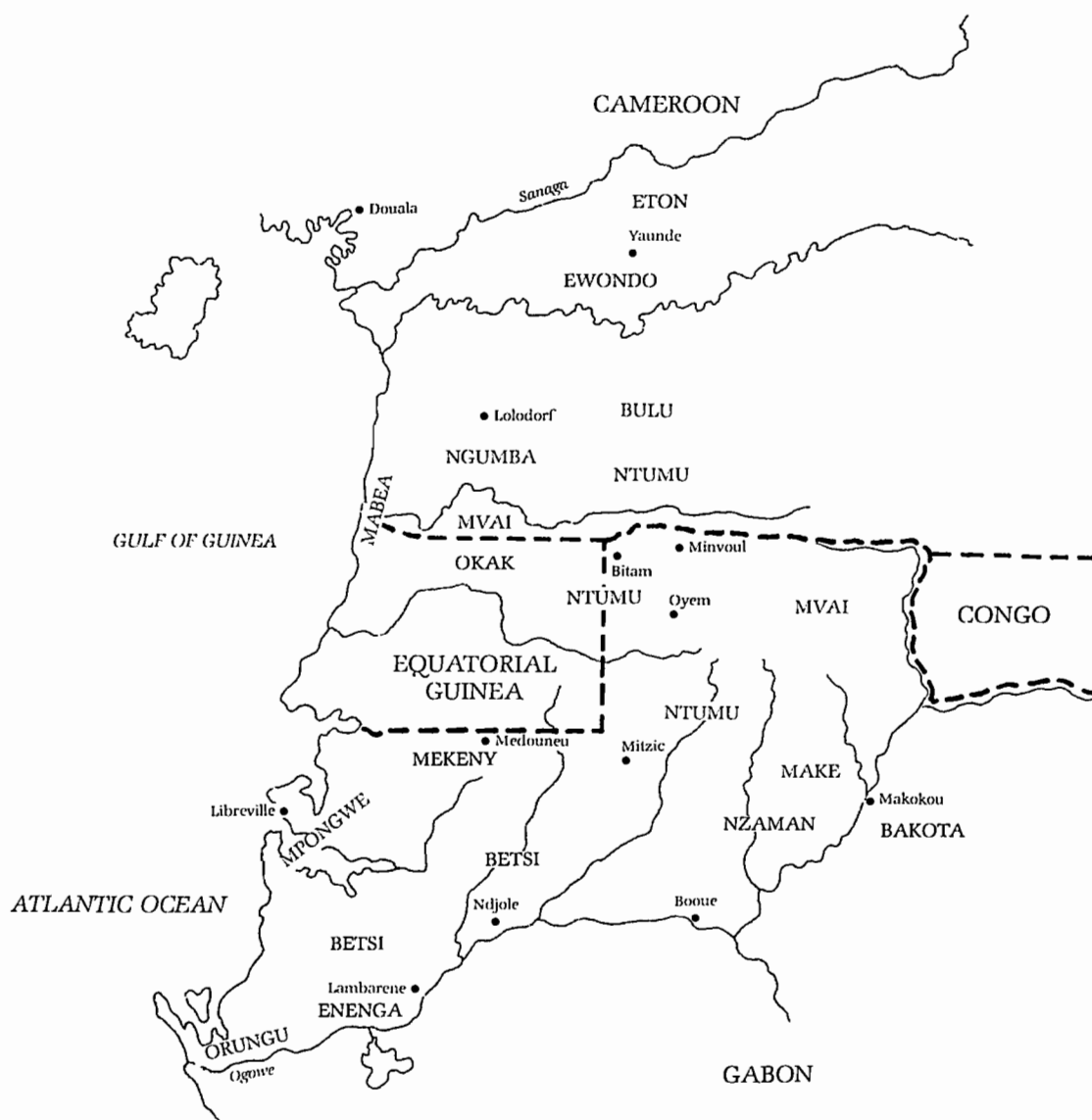
The more inland one goes the less volumetric the white masks become, evolving into a striking graphic effect.

The masks of the Bavuvi have raised eyebrows, a tiny nose, three slits for the eyes and the mouth set against a completely flat face (photo: Pierre Amrouche).





chapter three:
northern gabon,
equatorial guinea and southern cameroon



THE FANG PEOPLES

The Fang, famous in the 19th century for their determination if not their actual aggression toward other peoples of the region and their reserve toward Europeans, migrated southwest in the direction of the ocean, across the forests of southern Cameroon and northern Gabon. Explorers such as Reverend Trilles and Captain Roche (1901), telling of their expeditions in

“Pahouin” country, noted the numerous and well-fortified Fang villages in Rio Muni and the Woleu-Ntem (modern name of northern Gabon region). One evening at a stopping place, recalls Reverend Trilles, the house that was provided for the Whites was furnished in the back with a sort of shelf holding a large sewn bark box and a

58. Fang village in the middle Ogowe region with two rows of houses on each side of the “palaver house” (engraving from Tour du Monde, 1878.2, p. 413).





couple of “crudely fashioned” wooden figures. No doubt they had been placed in a house of the lineage chief, furnishing the *Byeri* corner.

The Fang (and Fang styles) extend from the Sanaga River to the Cameroon River in the north and to the Ogowe River in Gabon in the south. The western and eastern boundaries are respectively formed by the Atlantic Ocean and the Ivindo River, going towards the Congo. They are divided into three large, principal groups which are in the north, the Beti (primarily Eton and Ewondo in the Yaunde region); in the center, the Bulu (in southern Cameroon); in the south from the coast of rio Muni to the Ivindo, the Fang proper who inhabit the artistic center as one understands it.

The Beti and the Bulu, with no intention of minimizing their aptitude or simply their taste for sculpture, have left only minor works compared to the extraordinary products of the Southern Fang: i.e., Rio Muni, southern Cameroon, and northern Gabon. Some “pahouinized” peoples, culturally and linguistically assimilated by the Fang group, have been applauded for being gifted in this regard, for example, the Ngumba and Mabea on the Cameroon coast.

The Fang of Gabon and Equatorial Guinea are divided into a certain number of peoples or clans of which the principal ones are: the Ntumu of southern Cameroon and the Woleu-Ntem; the Okak in Equatorial Guinea; the Betsi, the closest

59. Fang woman (photo: H. Huet, Ag. Hoa-Qui).

to Libreville and the Ogowe; and lastly, the Nzaman in the southeast near the Ivindo (see map p. 134). Given the dispersion caused by small groups walking through the dense forest, it is certain that on the land itself these divisions were not as clear as the boundaries of a kingdom, for example. The tribal entities interpenetrated widely in their continual movement toward the ocean. Yet, region for region, these ethnic poles did exist and possess particular characteristics (for example, the development of the rituals of *So*, *Melan* and *Byeri*).

The differences in Fang peoples that we recognize today appear to be logical reconstructions established by systematically comparing many types of data (early recitations, inquiries, observations, objects, photos, etc.).

This rather specific ethnological process based on the observation of objects leads to Man himself and to a presentation of Fang statuary styles of which only the most essential will be dealt with here¹⁷.

FANG FIGURATIVE SCULPTURE

Sculpture associated with the ancestor cult, essentially anthropomorphic, is not the only sculptural expression of the Fang who, especially in southern Cameroon, have produced animal forms in addition to masks destined for certain



17. L. Perrois 1979.

60. Fang warrior of the Betsi group of the beginning of the century (Coppier Album, Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva).

initiation rituals. But, the abundance and often formal perfection of the figures of the *Byeri* cult throughout Pahouin country have established this style as one of the most remarkable in African art history.

Dating from the end of the 19th century, the period of colonial penetration of the Gulf of Guinea hinterlands (i.e., southern Cameroon, Rio Muni, Gabon), explorers noticed the Fang's taste

for sculpture and body adornment. The few, rare photographs taken between 1900 and 1910 show fierce warriors with profuse and intricate scarification, copper necklaces, and shell-shaped or crested helmet headdresses embellished with braids or small, delicate chains (fig. 60 and 61). And, women were not to be outdone. They wore

61. Fang warriors wearing headdresses made of mother-of-pearl buttons, identical to those reproduced in Cat. Nos. 55 and 56 (Centre d'information missionnaire, Paris).



one or two extremely heavy and finely chiseled necklaces, copper and ivory bracelets, leg guards, and equally complicated, highly decorated coiffures (e.g., cowries shells, trade buttons, feathers).

Fang figurative sculpture is divided into two principal styles, the northern Fang style, which has a “longiform” (long form) tendency, and the style of the southern Fang, which has a “breviform” (short form) tendency. The word “tendency” is used because apparently there are no strict stylistic norms in a social environment which is rather fluid because it is peripatetic. The principal sub-styles determined by ethnomorphological analysis are:

Northern Fang style

Ngumba sub-style (southern Cameroon);

Mabea sub-style (coastal southern Cameroon);

Ntumu sub-style (extreme south of Cameroon, northeastern Equatorial Guinea, northern Gabon);

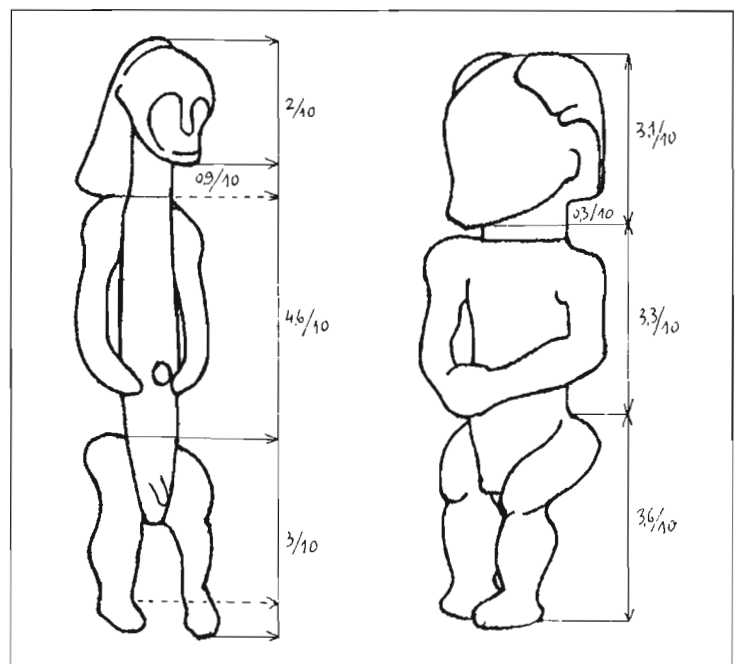
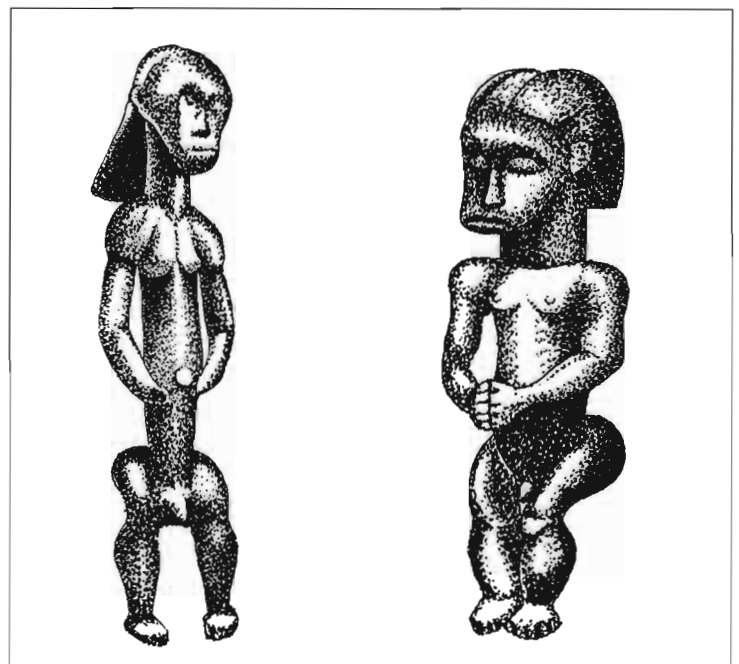
Southern Fang style

Sub-style of Betsi heads (Okano River Valley);

Nzaman-Betsi sub-style (river valleys of the Okano, Ogowe and Abanga);

62. Fang figures: “longiform” on the left, “breviform” on the right (drawing: Domenico Terrana).

63. Diagram showing the relative proportion of morphological elements (drawing: Louis Perrois).





Mvai sub-style, a local variation of the preceding sub-style (Ntem River Valley);

Okak sub-style (Equatorial Guinea).

The main characteristics of the northern styles are “hyperlong form” and “long form” design. They have a thin, tall trunk, rather slender members well detached from the body, small or medium head, detailed carving as in all Fang styles, heart-shaped face under a full forehead, protruding mouth with a receding chin, and pulled back coiffure of braids and a centrally crested helmet. Moreover, there is a noticeable tendency toward the use of plates of copper, brass, and iron as decorative elements, either on the shoulders and chest or on the face and coiffure.

A common variation of this generally “hyperlong form” or “long form” style is the Ngumba sub-style of the Lolodorf region in Cameroon. (The Ngumba are the Maka who were culturally assimilated by the Fang.) It is easily recognizable by certain details: the prognathous mouth with displayed teeth, a beard carved in the form of a parallelepiped, the gesture of the hands which hold either a whistle or a medicine horn, the shoulders which are carved as one volume with the chest, and frequent use of metal as a decorative element.

The Mabea sub-style, often minimized in the

Fang group, is more naturalistic. Certain Mabea objects have been known since the end of the 19th century. This is understandable because the Mabea are a coastal people. With light patina and smooth well-finished surfaces, the often tall Mabea figures have curvilinear forms (Pl. 28, p. 161). The male or female figure stands with legs slightly bent, arms stretched out, hands either placed on the upper side of the thighs or folded, and hands holding a medicine horn or magic whistle. This sub-style is comparable to the Bane, Bulu, and Ewondo styles of southern Cameroon which are still poorly understood.

The Ntumu sub-style in the strict sense is at once curvilinear and volumetrically thin. The Ngumba sub-style is more angular and schematic.

Southern Fang style is consistently “short form.” These are figures of more compact, round and powerful volume, giving the impression of robust monumentality, even for the small pieces.

The heads are considered earlier, stylistically speaking, than the figures. It is possible but difficult to establish because at the time of exploration, circa 1900, heads and figures coexisted (see p. 143).

The Nzaman are the eastern branch of the Betsi ethnic mass, the Fang peoples closest to the Ogowe. The Nzaman-Betsi sub-style produces the most “classic” of all Fang figurative sculpture: powerful head dressed in a helmet-wig, arms pressed against the sides, hands in

64. *Fang reliquary boxes containing bones of distinguished ancestors surmounted by wood figures* (photo: Hans Gehne, circa 1914, National Museum of African Art, Washington).

fang styles

- a. Ngumba
- b. Ntumu
- c. Mabea



- d. Betsi
- e. Okak
- f. Mvai



- g. Betsi, Upper Okano
(reliquary heads)



(drawings: Domenico Terrana and Louis Perrois)

front of the chest, short, massive trunk, powerful legs with short thighs and double-sectioned calves, extremely finished, smooth surfaces. The very characteristic heart-shaped face is terminated by a thin mouth where the chin is normally, and metal disks for eyes.

The contrast between northern and southern styles becomes clear through study of large collections of objects. The sculptural solutions are not the same due to the environment producing the sub-style. When the carving changes in structural design by virtue of the freedom of the artist within the framework of stylistic norms, carvers are reminded of these norms by the initiates who judge the work after it is carved. Borrowings are also a factor in understanding differences in style, in terms of form and decoration.

Represented by objects primarily collected in Equatorial Guinea south and west of the Ntumu, the Okak sub-style is more difficult to characterize from a morphological standpoint. It has "short form" proportions, a squat trunk and massive, highly curvilinear legs, triangular face with prognathous mouth (occasionally provided with a geometric beard) under a full protruding forehead.

It should be noted that ritual figures, including those which were very selectively collected, are not all masterpieces. It could also be said that most ritual objects *in situ* are not beautiful and many, frankly, of low quality. Without ignoring aesthetic considerations altogether, it is clear that beauty exists only on a social and religious level

where symbol takes priority over form. African masterpieces are therefore the expression of an ephemeral, lest we say fortuitous, meeting of self-awareness at odds with inspiration directly controlled by the group. Formal beauty immediately recognized is a rare luxury but also a neutral one which adds nothing to the understanding of the function of the object, determined by the relics of which it is both guardian and symbolic effigy.

An exhaustive count of different forms of Fang sculpture, from figures and masks to utilitarian objects, is not possible using the relatively imprecise data of early ethnographic records and the more recent research carried out in a society greatly changed in comparison to the one that produced these magnificent objects.

FANG RELIQUARY HEADS

G. Tessmann¹⁸ thought that *Byeri* reliquary heads antedated the figures, the latter being only an evolution from a preexistent style. J. Fernandez¹⁹ suggests that during their migration, the Fang preferred to transport wooden heads with their relics rather than entire figures which would have appeared concomitantly with the relative sedentarization of the Fang in the 19th century. These viewpoints are not confirmed by the data, however. Although wooden objects are never very old in tropical Africa due to environ-

18. G. Tessmann 1913.

19. R. and J. Fernandez 1974.



mental constraints (especially xylophagous insects and inclement weather), many of the *Byeri* heads as well as the figures were found between 1880 and 1920. It is therefore likely that these two forms, the “head alone” and “man with feet” (bust or entire figure), coexisted. Yet, depending on the region, it is possible that rituals like *Melan* favored figurative sculpture over heads, as the figures better fulfilled the marionette function.

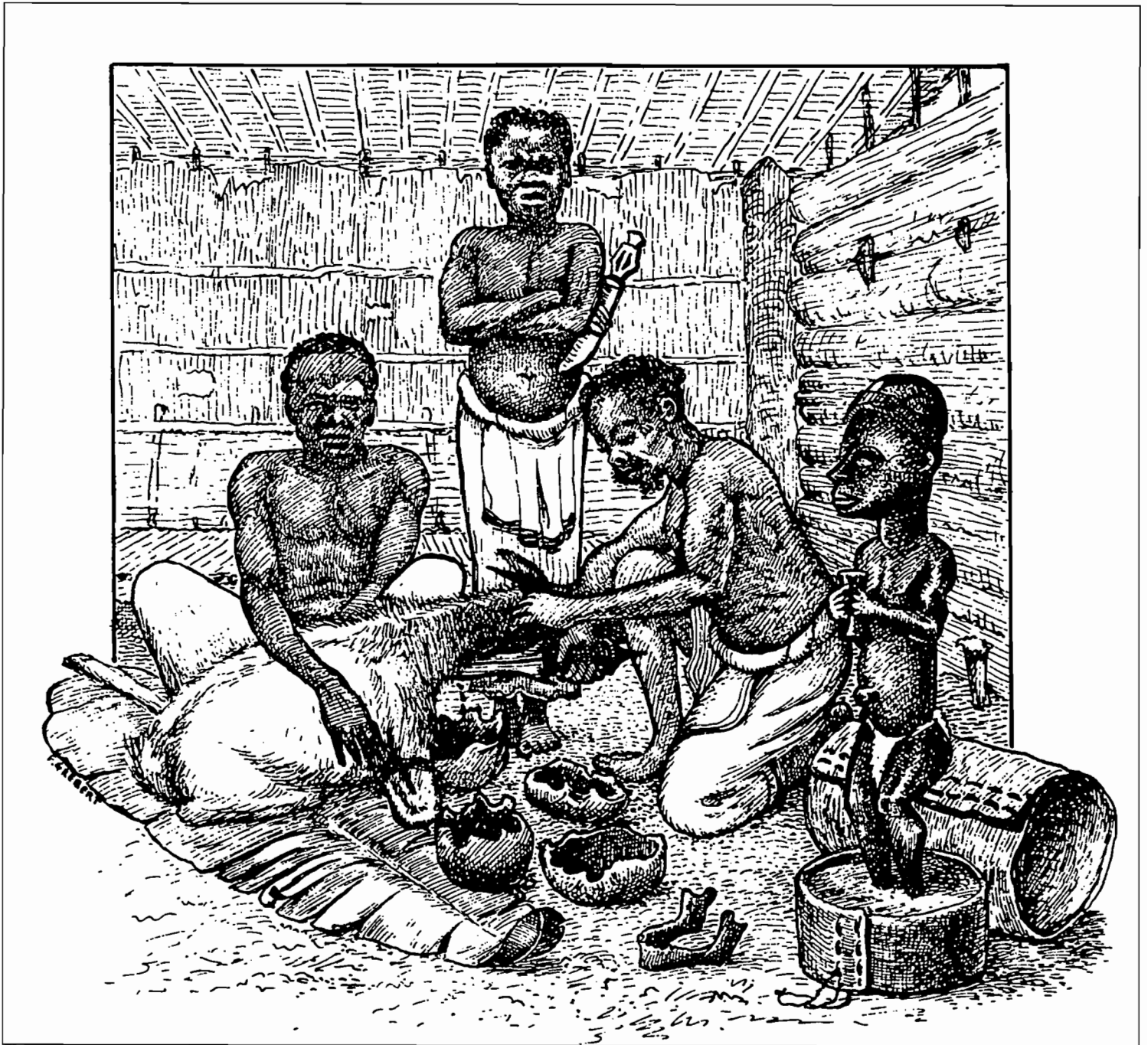
The corpus of documented heads shows considerable homogeneity in contrast to the relative variety of other Fang forms. All told, three groups of heads can be distinguished:

1. Heads dressed in a helmet-wig with *ekuma* braids (the one in Pl. 32, p. 169, is a remarkable example);
2. Heads dressed in a helmet-wig with a sagittal crest, *nlo-o-ngo*;
3. Very rare pieces that have a rather unusual headdress made of hair, delicately braided flat

65. “Bwiti: Nkomi idol, Lake Avanga”. Probably a Fang head from a group mixed with the Nkomi (quotation and drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert, sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).

66. Veneration of ancestral relics among the Fang of southern Cameroon. The skulls are danced around a bunch of sacred plants (photo taken from Tessmann, 1913, vol. II, p. 125).

67. “Blood sacrifice over ancestor skulls (Byeri) taken out of their bark box here ornamented with a figure of Mba Baña, father of the Esibaña tribe, an image representing spirits of the skulls of four generations (...) carried to Talagouga after the conversion of the chief of the tribe in Mengeyñ in 1927” (quotation and drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert, sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).



against the head with a transverse knot arranged as a crown.

Heads with *ekuma* braids are the most numerous. Some of them are clearly of the same region if not by the same hand. My research of 1968 led me to place them in the Okano Valley, a region east of Mitzic, today uninhabited but quite populous before 1930. Generally, heads are the work of southern Fang. Nothing is known of their existence in southern Cameroon.

J. Fernandez thinks that their center of diffusion would be the Ntumu region. Given the extension of the Pahouin area and the relative diversity of ethnic groups from the Sanaga to the Ogowe and the coast to the Ivindo, reflected by a diversity of forms that we have seen in its extreme limits as much in terms of structure as carving and decoration, it seems to me more exact to understand Fang sculpture styles as a plura-polar complex. At least in that way we can approach it from the end of the 19th century by means of records of travellers and ethnographers and for later periods, directly.

A "proto-Fang" style can of course be conceived with fewer diverse variations, but how is it possible to support this hypothesis by the objects when the oldest extant pieces certainly do not date before the beginning of the 19th century? The bipolarity of Fang style is perhaps the result of an evolution abounding in older sub-styles of which unfortunately nothing is known. Being a migrant people, the Fang forgot certain characteristics of their former culture and substi-

tuted for them a mythical vision of the past wherein sculpture disappeared to the advantage of speech.

FANG MASKS

If Fang masks in private and museum collections are listed, it becomes apparent that few are unquestionably old. Fortunately, some are well documented in time and space because they were acquired by ethnographers such as G. Tessmann and G. Zenker. In fact, because of Tessmann, five beautiful white masks are presently preserved in the Ethnographic Museum of Lubeck. There are two *So* masks (polychromed representations of an antelope with long horns), two white masks from Bulu country (Akoafim village on the Aina or Upper Ivindo), and a very curious helmet mask with a vertical appendage with a Janus-face on its extremity. These objects were collected in Fang country between 1905 and 1909, a period when contact with Europeans was still extremely rare. This, however, does not preclude frequent interethnic contacts possibly having led to observable stylistic variation.

The mask from the former Derain Collection (given to Maurice de Vlaminck in 1905 and subsequently sold to Derain) (fig. 68) is equally remarkable in that it seems to represent a specific sub-style characterized by an oval face completely surrounded by a decorative band of triangle motifs. It is not to be excluded, however, that this stylistic vein was ulteriorly exploited to produce dubious pieces.

Another example is a white Janus-faced mask from the former Paul Guillaume Collection carved by the Fang-Betsi of the Abanga region (Essissone group north of Ndjole). It is certainly one of the most attractive of its kind from a sculptural standpoint with its two precisely circular faces, small, close-set, split eyes, and moon-shaped decorative motifs on the cheeks.

Judging by those presently known, Fang masks can be schematically classified in the following way:

- Polychromed caricatural masks;
- White masks called *nlo ngon ntan* or *ngon ntang*;
- Polychromed masks with long horns (*So*);
- *Ngil* ritual masks.

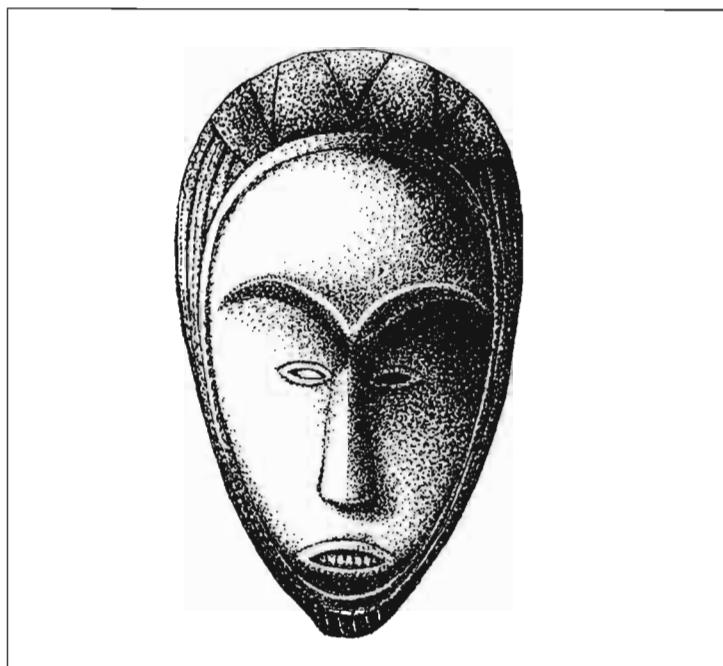
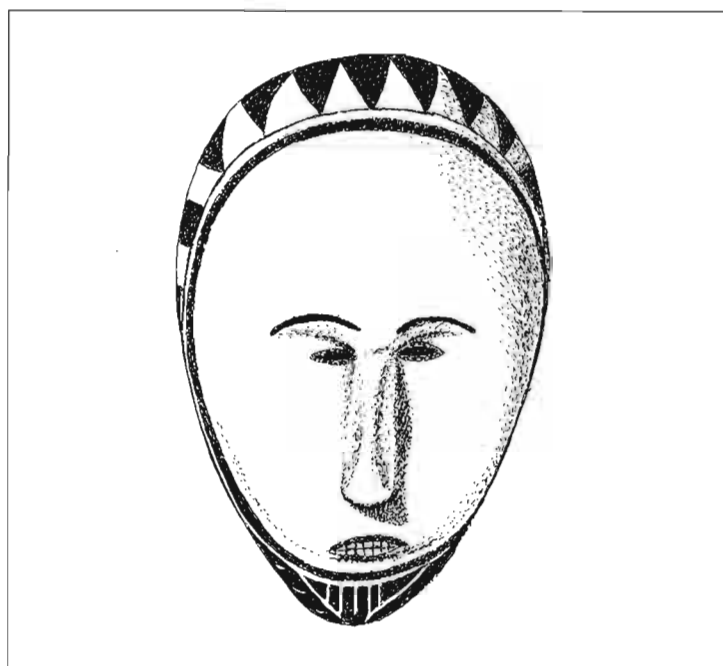
This summary classification will be taken up again in order to clarify it by means of several explanations.

1. Polychromed caricatural masks

Polychromed caricatural masks of wild expres-

68. This celebrated mask, given to M. de Vlaminck in 1905, is now in the Georges Pompidou Art Center (drawing: Domenico Terrana, from a photographed document).

69. Masks identical to the one in fig. 68 are known. The one presently in the Toledo Museum (USA) was mistakenly described in a catalogue for an auction in Paris as being Derain's. The authenticity of these sculptures is often questioned. In any case, if they were made to be sold to Europeans, it was at a very early date and without copying the Vlaminck-Derain example as thought. In 1910 H. Ward (*A Voice from the Congo*) had already reproduced the mask seen here (drawing: Domenico Terrana).





sion with lower eye arches hanging over the face, an enormous nose, an open, protruding mouth, pointed ears, and a sagittally crested helmet. They are called, according to location, *Bikereu*, *Ekekek*, or *Okukwe* (under the influence of the Galwa of the Lambarene Lakes) (See Pl. 34, p. 172, as well as fig. 50). They are characteristic of the Fang of the Woleu-Ntem and the Ogowé and often dated late within this sculptural tradition the origin of which is presently unknown. As ritual masks, they have become embellishments of entertainment.

II. White masks called *nlo ngon ntan* (i.e., "head of the young White girl")

These masks are single or multifaced (two to six). Their stylistic variations should definitely be considered schools of sculpture.

This mask type is probably the prototype for helmet masks with several faces whitened with kaolin (two, four, five, and occasionally even six faces). They appeared in Gabon between 1920 (?) and 1930 and are still used for a dance of rejoicing called *Ngontang*. A. Panyella, the Spanish ethnologist who conducted fieldwork in Equatorial Guinea in 1948, states that among the Okak this mask was used by men (in spite of the appellation, *ngon*, meaning young girl) in a ritual dance linked to the *Byeri* ancestor cult. (Equatorial Guinea is populated by Fang-Okak and Fang-Ntumu who were studied by G. Tessmann at the beginning of the century.) Among the Fang,

white is the color of the spirits of the dead. Then, could the mask still be the representation of an European? Perhaps, in the sense that Fang tradition says that the deceased are reincarnated in the land of the Whites. Whites would therefore be ancestors who have returned to visit the living. They have all the characteristics of treacherous spirits from the world of supernatural forces. They are powerful and cunning (as often demonstrated by rifle shooting), and although few in number, they learn the dialects of different villages, know how to care for others, etc.²⁰. In any case, the oldest extant pieces have only a single face. Their exact function is not known.

Today, when *Ngontang* is presented in a village, "it is worn by a man who conceals his body. Formerly, the raffia fibers fell over the sleeves and pants, concealing the hands and feet. Now, short socks are worn which give the feet an unexpected appearance. The dancer's body is covered by clothes and a fiber collar attached to the helmet mask to protect his neck and shoulders. In their cut, the fibers and animal skins suggest traditional clothing."²¹

Although it is not necessary to exaggerate the importance of the sacred in the *Ngontang* dance, J. Binet points out that the dancer had to submit to a specific initiation during which he swallowed a medicine to gain lightness of movement, and then, at each performance had to rub his body with protective potions, wear talismans,

70. Recent Fang mask, reminiscent of So initiation society masks photographed by G. Tessmann in 1907 (Ag. Hoa-Qui).

20. Reverend Trilles 1899-1901.

21. J. Binet 1972.

and apparently abstain from sex for a week before rendering his service. The dancer is accompanied by a singer who is also an initiate. The two of them are possessed by the spirit of the “young White girl” during the performance. When the mask is removed, the dancer becomes himself again and the wooden object, like the costume, a simple element of decoration.

III. Polychromed masks with long horns associated with *So* ritual.

These are certainly the oldest Fang masks, or those best identified and localized thanks to the work of G. Tessmann in 1907. In southern Cameroon and at the Gabon/Rio Muni border, the *So* initiation among the Bulu, like the Ngumba, Ntumu and Mvai, took place every three years and lasted several months. *So*, the red antelope, was the tribal totem of the Fang. This complex initiation was very expensive but was a source of great prestige for the chief who underwrote it. The *Byeri* initiation was only one of the episodes of *So*. The display of masks, representing both man and antelope, was the carved symbol of the spirit and power of *So*.

IV. Masks of *Ngil* Ritual

Masks called *ngil* generally white and elongated (approximately 80 centimeters or more), traditionally associated with *Ngil* ritual. The problem with *Ngil* masks is that their function remains shrouded in mystery and that few objects are accompanied by precise background information.

Reverend Trilles left us a photograph of the *Ngil*, “second class medicine man” (see fig. 51) which appeared like an *Okukwe* mask of the Galwa from the Lambarene region (1903), with the typical frontal decoration of an inverted black triangle on the white forehead and bottom of the black face (see Cat. No. 40). G. Tessmann describes *Ngil* rituals in his discussion of giant mud figures which served in the cult and especially in the initiation, but without mention of masks (1907). He insists on the importance of the horns as a principle of man’s aggressiveness, of evil in some way, and suggests that they are found only on *So* masks.

On the other hand, M. Okah,²² a Cameroonian author, gives a description of early *Ngil* rites where masks intervene. First, note that *ngi* in a high tone is the name of the rite. *Ngil* in a low tone means gorilla. These words are possibly more than simple homonyms. *Ngil* according to the Beti of Cameroon, is of Maka origin, the people located in southeastern Cameroon, who migrated toward the ocean and settled between the Bulu, Fang and Beti. The Ngumba of today would be their descendants. *Ngil*, outlawed circa 1910, had as its goal the protection of the individual against evil spells and poisonings. It also allowed the enrichment of dignitaries. There were three principal grades in this association of justicers: *mbege-feg*, the chief of *Ngil*, the grand initiate (who occasionally had to come from afar); *mod-esam*, the master of ceremonies; and *nnom-ngi*,

22. M. Okah 1965.

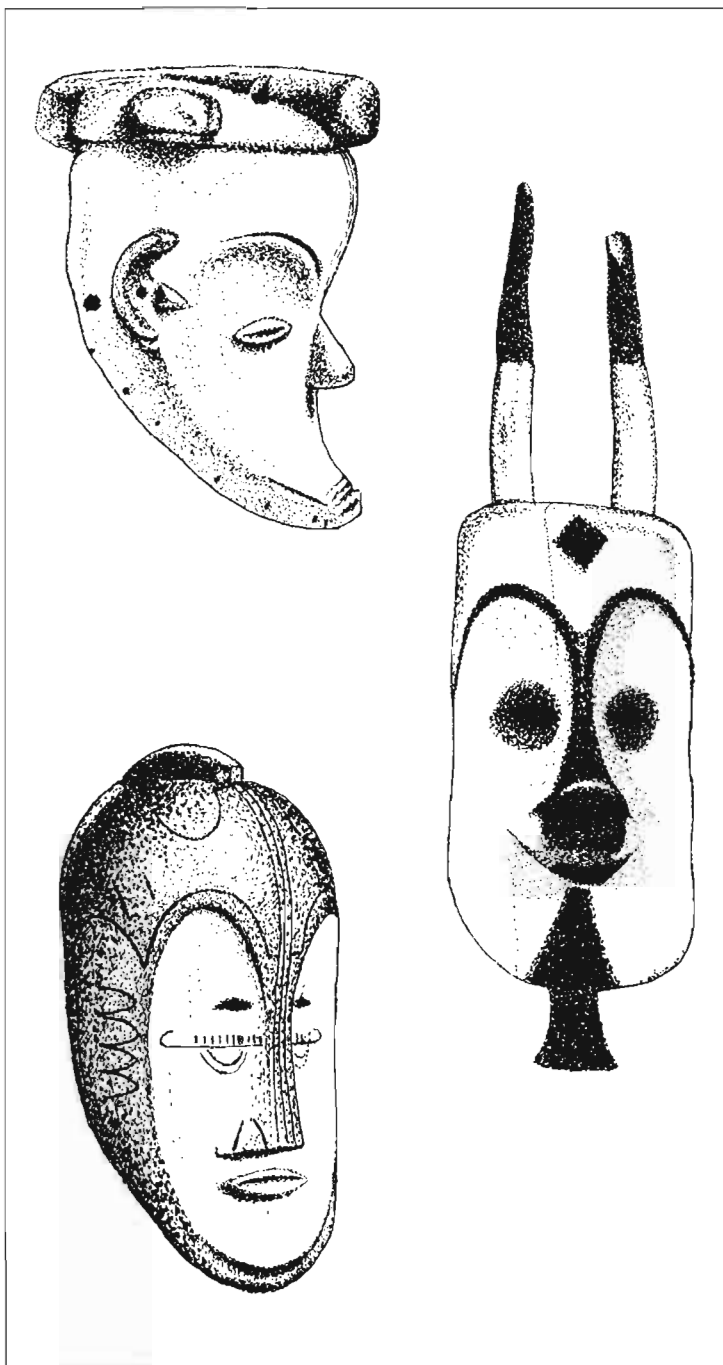
the ordinary initiates, the chief's agents of execution. The candidates were the *mvon-ngi*. The initiation consisted of a series of tests and an explanation of prohibitions of *Ngil*. These prohibitions included hunting sorcerers without the aid of *Ngil*, having sexual relations in the daytime,

stamping one's feet on the ground, contemplating the moon, calling snakes by name (recognizing them as such), etc.

Several steps were necessary in initiating the youths who wanted to become members of *Ngil*: rubbing the *mvon-ngi*'s body with the herb, *nkadena*; staging a porcupine hunt (the role of hunted animal played by an initiate who had to exhaust the candidates); after fishing, the prepa-

71. Various Fang masks drawn by Reverend Fernand Grébert. No explanation of their respective function is given. At the top are Ngontang with several faces (sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).





ration of a repugnant fish dish called *awoled*, which served both as ordeal (judicial test) and as magical antidote in the confession of candidates; “vaccination” against snake bites; visiting the initiation house *meven-me-esam* for another round of confession where the candidate was put before three mud figures: *Niangom*, man; *Omoa Ngon*, woman, and *Evina Edu*, child, occasionally flanked by two small wooden figures; going through the tunnel or trench of proof, *endam*, in which the *mvon-ngi* was terrorized, beaten, and hurt with clubs, thorny sticks, or broken human bones. At the exit of the tunnel of proof, the *mvon-ngi* was accepted as a member of the association by the *mod-esam* or *mbege-feg*, who wore a large mask called *asu-ngi* and armed himself with two human femurs. Symbolically, a femur was given to the candidate who accepted it after having been brutally struck with it in his hands and then on his back. The exit of the new initiates from the initiation enclosure prompted great festivities in the village and compound of the *mod-esam*. *Omoa*, the *Ngil* genies, were made to appear in the guise of masked initiates, their bodies painted black, white, and red. The masks then rushed headlong into the crowd to strike the public.

Initiations took place when an initiate wanted someone of his family to be brought into the association. If an initiate violated one of the rules of the *Ngil*, he called his fellows, accused himself

72. Various Fang masks. From top to bottom: Ngontang (Cat. No. 76), So (Lübeck Museum) and Ngil (Cat. No. 82) (drawing: Domenico Terrana).

of the transgression, and asked to drink a medicinal beverage that was served to him in a cranial cap. Among other ingredients, this potion was concocted with the sanies of decomposing cadavers of deceased initiates.

Although the presence of masks is clear, it is difficult to determine exactly how they were made because, to my knowledge, no photograph has ever been taken of them. According to the Beti, the Fang of Gabon, like the Maka, practised *Ngil* more actively than the Bulu and Ewondo. This would explain why the majority of so-called *Ngil* masks come from the Ntumu and Okak in Equatorial Guinea.

In the Ogowe region, it is very possible that *Ngil* and *Okukwe* were combined. Farther south, *Mwiri* played this role of justiciary.

It is probable that after the prohibition and disap-

pearance of *Ngil* as a ritual of regulation of village life at the beginning of the century, other, less frightening ceremonies sprang up. *Ekekek* and *Bikereu* masks, which are never very old, have certainly substituted for *Ngil*, at least in its public aspect as bogymen. Today, they are presented merely as an element of folkloric rejoicing, but fifty years ago, it was not the same. The mask appeared at dawn or twilight, armed with a wooden sword or a simple cudgel. After being informed by his assistants, the masked initiate broke the kitchens and houses of villagers who were recalcitrant in palavers with members of the "society", adulterous, thieves, debtors, makers of talismans and deadly medicines, etc. Like everywhere else in Gabon (*Mungala* of the Bakota, *Mwiri* of the Eshira-Bapunu, and *Njobi* of the Obamba for example) the mask had a terrible, grave, raucous and formidable voice that must have frightened women and children.

plates
of chapter III

Plate 26

Fang, Choker and bracelet. Diameter: 14 and 10.5 cm.
See Cat. Nos. 51 and 53, pp. 210 and 211.

Illustration

Clasp of a brass necklace similar to that reproduced on the left:
one can see that the neck was literally caught between the hammer
and the anvil (drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert,
sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).





Plate 27

Fang. Dagger and sheath (*ntsakh*).
Length: 43.5 cm. See Cat. No. 54, p. 211.

Illustration

The Fang very quickly took to the use of trade rifles,
but they also used daggers of typical form
(engraving from Du Chaillu 1863, p. 141). See also fig. 60, p. 137.

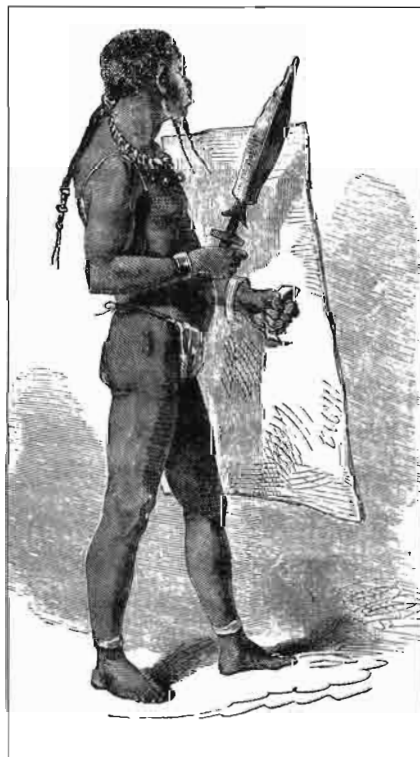




Plate 28

Northern Fang, Mabea sub-style (Southern Cameroon).

Female ancestor figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Height: 70 cm. See Cat. No. 61, pp. 213 and 214.

Illustration

Back view of the sculpture reproduced opposite,
remarkable because of its size.



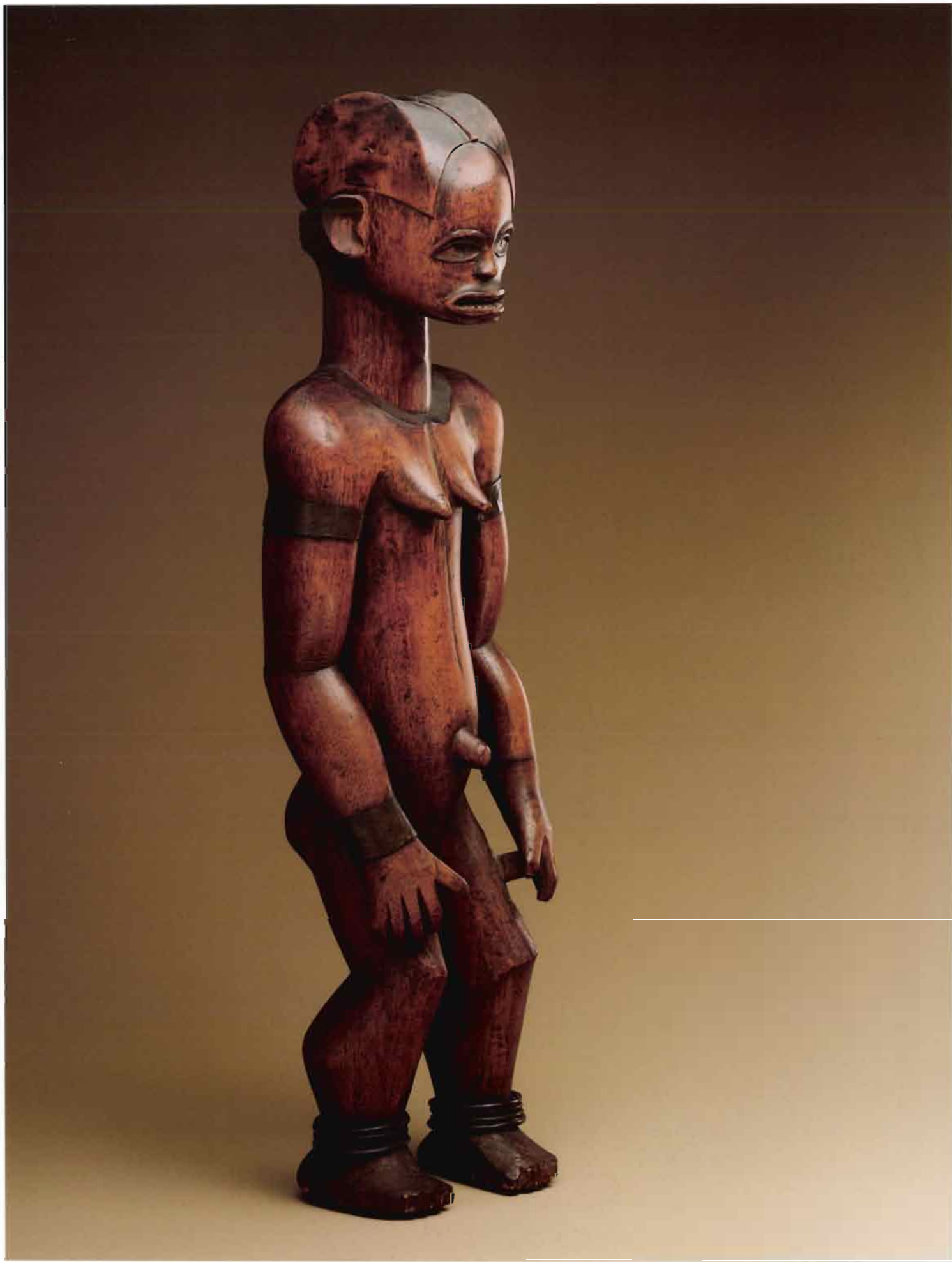


Plate 29

Northern Fang, Ntumu sub-style.

Ancestor figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Height: 55 cm (figure: 29.5 cm). See Cat. No. 62, p. 214.

Illustration

Back view of the figure reproduced opposite.





Plate 30

Northern Fang, Ntumu sub-style.
Male ancestor figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).
Height: 44 cm. See Cat. No. 64, p. 215.

Illustration

Back view of the figure reproduced opposite.





Plate 31

Northern Fang, Ntumu sub-style.
Reliquary figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).
Height: 69 cm. See Cat. No. 65, p. 216.

Illustration

Symmetry of the profile of the head:
the curvature of the jaw is the same, but inversed,
like that of the forehead and headdress
(drawing: Louis Perrois).

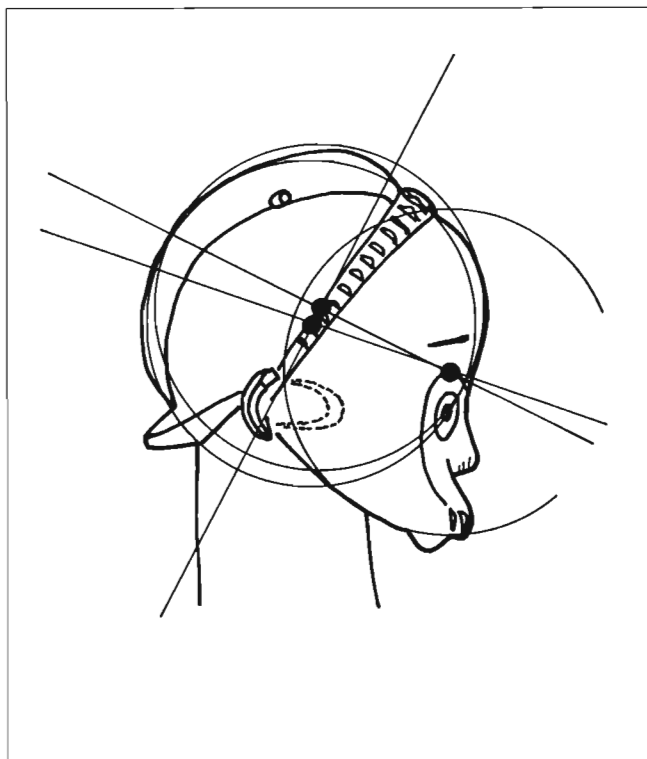




Plate 32

Fang, Betsi sub-style (Okano valley).
Reliquary head. Height: 36 cm. See Cat. No. 72, p. 219.

Illustration

This drawing by Reverend Fernand Grébert, shows the shed
in which the *Byeri* figure with its guardian
is kept in the Oyem region
(sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).



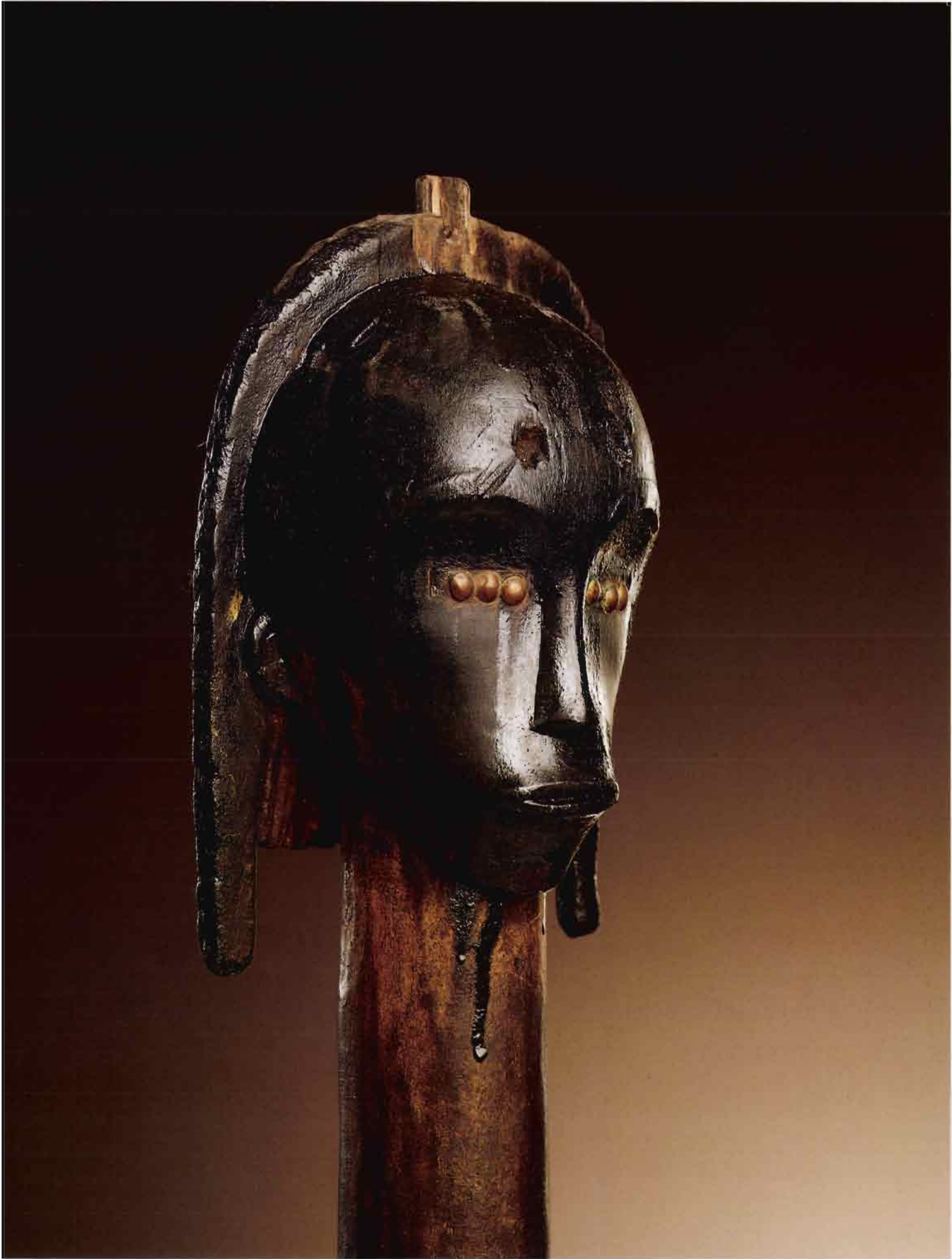


Plate 33

Southern Fang, Betsi sub-style (?).

Reliquary head.

Height: 23 cm. See Cat. No. 74, p. 220.

Illustration

Back view of the reliquary head reproduced opposite.



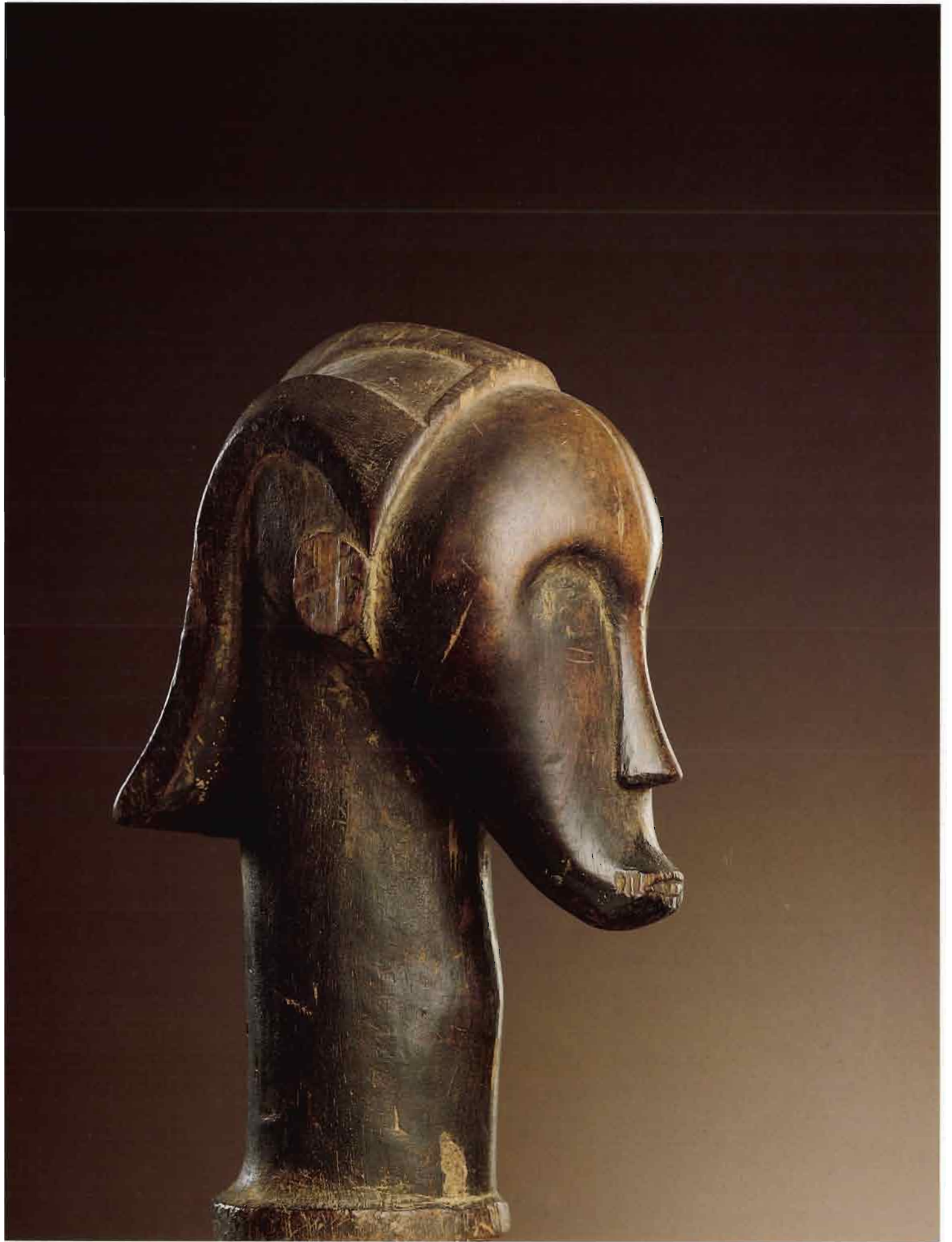


Plate 34

Fang, Woleu-Ntem region.

Dance mask (*Bikereu*).

Height: 53 cm. See Cat. No. 75, p. 221.

Illustration

“Children dancing the “bikeghe” (bergeronnette)”
that is the *Bikereu*

(drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert,
sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).



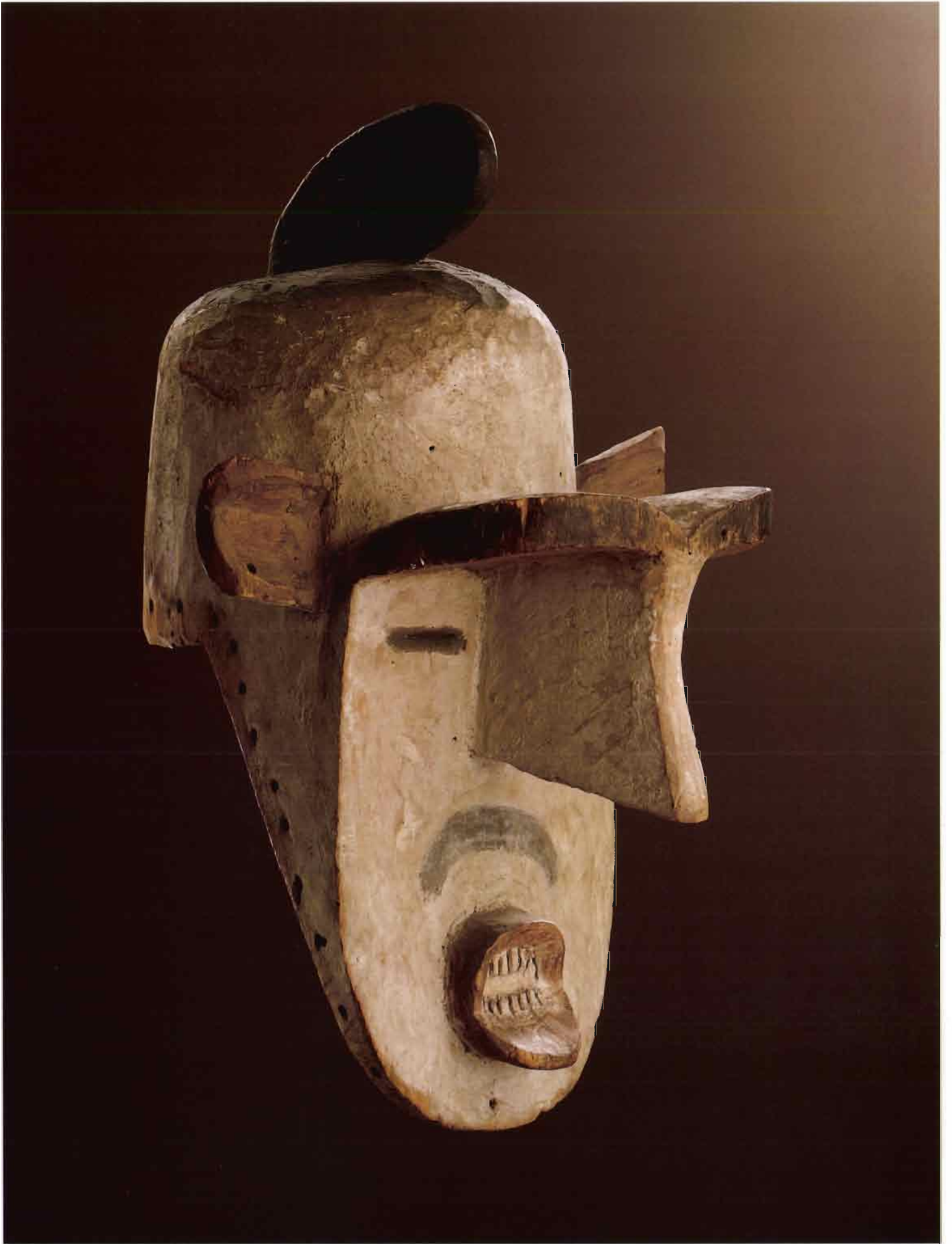


Plate 35

Fang, Dance mask (*Ngontang*).
Height: 26 cm. See Cat. No. 76, p. 221.

Illustration

Front view of the mask reproduced opposite.





Plate 36

Fang. Four-faced helmet mask (*Ngontang*).
Height: 39 cm. See Cat. No. 77, p. 222.

Illustration

The documents at our disposal prove that the multi-faced masks were relatively common among the Fang in the first quarter of this century (drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert, sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).



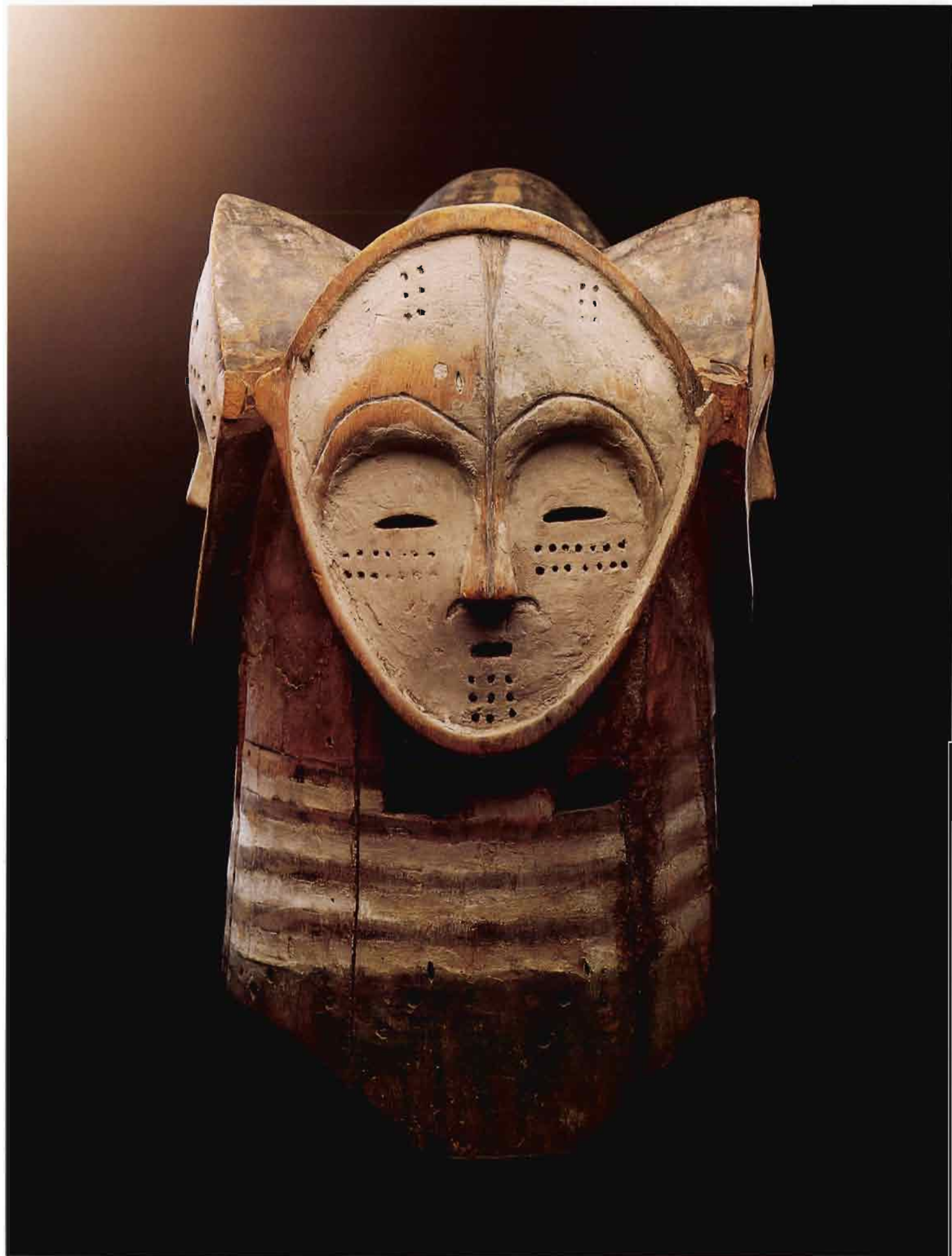


Plate 37

Fang. Dance mask.

Height: 24 cm. See Cat. No. 78, p. 222.

Illustration

In the documents left by Reverend Fernand Grébert, the caption of the drawing below indicates it is a non-Fang object “of Upper Ogowe and Masango”. As in the case of the mask opposite, we are dealing with a sculpture which nonetheless belongs to the Fang sphere of influence (sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).





Plate 38

Fang. Dance mask (*Ngontang*).
Height: 31 cm. See Cat. No. 81, p. 224.

Illustration

The eyes represented by round holes are not limited to the mask reproduced opposite, as the drawing shows
(drawing: Reverend Fernand Grébert, sketch-book from the years 1913 to 1917).

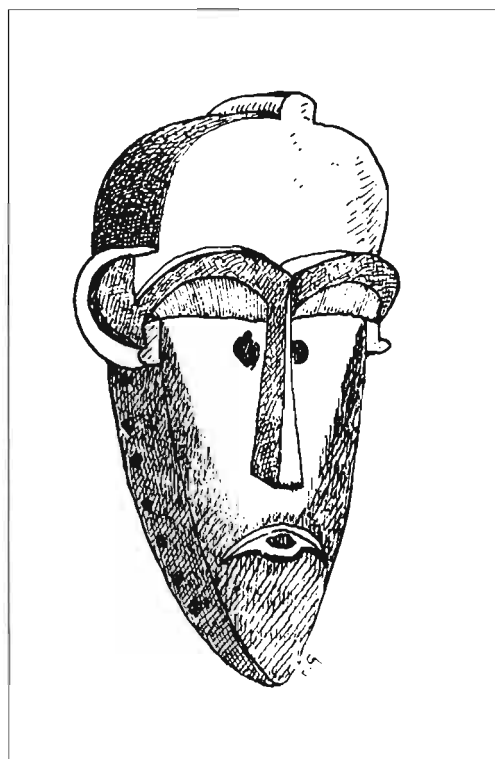




Plate 39

Fang. Dance mask (*Ngil*).

Height: 44 cm. See Cat. No. 82, p. 224.

Illustration

The mask reproduced below, collected by Tessmann
at the end of the last century in Mabea country,
is certainly the oldest known *Ngil* mask
(photo: K. Wieckhorst, Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig).





illustrated catalogue
of the collection



1. BAKOTA

Anklet (*djokelebale*).
Copper alloy.
D: 10.5 cm; # 1031-54.
Josef Mueller Collection.
Acquisition: before 1942.¹
Unpublished.
See Plate 1, p. 61.

This type of anklet sometimes weighing as much as several kilograms originates in the region between Okondja and Makoku in the Ivindo Basin (Bakota, Mahongwe, Bushamaye, Obamba). It is called *djokelebale*. Only the lightest of them could be worn. Most simply served as bride-price wealth.

The shape of the anklet is not unlike the triangular crest coiffures of the Ambete of the Congo, and it may very well be from that region.

There were few of these anklets to be found after the introduction of money in matrimonial transactions and after the massive confiscation of them by missionaries opposed to polygamy and the bride-price system.

Like necklaces, these objects were molded by blacksmiths with Congolese metal.



2. BAKOTA or FANG

Ritual throwing knife (*musele*, *osele*: Kota or *onzil*: Fang).
Iron, wood, brass.
H: 33.5 cm (blade: 38.5 cm); # 1019-45.
Josef Mueller Collection.
Acquisition: before 1942.
Publication: *Oiseaux* 1984, Pl. 25.
See Plate 2, p. 63.

Musele, ritual throwing knives, are used throughout Gabon but particularly in Kota and Fang country.

Among the Bakota of the Ivindo River the knife is an emblem of *Mungala* dignitaries who use it during acrobatic dances. In principle, these dances are reserved for initiates but today are more folkloric. The *nganga-mungala*, or dance chief, plays the role of *mungunda* monster. He crawls along on the ground, uttering raucous cries, brandishing the *musele*, and attempting to hurt the initiates who must jump above him as energetically as possible.

The sculptural theme, «toucan beak», suggests the form of the blade but is not fully explained. Its decorative motifs – lozenges, triangles and ovals – are also found on reliquary figures.

The *musele* is the only type of throwing knife from this region. There are many other forms of it, however, in the Congo and throughout Central Africa.

1. All of the objects which belonged to Joseph Mueller and set on bases in Paris by the celebrated Inagaki were perforce acquired before 1939-1940. This is the case for Fang heads and most Fang reliquary figures. Other objects (like this one) without a base to date their acquisition were included in the inventory of the transfer of the collection from Paris to Solothurn, Switzerland and thus acquired before 1942, when Josef Mueller left France. The pieces for which no date is given were acquired through the European and American art market between 1965 and 1985.



3. BAKOTA

Stool (*kwanga*).

Wood, copper plating (*repoussé* decoration).

D: 36 cm; # 1019-54.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: May 6, 1941 from M. Portier, Paris.

Unpublished.

See Plate 3, p. 65.

Of the many forms of Kota stools this one is most commonly found in villages: a slightly depressed circular platform and four curved feet; all monoxyle (see fig. 25, p. 31).

The originality of this object lies in the copper application. It is rarely documented. The thin metal leaf embossed from the underside is affixed to the seat by round-headed nails and staples along the edge. The decorative motifs are identical to those found on the *ngulu* ancestor figures: triangles, lozenges, diagonal grooves, arches, etc. They are grouped by fours and redivided into sets of circles. The same motifs were used for ornamental and ritual scarification.

This seat was most likely reserved for dignitaries and never offered to women.



4. MAHONGWE

Reliquary figure (*Bwete*).

Wood, brass strips and plates.

H: 38.2 cm; # 1019-68.

Unpublished.

See Plate 4, p. 67.

Even for the novice in African art, this magnificent *Bwete* reliquary figure from the region southeast of Mekambo immediately attracts attention by virtue of its smooth curves and exact rendering.

The perfectly ogival face, barely but noticeably recessed, is ornamented with thin, gently curved brass strips. It is divided by a wide, vertical metal band representing the forehead midway up. (Note also the finish of the finial of the small chevron plate to which the bun is neatly anchored.)

The rather small cabochon eyes flank the pointed nose made from a thicker piece of metal. Below, two sets of thin metal strips (but thicker than those on the face) radiate diagonally from both sides of a small triangular plate that merely suggests a mouth.

The upper diagonal bun, like the back double braid, is stylized but still recalls clearly the traditional coiffure of early Mahongwe initiates.

Category I (see p. 50).



5. MAHONGWE

Reliquary figure (*Bwete*).

Wood, copper strips.

H: 47 cm.; # 1019-51.

Publication: L. Perrois 1979, fig. 138.

This other *Bwete* has an elongated ogival face. The eyes are positioned below a third of the height. The forehead plate embellished with lozenges is butted by horizontal copper strips that overlap at certain points along the center. The cylindrical neck is wound with copper wire. The sheathed support is ornamented with the common motif of dotted chevrons. The opposite side, in a perfect state of conservation, has a truncated conical bun extending into a massive braid with three ridges. Here and there the sheeting is adorned with chevron friezes.

The multiplicity of horizontal strips wrapped around the curves and the vertical band aligning the cabochon eyes and sharp-edged nose constitute elements of rupture which also emphasize the unruffled serenity of the face.

Category I (see p. 50) probably a little *Bwete*.



6. BUSHAMAYE

Reliquary figure (*Bwete*).

Wood, brass strips and small plates.

H: 30 cm; # 1019-4-I.

Unpublished.

Reliquary figures in this particular sub-style are uncommon. Field studies (1966-1970) seem to prove that this form of recessed face that is almond-shaped or a foliated auroral, an encircling headpiece of a sort provided with slanted pendants, originates in Boueni canton in the Mounianze or Mounianghi Valley (tributary of the Ivindo) between Makoku and Okondja.

The Shamaye sub-style can be considered as a morphological transition between the classic Mahongwe *Bwete* (Category I) and the *Mbulu Ngulu* of the Upper Ogowe (Category III).

The more or less narrow foliate face is divided by a wide metal band aligning a very long nose (beginning from the upper face) and cabochon eyes placed rather low. Instead of a mouth, there is a small brass plate embossed with decorative motifs arranged in a frieze on the chin. A diagonal star is created by the quartered sections of metal strips of the left and right sides.

The encircling headdress presses close to the face, somewhat in the manner of the *cadennette* coiffure of French Royalists of the 18th century (i.e., braids worn by men on each side of the face in front of the ears). In this case it appears that the headdress was not covered with metal. A small, vertical and triangular bun crowns the face.

On the back, as with all Mahongwe reliquary figures, a wide braid with three chevrons falls rather low on the neck.

The base is broken. (Only the Shamaye *Bwete* of the Basle Museum has an intact base, a knob with an oval, longitudinal opening, a morphological transition from the lozenge base with a frontal, transverse opening of the objects from the north and south.)

Category II (see p. 50).



7. OBAMBA/MINDUMU

Reliquary figure (*Mbulu Ngulu*)¹.

Wood, copper strips and plates.

H: 42.8 cm; # 1019-4-G.

Displayed in France at an unidentified colonial exhibition in 1931 (see ill. p. 68).

Unpublished.

See Plate 5, p. 69.

The very classic form of this reliquary figure reputedly in France in 1931 is in the southern style (Franceville, Bambama, Zanaga).

Its notable characteristics are curved lateral headpieces, transverse crest joined to the lateral headpieces, slanted, cylindrical pendants, strips on the face radiating from the small central plate on both sides of the oval, and decorative motifs on the crest (frontal border and blazon) and neck.

Several remarkably similar pieces, even in the decorative motifs, are known – for example, the one in the University Museum of Philadelphia. This consistency of design and form allows one to consider this a significant variation and perhaps even a «school» like Otala.

The base is lozenge-shaped and slightly extended around the bottom. On back of the face an elongated lozenge in relief recalls the «canoe» motif of central Gabon.

A note on the overall form of the figure: evenly ovoid and a face designed as a set of contained curves supported by the axis of the cylindrical neck.

Category III, Variation 4 (see p. 50).



8. OBAMBA/MINDUMU

Reliquary figure (*Mbulu Ngulu*).

Wood, brass strips and plates.

H: 47 cm; # 1019-4-A.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: February 22, 1939 from Anthony Moris.

Publications: L. Perrois 1979, fig. 149; A. et F. Chaffin 1979, No. 37; 2000 *Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, No. 49.

See Plate 6, p. 71.

This beautiful carved reliquary figure has an oval, nearly ovoid, and slightly concave face wrapped in narrow metal strips radiating obliquely from a central cross motif which joins the eyes and triangular nose. The extremely thin crest and lateral headpieces are covered with brass foil with cross-hatching. On the bottom of the lateral headpieces are slanted pendants representing ears, ornaments or coiffure. The neck is covered with a thin foil of chased metal engraved with a small burin. The support is elegantly carved like an ace of diamonds. The pitting is probably due to vermin such as termites. The figure was placed on a reliquary box or basket with string attached to hold it upright. A carved triangular excrescence appears on the back without a metal covering.

The meaning of these motifs on the back (triangle or more often lozenge) are still completely unknown to us: emblem of clan, lineage or initiation society, or even magic symbol of protection.

Category III, Variation 1 (see p. 50).

1. *ngulu* (or *nguru*): the reliquary basket was called *mbulu* (*musuku* or *nsuwu*).



9. OBAMBA/MINDUMU (?)

Reliquary figure (*Mbulu Ngulu*).

Wood, copper, brass and iron strips and plates.

H: 63 cm; # 1019-4-D.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: 1939 from Charles Ratton.

Unpublished.

This reliquary figure, a classic sculpture albeit a bit unbalanced, has an oval face of alternating strips of brass and iron arranged horizontally on both sides of the foil central cross motif. The crest is quite wide as are the somewhat asymmetrical lateral headpieces bearing a band motif. This type of figure was pervasive among the southern Bakota. L. Guiral and P. de Brazza brought back beautiful examples for the collection of the Trocadero Museum (1883 and 1886) found among the Ondumbo (Mindumu or possibly Obamba) of the Franceville region. On the non-plated reverse side there is a lozenge-shaped excrescence. Among the Mitsogho and Masango of central Gabon the lozenge symbolizes the feminine sex.

Category IV, Variation 1 (see p. 51).



10. OBAMBA/MINDUMU

Reliquary figure (*Mbulu Ngulu*).

Wood, brass and copper plating.

H: 41 cm; # 1019-4-F.

Former Olivier Le Corneur Collection.

Publications: P. Meauzé 1967, fig. 199; A. et F. Chaffin 1979, fig. 62.

See Plate 7, p. 73, and cover.

This object is justifiably known and appreciated for its very harmonious forms, but unfortunately it is impossible to date or to localize.

Reliquaries of this type constitute a significant sub-style by their consistent characteristics: underdeveloped curves of the lateral parts; pierced terminal volutes; narrow crest (occasionally encased); concave-convex face with protruding forehead; symmetrical eye sockets recessed in the extension of the heart-shaped face; large, circular eyes; mouth provided with teeth; and pointed chin. The lateral parts with terminal volutes seem to be an evolution or variation of the slanted pendants of the Sebe region style said to be "of Shamaye influence" (Chaffin).

The neck is decorated with dotted foil. This decoration echoes the motifs of the lateral sections and crest. The support is a rather small lozenge centered over the foot.

Category V, Variation 3 (see p. 51).



11. OBAMBA/MINDUMU

Reliquary figure (*Mbulu Ngulu*).

Wood, copper plating.

H: 63 cm; # 1019-4-C.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: August 1940 from Anthony Moris.

Publications: L. Perrois 1979, fig. 189; *Exotische Kunst...* 1981, p. 98.

See Plate 8, p. 75.

This reliquary figure is probably of Obamba origin: wood covered with smooth copper sheets; oval, concave-convex face with an overhanging forehead forming a rectilinear upper eye visor. It is balanced and sober with a crescent and wide curved lateral headpieces.

Its massive and forceful presence is not unusual. The extended lozenge of the support is a bit eaten away around the foot. The embossed motif on the crest is probably a lineage emblem; its exact meaning is not known. A large lozenge in low relief is on the back.

Category IV, Variation 3 (see p. 51).



12. MINDASSA/BAWUMBU (northwestern Congo)

Janus-faced reliquary figure (*Mbulu Viti*).

Wood, copper, brass and iron.

H: 54.2 cm; # 1019-4-H.

Unpublished.

See Plate 9, p. 77.



“Naturalistic”, Janus-faced figures in style are rather rare. This one, a Category V (predominant curved lateral headpieces with terminal volutes), Variation 2 (Janus-faced figures, abstract, concave face, and opposing naturalistic, convex face), is a highly representative example. What makes this an extraordinary object is the width of the transverse crescent crest (slightly restored), like that of the lateral headpieces, relative to the oval of the faces, the symmetry of the face, headdress and base, the delicacy of the embossed decoration (particularly the borders), and the contrast between the austere sobriety of the concave face and the latent realism of the convex face. The concave side of the head is divided in two by a wide metal band flanked on either side by a decoration imitating metal strips (northern style), a very pointed, triangular nose, crescent eyes affixed by nails, and “tears” of iron scarification. On the convex side the elongated oval face has a protruding forehead that hangs over the recessed eye sockets connected to the pugnose. The mouth, open and pouting, exposes teeth filed to a point. The ensemble is richly adorned: headband, iron eyebrows and cheek scarification (fine bands) contrasting with the shiny copper face. The chin is incised with a motif probably representing a beard. The lateral headpieces bear a sort of radiating auroral motif that accentuates the piercing gaze and serious expression. It was seen above that the suggestions of E. Andersson concerning comparable objects in the K. Laman Trust of the Museum of Stockholm tend to place this type of reliquary to the extreme south of the Kota-Mbete area (Mossendjo region in the Congo) among the Mindassa and Bawumbu.

Category V, Variation 2 (see p. 51).



13. OBAMBA/MINDUMU

Janus-faced reliquary figure (*Mbulu Viti*).

Wood, copper plating.

H: 66 cm; # 1019-4-B.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Publications: L. Perrois 1979, fig. 195; A. et F. Chaffin 1979, No. 117; *2000 Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, cover and No. 48.

This is a magnificent Janus-faced figure. The concave-convex side is in the same style as the figure in Number 11. The bulbous forehead forms a rectilinear upper eye visor that hangs over the concave face. The concave opposite side is ornamented with a simple cross motif formed by two wide bands of copper supporting the hemispherical eyes and trihedral nose. The regular oval shape of the Janus-face is important in relation to the curved lateral headpieces and the transverse crest ornamented with a lineage emblem and two small crescents.

This piece is strikingly similar to a Janus-faced figure in the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, acquired in 1941.

Category IV, Variation 4 (see p. 51).



14. AMBETE

Figure with dorsal reliquary.

Wood, pigment.

H: 79 cm; # 1019-2.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: circa 1935 from Charles Ratton.

Publications: *Sculptures d'Afrique* 1977, p. 111; L. Perrois 1979, fig. 217; *2000 Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, No. 50.

The height of this figure (nearly 80 centimeters), typical of the traditional style of the Ambete of eastern Gabon and the Congo border zone gives it a certain monumental air.

The small, triangular face is finely worked with deeply carved eyebrow arches articulating the geometric nose, round eyes in relief, and a stylized mouth with pointed teeth. The coiffure of small, parallel bivalve shell forms on top of the head is embellished by three bands on the forehead that frame the upper part of the face.

The posture of the body is stiff. The massive legs are semi-fixed. The arms and shoulders are thrust forward, hands on the upper abdomen. The back is fitted with a reliquary niche, here, emptied of its contents (generally fixed by a plaster of vegetal resin).



15. BAKOTA

Helmet mask (*Emboli*).

Wood, pigment, copper nails.

H: 63.7 cm; # 1019-57.

This mask has been in a Parisian collection before 1942.

Unpublished.

See Plate 10, p. 79.

Emboli masks of the Makoku region east of the Ivindo between the Liboomba and Djaddie were found among the Bakota. In spite of advanced acculturation of all the peoples of the region, three types of masks still play a role in Kota social life: *Emboli* among the Bakota, *Ehukulukulu* among the Mahongwe, and *Mwesa* among the Bakwele north of Mekambo.

The *Emboli* participates in the *Satsi* initiation and probably at the funerals of dignitaries as well.

The example at hand is interesting as a particularly expressive and powerful sculpture. The upper face is divided into two very wide sub-orbital depressions that border a narrow, triangular forehead ornamented with copper round-headed nails. The prominent eyebrows surmount deeply recessed sockets and crescent eyes projecting forward, thus combining a Kwele motif with a general form that is thoroughly Kota. The nose corresponds to the triangular forehead in its similar decoration.

The design of shifting planes, indeed broken into discontinuous facets, and vibrant colors (red, white, black) reinforcing the impression given by the highly geometric conception, attests to the carver's great sculptural skill in researching and producing the right effect. *Emboli* have to create fear as the half-gorilla (the sagittal crest), half-man spirit emerging from the forest to uphold social order. During the *Satsi* initiation (of which only the circumcision rite remains today), the *nganga* reveals to the neophytes the secret of the mask as a carved wood object manipulated by men.

See also L. Perrois 1968.



16. BAKOTA

Janus-faced helmet mask (*Emboli*).

H: 49 cm; # 1019-28.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: October 31, 1939 from Charles Ratton.

Unpublished.

This mask consists of a cylindrical helmet of two opposing triangular faces flanked by flat, transverse pendants of a sort and surmounted by a rounded sagittal crest. This is a highly expressionistic carving wherein the creative impulse seems to have dominated the proper sculptural process. It has recessed eye sockets and striking eyebrow arches, bulging eyes (some examples have tubular eyes), and an expansive, protruding forehead delimited by the headdress shared by the two faces. The faces are coated with whitish kaolin and the rest with greenish clay.

Serving primarily in *Satsi* circumcision ceremonies, this mask was also shown to newly initiated youths by members of the *Mungala* association.

According to the indications of Charles Ratton¹ this mask comes from the Ndambomo, a sub-group of the Bakota of the Ivindo.

1. Inside the mask is a label written by Josef Mueller stating information provided by Charles Ratton: "Damborno mask, Kekele village, Booue district".

17. BAKOTA¹

Horned Janus-faced helmet mask (*Emboli*).

H: 1.12 m; # 1019-29.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: October 31, 1939 from Charles Ratton.

Unpublished.

According to Charles Ratton, this mask has the same provenience as the preceding *emboli* mask. This one, however, is far less typical of the Bakota style with its two tall horns curiously arranged perpendicular to the two faces. The recessed part of the helmet constituting the headdress measures only 40 centimeters high and the horns 70 centimeters.

The two faces are carved identically: heart-shaped face; round, recessed eye socket create a background for the tubular eyes and make them stand out; a different look for each eye; a narrow mouth above a triangular chin, and on both sides, circular ears.

The sinuously modelled horns are adorned with ochre, white and black triangles (faded tones due to the impermanence of the pigments employed: kaolin, charcoal, clay and powdered padouk wood). They might represent *mbomo*, the python appearing in many fables and initiation texts.

This mask does not appear to have been used for a long time. It was clearly worn on a circular support made of willow stems approximately 80 centimeters in diameter. It was also worn with a wide, short fiber skirt that hid the head and torso of the dancer. The lower part of his body was enveloped in a sarong of raffia and, later, of fabric.

1. Inside the mask a label provides the same information as for No. 16.



18. BAKWELE

Horned mask with pierced eyes.

H: 42 cm, L: 62 cm; # 1019-15.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939 from Vignier; originally collected by an administrator, Aristide Courtois.

Publications: L. Perrois 1979, p. 277; W. Fagg 1980, p. 115.

See Plate 11, p. 81.

This is one of the best carved Kwele masks with a human face and long arched horns that frame the face and meet at chin level. Other masks of this type from the same area are in the Charles Ratton Collection (published by W. Fagg and E. Elisofon, 1958) and the Rockefeller Wing of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The famous Kwele mask with an omega shaped headdress at the Museum Lafaille de la Rochelle is a variation of this one.

The relatively small, central face is concave and in the shape of a heart. The eyebrows join above a triangular nose flanked by extended but contained almond eyes. The narrow mouth underlines the point of the heart face. There is no forehead or ears. The headdress consists of a pair of enormous, widely arched horns, which including the face, form an inverted omega (a common sculptural form in the Ogowe Basin). These horns have distinct planes of octagonal form alternately colored white and black. Near the ends of the frontal plane are two lightly carved faces in the same style as the central face.

The pierced eyes of this mask indicate that it was intended to be worn, unlike the majority of extant Kwele masks.



19. BAKWELE

Heart-shaped mask (*Pibibuze*).

Wood, pigment.

H: 28 cm; # 1019-22.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: circa 1939 from Vignier; originally collected by Aristide Courtois.

Publication: *2000 Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, No. 51.

See ill. p. 80.

This mask belongs to the most well-known type, *pibibuze*, or man (see p. 58). It is an enigmatic face without a mouth, gently recessed within the interior of a heart shape defined by the cheeks and eyebrows. The elongated, almond-shaped eyes are slanted downward on the outer ends. The upper lip depression extends from the base of the nose to the chin. The face is painted white and the nose and periphery of the heart, black. Elsewhere it seems that painted sculpture (especially black) died out in favor of showing the yellowish bare wood. (This object was probably cleaned after arriving in Europe.)

The pierced eyes and holes on the back of the mask suggest that it was danced and not simply hung on a wall.

This mask from the Barbier-Mueller Collection is almost exactly like an object from the former Tristan-Tzara Collection exhibited in Cannes in 1957 and in Paris in 1964 (*Africa: One Hundred Tribes, One Hundred Masterpieces*), the only differences being the dark brown color which covers the entire mask except for the white heart face (absent on this example) and the form of the slanted crescent eyes of the Tzara mask.



20. BAKWELE

Antelope mask.

Wood, pigment.

H: 38 cm; # 1019-49.

Publication: W. Fagg 1980, p. 114.

See Plate 12, p. 83.

This small mask is a marvel of harmony and balance. The face of the animal is equally divided by a softly curved median line from the top of the forehead to the bottom of the muzzle. The slanted, narrow and attenuated eyes are the only other facial feature.

The pointed ears hang over the forehead, forming the base of the horns that are arranged like a lozenge.

The overall sculpture is a simple, undulating surface, made to be seen from the front. The sides are flat, without any modeling.

The face, ears and base of the horns are painted white, the upper part of the horns, the sides and the back in black.

Although many masks were not made to be used, this one is carefully recessed and carved in the back. The bottom back of the mask has several triangular planes seeming to mushroom up toward the concavity of the innerplacement of the eyes.

From an aesthetic standpoint, the curved surfaces and frontal lines contrast with the rectilinear stiffness of the horns. The dynamism of the object is the result of a symmetry of obliques (edge of the cheeks, eyes, ears, horns) and their opposition to the median line.



21. BAPUNU/BALUMBO

Spoon with anthropomorphic handle.
Wood.

H: 21 cm (figure: 8.5 cm); # 1019-44.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Unpublished.

The handle of this spoon represents a woman wearing a typical Punu/Lumbo coiffure with a prominent central "shell" and side braids. The face is also typical in its split coffeebean eyes. Note that the back of the figure is carved as well as the front.

Increasingly rare today, this is evidence of daily life in traditional times, when art of all kinds was held in esteem.



22. BALUMBO/BAVILI

Female figure representing a divinized ancestor.

Wood, pigment.

H: 1.23 m; # 1019-9.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Unpublished.

Without precise information, this figure can be only vaguely attributed to the Balumbo/Bavili or Loango. It originates in the general region between the Nyanga and Kwilu Rivers.

A nude, standing woman is represented, her arms raised in a position of defense. The hands must have held weapons, a knife or assagai. Her stance is similar to Kongo figures but different in the long neck adorned with necklaces and a kaolin-whitened head.

The face has a certain naturalism that is related to the styles of central Gabon and the coast, Bapunu in particular: blackened eyebrows, convex face, straight nose, neatly tucked mouth with red lips, ears and coiffure of multiple "shells" radiating from the top of the head. As for the body, it is also naturalistically carved (shoulders, arms, breasts). It is not painted but rather patinated by frequent contact. There was probably a magical medicine attached to the stomach, a poultice stuck on with resin commonly called *bilongo*, which reinforced the charge of the object. The eyes represented by pieces of mirror suggest the power of divination of the *nkhosi* (see p. 89-90).



23. BALUMBO/BAVILI

Figure with ventral reliquary (*nkhosi*).
Wood, pigment, terracotta coiffure.
H: 36 cm; # 1019-10.
Josef Mueller Collection.
Acquisition: before 1939.
Publication: *Du*, August, 1978, cover.
See Plate 13, p. 107.

This small figure from the Barbier-Mueller Collection is stylistically analogous to an object published in *Arts du Gabon* (1979, fig. 244, p. 232). It is a reliquary guardian bust placed in a skull box. The shortening of the lower part of the object from the waist perhaps corresponds to this function. It gives the impression that the only visible parts are the elaborate head, the enormous breasts with blackened nipples, and the arms. The ventral reliquary niche, now empty, served to charge the figure with magical energy.

The head is typical of the Lumbo/Vili style: naturalistic face with arched eyebrows, well carved nose, open mouth exposing white teeth, mirror eyes, eyelids and pupil represented, and a coiffure created in terracotta and its several "shells" (three in front, one across, and three in back) painted black. The forehead is whitened with kaolin, the body and face, ochre. The complete figure is irresistibly reminiscent of Bakongo "fetishes".

Each hand holds an object resembling a short stick. The fiber skirt conceals the genitals. To the arms are attached various magical "medicines".

A cult object *par excellence*, this small figure well illustrates the relationship between aesthetics and religious beliefs, forms and colors being dictated by magical function.



24. BAPUNU/BALUMBO

Female figure ("mother and child").
Wood.
H: 35.5 cm; # 1019-70.
Unpublished.
See Plate 14, p. 109.

"Mother and child" subjects are scarce in Gabon. The only ones known are small Fang figures of southern Cameroon and miniatures from southern Gabon, hunting charms and cane finials. Here, unfortunately, the child is broken off. All that is left are the hands, nonetheless, exquisitely carved, and the feet; (it was carried on the back, while, among the Fang, babies were carried by a shoulder strap). This surely accidental damage does not diminish the beauty of the rest of the figure.

At once a powerful and refined design, this maternity figure is in the Punu/Lumbo style of the southwestern region of Gabon.

The artist emphasizes the head and coiffure and gives the illusion of monumental proportions, yet without neglecting either the highly ornamented trunk or the limbs (including the rare, beautiful hands).

A coiffure of three "shells" minutely carved, the middle one an oversized crest, surmounts a Punu face (eyes as split coffee-beans, highly arched eyebrows, pugnose, checkered pattern scarification on the forehead and temples, protruding ears – all the characteristics of *Okuyi* masks).

As if swollen with milk, the goat-udder breasts point forward. The entire abdomen is scarified around the prominent navel.

The limbs are rather fleshy and in rounded relief, like the cambered hindquarters, to a degree, steatopygous.

Idealized here in wood are all the characteristics of a beautiful woman of southern Gabon.

In the abdomen, a niche served to "charge" the object with an appropriate magic medicine. This small figure functioned like comparable Bateke, Bavili and Bakongo figures of the southern Congo zone.



25. BAPUNU/BALUMBO

Pendant.

Wood.

H: 9 cm; # 1019-52.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Unpublished.

See Plate 15, p. 111.

Punu/Lumbo pendants often possess a degree of refinement which white masks of the same style are seldom endowed. Most objects of this type measure from 5 to 10 centimeters in height and are found in southwestern Gabon and the region adjacent to the Congo. Elsewhere, there are utilitarian objects (seats, canes, sceptres, fan handles, and musical instruments) and masks in high relief that are adorned with small figures. In this case, the nude woman is standing with legs slightly bent, in a position of tension. Arms bent backward, she holds a wicker basket in the usual way, on her back with a liana band across the top of her head. The band, by sculptural artifice, is combined with the coiffure consisting of a central «shell» at the top of the head and an occipital bun styled toward the back. The abdomen has lozenge-shaped scarification. The serene, unscarified face features a high bulging forehead, eyes like coffee-beans delicately slit in an arched line, and a strong straight nose of well carved lines, hanging directly over projecting lips.

The light-colored wood is highly patinated with traces of wear, giving the object a velvety surface of curves. There are two holes for threading.



26. BAPUNU/BALUMBO

Pendant.

Wood.

H: 11.5 cm; # 1019-8.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1942.

Unpublished.

Representing a woman seated on a stool, this pendant is an example of the miniaturizing style of the Balumbo mentioned in the preceding entry.

Although the function of these figures is not clear, they probably served as apotropaic devices. Most people wore one attached to their belt. F. Hagenbucher calls them *muti* (see p. 89). This is a basic element of witchcraft machinations among the Punu, Lumbo, and Vili.



27. BAPUNU/BALUMBO

Female figure.

Wood.

H: 39.5 cm; # 1019-11.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1942.

Publication: *2000 Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, No. 55.

The head of this figure is carved in the usual forms of the Punu and Lumbo styles: curved volumes and lines, arched eyebrows, eyes like split coffeebeans, a somewhat flattened nose, and "shell" coiffure. The coiffure of this example is extraordinary: pushed toward the back are two large, well divided "shells". The body is handled with less vigor and naturalism. The arms, for example, are clumsily carved. It is as if only the head is important.

Not much is known about the ritual nature of Punu figures. Some were used in cults for magical power. Apparently, the preservation of ancestral relics was not as widespread in this area as it was in northern and eastern Gabon, or at least it did not take the same form. Bones of the dead may have been more commonly used in witchcraft.



28. ESHIRA/BAPUNU

Bellows.

Wood.

H: 62 cm; # 1019-21.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: July 4, 1938 from Anthony Moris.

Publications: *African Negro Art* 1935, fig. 48; *2000 Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, No. 56.

See Plate 16, p. 113.

Blacksmith's bellows are greatly valued throughout Gabon, whether it be among the northern Fang or among the Eshira, Bapunu and Mitsogho south of the Ogowe.

In this region bellows (*okuka*) have a symbolic, anthropomorphic connotation: they are partly the body of a woman with an aperture to drive back air (symbolic of the vulva), and partly a man with two compartments for air covered with skin (symbolic of testicles), the penis being represented by one or two tubes serving to set the bellows into action. This symbolism is explained to neophytes during initiation rites.

This object is unquestionably Punu. The carved head clearly represents a woman with a ringed neck. The face has lightly arched eyes, a flattened nose, tucked lips (somewhat worn), and fish scale scarification on the forehead. The coiffure is the same central "shell" style seen on Lumbo pendants.



29. MITSOGHO

Reliquary head (*Mbumba Bwiti*).

Wood, pigment, brass.

H: 30.8 cm; # 1019-75.

Publication: *Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika*, 1970, No. R 20, p. 259.

See Plate 17, p. 115.

Although less dramatic in design than the following one, this sculpture is much more characteristic of Tsogho style, particularly the oval, concave-convex face (already seen among the southern Bakota), the double eyebrow arch, and triangle nose, the eyes and mouth of the same almond shape, and the very finely braided coiffure.

This sculptural design, well typed but never uniform, is in the repertoire of Tsogho sculpture (small columns, *ebandzaposts*, small figures, bell handles) (see figs. 46 and 47, pp. 94-95).

The use of small brass plates on the forehead and around the neck prefigures the Sango style and, farther east, the Kota style.



30. MITSOGHO

Reliquary head (*Mbumba Bwiti*).

Wood, pigment, copper.

H: 36.8 cm; # 1019-53.

Collected by baron Rang des Adrets, administrator in Gabon from 1927 to 1936. Former Sommer Collection.

Publication: Catalogue of the sale from Sommer to Hôtel Drouot on May 27, 1982 in Paris.

See Plate 18, p. 117.



The populations of central Gabon — Masango, Aduma and Mitsogho from Fugamu on the Ngunie up to Lastoursville and in the south towards Mbigou — fashioned commemorative figures that were connected to the ancestor cult either through lineages or associations.

This *Mbumba Bwiti* is a stylized head of either Tsogho or Sango style with a longish neck. It is thrust into a bag or basket containing special relics, various bones (human and animal), rings, seeds, stells, fragments, copper bracelets, etc.

This *Mbumba Bwiti* is of the same genre as Number 29. Among the Mitsogho, the ancestor cult is called *Mombe* and is practiced at the family level.

This more or less ovoid reliquary head has eyebrows that are strongly arched and in relief, creating the image of an inverted omega from both sides. The nose is triangular and only lightly carved. The protruding forehead is often ornamented with a centrally positioned metal plate with dotted lines. The coiffure and well separated ears are carved as one piece. The tubular eyes are enormous. The thick-lipped mouth opens over pointed, wooden teeth.

This head brings to mind another one preserved in the Museum of Libreville, collected by a "fetisher" from the Fougamou region, who confiscated it on the Ngunie during anti-witchcraft performances. The metal ornament on the forehead is the same color as the wood rubbed with Kaolin (*pemba*) and padouk wood powder (*tsingo*).



31. MITSOGHO

Ancestor figure (*gheonga*).
Wood, fabric, pigments.
H: 53.4 cm; # 1019-64.
Unpublished.
See Plate 19, p. 118.



32. MITSOGHO

Bwiti board.
Wood, pigment.
H: 1.42 m; # 1019-1.
Josef Mueller Collection.
Acquisition: between 1950 and 1952 from Ernest Ascher.
Publication: *Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika* 1970, No. R 18,
p. 258.



The small figures that the Tsogho fashion for the *Bwiti* cult are mythical entities representing ancestors. They are used either in the rituals of *Bwiti* itself or the familial context for the cult of *Mombe* ancestors. They have a certain prophylactic power when substances of a magical nature are affixed to them.

The style of the *gheonga* is very characteristic: body in a position of tension, raised shoulders, arms separated from the trunk, hands with clenched fists brought together in front, rounded abdomen with truncated, prominent navel, and half-flexed legs. The curvilinear head has a very expressive face with arched and blackened eyebrows, a narrow nose, large ears, and an open mouth. The eyes are unusual: nail pupils, the lower eye in white, and the edge of the eyelids made up with black kohl. The braided headdress is pigmented white and black. The entire body is ochre with the points of the breasts blackened. A cloth wrap covers the lower part of the figure.

The carving of this object is particularly successful in terms of the form which seems Egyptian in the fineness of the face and bust and in terms of the neat and harmonious ornamentation (alternating ochre-black and ochre-white).

The woods used are *gekombo* and *ogobe*. The colors are created in the following way¹:

black: charcoal (*mbii*)
ochre: yellowish clay soil (*tsombo*)
ochre-red: ground (*mondo*) rock
white: white clay, Kaolin (*pemba*)
blue-grey: (*eboo*) clay
red: decoction of ground rocouyer shrub seeds (*momweni*)

1. O. Gollnhofer 1975.

This cult board called *ana-a-ndembe* (i.e., children of Ndembe) decorated an altar (*ndembe*) provisionally installed in the back of the cult house (*ebandza*) for funeral ceremonies. It is a representation of the ancestor of humanity. Generally, there are two carved posts or small boards representing the male and female ancestors of humanity, *Nzambe-Kana* and *Disumba*.

Here the board is painted with opposing triangles that form lozenges (suggesting the female sex). This motif varies from temple to temple. It serves as a mnemonic aid in the recitation of genealogies and old myths. The human head that surmounts the board is typical of the style of the region: triangular face bordered by a band in low relief compared to a slightly convex and nearly flat face, double arch of eyebrows, flat, triangular nose, and lozenge-shaped mouth and eyes. The decorative motif is in low relief, made to be seen from the front. The sculpture totally abandons three-dimensional form in order to remain a graphic symbol. Tsogho, Sango and Vuvi masks also have this quality.



33. MITSOGHO

Ritual gong with carved handle (*mokenge*).
Iron and wood.

H: 45 cm (handle 19.5 cm); # 1019-42.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: 1939.

Publication: 2000 *Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, No. 52.

Like all cult instruments of the Mitsogho, the gong is heavily laden with an anthropomorphic symbolism. The sound produced by the strike of the mallet symbolizes the beat of man's heart.

The forged iron of the gong (*mokenge*) was imported from Tsangui country farther south. It was used in the rituals of the initiation association, *Evovi* (the judges). The carved handle represents the mythical entity, *Kombe* – the sun, male entity, source of life, and «supreme judge» of humans.

Stylistically, this gong handle, like the one following, is typical of Tsogho art: oval, concave face and protruding forehead, double arch of eyebrows in perfect symmetry with the short, barely suggested nose, open, coffeebean eyes extended to the temples, half-open, pouting mouth (symbolizing the breath of life). The coiffure, like Number 34, is formed by a transverse crested bonnet and the other by a «shell» helmet with a prominent posterior crest.



34. MITSOGHO

Gong handle (*mokenge*).
Wood, metal.

H: 18 cm; # 1019-41.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Unpublished.

Handle of a ritual gong like that described in the preceding entry.





35. MITSOGHO (?)

Eight-string harp (*ngombi*).

Wood, skin and fiber.

H: 59.5 cm; # 1019-33.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: March 20, 1940 from Anthony Moris.

Unpublished.

The eight-string *ngombi* harp is the sacrosanct musical instrument of *Bwiti*. It is played at every ritual of this male initiation society so widespread among the Mitsogho and Masango of central Gabon. The resonance case represents a female body, and the first ancestor, *Disumba*, is represented by a human head at the top of the case. Occasionally, the harp is androgynous: a female head and a base in the form of legs provided with male genitals. The *ngombi* produces the sound of rumbling waterfalls, the place where genies supposedly dwell. It is the quintessential ritual instrument that allows communication between the world of man and the world of spirits, its melody being the pre-eminent «ritual» language, beyond all chants and words.

The harp is thus «the mother of all things». Of its eight strings, four are male and four female (life and death). In playing, the inspired harpist reactualizes the creation of the world by the emitted vibrations.

This type of instrument is found all over central and southern Gabon, but it is among the Mitsogho that it best preserves its significance as the communicator between men and the beyond.



36 et 37. MASANGO

Two complete reliquaries (*Mbumba Bwiti*).

Wood, copper strips and nails (basket with human skull and bones).

H (36): 28.5 cm; # 1019-65.

H (37): 30 cm; # 1019-77.

Former Arman Collection for No. 36. Former prince Sadrudin Aga Khan for No. 37.

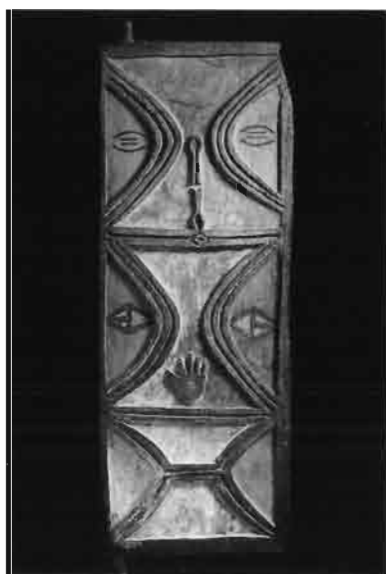
See Plates 20 and 21, pp. 121 and 123.

Here we have two Sango *Mbumba* figures of *Bwiti* of the same function as Nos. 29 and 30, probably from the Lastoursville region. For the No. 36, the flat face in an almond shape is ornamented with copper strips arranged vertically on the forehead and lower face, and horizontally on the cheeks. The nose is low relief. The eyes are represented by nails. The headdress extending backward is ornamented with copper strips and nails. The braid (here slightly restored) is the same as that worn by the Bakota, Bashake and Mahongwe and is elsewhere (Mahongwe style) represented by a vertical bun.

No. 37 is more angular, with an elongated face.

Sango *Mbumba* are stylistically related to the large complex of reliquaries of the Obamba, Mindassa, Bawumbu, and farther north, Bushamaye and Mahongwe. Shamaye style especially bridges these styles with almond-shaped face and use of strips as a basic structural element.

In «Explorations dans l'Ouest Africain» by Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza there are figures resembling this one seen on the banks of the Ogowe, between Booue and Franceville (see fig. 34, p. 47). They are associated with the more oval figures with a crest in the Obamba style. Arranged under a canopy, the small figures with lozenge-shaped bases surmount reliquary baskets undoubtedly containing skulls. Initiates and the aged of the lineage could extract the skulls and make symbolic offerings to them (food, palm wine, chicken or kid blood, etc.) to secure the aid of the departed, or at least their neutrality in the affairs of this world.



38. BAVUVI/MASANGO

House door.

Wood.

H: 1.60 m; W: 60 cm; # 1019-43.

Publication: *Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika* 1970, No. R 22, p. 259.

Tsogho, and especially Vuvi and Sango doors attracted the attention of early European travellers such as Monseigneur Le Roy, who in 1893 made many sketches of them in his journals. The door designs vary, but all derive from myths from *Bwiti* and other related cults. Here the panel is divided into three compartments filled with different motifs in low relief: at the top the distinctive symbol of *Mwiri* between two rainbows and a motif of sexual signification, the lozenge; on the bottom two lozenges, the most common sculptural motif among the Mitsogho and Bakota, and an open hand with concentric circles incised in the palm. The horizontal lines separating the compartments may represent the Moboghwe River (its name means woman's breast), the vital axis in *Bwiti* myths.

Mwiri of the populations of western and southern Gabon corresponds more or less to *Ngil* of the Fang or *Mungala* of the Bakota. It is an association of judicial character whose goal is to improve village life. The *Mwiri* symbol in this case probably means that the occupant of the house is a member of this association, and therefore, it would be dangerous to try to steal from him. He may also be an *evovi*, a highly initiated dignitary and judge of *Bwiti*, whose common symbols are the rainbow and lozenge.

There is such a variety of motifs on doors that it is useless to try to explain them one by one without the assistance of natives or the sculptors themselves. These everyday objects were carved by amateurs, each villager being capable of making his own canoe, mortar or house ladder.

It may be simply noted that even in the ordinary aspects of life, the Mitsogho and Masango demonstrated a need to embellish, to express themselves sculpturally, and to surround themselves by symbols of their beliefs.



39. BAVILI (?)

Dance mask.

Wood, pigment.

H: 28 cm; # 1021-23.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Publication: W. Fagg 1980, p. 119.

See Plate 22, p. 125.

In *Masques d'Afrique* William Fagg emphasizes the affinities of this mask to the *Ndunga* masks of the Ngoyo Kingdom of Cabinda. I think in accepting this influence that it could originate more precisely among the Bavili in the Congo region south of the Mayombe. It has an oval face, gently convex and naturalistically curved, a small, agape mouth, delicate lips, an elongated nose with slender nostrils proportionate to the whole face. These characteristics recall the early Punu-Lumbo masks previously mentioned and particularly the one from the Museum of Oxford with the visor-like coiffure (fig. 54, p. 101).

F. Hagenbucher in his study of the Loango Kingdom¹ cites the observations of Reverend Dennett (1887) and Bittremieux (1936):

"It is in the name of the *Nkisi-si* that the Badunga masked men, also called 'women of the *Nkisi-Tsi*', or even its 'soldiers', supposedly made the police force of the villages of the Kabinda. [...] The 'king's policemen' (*awho*) were chiefly used by as detectives to deter his people from committing acts of immorality. [...] Concealed under a thick mantle of banana leaves or duck feathers, the wearer of the mask, whose identity is kept secret, owns everything he touches, and, according to Dennett, condemns to crucifixion individuals who he judges to be guilty of offense against the genies by their non-observance of prohibitions."

1. F. Hagenbucher 1976, p. 47.



40. GALWA

Dance mask (*Okukwe*).

Wood, fiber and pigment.

H (without fibers): 36 cm; # 1019-63.

Acquisition: collected by Philippe Guimiot in the Lambarene region circa 1963.

Among the *Okukwe* masks of Gabon maritime region, Galwa objects are highly typified in stylistic terms. The Galwa are settled on the Ogowe, downstream from Lambarene. They are known as “the peoples of the lakes.” They are now mixed with the southernmost Fang as well as with other small Myene groups.

The Galwa style is characterized by an oval face of very regular forms with a slightly protruding forehead, coffeebean eyes with heavy, nearly closed eyelids, a straight, often thin nose, a mouth with a thin smile, and decoration of opposing black and ochre triangles (forehead, chin) on a white background. White, the color of the spirits, is in this case beneficent, while black connotes death.

Called *Ezogha*, *Tata-Mpolo* or *Ezoma-Zanomi* (which means “the big chief”), by women and foreigners, the mask is primarily the domain of men.

Like most masks elsewhere in Gabon, the *Okukwe* is at the center of village life. It sanctions the important events (mourning of important people, birth of twins, initiation, etc.), and generally contributes in a natural way to the maintenance of social order.

Today, Galwa masks are very rare. This one was collected in the early sixties. The earliest extant examples date from the end of the 19th century (published by Frobenius in 1898)¹. (See fig. 50, p. 98.)

1. L. Frobenius 1898.



41. BAPUNU / BALUMBO

Dance mask (*Okuyi*).

Wood, pigment.

H: 28 cm.; # 1019-31.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Publications: *Allerlei schönes aus Afrika...* 1957, No. 142;

W. Fagg 1980, p. 121.

See Plate 23, p. 127.

This beautiful *Okuyi* mask is an example of the most commonly represented variation of this style: a central hair “shell” flanked by short braids and fish scale scarification on the face. It is possible, but not fully supported by field research, that this scarification has a sexual meaning and that these masks are female representations. The others without this particular scarification pattern would therefore be male despite the fact that the dancing of the mask is the exclusive prerogative of men. The scarification consistently groups nine fish scales into a lozenge. In Gabon, the number nine as a multiple of three often recurs in rituals and has important symbolic meaning. The coiffure seems to be primarily feminine, although nothing is known about any former ornamental masculine coiffure which could have been as elaborate as those of women (as among the Fang where the coiffures were rather masculine).

This mask is a fine carving, remarkable for the elegance of the coiffure, the large, central “shell” of hair, and the small braids providing a contrast of volume. In profile, the headdress hangs over the forehead and much more so when actually used. The mask is tilted forward, the dancer performing evolutions at a height of three or four meters (see ill. p. 126). The dancer’s face is placed against the black posterior base of the mask that also serves to hold the costume.

The forehead is separated from the headdress by a delicate transverse braid. The details of the face show a mastery of carving: split coffeebean eyes (the eyelids are underlined by two lines arching parallel to the crevice); well modelled nose; and a mouth with red lips tucked into an impassive, figure-eight pout. This expression is prevalent in the Ogowe area.



42. BATSANGUI (?)

Dance mask (*Okuyi*).

Wood, metal and pigment.

H: 30 cm; # 1019-66.

Publication: M.-L. Bastin 1984, No. 275.

See Plate 24, p. 129.

Resolutely original in design, this “white mask” can be considered from a stylistic standpoint as a transitional form between Bapunu/Balumbo of the west and the Batsangui of the Upper Ngounie.

The nearly lozenge-shaped face is divided into three sections: a reduced forehead limited by the headdress on one side and by very wide, arched eyebrows on the other side; the median area with attenuated almond eyes that are nearly closed, and the delicately prominent nose at the level of the forehead which hangs over the eyebrows and two cheek scarifications, and, lastly, the powerfully carved mouth and chin, the lips projected upward, making a pout and a streamlined chin, scarified as below the nose.

The coiffure of a central “shell” and lateral braids is finely carved and decorated along the ridges with round-headed brass nails (the metal application is one of the characteristics of the easternmost Kota styles).

The total ensemble demonstrates a great mastery of sculpture, especially in the harmony of juxtaposing curves (eyebrows, scarification and mouth) against vertical lines (scarification under the nose and on the chin). The force of the pouting lips is accentuated by two “corners”, deeply and precisely carved to frame the mouth.

The Kaolin coating the face is effaced in spots, exposing the yellowish wood and contrasting with the black headdress and collar.



43. BATSANGUI

Dance mask.

Wood, pigment.

H: 26 cm; # 1019-30.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Publication: L. Perrois 1979, fig. 268; W. Fagg 1980, p. 120; *2000 Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, No. 54.

Masks with cheek and forehead scarification originate from the hinterland in the border region between Gabon and Congo-Brazzaville. It is a region inhabited by the Batsangui, Bandjabi, Bawumbu, and more easterly, the Mindassa and Mindumu, all belonging to the Kota-Obamba-Ndjabi complex.

Similar to the mask called *Duma* by the Congo Bakota discovered by E. Andersson in N'tina village, this mask comes from this vast stylistic sub-group which constitutes the Congolese fringe of “white masks.” The face is more convex and volumetric than Punu/Lumbo variants where the face is generally triangular under a wide forehead. This face is divided into three sections: the forehead with a wide, inverted “T” scarification, well separated eyebrows, and an enormous, thick-lipped mouth under a small, short and wide nose, and a horizontal scarification rising vertically in front of the ears to form the band of the headdress at the top of the forehead. The profile view is especially pleasing because it is possible to grasp the total dynamism of the sculpture: headdress curved forward, protruding forehead, short nose, overhanging mouth, and receding chin. The modelling of the flesh in a rather naturalistic manner is more static than the preceding Punu/Lumbo mask but not without charm in the play of fuller volumes.

It may be surprising to some to find such masks outside of the coastal zone from where the style spread. Cogent argument would show, however, that these ethnic groups and their art styles were not closed worlds. All of these peoples, near the borders of the Loango Kingdom longtime vassals of the *Mani-kongo* and for centuries were in contact. Because of their cultural and commercial relations, it is logical to think that artistic forms were also circulated and modified according to different concepts. (See ill. p. 128.)



44. BANDJABI

Dance mask.
Wood pigment.
H: 32 cm; # 1019-62.
Unpublished.

This mask showing signs of deterioration was probably collected among the Bandjabi, rather far from the Balumbo/Bapunu from whose *Okuyi* masks it is copied.



45. BAVUVI

Dance mask.
Wood and pigment.
H: 34 cm; # 1019-32.
Josef Mueller Collection.
Acquisition: before 1939.
Unpublished.
See Plate 25, p. 131.

This mask is made in such a way that the face of the spirit is beautifully represented in soft relief: bulging forehead, recessed eye sockets and an ovoid band defining the entire face and forming hair at the top. The double arch of eyebrows, the eyes in a horizontally slit almond shape, and the small, half-open mouth complete these characteristics. The whitish color of the face (a bit restored between the eyes and mouth) is adorned with *Mwiri* signs on the cheeks and a beard painted under the mouth (insignia of dignitaries). The face was completely hidden under a mass of cloth attached all around the mask, and flush with the face.

The Vuvi sub-style is the apex, or at least one of the poles, of the process that from one end to the other goes from figurative and naturalistic forms on the coast to abstract signs of the region of the Offoue and the Lolo. I say "apex" because it seems that stylization is less spontaneous in sculpture than in the corresponding figuration. Reduction into simple, decorative signs springs from reflection on form and from profound introspection which among the Masango and Bavuvi is deeply instilled through a long initiation in the world of symbols, as much verbal and auditory as visual.



46. MASANGO

Dance mask (*Mvudi*).
Wood and pigment.
H: 32 cm; # 1019-26.
Josef Mueller Collection.
Acquisition: before 1939.
Unpublished.

This mask is a stylistic hybrid in the sense that there seem to be two divergent tendencies present: Tsogho forms plus more naturalistic forms from the west (eyebrows, bridge of the nose, thick-lipped mouth) and a tendency toward geometric and abstract forms from the east (flat forehead, polychrome, incised eyes, flat, simple headdress). The eyebrow arches are prominent and the bridge of the nose on the same vertical plane. The face is whitened with Kaolin and a small amount of ochre. The forehead is colored ochre and white in quarters. The eyebrows and bridge of the nose are black like the top of the headdress.

This type of mask has a forehead more prominently overhanging than is found among the Bawandji and even among certain peoples of the Upper Ogowe. It is called *mvudi* or *bodi* and appears at all public celebrations. Its meaning seems lost. Among these populations, the masks come out at dawn or twilight for funerals or initiations. They perform rather acrobatic and grotesque dances that no longer frighten women and children.

Generally, several masks come out one after another, dance, then, disappear at the end of the village behind the houses.



47 et 48. FANG

Chokers (*akure*).
Brass.¹
D (46): 18.5 cm; # 1034-68.
D (47): 18.5 cm; # 1034-69.
Josef Mueller Collection.
Acquisition: before 1942.
Unpublished.

These two chokers, the most massive one for a woman and the other for a man, were generally worn until death, at least for women.

After being poured into a mold, the zinc and copper alloy was hammered and incised with a burin for the most intricate decorative motifs. The copper was imported into Fang country. In fact, this metal was not exploited as an ore anywhere in central or northern Gabon. This came from mines in the Congo. Later, it is European copper imported in the form of "neptunes". These were small dishes of a sort serving as gifts as well as currency, and in making jewelry (see fig. 27, p. 33).

1. Copper, brass and bronze are designated by one word, *ngo*. By extension it is used to indicate all metal ornaments.



49. FANG

Choker.

Brass.

D: 20 cm; # 1034-71.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1942.

Unpublished.

Women's chokers often worn in pairs are extremely heavy. They were closed onto the neck of the woman by a blacksmith (see ill. p. 156). Only after several months following the death of the woman could they be broken off. Those worn by men (the division of the two types is not absolute) were generally lighter and unincised; two sharp ridges along the circumference are their only decoration.



50 et 51. FANG

Chokers.

Brass.

D (50): 12 cm; # 1034-115.

D (51): 14 cm; # 1034-70.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1942.

Unpublished.

See Plate 26, p. 157, for No. 51.



52 et 53. FANG

Bracelets (*akal-e-ngo*).

Copper alloy.

H (52): 6.5 cm; # 1031-109.

H (53): 10.5 cm; # 1031-110.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1942.

Unpublished.

See Plate 26, p. 157, for No. 53.

Of all the ethnic groups in Cameroon, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea the Fang were accustomed to wearing not only helmet wigs (see Cat. Nos. 55 and 56) but jewelry such as anklets, bracelets, leg covers, necklaces and nosechains. Most was worn permanently and not simply for celebrations as shown in photographs from the period (see fig. 61, p. 138.)

Decorative motifs – triangles, crescents, square arabesques, bands – are finely incised on all of the visible surface.

The bracelets here are probably for the wrist or forearm. Biceps bracelets were much lighter. The blacksmith made them by hammering a thin strip of metal (copper and zinc alloy) before incising motifs on them with a burin.



54. FANG

Dagger and sheath (*ntsakh*).

Wood, iron, lizard skin, copper.

L: 43.5 cm; # 1019-56.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Unpublished.

See Plate 27, p. 159.

Fang arms included lances, javelins and daggers or glaives. This is a typical dagger. It has a wooden handle gently carved to facilitate holding, a guard decorated with brass cord, and an extended double-edged blade. The lower part of the blade is adorned with two points covered with brass cord. The blade itself is decorated by incised dotted lines and crescents. These motifs are also found on architectural elements, masks, and tattoos.

The sheath (*abam*), remarkable for its full form, is enlarged at the bottom. It is made of light wood, brass cord and lizard skin affixed by round-headed copper nails, the same kind used on ancestor figures.



55 et 56. FANG

Helmet-wigs (*nlo-o-ngo*).

Vegetal fibers, glass beads, copper nails, fabric, buttons and cowrie shells.

H (55): 25 cm; # 1034-46-A.

H (56): 18 cm; # 1019-46-B.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1942.

Unpublished.

These wigs styled in the form of a helmet were still being worn by the Ntumu and Betsi at the beginning of the 20th century. They are the object of much care and attest to the taste of the Fang for spectacular adornment. They are called *nlo-o-ngo*, i.e., “the head with shirt buttons”; *ngo* means “garment or tunic.” Upon the arrival of the Whites, who distributed packets of shirt buttons as gifts, buttons were considered elements of adornment or money but rarely as fashion accessories before 1920. Attached directly to the hair, the wig constituted an important prestige item for men and women.

Most *Byeri* figures are represented wearing this type of helmet wig, with or without braids, back appendage, and crests. Note that the study of Fang adornment remains to be done.



57. FANG

Flywhisk (*akwa*).

Wood, elephant or hippopotamus skin.

H: 29.3 cm (handle 8.2 cm); # 1019-61.

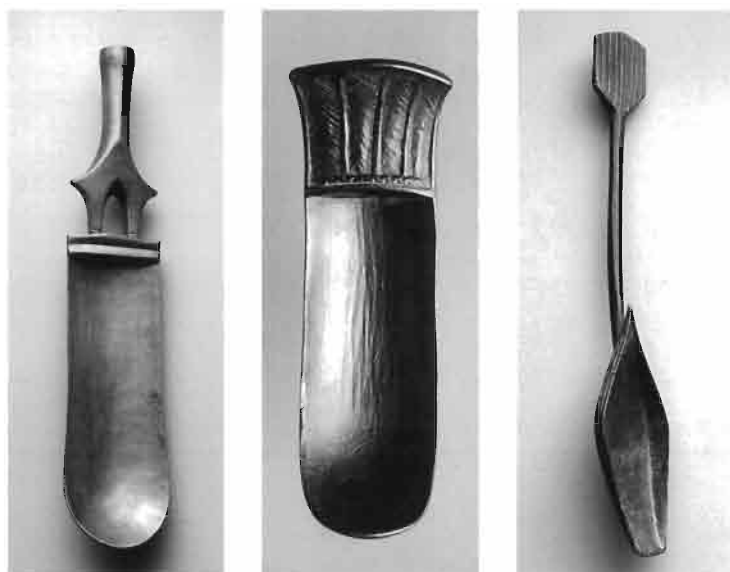
Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1942.

Unpublished.

Flywhisks are found almost everywhere in Gabon, fitted with either monkeyhair or a leather round like this one. It is an instrument of state for chiefs and high dignitaries, and equally important as the cane and ritual gong.

The handle was ornamented with an anthropomorphic figure – a body, bust or, simply, a face. In this case there are four finely worked faces with protruding forehead and the inordinately long nose of Fang figures. As with any object used over a long period of time, the patina is an impressive brilliant black. This object was called *akwa* among the Make Fang. Others had handles with geometric motifs.



58, 59 and 60. FANG (?), Ogowe region

Spoons.

Wood.

L (58): 31.1 cm; # 1019-72.

L (59): 13.9 cm; # 1019-71.

L (60): 31.8 cm; # 1019-74.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1942.

Unpublished.

These three spoons represent only some of the shapes found in Center Gabon. The handle of the one on the left represents possibly a stylized human figure.



61. NORTHERN FANG, Mabea sub-style (Southern Cameroon)

Female ancestor figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Wood.

H: 70 cm; # 1019-5.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: July, 1939 from Charles Ratton.

Publications: *Sculptures d'Afrique* 1977, cover and p. 109; *Exotische Kunst...* 1981, p. 97.

See Plate 28, p. 161.

The Mabea and Benga are two ethnic groups settled along the coast of southern Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon (Libreville region). The figures of these groups are easily recognizable as Fang. This is one of the most attractive figures in the Barbier-Mueller Museum Collection. It is a female effigy of well balanced proportions, medium-sized head (less than a fourth of the height), elongated trunk, and slightly flexed legs. It has all the characteristics of the Mabea sub-style: head projected forward, prognathous mouth, long, thin lips padding the teeth, negligible chin, and well defined nose; prominent eyebrows, slightly sunken eye area, naturalistic eyes, and carved out eyelids and pupil; large ears; double crested or "shell" helmet with a sort of double occipital bun representing pulled back hair.

The body is naturalistically carved, albeit somewhat stylized: well modelled shoulders and clavicles, small, pointed breasts like udders, extremely long arms, especially the forearms, hands held near the upper thigh, slightly distended stomach as in all Fang styles, and a prominent navel. On the back, the omoplates and spine are indicated. The hips and buttocks are conceived as an extension of the powerful legs that are slightly parted to support the figure. Its adornment consists of biceps and wrist bracelets as well as anklets. There is no scarification represented on the reddish wood with a light patina.

Based on its most consistent morphological elements, the Mabea sub-style corresponds to the neighboring sub-styles, Ngumba, Bulu and Beti. These groups occupy the region between Yaunde in the north and the border of Gabon in the south. Although they were all active in the production of

(continued on next page)



61. (continued)

sculpture, relatively more is known about objects from Gabon than from Cameroon. It seems that Ngumba and Mabea figurative sculpture is the most accomplished of the total production in the area. This could mean that these were the only sculpture centers to survive and to show a certain stylistic continuity when Fang figures were collected between 1880 and 1920. The Bulu and Beti sub-styles probably disappeared earlier.



62. NORTHERN FANG, Ntumu sub-style

Male ancestor figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Wood.

H: 55 cm (statue: 29.5 cm); # 1019-19.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: January 1939 from Anthony Moris.

Publication: 2000 *Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, No. 46.

See Plate 29, p. 163.

This ancestor figure is typically Ntumu: clearly “longiform” proportions, i.e., an inordinately long trunk, small legs and thighs, strong calves, and a large head (a third of the total height). The legs of the figure are incomplete. From below the knee they are carved as part of the base, a thickness of fifteen centimeters. There are no feet. Perhaps this figure was the finial of a cult house post that was cut at the base¹. In any case, the figure is carved from a wood cylinder: the trunk, a centered amphora-shape; the arms pressed against the sides; hands in front of the chest holding a cup for propitiatory offerings; and the thighs slightly larger than the circumference of the base. The sex of the figure is clearly indicated (phallus without testicles).

The face and head are basically Ntumu: concave, heart-shaped face, protruding forehead as polar opposite of the prognathous lower jaw; and wide, pouting mouth. The long, delicate nose extends from the scarification and ornamental nail on the forehead. The eyes are made of small pieces of copper foil. Nails also ornament the prominent umbilicus and phallus. A wide necklace and biceps bracelets are carved into the wood mass. The coiffure is an *nlo-o-ngo* helmet with a wide sagittal crest.

From a sculptural point of view, the Ntumu sub-style seems to be one of the mainstays among the many Fang styles. It is found in southern Cameroon along the lower Ntem River and around the northern and eastern limits of Equatorial Guinea and northern Gabon, near Bitam and Oyem.

1. The carved posts of the Fang are insufficiently documented and, in any case, very rare. They originate primarily in Equatorial Guinea. Unfortunately, some were cut in order to make independent figures.



63. NORTHERN FANG, Ntumu sub-style
Ancestor figure (*Byeri*).
Wood.
H: 23 cm; # 1019-38; (right arm restored).
Josef Mueller Collection.
Acquisition: before 1939.
Unpublished.

Only the upper part of this small figure was carved – the chest, shoulders, arms and head. Certain characteristics identify it as Ntumu: concave, heart-shaped face; worn nose and mouth; metal disk eyes; wide and bulbous forehead adorned with scarification in classic motifs, i.e., a long sagittal band extending from the top of the forehead to the base of the nose and two triangles diametrically opposed on both sides of this line; unadorned helmet coiffure. The chest, navel and arms are roughly carved as if only the head had to be identified. The trunk is slender and cylindrical. It is slightly depressed longitudinally on the back, indicating the spine. The arms are separated from the sides.

This is actually a commemorative figure rather than a *Byeri* guardian. It is difficult to specify the role of these small figures that usually accompany the more common large figures measuring between 40 and 60 centimeters.



64. NORTHERN FANG, Ntumu sub-style
Reliquary figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).
Wood.
H: 44 cm; # 1019-34.
Josef Mueller Collection.
Acquisition: before 1939.
Publication: *Barbier-Mueller Museum, 1977-1982*, commemorative plate, cover.
See Plate 30, p. 165.

This male figure has lost its lower legs. Such as it is, “longiform” proportions are evident. The trunk and neck of the same diameter stretch toward the medium-sized, spherical head (a third of the total figure height). Well developed shoulders cap the central cylinder, arms separate from the body, and minimally carved hands protect the abdomen on both sides of the navel. The buttocks are somewhat steatopygous.

The triangular, heart-shaped face under a wide, protruding forehead has recessed eye sockets, a large nose and a wide mouth above a small chin that is hardly visible. The coiffure is exceptional: it is a sort of helmet consisting of small braids molding the upper cranium and occiput. This is an unadorned figure apart from the vertical scarification on the forehead and nose.

These figures usually placed on top of the reliquary barrel served not only as guardians but also as a symbolic evocation of the ancestors whose relics were preserved.



65. NORTHERN FANG, Ntumu sub-style

Reliquary figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Wood.

H: 69 cm; # 1019-6.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: 1939 from Anthony Moris.

Publications: *Sculptures d'Afrique* 1977, fig. 8, p. 23; L. Perrois 1979, fig. 43.

See Plate 31, p. 167.

This handsome, male *Byeri* effigy has a Ntumu morphological structure: slender, tall trunk between a medium-sized head and legs measuring slightly more than a third of the total height. The shoulders in typical rounded relief (with the mark of biceps bracelets) connect to short well-formed arms. Fang sculpture styles present arms and legs strongly shaped into full muscular masses. The trunk seems planted into the legs that are in a tense, half-flexed position with a wide support in back.

The head is subtly balanced by the curvature of the concave face, the bulging forehead, and the coiffure. The coiffure consists of a centrally crested helmet with an elegant posterior neck protector beginning at the upper forehead and decorated by a transverse band. The small, heart-shaped face has metal disk eyes, a flattened nose, and an extremely wide mouth that is barely indicated above the small, spout-like beard.

The simple decoration consists of vertical scarification on the forehead, two horizontal lines above the eyebrows, a crescent on each cheek in front of the ears, and on the abdomen, a long triangle of horizontal lines. The back is carefully carved with a long spine in relief. The hands in front of the thorax probably held a small cup for offerings and libations. Usually, this part of the figure was broken off by native vendors because it was too magically charged. The figure, on the other hand, a symbolic evocation of the ancestors, did not have as much value.



66. NORTHERN FANG, Ntumu sub-style

Reliquary figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Wood, brass.

H: 23 cm; # 1019-7.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Unpublished.

This is another miniature *Byeri* figure although male in this case. It can be appreciated for both its carving and patina. A generally "longiform" structure: an elongated trunk of the same diameter as the neck, and the shoulders and arms thrust forward but still attached to the trunk. The meditating personage expresses controlled tension, especially in the short, powerful legs solidly planted in the base. There is little decoration. The head, frontally and in profile, is particularly well carved. The carver seemed to know how to find the right balance between the face from the sinusoidal profile and the helmet headdress provided with a slightly curved neck cover. The sober face is typically Ntumu in its large forehead and concave eye sockets defining the heart-shape of the cheeks and mouth. The mouth is wide and placed where the chin should be. The back is also well carved like Ngumba and Mabea figures of southern Cameroon.



67. NORTHERN FANG, Ntumu sub-style

Reliquary figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Wood.

H: 42 cm; # 1019-39.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Publication: 2000 *Jahre Kunst Westafrikas* 1982, No. 45.

This *Byeri* figure, judging by its morphological structure and decoration, belongs among the transitional styles between the Ntumu and Betsi from the region between Oyem, Mitzi and Medouneu, farther west. In “longiform” style, it has a slender trunk and arms well separated from the sides; its proportions are medium. Only the trunk can be considered long-lined, the neck being the same diameter and on the same axis. The half-flexed legs, however, are long. The shoulders and arms are thrust forward as the hands hold a carved goblet in front of the stomach. The chest and navel of this male figure point forward. The phallus is circumcized. A copper ring (*asung*) is fitted on the right ankle.

The head is notable for the originality of its carving. Few similar objects are known. One of them was in the Paul Guillaume Collection but with definite “breviform” proportions (*Statuaire Faï* 1972, p. 244, fig. 163).

In profile, the head has a short forehead, a concave face, well separated eye sockets, a prognathous lower jawbone, and a thick-lipped mouth projected forward. The nose and one of the eyes are damaged. It is as if they had been carved with the express purpose of disfigurement. The remaining intact eye looks like a split coffeebean. The eye sockets determine the relief of the cheeks (zygomatic arches) which is rare in Fang styles. The stylized ears are well indicated. The coiffure is composed of a bun tied with a band and flattened crests falls low on the neck. The only anterior scarification is on the temples and forehead. On the back, the spine is ornamented by a set of depressed, vertically aligned, incised lozenges. During initiations, the figures were taken out of the sanctuary-house and used as ritual puppets at the skull presentation and the genealogy lesson. For that, a small theater was erected between two trees and the manipulators hidden by a raffia curtain.



68. SOUTHERN FANG, Okak or Betsi sub-style

Reliquary figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Wood.

H: 23 cm; # 1019-35.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Unpublished.

This “breviform” *Byeri* figure (i.e., upper parts equal to the head and legs), probably belongs to one of the southernmost Fang sub-styles, in Equatorial Guinea or Gabon, Okak to the west, Betsi and Mvai in the center and Nzaman to the east. It is at one end of the range of Fang figurative sculpture which is opposed by the Ntumu style of the northwest and its southern Cameroon variations. From a distance Fang figurative sculpture seems homogenous but detailed analysis reveals significant variations, especially in terms of the basic structure of volumes and sculptural techniques. The characteristics of these southern styles include: full, “breviform” proportions, a tendency for the head, trunk and legs to be equal in height, an air of monumentality and power supported by formal details, volumetric head covered by a helmet wig with central crest, arms pressed to the sides, hands in front of the chest in a gesture of offering, short, amphoral trunk with a prominent navel, thick-set thighs and calves nearly in a seated position, back support for setting on the reliquary box.

The male figure, small in size but monumental in presence, has a typical Betsi body, as much in the proportions as in the details of carving: curved shoulders, distended stomach, horizontally positioned thighs, spinal depression, and full buttocks. The head, however, is less successful, especially the face which is like Okak objects from Equatorial Guinea. The split coffeebean eyes are damaged. The large mouth with teeth under a short nose sets the face off balance. The holes under the arms serve either to attach the object to something or to manipulate it as a marionette.



69. SOUTHERN FANG, Betsi sub-style

Reliquary figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Wood, metal bracelets.

H: 17.2 cm (figure: 12.5 cm); # 1019-3.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Unpublished.

The proportions of this miniature figure are “breviform”, i.e., the head and trunk are the same height but disproportionate compared to the atrophied legs. It has a typical Betsi head of volumes subtly balanced between the forehead and the large mouth. The wide, centrally crested helmet-wig is pulled back and tied into a bun. In spite of the small dimensions, the head seems massive and strong. The eyes are round-headed nails. The arms are tightly pressed against the body and come forward to the abdomen where the hands hold a small offering cup.

The role of these figures has yet to be determined. The posterior support, very wide compared to the figure, indicates that the figure was at one time tied to a reliquary alone or accompanied by larger figures.

Other miniature sculptures do not have an attachment handle. Conceived as a head, figure or a half-figure, they served an ornamental function as arm emblems of dignitaries (*asu-e-ya-minkun*, i.e. «the mask on the upper part of the arm») or poet musicians (*Mvet* initiates) and on combs, spoons, and other utilitarian objects.



70. SOUTHERN FANG, Mvai sub-style

Reliquary figure (*eyema-o-byeri*).

Wood.

H: 42 cm; # 1019-40.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: January 25, 1939 from Anthony Moris.

Unpublished.

The legs and forearm are missing from this figure. Nevertheless, it is a good example of southern Fang style and the Mvai style in particular. The Mvai sub-style is distinct from the other Fang sub-styles. Perhaps it is the result of a regional “school” that was limited in space and time since only a few objects in this style are documented. G. Tessmann worked among the Ntumu and Mvai (or Mvae) and photographed some of their sculpture. Some of it is now in the Lubeck Museum.¹ The Mvai are dispersed along the Ntem River in two groups separated by the Ntumu and Okak.

The Mvai sub-style, identifiable from photos taken in the Minvoul region in 1968, is characterized by a massive head covered by an alluring helmet-wig consisting of three triangular crests, a tied bun, and three long, posterior braids. The sex of the figure is clearly indicated by the phallus and developed musculature (pectorals, shoulders, back, thighs). The face is curvilinear with a medium-sized forehead hanging over recessed eye sockets and the split coffeebean eyes are adorned with round-head copper nails for pupils. Typical of Mvai figures are a long, flat nose, a pouting mouth above a receding chin, and schematic ears. The trunk is a thick amphoral shape under a well carved chest. The umbilicus protrudes in quarter of a sphere unlike the cylindrical ones of the Ntumu. It was also hidden by the hands which perhaps held a small offering cup. When it was originally collected in the field, the cup was probably broken off to desanctify the object. The lower abdomen is scarified with the common triangle motif.

The most outstanding Mvai figure known is in the Rietberg Museum in Zurich. It is a seated figure wearing an extraordinary coiffure of irregular fullness.

1. Part of this collection was destroyed at the end of Second World War.



71. SOUTHERN FANG, Betsi sub-style

Figure and reliquary box (*Byeri*).

Wood, sewn bark.

H: 51 cm (figure plus posterior support: 59 cm, reliquary box alone: 24 cm); # 1019-18.

Former Butheaud Collection.

Publications: Catalogue of the Le Corneur-Roudillon Gallery, Paris, May 17, 1968, No. 22; L. Perrois 1979, fig. 62.

Characteristic of the Betsi sub-style of the southern regions of Fang country, this handsome *Byeri* figure is carved of hard wood and has a hard, brilliant patina. The support allows the figure to sit on the cover of the reliquary bin. It has a stocky, amphoral trunk, strong legs in a seated position, a massive head, a truncated, ogival face, and a helmet headdress of wide braids forming a ribbon tied bun in the back. The sober face has the following characteristics: eyes incised as a slit on a small, concave face, flattened nose, and a wide toothed prognathous mouth above the chin or beard. The hands are, as always, joined in front of the chest.

In profile as well as from the back, it is possible to admire the ability of the artist to create an impression of serenity and balance. The treatment of the head is remarkable in terms of the arrangement of volumes which are never bunched together but rather are harmoniously poised.

It is not certain that the reliquary bin was made to correspond to this figure that has been reproduced standing on the bin. The bin contains cranial caps brought out at initiations or healing rituals. Certain bins contained up to twenty crania, but usually the relics were reduced to the least cumbersome bones along with one or two cranial fragments.



72. FANG, Betsi sub-style (Okano Valley ?)

Reliquary head (*Byeri*).

Wood, copper.

H: 36 cm; # 1019-13-A.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: January 25, 1939 from Anthony Moris.

Publications: *Allerlei schönes aus Afrika...* 1957, No. 150; L. Perrois 1979, fig. 23.

See Plate 32, p. 169.

This head coiffed in *bikoma* braids is a masterpiece in the Fang style of the region east of Mitzi in the Okano Valley.

Harmoniously proportioned, the triangular face is balanced between a protruding forehead and sunken eye sockets. The cheek lines lead to a pouting mouth. Intended to be seen from the front, this sculpture takes on volume from the braided coiffure, full on top and narrow at the bottom and the interplay of well separated braids. In profile, the face and cranium seem crushed in. The face is carved, but the volume of the head is not.

In the back, the middle braids are carefully carved, those on the edge still better finished with a linear decoration of lozenges. At the top, a double tenon permitted the attachment of a tuft of eagle and touraco feathers which each figure was supposed to have.

Note that the face is oozing with resin like many other Fang objects from the Nzaman-Betsi region. The eyes are indicated with copper nails.



73. SOUTHERN FANG

Harp finial.

Wood.

H: 22.5 cm; # 1019-13-C.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: circa 1939 from Anthony Moris.

Publication: *Sculptures de l'Afrique Noire* 1971, No. 106.

This Betsi head carved from dense wood has an attractive, blackish, lightly oozing patina. It is different from the preceding piece in its volume, e.g., the spherical neurocranium on the massive neck. It brings to mind the characteristics of the southern Fang sub-styles: helmet coiffure with braids and a wide, central crest; protruding forehead, concave, heart-shaped face; mouth and chin projected forward; tiny, circular eyes; and large ears at the edge of the hairline.

In the present case, the short neck and the presence of an oblique hole lead one to think that it was probably the finial of a harp. Although Fang harps (*ngomi*) are usually ornamented with smaller human heads, or even double heads, there are some that have heads of this kind.



74. SOUTHERN FANG, Betsi sub-style (?)

Reliquary head (*Byeri*).

Wood.

H: 23 cm; # 1019-13-D.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Unpublished.

See Plate 33, p. 171.

This *Byeri* reliquary head is as elegant from the front – with its elongated face, protruding forehead, and narrowing around the pouting mouth – as it is in profile – the sinusoidal curve of the headdress corresponding to the curve of the face ending in a tapered lower jaw. Here it is possible to speak of Ntumu influence because of the well placed lines and volumes, especially the elongated heart face. The lost eyes were undoubtedly made of small copper plates affixed with resin. The nose is restored. The wood, although of light patina, exudes a blackish resin. The helmet coiffure with three crests is reminiscent of the southern sub-styles.



75. FANG, Woleu-Ntem region

Dance mask¹ (*Bikereu*).

Wood, pigment.

H: 53 cm; # 1019-20.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939 from Charles Ratton.

Publications: L. Perrois 1979, fig. 290; W. Fagg 1980, p. 117.

See Plate 34, p. 173.

This mask has a familiar appearance: visor-like eyebrows, inordinately large nose, erect ears, thick-lipped mouth with bared teeth. The sagittal crest on the top of the head refers to the frightening head of a forilla (*ngi*) or a White person (traces of a moustache). The Fang produced many composite caricatural masks, combining animal and human elements to create horrifying monsters like this one. They contrast quite obviously with the serene expression of the ancestor figures.

Bikereu masks issue directly from *Ngil* masks. They were still in use at the time of the last war in the Lambarene region. Since then, they are still produced, but serve in dances of folkloric character.

Stylistically speaking they can also be associated with Okande and even Duma forms from the mouth of the Ogowe.



76. FANG

Dance mask (*Ngontang*).¹

Wood, pigment.

H: 26 cm; # 1019-27.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Publications: L. Perrois 1979, fig. 104; W. Fagg 1980, p. 112.

See Plate 35, p. 175.

This Fang mask, like those in the Lubeck Museum (collected by G. Tessmann between 1904 and 1909), is of light wood, small size, and pure form: a protruding forehead, recessed eye sockets, and a concave, heart-shaped face terminated by a narrow mouth placed at chin level as on some *Byeri* figures.

This is a good example of a single face *ngontang* ('the young white girl') mask (see p. 149). Its particularity lies in the opposition between the curves of the face (edge of the cheeks, frontally and in profile, forehead, recession of the lower eye area and ears) and the flatness of the headdress created by three large braids styled upward along the sides and top of the forehead.

In a way, this form extends from or corresponds to the basic morphological design of *Ngil* masks, although the latter are more elongated, occasionally to the point of extending the curve of the profile from the forehead to the chin.

1. The dance mask is called *asu-ngyel* or *asu-nkukh* 'the face of the man who dances'. The specific name of the dance (*Bikereu*, *Ngontang*, *Ngil*) designates the particular type of mask.

1. Incorrect reference to "*Ngil*" in the caption of the reproduction on page 106 of L. Perrois, *Arts du Gabon* (1979); (information cited by W. Fagg in *Masques d'Afrique* 1980).



77. FANG

Four-faced helmet mask (*Ngontang*).

Wood, pigment.

H: 39 cm; # 1019-23.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: circa 1935 from Charles Vignier.

Publications: L. Perrois 1979, fig. 94; W. Fagg 1980, pp. 108-109.

See Plate 36, p. 177.

As mentioned earlier concerning Fang white masks (see p. 149), helmet masks can also have several faces: two, four (like this one here) and even five or six.

Like the mask from the former Paul Guillaume Collection, which later belonged to Helena Rubinstein, one of the faces is larger than the other three. The right side is indicated by viewing holes for the dancer at the bottom of the helmet. The face on this side is the largest of the four and decorated on the forehead (two sets of two vertical dotted lines) and the chin (three dotted lines possibly representing a beard?). The three other faces are more lozenge-shaped with identical scarification on the forehead (two circular arches), on the cheeks (two lines of horizontal dots), and under the nose (a small omega symbol), but different eyebrows (two faces with linear eyebrows and one with eyebrows in a double line of dots).

Colored with kaolin, all the faces are whitish. On the base of the helmet four white, horizontal bands stand out against the blond tint of the wood. The non-descript headdresses were blackened with a red hot machete.

These multi-faced masks were and are still often danced at celebrations without great religious solemnity.



78. FANG

Dance mask.

Wood, kaolin.

H: 24 cm; # 1019-16.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Publications: L. Perrois 1979, fig. 14; W. Fagg 1980, p. 113. See Plate 37, p. 179.

Undeniably, this mask, which can be reasonably attributed to the Fang, poses a problem. In general morphological structure it is Punu-Lumbo, e.g., volume of the face, roundness of the cheeks and chin, side braids of the visor-like headdress, blackened coiffure, slightly protruding eyes arched in an almond-shape, and mouth in the form of a horizontally stretched figure-eight. The mask has a "Fang" appearance, however, in the characteristic design of the upper part of the face, i.e., forehead, nose and ornamentation (forehead, nose and upper eye area) created by a curved double median line and a double arch of eyebrows rising at the temples. Other pieces pose the same problem. For example, the mask at the Musée de l'Homme from the former Philippe Guimiot Collection (No. 65521), published by M. Leiris and J. Delange (1967; fig. 378), which has a Fang face (eye sockets, nose, cheeks) embellished with the details of Punu/Lumbo diagnostic features (eyes, coiffure, mouth). As to the figure-eight form of the mouth, it is seen again on a typically Punu/Lumbo mask from the Linden Museum in Stuttgart. The visor-like coiffure is characteristic of the oldest *Okuyi* Punu/Lumbo masks, the type represented by an object from the Oxford Museum in Great Britain. Collected by Bruce Walker in 1867 in the Ogowe region (lower Ngounie) and bought in 1884 by Pitt Rivers, it is the oldest "white" mask known today (see fig. 54, p. 101). Here, the frontal ornamentation of the bridge of the nose, and the eyebrows and temples are so typical of the Fang (from the Bulu to the Ntumu) that this mask cannot be attributed to anyone else. Because the ornamentation has a meaning of the first order, which is imposed on the stylistic model itself (especially on objects of stylistic transition), and brings to mind Punu/Lumbo diagnostic features without being absolutely typical, I think that it should keep the Fang identification.



79. FANG

Long horn helmet mask.

Wood, pigment.

H: 43 cm (with horns: 85 cm); # 1019-24.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: 1939 from Charles Ratton.

Unpublished.

According to an old label glued to its bottom, this helmet mask was collected by missionaries of St. Pierre Mission in Libreville. It is attributed to the Pahouin.

The facial forms and decoration motifs make this carving typically Fang.

It can be classified with *ngontang* masks despite its single face. This face is rectangular and whitened entirely with kaolin. It has small, close-set eyes, a large nose, and long eyebrows reaching the edge of the face. The headdress formed by six "shells" is surmounted by a pair of long, arched horns painted alternately red and white as a sign of aggressivity. On the back of the helmet are several symbolic motifs: two mirrors (meaning that the mask is omniscient and ubiquitous); a circle around a star (i.e., spider), checkerboard, coupled triangles, semi-circles, and a double arch representing a face without eyes. These symbols refer to the mask's power (the triangles and double arch are from the south, signs of *Okukwe* and *Mwiri*, the judicial associations) and clairvoyance in matters of witchcraft (mirrors).



80. FANG

Janus-faced mask.

Wood, kaolin.

H: 24.5 cm; # 1019-25.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: before 1939.

Unpublished.

This Janus-faced mask made of hard wood must have been worn as a crest because its circumference is smaller than a man's head. The two faces whitened with kaolin are typical of Fang carving: eyes set close to the straight nose beneath prominent eyebrows; small, pouting mouth (cf. *Ngil* masks); skull-cap headdress ornamented by linear, geometric and checkerboard patterns incised on a black background.



81. FANG

Dance mask (*Ngontang*).

Wood, kaolin.

H: 31 cm; # 1019-76.

Unpublished.

See Plate 38, p. 181.

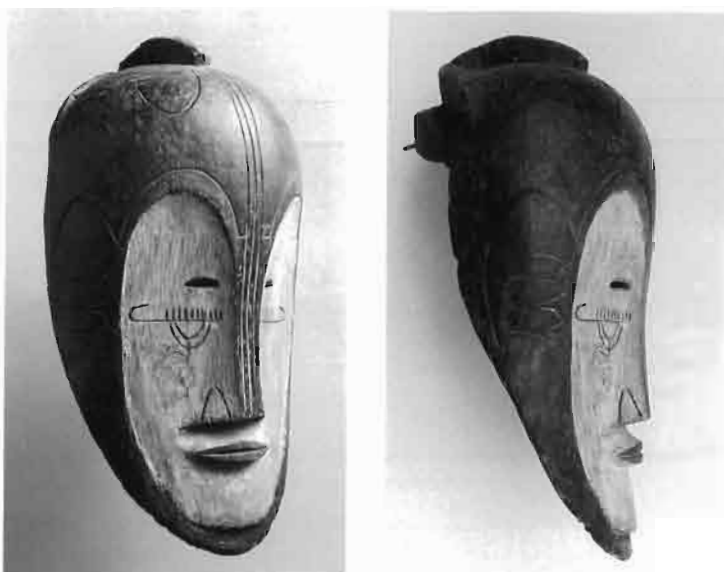
Stylistically, this mask is an illustration of the interpenetration of forms of ritual objects, both in time and in function, between the *Ngil* figures (generally more elongated) and those of the *Ngontang* dance (rather spherical or "lunar").

This is undeniably a Fang mask as proven by the volumes (protruding forehead and gently recessed face), decoration (vertical scarification from the top of the forehead to the chin, fine pyroengraved eyebrows), and coating (white *ekon* clay). The face is unusual in the very simple, round holes for the eyes and mouth.

The design shows considerable sculptural sensitivity, in delicacy and nuance, and in the contrast of the hard vertical median scarification with the volumes and curved lines which constitute the mask.

In reference to the find of J.M. Pitres¹ made between 1920 and 1930 in the Abanga region, north of the Ogowe, it might be thought that this magnificent object comes from the southern Fang, probably Betsi of the Mitzi area.

1. See Catalogue of the sale of October 23, 1968, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, Nos. 33 and 59.



82. FANG

Dance mask (*Ngil*).

Wood, pigment.

H: 44 cm; # 1019-14.

Josef Mueller Collection.

Acquisition: circa 1935 from Charles Vignier.

Publication: W. Fagg 1980, p. 111.

See Plate 39, p. 183.

The clear form of this mask is unlike most other known *Ngil* masks: heart-shaped face divided by a long, flattened nose whitened with kaolin; eyes of simple incisions; pouting mouth but not to the edges of the face; protruding forehead; and sagittal crest. The linear motifs resemble the Ntumu and Mvai designs noted by G. Tessmann. These designs suggest tail feathers of the kite and swallow, tree branches, scorpion, frog feet, parrot talons, and spider – symbolic elements related to the magico-religious myths and rituals of associations such as *So*, *Schok* and *Ngil*.

There is hardly any information on these large Fang masks. We know very little concerning authentic examples in collections. They have not been used in the last sixty years in the most active areas (Equatorial Guinea, Ntem Valley).

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Mouila: southern Gabon locality. 92.

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Ngounie: southern Gabon river. 22, 23, 88, 91, 92, 95, 100, 201, 207, 222.

Ngoutou: Ogowe-Ivindo land elevation. 39.

Ngoyo: former kingdom of the Cabinda. 205.

Ngwali: former designation of a region occupied by the Obamba. 40.

Niari: river in the Congo. 32, 40.

Northern Gabon: 22, 26, 135, 136, 213.

Ntem: river dividing southern Cameroon and northern Gabon. 141, 213, 218, 224.

N'tina: Congo village. 207.

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Okanda: Middle Ogowe savanna zone. 19.

Okano (valley of the): tributary of the Ogowe. 139, 142, 146, 219.

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index of peoples

The orthography of the names of the peoples is keeping up with current and official orthographic system (e.g. Bakota, Bapunu, Balumbo). When the name is employed as an adjective, the prefix is dropped (e.g. Kota, Punu, Lumbo) except for Galwa, Mpongwe, Orungu, Obamba, Eshira, Okande, Aduma, Mahongwe, Adjumba and Fang, which are used as both proper names and adjectives.

Adjumba: Middle Ogowe, towards Gome Lake. 96.

Aduma: bend of the Ogowe. 32, 37, 38, 46, 48, 92, 93, 96, 102, 201, 209, 221.

Akele (Ungomo, Mhamwe, Mbahouin, Ntombili or Mbississiou): Middle Ogowe, Ogowe-Ivindo, Upper Ogowe. 37, 38, 40, 54.

Akowa (Akua; Myene name for the Pygmies): Estuary and Middle Ogowe. 21.

Ambete (see Mbete): 37, 38, 39, 40, 54, 187, 192, 193.

Ampini, sub-group of the Obamba: Upper Ogowe. 39.

Andjinigi (see Ndjini), sub-group of the Obamba: Upper Ogowe. 39.

Apindji: Lower Ngounie. 96.

Asingami (sub-group of the Obamba): Upper Ogowe. 39.

Bahongo (name for the Pygmies among the Mitsogho and Masango): central and southern Gabon. 21.

Bakanigui: Upper Ogowe. 37.

Bakele (see Akele): 22.

Bakola (name for the Pygmies among the Bakota): northeastern Gabon. 21.

Bakongo: southwestern Congo. 40, 88, 197, 198.

Bakota: Ogowe-Ivindo. 5, 10, 12, 19, 21, 26, 27, 28, 32, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 50, 54, 57, 93, 96, 103, 153, 187, 188, 190, 192, 194, 195, 201, 204, 205, 207.

Bakwele: Ogowe-Ivindo and Congo. 10, 12, 44, 54, 56, 57, 58, 194, 195, 196.

Balumho: Nyanga. 10, 22, 48, 54, 87, 88, 89, 90, 92, 93, 96, 99, 102, 103, 197, 198, 199, 200, 205, 206, 207, 208, 222.

Bandassa: Upper Ogowe and Congo. 96.

Bandjabi: Ogowe-Lolo and Congo. 37, 38, 96, 102, 103, 207, 208.

Bane (relatives of the Fang): southern Cameroon. 141.

Bantu (congeries of peoples related on the basis of linguistic evidence, located from the Equator to southern Africa; 450 languages, approximately 200 million people): 27.

Bapunu: Ngounie, Nyanga. 10, 22, 23, 54, 87, 90, 92, 93, 95, 96, 99, 100, 102, 103, 155, 197, 198, 199, 200, 205, 206, 207, 208, 222.

Baseke: Coco-Beach coastal region.

Bashake (relatives of the Bakota): Bowe region. 37, 40, 44, 204.

Bateke: Upper Ogowe and Congo. 19, 37, 38, 39, 40, 102, 198.

Bateke-Tsaye: southwestern Congo. 18, 37.

Batsangui: Ogowe-Lolo and Congo. 37, 38, 48, 96, 203, 207.

Bavarama: coastal zone, Fernan Vaz, Gamba. 90, 92.

Bavili: south of the Mayombe, Congo. 22, 23, 87, 88, 89, 96, 98, 103, 197, 198, 199, 205.

Bavungu: coastal zone, Ngounie. 90, 92.

Bavivi: central Gabon. 10, 92, 93, 94, 96, 103, 202, 205, 208.

Bawandji: bend of the Ogowe; Upper Ogowe. 37, 92, 93, 96, 203.

Bawumbu: Upper Ogowe. 37, 40, 96, 192, 204, 207.

Bayombe: Mayombe. 87, 88, 89.

Bekouk: name for the Pygmies among the southern Fang. 21.

Bembe: Congo. 90.

Benga: coastal region of Libreville. 214.

Beti: southern Cameroon. 54, 136, 150, 153, 214.

Betsi: southern Fang, Gabon. 136, 137, 139, 141, 142, 147, 212, 217, 218, 219, 220, 224.

Bocheba (Ossyeba, see Make): Bowe region. 44.

Bongomo (Akele group): 22.

Bulu: Beti of southern Cameroon. 54, 136, 141, 146, 150, 153, 214, 222.

Bushamaye (Kota group): Ivindo. 37, 38, 39, 42, 54, 187, 189, 191, 204.

Enenga (Myene group): lake region of the Middle Ogowe. 96.

Eshira: Lower Ngounie. 22, 92, 95, 103, 153, 200.

Eton (Beti group): Yaunde region, Cameroon. 136.

Ewondo (Beti group): Yaunde region, Cameroon. 54, 136, 141, 153.

Fang: southern Cameroon and Gabon. 5, 7, 11, 12, 19, 21, 24, 27, 28, 30, 38, 40, 44, 54, 56, 57, 58, 92, 94, 96, 98, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 141, 143, 144, 146, 147, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 187, 198, 200, 205, 206, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224.

Galwa: lacustral region, downstream from Lambarene. 96, 98, 99, 149, 150, 206.

Ivili (Vili group of Zile Lake near Lambarene): 96, 101.

Laali: Congo. 38.

Mabea: coastal zone, southern Cameroun. 136, 139, 141, 142, 214, 216.

Mahongwe (Kota group): Ivindo. 18, 37, 38, 42, 43, 44, 45, 57, 187, 188, 189, 190, 194, 204.

Maka: people of southeast Cameroon. 54, 141, 150, 153.

Make (Mekina, Ossyeba or Bocheba): Fang of the Ovan and Makokou region. Ivindo. 44.

Masango: Central Gabon. 27, 41, 46, 48, 54, 90, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 102, 103, 190, 201, 202, 204, 205, 208, 209.

Mbahouin (see Akele): 22, 40.

Mhamwe (see Akele): 37.

Mbede (see Mbete): Congo. 37.

Mbete (Ambete, Mbede, Mbeti, Obamba, Mbama, Ambiri, et al): Upper Ogowe and Congo. 21, 37, 40, 193.

Mbissisiou (see Akele): 22.

Mhoschi: Congo, Likuala. 40.

Mekenp (sub-group of the Fang): Medouneu region.

Mekina (see Make; name of the southeastern Fang): Ivindo. 44.

Mindassa: Upper Ogowe. 26, 37, 42, 192, 204, 207.

Mindumu (Ondumbo): Upper Ogowe. 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 46, 48, 93, 96, 190, 191, 192, 193, 207.

Mitsogho: Central Gabon. 19, 24, 25, 27, 40, 48, 54, 57, 90, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 102, 103, 190, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 208, 209.

Mpongwe: Estuary, Libreville. 26, 92, 99.

Mvai (sub-group of the Fang): Ntem Valley. 141, 142, 150, 217, 218, 224.

Myene (group of peoples related on the basis of linguistic evidence): Estuary, Middle Ogowe. 22, 26, 54, 57, 87, 99, 103, 206.

Ndambomo (Kota group): Ivindo. 37, 44, 54, 194.

Ndjinini (Andjinigi; sub-group of the Obamba): Upper Ogowe.

Ngumba (Pahouinized group of Maka origin): Lolodorf region, southern Cameroon. 54, 136, 139, 141, 142, 150, 214, 216.

Ngutu (sub-group of the Obamba): northeastern Gabon. 39.

Ngove: coastal zone of southern Gabon. 90.

Nkomi: Fernan Vaz. 144.

Ntombili (see Akele): 21.

Ntumu (sub-group of the Fang): Southern Cameroon, Guinea, northern Gabon. 136, 139, 141, 142, 143, 146, 149, 150, 153, 212, 213, 215, 216, 217, 218, 220, 222, 224.

Nzaman (group of the southern Fang): Gabon. 136, 139, 141, 217, 219.

Obamba (see Mbete): Upper Ogowe. 26, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42, 46, 54, 103, 153, 187, 190, 191, 192, 193, 204, 207.

Okak (Fang sub-group): Equatorial Guinea. 136, 141, 142, 143, 149, 153, 217, 218.

Okande (group of peoples): bend of the Ogowe. 54, 87, 92, 221.

Ondumbo (see Mindumu): Upper Ogowe. 39, 40, 41, 46, 92, 191.

Orungu: region of the Ogowe delta.

Ossyeba (Bocheba; see Make): 42, 43, 44.

Oungomo (see Akele): 37.

Pahouin: name formerly used in the literature to designate Fang groups. 8, 9, 10, 54, 135, 138, 146, 223.

Pende: Zaire. 90.

Pubi (Puvi, Povi or Vuvi): Central Gabon. 103.

Puvi (see Pubi): .

Pygmies: 21, 22, 27, 92.

Vuvi (see Pubi).

index of vernacular names

Vernacular names are transcribed according to a highly simplified phonetic system, which does not indicate tones. In every case, the spelling of the names in quotations is respected.

Vowels **ou**: as in well

Consonants **g**: hard g as in go
s: as in same
gh: soft guttural sound
kh: hard guttural sound as in the German nach

aban: Fang dagger cover. 211.

akal-e-ngo: type of Fang bracelet. 211.

Akom: Fang initiation dance associated with metallurgy. 28.

akure: Fang choker. 209.

akwa: Fang flywhisk. 212.

ana-a-ndembe: board decorated for Bwiti. 202.

asu-e-ya-minkun: "the mask of the upper arm" of the Fang. 218.

asung: Fang anklet. 217.

Asu-ngi: wearer of the large Ngil mask of the Fang. 152.

asu-ngyel (asu-nkukh): "the face of the man who dances", a Fang dance mask. 221.

avho: guardian of the chief among the Bavili. 205.

Awoled: Ngil "medicine" of the Fang. 152.

badunga (pl.): Bavili mask. 98, 205.

bakisi basi (pl.): Bavili genies. 88, 90.

banzi: first degree initiate of Tsogho Bwiti. 25.

Bikereu: masked dance of the Middle Ogowe Fang. 57, 149, 153, 221.

Bikoma (pl.): braids. 219.

bilongo: "magic medicine" in southern Gabon. 197.

Bodi (cf. Mvudi): masked dance of several peoples of the Ogowe-Lolo and Upper Ogowe. 102, 209.

boho-na-bwete: "face of the Bwete", refers to the form of the Mahongwe reliquary. 43.

buti (pl. muti): among the Bavili, a sort of genie represented by small portable figures. 90.

Bwete (or Mboy): ancestor cult of certain Kota peoples of the Ogowe-Ivindo. 25, 40, 42, 44, 45, 57, 188, 189.

Bwiti: society and initiation cult of the Mitsogho of the Upper Ngounie; a syncretic form of the Mitsogho cult among the Estuary Fang. 24, 25, 27, 92, 95, 103, 144, 202, 204, 205.

Byeri: ancestor cult of the Fang. 11, 12, 27, 136, 137, 138, 143, 144, 149, 150, 212, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220.

Disumba: mythical personage of Tsogho Bwiti. 202, 204.

djokelebale: Kota anklet. 187.

Duma: Kota mask, Congo. 207.

ebandza: Bwiti temple of the Tsogho. 25, 94, 95, 201, 202.

ebomboya-mekuku: bag of skulls among the Mahongwe. 190.

ehoo: clay of gray or white color among the Mitsogho. 202.

Ehukulukulu: "owl" mask of the Mahongwe of Mekambo. 194.

Ekekek: masked dance of the Fang of the Woleu-Ntem. 57, 149, 153.

ekon: Fang word for white clay, or kaolin. 224.

ekuma: braid (Fang dialect). 144.

Ekungala: name of Okukwe mask. 99.

Emboli (M'boli and Empoli): dance mask of the Ivindo Bakota. 54, 56, 57, 194, 195.

Evina edu: «child», Fang ritual mask. 152.

evovi: judge, grand initiate of Tsogho Bwiti. 203, 205.

eyema-o-byeri: Fang Byeri figure. 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218.

Ezogha: "the great chief," mask name among the Galwa (see Tuta-Mpolo and Ezoma-Zanomi). 206.

Ezoma-Zanomi: 206.

Fiotes: name for the Bavili in colonial literature. 87.

funu: Bavili "princes". 88.

gekombo: wood used by the Tsogho for carving figures. 202.

gheonga: figure used in certain rites of Tsogho Bwiti. 202.

Gon: Bakwele masked dance (northern Congo). 56.

iboga: a plant root chewed for a long time to produce a hallucinogenic effect. 25.

Indo: initiation society of the Mpongwe of the Estuary. 99.

Kombe: the sun among the Mitsogho, source of life and supreme judge. 203.

Kono: one of the rites of Tsogho *Bwiti*. 95, 103.

kwanga: stool. 188.

Lisimbu: female initiation association of the Ivindo Bakota. 26, 93.

Manikongo: title of the Kongo king (17th century). 207.

mavala:na:ga: Vili mask. 98.

Mba Baña: name for ancestor figure among the Fang. 144.

mbege-feg: the chief of Fang *Ngil*. 150, 152.

mbii: black charcoal among the Mitsogho. 202.

M'boli: see *Emboli*. 56.

Mbomo: python among the Bakota. 195.

mboto-mwa-empoli: "face of *Empoli*," or *Emboli* mask of the Bakota. 56.

mboy: see *Bwete*. 40.

mbulu: reliquary basket (cf also *musuku* and *nsuwu*). 190.

Mbulu Ngulu: "reliquary basket with a face;" the term "*ngulu*" refers to the sculpture. 27, 189, 190, 191.

Mbulu Viti: Janus-faced reliquary figure (Andersson). 192, 193.

Mbumba: ancestor cult and ritual paraphernalia among the peoples of Central Gabon (Masango, Aduma). 27, 92, 95, 204.

Mbumba Bwiti: small reliquary figure of the *mbumba* cult. 201, 204.

Melan: ritual and hallucinogenic plant among the Fang or northern Gabon. 137, 144.

meven-me-esam: initiation shed for *So*, Fang. 152.

Migembo: *Okukwe*, of a sort, in Libreville. 99.

Mohoghwe: "the breast of woman," a mythical Tsogho river. 205.

mod-esam: the master of *Ngil* ceremonies among the Fang. 150, 152.

moghondzi: ghost in Central Gabon. 103, 208.

mokenge: Mitsogho ritual gong. 203.

mombe: ancestor cult of the Mitsogho of Central Gabon. 201, 202.

momweni: rocouyer tree among the Mitsogho; its seeds are crushed to make a red pigment. 202.

mondo: an ochre-red rock used to color Tsogho figures and masks. 202.

Motove: see Geographical Index.

Movei: death in the Tsogho language. 102.

Mukulu: Kota initiation association. 93.

Mukuyi: Eshira, Punu and Lumbo masking association. 99, 100.

Mungala: masked dance of the Ivindo Bakota. 26, 30, 93, 153, 187, 194, 205.

Mungunda: mask of the *Mungala* association. 187.

musale: Kota and Fang throwing knife in the form of a toucan beak. 30, 187.

musuku: see *mbulu*. 190.

muti: see *buti*. 90, 199.

mvét: Fang harp-lyre; initiation chant. 218.

mvon-ngi: candidate for initiation into the Fang *Ngil*. 151, 152.

Mvudi (see Bodi): masked dance of certain peoples in eastern Gabon (e.g., Aduma, Bandjabi). 48, 102, 209.

Mwesa: name of a mask of the Bakwele north of Mekambo. 54, 194.

Mwiri: male initiation society in central Gabon. 26, 100, 103, 153, 205, 208, 223.

ndembe: *Bwiti* altar of the Tsogho. 202.

Ndjembe: female initiation society of the Middle Ogowe and Estuary. 26, 99.

Ndomba: one of the *Okukwe* of the Middle Ogowe. 99.

Ndungu: masked man among the Bavili. 205.

Ngadi-na-digala: kind of *Okukwe* in Libreville. 99.

Nganga: healer, diviner, master of rites. 28, 87, 194.

nganga-mungala: chief of the *Mungala* dance. 187.

ngi: gorilla. 150.

Ngil (ngi, Ngel): masked dance and former association of the Fang. 26, 100, 147, 150, 151, 152, 153, 205, 221, 223, 224.

ngo: Fang "clothing". 212.

ngo-e-ya-minkun: Fang "upper arm bracelet". 211.

ngombi: Mitsogho ritual harp used in *Bwiti* ceremonies. 204.

ngomi: Fang harp. 220.

ngon: young girl in Fang. 149.

Ngontang: "the young White girl," masked dance of the Fang. 56, 57, 58, 147, 149, 151, 152, 221, 222, 224.

Ngoy: “panther” among the Bakota; initiation ritual. 26, 56, 93.

Ngulu: carved face among the southern Bakota (see *Mbulu Ngulu*). 188, 190.

nguru: see *ngulu*. 190.

Niangom: «man», Fang. 152.

Njobi: initiation association and prophylactic ritual of the Upper Ogowe. 25, 93, 153.

nkadena: ritual herb in the Fang *Ngil*. 151.

nkhosi: Bavili figure. 197, 198.

nkisi (pl. *bakisi*): genie among the Bavili. 88, 205.

nlo: head in Fang.

Nlo-byeri: Fang reliquary head.

nlo ngon ntan: 146, 149.

nlo-o-ngo: “the head with shirt buttons,” type of helmet coiffure among the Fang. 144, 212, 213.

nom-ngi: ordinary initiate of *Ngil* of the Fang. 150.

nsekh: reliquary coffer. 219.

nsuwu: see *mbulu*. 190.

ntsakh: Fang dagger. 211.

Ntumbu nsoni: name of a plant associated with Vili masks. 98.

nvuduku sa:la: mask name, Vili. 98.

Nyima-Makomwe: initiate of the second degree in Tsogho *Bwiti*. 25.

Nzambe-Kana: mythical personage of Tsogho *Bwiti*. 202.

Nzambi: primordial god; mythical hero. 88.

ogobe: wood used for carving Tsogho figures. 202.

okuka: bellows of the Eshira of the Lower Ngounie. 200.

Okukwe: masked dance of the Galwa of the Middle Ogowe. 57, 100, 149, 150, 153, 206, 223.

Okuvi: masked dance of the Bapunu and Balumbo of the Ngounie. 90, 99, 100, 101, 198, 206, 207, 208, 222.

Ombudi: one of the *Bwiti* ritual of the Tsogho. 95.

Ombwiri: female initiation association of southern Gabon. 26.

omoa: masked genies of Fang *Ngil*. 152.

Omoa ngon: «woman», mask name, Fang. 152.

onzil: Fang; see *musel*. 187.

osele: Kota; see *musel*. 187.

oso: “face” in the Tsogho language. 57.

padouk: red wood; the dust used in body decoration. 201.

pemba: Tsogho word for kaolin ore white clay, a very common pigment in Gabon. 201, 202.

Pibibuze: “man,” Bakwele mask name (Congo). 58, 196.

povi: judge, grand master of Tsogho *Bwiti*. 25.

Satsi: an arrangement of initiation rites among the Ivindo Bakota. 56. 194.

schok: initiation ritual of the Fang. 224.

sinkhosi (pl.): Vili figures. 88, 89, 90.

So: major initiation ritual of the Beti of Southern Cameroon. 26, 137, 146, 147, 150, 152, 224.

Tata-Mpolo: Okukwe mask name. 206.

tchibila: Bavili sanctuary. 88, 90.

Tchitomi i mbata: mask name, Vili. 98.

Tsenge-gebamba: sort of *Okukwe* in Libreville. 99.

tsingo: 201.

tsombo: ocre or yellow argillous soil among the Mitsogho. 202.

umbumbu: brass “neptune” on the Upper Ogowe. 32.

Ya-Mwei: *Bwiti* ritual of the Tsogho. 95, 103.

appendix: excerpt from the chronological table established by H.O. Neuhoﬀ¹

11.25.1472	The Portuguese navigator <i>Ruy de Sequeira</i> , discovers Cape St. Catherine. About the same time, <i>Lopez Gonzalvez</i> reaches Cape Lopez and Fernão Vaz at the Fernan Vaz Lagoon.	1862	The C. <i>Woermann</i> factory expands its activity from Liberia to southern Guinea and establishes agencies in Gabon.
1485	The Portuguese navigator <i>Diego Cão</i> , at the time of his second exploration of the mouth of the Congo, and in southwest Africa circumnavigates Cape Lopez and Cape St. Catherine.		French naval officer <i>P.A. Serval</i> , and naval doctor <i>Griffon du Bellay</i> make a reconnaissance survey of the interior course of the Ogowe.
1611-1620	In three successive voyages the Baselian doctor <i>Samuel Braun</i> arrives at the Estuary of Gabon, Cape Lopez, and Mbanio Lagoon.	1863-1865	Third expedition of <i>P. Du Chaillu</i> to the massif which will later bear his name (Du Chaillu massif).
16th-19th centuries	Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch and English are hardly involved in commerce on the coast of Gabon. Establishment of several missions.	1865-1867	The English merchant <i>R.B.N. Walker</i> travels up the Ngounie and the middle course of the Ogowe to Lope-Okanda.
1780	Birth of <i>Denis (Antchouwe Kowe Rapontchombo)</i> , king of the Mpongwe.	1867	<i>A. Aymés</i> , French naval officer, surveys the middle course of the Ogowe up to the Ngounie confluence.
1817	The English missionary <i>T. Edward Bowdich</i> visits the Gabon Estuary.		Death of <i>King Louis</i> .
1820	First incursion of the Fang in northeastern Gabon.	1871	Accord between <i>King Nkombe</i> of the Galwa and <i>E. Schulze</i> on the establishment of a Woermann office at Adolinanongo close to present-day Lambarene.
2.9.1839	The captain of the vessel <i>Edouard Bouët-Willau- mez</i> , mandated by the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce and by king of France, <i>Louis-Philippe</i> , signs a treaty with <i>King Denis</i> , one of the first cession of territory on the left bank of the Gabon Estuary.	1871-1873	<i>E. Schulze</i> explores the Middle Ogowe up to Lope-Okanda.
3.18.1842	Second treaty with <i>King Louis (Angulle Re-Dowe)</i> , a cession of territory on the right bank of Gabon Estuary.	1873-1874	The marquis <i>Victor de Compiègne</i> and <i>Alfred Marche</i> make a reconnaissance survey of the middle course of the Ogowe up to the Ivindo confluence.
9.28.1844	Arrival of Reverend <i>Jean-Rémy Bessieux</i> in the Gabon Estuary and founding of the catholic mission Sainte-Marie. <i>J.-R. Bessieux</i> will be named first bishop of Gabon in 1848.	1873	Professor <i>Adolf Bastian</i> , president of the Geographical Society of Berlin, lands on the coast of Gabon and the Congo.
1849	Establishment of Libreville.	1873-1876	German Expedition of Loango in present-day Congo-Brazzaville and southwestern Gabon.
1851	First expedition of the American <i>Paul Belloni Du Chaillu</i> in the hinterland of the Gabon Estuary and the Bays of the Monda and Muni.	1874	<i>Dr. Paul Güssfeldt</i> surveys the interior course of the Nyanga.
1855-1859	Second expedition of <i>P. Du Chaillu</i> . New exploration of the hinterland of the Gabon Estuaries as well as Cape Lopez, and penetration up to the Ngounie from the Fernan Vaz Lagoon.	1874-1876	Lenz Expedition on the Ogowe. <i>Professor Lenz</i> surveys the upper course of the Ogowe up to its confluence with the Sebe River and is the first European to conduct geological research in Gabon.
		1874	Death of <i>Nkombe</i> , sun-king of the Galwa.
		1875-1878	First expedition of <i>Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza</i> . This French naval officer discovers the headwater of the Ogowe and traverses the Alima Basin.

1. H.O. Neuhoﬀ 1970.

1876	Death of <i>King Denis</i> .	1907-1909	Lubeck Expedition in Pahouin country. <i>Dr. Günter Tessmann</i> conducts an ethnographic study of Spanish Guinea and northern Gabon.
1879-1882	Second expedition of <i>P.S. de Brazza</i> in regions of the Ogowé, the Congo, Niari and Kwilu.		
1883-1885	Third expedition of <i>P.S. de Brazza</i> in regions of the Ogowé and the Congo.	1.15.1910	Creation of the Federation of French Equatorial Africa.
1884	The Fang reach Cape Lopez.		
12.24.1885	Franco-German accord on the drawing of the boundary between Cameroon and Gabon.	11.4.1911	Accord between France and Germany on the respective possessions of the two countries in Equatorial Africa (Congo-Maroc treaty). The greatest part of the Woleu-Ntem and the northern section of the present Estuary region are annexed to the new Cameroon.
1888	Creation of the French Congo colony, encompassing all of the territories situated between Libreville, Loango and Brazzaville.		
1888-1904	Libreville is the capital of the French Congo.	1913	<i>Dr. Albert Schweitzer</i> establishes a hospital in Lambaréné.
3.15.1894	Further Franco-German accord on the drawing of the boundary between Cameroon and Gabon.	1916	Return to the boundaries of 1885. Expulsion of the German from Equatorial Africa.
6.27.1900	Franco-Spanish accord on the drawing of the boundary between Spanish Guinea (Rio Muni) and Gabon.	8.17.1960	Gabon gains independence.

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