

Hermetic huts and modern state: the politics of iconoclasm in West Africa

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In 1993 I was walking with my friend Lamin around his native village in Guinea when he pointed out at a manioc field: 'And this is where our sacred bush used to be.' 'Used to be?' I asked. 'Yes', he replied; 'it was here that we used to do the initiations into manhood, but Asekou, a Susu man, cleared it in 1957; he put an end to our custom.' This comment triggered my long-term interest in an iconoclastic movement that I wanted to understand.

Lamin was a Baga man, a member of an ethnic group most recognized by Westerners for carving beautiful 'African art' pieces, such as the *nimba* and the *banda* headdresses, the *acol* or *elek* figurines, the serpentine *bansonyi* and so on. Baga material culture, well represented in Western museums since the turn of the twentieth century, had been at the heart of the interest in non-Western art typical of many early twentieth-century artists; both Picasso and Matisse, for instance, owned pieces from this Guinean group.¹ Beautiful they were, but what to Western eyes were art objects were also, to the eyes of many young Baga men and women, part and parcel of a 'landscape of fear', to use Yufi Tuan's apt concept.² All those masks, sculptures and headdresses were in fact steeped in contradictions common to iconic representations in Africa in general:³ they could protect and heal, but they could also punish and kill (Figure 12.1). Much as we may despise iconoclasm because it entails the destruction of a cultural 'heritage', we must also try to understand the perceptions of those living with these objects. In my research on the iconoclastic movement, I made a conscious effort to listen to the voices of the iconoclasts⁴ as well as to the voices of those who suffered the violent attacks of the former and who hid the objects away from them.

Many of the colonial and post-colonial African religious movements were started by charismatic leaders who, in the name of a monotheistic creed,



12.1 Nicaud, Asekou Sayon and his Followers in the Village of Mare, February 1957, with the Objects They Confiscated, 1957, photograph. Courtesy of Maurice Nicaud, archives Marceau Rivière, Paris

persuaded their followers to destroy objects attached to non-Christian or non-Muslim practices. The destruction of such objects became part of the cleansing of the society and of the making of a new social, religious and political order.⁵ Unlike other forms of iconoclasm in which people destroyed images because they *represented* something that ought not to be represented at all, in most African iconoclastic movements, images were destroyed because of what they *presented*; they materialized invisible forces used to maintain social control and to oppress a social group. Normally, and certainly among Baga, these iconoclastic movements were intended to destroy the power of elderly 'big men' by subaltern groups of youths, women and ethnic strangers. Maybe the uniqueness of the case here analysed is that it was religious iconoclasm paving the way to an overtly political one. When this iconoclastic movement took place in 1956–57, Guinea was still a French colony, but from 1958 until 1984 it was a modernizing socialist state which prohibited past religious practices and set up demystification campaigns to suppress any possible return to the old, 'irrational' religion.

The introduction to Baga territory and religious history that my friend Lamin offered me was interesting for several reasons. First, when the events he referred to took place (in 1957), Lamin was very young and did not remember them very well, but in 1993 he knew the exact location of the sacred bush. In the second place, the very transformation of the infamous 'sacred bush' into a productive manioc field epitomizes the kind of 'rationalizing' transformation that the landscape suffered as a consequence of the 1957 iconoclastic movement and of the subsequent political regime. Finally, Lamin wrongly identified Asekou's ethnicity. He was not a Susu man, but a Malinké (i.e. from much farther away), but to today's memory this is not relevant: for Baga, Susu has become almost a synonym of 'stranger', and what really matters is the stranger factor in the movement. So, who was the stranger and what did he do?

A stranger arrives

It would be hard to establish when and where Asekou Sayon started his jihad against 'sorcery' and 'fetishism' in Guinea. He was probably a jihadist working against witchcraft already in the 1940s in the hinterland of Guinea. But it was his jihad against Baga, in coastal Guinea, that is particularly remembered there, probably because the Baga were famous for a rich material culture and ritual life that was significantly altered by Sayon's deeds. For the specific case of Baga Sitem (one of the seven linguistic subgroups of the Baga), we know that his jihad took place between August or September 1956 and May 1957.⁶ Although I have visited some of the Bulongic (a Baga subgroup also

known as 'Baga Fore') villages where he conducted his jihad, my analysis will concentrate on Baga Sitem, a group for which the events seem to have been more traumatic than for other Baga groups.

The first Baga Sitem village Sayon visited was Bukor, which unlike other Baga Sitem villages was not in the 'Canton Baga' but in the 'Canton Monchon-Bigori'.⁷ It was at the end of July 1956 that people of that village first heard of him, while he was performing the Islamic purifying ceremonies known as *kalimas* in a village farther south. He was said to be powerful and to detect evil doers.⁸ He was also reported to be teaching some beautiful Sufi songs to the young people. Some Baga youths became very curious about it all. At that time, the youths were at odds with their elders for many reasons, crucial amongst which, judging from the accounts that I have gathered, was that the elders did not allow youths to attend the dancing parties of the youth wing of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA).⁹ This of course was not the only reason, but it was the last straw. In fact, at the end of the colonial period, youths were craving for social change, while elders, many of them in coalition with colonial chiefs, were maintaining 'traditional' power relations that were based on ritual and were in general very oppressive for the youths.

Some young people, angry with their elders and encouraged by the President of the RDA committee in Bukor, a Muslim man, went to see Sayon and invited him to Bukor.¹⁰ Asekou Sayon agreed to their request and told them that in a few days he would be going to their village, if they brought him enough wood and money. Wood was needed to keep the fire going during the all-night-long *kalima*, and also to build fences around them and around other appropriated sites intended for mosques. Whenever he arrived in a village, Asekou Sayon created a space surrounded by a big fence. In the middle of this space he sat, with a red robe representing, according to many, the purifying fire of his action, holding his trident and his sword, next to a white flag and to a *tabala* (the drum used by colonial chiefs). Each morning the women of the village had to 'hail the flag', bringing water, rice and five francs each. Women, like strangers and young men, acquired a strong role in this movement, in contrast with their lack of agency in colonial political and religious life. Whether man or woman, everybody was encouraged to buy an *asmani*, a liquid people had to wash with and drink in order to cleanse themselves. Those who refused to buy or drink the purifying liquid were *ipso facto* accused of evil thoughts. In the villages, Sayon nominated a few young men and women to be his 'police'. Not surprisingly, all the 'police' members I met were, in fact, Susu, Nalu and other strangers living among the Baga. These people were provided with whistles and were in charge of organizing the village.¹¹ They were also in charge of finding out, by torture if necessary, which houses were the 'big houses' of each Baga descent group and where its

ritual objects were kept.¹² Sayon then entered the 'big house' and retrieved the objects.

Asekou Sayon arrived in Bukor in September 1956. With his red robe, the turban, the trident, the sword and his body covered with artefacts meant to offer mystical protection, we can imagine the feeling of strangeness he inspired. The fact that his language was Maninka (the language spoken by Malinké people) increased the aura of awe at his arrival. At that time, Maninka speakers were very uncommon in that part of coastal Guinea. According to one of my interviewees, some believed that Sayon's was a language spoken by spirits in communication with God. Sayon spoke always in his mother tongue, with the aid of a translator. According to some accounts, he was very fluent in Susu too, but preferred to speak in Mandekan to deceive or control people.

When he arrived in Bukor, Sayon stayed for a few days in the Susu ward, not in one of the six Baga wards. He stayed there with the youth team who had come with him in order to teach the songs to Bukor's youth. The team returned a few days later and was replaced by Bukor youths who had learned the litanies. Sayon's following was huge, probably hundreds of people, 'all living together at the edge of a village' as one of my interlocutors put it. Asekou Sayon arrived in Bukor at the height of the rainy season, when Baga young people were supposed to spend much of the day in the rice fields and when the rice from the last harvest started to run out. As such, Asekou Sayon was a religious preacher who not only withdrew the most active forces of society, but who also represented a high cost for the village and, nevertheless, was difficult or impossible to resist.¹³ This became a concern for the representatives of the Baga and other ethnic unions in Conakry and Boké and, as a result, they complained to the authorities about Sayon (and other jihadists) and their exploitation of the population.

Asekou Sayon stayed in Bukor for over a month (probably two), performing the *kalima*, converting people to Islam, clearing the sacred bush, cutting down the big silk-cotton trees, and destroying whatever objects or products were surrendered to him. These objects included indigenous medicines, masks, sculptures and headdresses. Unfortunately, however, material destruction was not his only intervention in village life. He and his followers were also very aggressive toward people unwilling to surrender the objects. On these grounds, René Amadou was one of the first men accused of sorcery by Sayon's followers in a Baga Sitem village. When I interviewed him, in 2001, he told me they accused him of having invisible radios, airplanes, telegraphs and other typically 'modern' things that he was using to enrich himself. Back then, like today, sorcery was conceived of as an illegitimate means for individuals to acquire things for themselves at the expense of other people. René Amadou was beaten almost to death, and was left badly injured in a stream.

Sayon and his team marked the spot where eventually, in 1958, the villagers were to build the big mosque. The spot was precisely the place where the performance of *amanco ngopong*, Baga's most awesome spirit, used to take place. This appropriation of sacred spaces is typical of the movement, and of religious expansion across cultures. In Minar, where Sayon's disciple Asekou Abdoulaye conducted the jihad, the mosque was built over the recently cleared sacred bush; sacred sites were also appropriated in Kouffin and Tolkoc. In other villages, people constructed the school over the cleared wood, thus transforming a space reserved for secret Baga initiations into one dedicated to national public education. Whether located in schools, mosques or manioc fields, spatial appropriation replaced a ritual landscape that tied a people to their past with buildings that promised a flourishing future. According to some witnesses, when Sayon left Bukor, he entered the Canton Baga in a canoe that his followers had carved out of one of the big silk-cotton trees they had cut down in the village. The transformation could not have been more symbolic of the ethnic and religious changes that Baga were experiencing under colonial rule. The huge tree, marking a privileged place for 'pagan' sacrifices, was converted into a conduit through which Islam and the political ideas of the RDA were propagated from one village to another through the difficult tidal creeks that kept them isolated.

In Kouffin, the first village of the Canton Baga that Sayon visited, his followers cleared the sacred wood and started the building of the mosque over it. A few days before his arrival, Kouffin had been visited by F. Calisti, a colonial administrator. Robert Thomas, a Christian man and President of a Baga Sitem association in Conakry (the capital of the colony) had denounced the jihad. According to a written report, Robert Thomas had complained to the French Administration about the 'destruction of Baga custom' by a Sékou Bokary Kouressi, from Kindia.¹⁴ The French administration sent Calisti, deputy commandant of the region, in search of the villagers' opinions. The main objective of his visit was to find out whether the Islamization respected freedom of belief, in which case the French would not be in a position to censure. But it is clear that they also wanted to know whether this jihadist was impelling people not to pay taxes to chiefs, a common strategy used by RDA agitators to delegitimize the oppressive institution of the chieftaincy.

The villagers told Calisti they were pleased with Sayon's presence in their canton, and that they wanted to get rid of 'fetishes' and *feticheurs*. They did not understand why Thomas was supporting the *feticheurs*. Thomas had to withdraw his complaint, but added, according to the report written by Calisti, that 'Baga will later regret having abandoned their custom.' It is very significant that it was a Christian who said these words. First of all, Christians were more tolerant than Muslims towards what Thomas called 'custom'; secondly, the people who later regretted 'having abandoned the custom'

were, indeed, mostly Christian. Robert Thomas's reaction was also an early example of a trend very common in Guinea during the 1990s. Villagers tended to have a negative, or at least an ambiguous view about the ritual objects and other aspects of their own lived-through culture. But people living in Conakry tended to have a more positive view, being more detached from ritual objects and sacred woods, they saw them as part of a 'cultural heritage' to be preserved, not to be done away with.

Sayon had serious difficulties with Christians in villages where they were numerous, such as Mare or Katako (then the capital of the Canton Baga). In Mare, the village became divided into two halves: the Christian population living together around the small Catholic mission, and the followers of Sayon living in their own space, just adjacent. When a Catholic French missionary went to meet Sayon and complained that his all-night-long *lailas*¹⁵ made people tired and prevented children from attending school, Sayon apparently replied: 'Close your school if you wish! The sorcerers do their evil by night; it is by night that they must be caught.'¹⁶ He then threatened the whole village with a malediction if the Christians did not help him clear the sacred bush, although in his characteristic syncretistic way, he allowed them to attend church first and clear the forest later. Emmanuel, one of my Christian interviewees in that village, told me that many Christian youths participated out of fear, but also, he insisted, because they were as tired of 'custom' as a Muslim could be. As was noted by many interviewees and by missionaries' sources, despite being Christian, numerous youths thought it was a good idea to get rid of 'fetishes'. This is what we could call the 'religious evolutionist' dimension of the iconoclastic movement. Whether Muslim or Christian, in 1957, youths wanted to move from the 'darkness' of the past towards the 'enlightenment' of the future. They saw themselves as 'modern' subjects and were conceptualizing their place in the world in terms not only of a geography much wider than the 'containerized' French canton, but also in terms of a progressive temporality that was moving subjects from traditional pasts to modern futures. How to combine this with anti-colonialism (i.e. how to be 'modern' without being 'Western', and how to be African without being 'traditional') was a major theoretical preoccupation of pro-independence thinkers such as Sékou Touré, the leader of the RDA in Guinea and later President of the First Republic (1958–84).

When the youths were ready to clear the woods, Emmanuel told me, an interesting compromise was reached: while young Muslims cleared the wood dedicated to the high spirit *amanco ngopong*, young Catholics cleared the wood dedicated to *abol*, *amanco*'s 'female' counterpart. Although I did not obtain any further clarification about this interesting division of iconoclastic labour, it might be due to the particular importance of the *amanco ngopong* cult. Whereas Muslim descendants of people who had arrived more recently

controlled the *abol* cult, landowning descent groups that (as in other Baga Sitem villages) had become Christian controlled *amanco ngopong*. By focussing on *abol*, the Christian youths were keeping Sayon happy while avoiding future punishments by the elders in charge of *amanco ngopong*. And it seems that they had a point. Some years after the iconoclastic movement, one leading man of the descent group in charge of *abol* died from bee stings, and many interpreted this tragedy as a punishment for his involvement in the clearing of *amanco ngopong's* wood. One of my interviewees, who was involved in that same clearing, told me that many of Sayon's followers were surprised and disappointed not to have found *amanco ngopong* inside the wood. We will see that a similar disappointment was reported later in Katako.

After staying in Mare for one month, Sayon went to Katako, where one of his *talibs* had already started to perform the *kalimas* while Sayon was in Mare. The attitudes of the big Catholic community in Katako were diverse. On the one hand, many of them complained that the all-night long *kalimas* made it difficult for people to sleep. On the other hand, however, many Catholics felt compelled to join the *kalimas* because otherwise they risked being accused of evil doing. Again, many Catholics in Katako thought it was not such a bad idea to clear the woods and get rid of the 'fetishes', and followed Sayon without converting to Islam. According to Antoine, who had been an active member of the JAC (*Jeunesse Agricole Catholique*, a Catholic youth movement), the JAC decided that they too would collaborate with the clearing of the woods in order to forge an alliance with the RDA youths. After all, he said, the movement was about getting rid of evil elements that divided the Baga. Other Christians, though, refused to join, and in order to escape the violence they all moved to the mission, which by then was already quite a big one. When Sayon arrived, after one month of *kalimas* by his *talib*, he found a huge team ready to clear the woods.

The very day of his arrival in Katako, Sayon and his followers went to a wood and cleared it out. One of the missionaries noted that 'strangers' were disappointed not to find *amanco ngopong* there ('strangers' here meant, most probably, non-Baga speaking peoples living in Katako and surrounding villages). They also went to the 'big house' of the descent group in custody of the awesome cult *abol* and demolished it after the owners of the house had surrendered the 'fetish' to Sayon. Yet, things may have been more complex, and while Sayon claimed that he destroyed *abol*, some interviewees in the village told me that he was misled, and that people gave him a piece of wood and not the real *abol*. According to several villagers, such trickery was common in the movement; many objects were rescued while the iconoclasts destroyed ad-hoc copies: not images, but images of images; not 'false idols', as the iconoclasts thought, but false 'false idols' (see Figure 12.1). Calisti had

thought the French should have no concerns about Sayon because he was only getting rid of objects (many of which were actually bought from Sayon by French 'tribal art' collectors living in the colony). Sayon's movement declined when it transgressed the limits of iconoclasm. The first tragedy took place in Katako. During the clearing of one of the sacred woods, a young Christian boy was bitten by a poisonous snake. He was immediately taken to Asekou Sayon, whose attempts to heal the boy failed. Sadly, the boy died and people started to question Sayon's powers against evil. Furthermore, he tried to pray over the boy's body, but was severely challenged by a French missionary who took the dead boy to the Mission's graveyard. Sayon found himself in a difficult situation. Despite the tragedy, Sayon stayed in the village for another two months, mainly building the mosque and fortifying the Muslim population. He left Katako on 15 May 1957.¹⁷

A second tragedy took place a few months later. During Sayon's jihad among Mikhifore people, an ethnic group neighbouring the Baga, an old man died after being beaten by Asekou Sayon's followers, who accused him of being a sorcerer. The episode was reported to the French authorities and Asekou Sayon's activities were put to an end. Sayon was tried, condemned to prison, and only freed when President Sékou Touré declared a general amnesty at the onset of Independence, in Autumn 1958.

Sayon and his *talibs* left the Baga in 1957. In only a few months, they burned sacred bushes, destroyed ritual objects, cut down huge silk-cotton trees, beat people (sometimes to death), accused the elderly of being 'witches', promoted the activities of women, strangers and youths to counterbalance the hegemony of elders and chiefs, transformed a 'landscape of fear' into a 'rationalized' one of schools, praying spaces and cash crops, and converted many people to Islam. While some of the outcomes could be considered positive, they were the results of a disruptive social movement whose violence scarred a society and left many traumatic memories.

Routinized iconoclasm

Our society is achieved by getting rid of the failings inherited from the past; from the fetishist past, from the colonial past, and from the feudal past.

Sékou Touré¹⁸

'When I arrived in the Baga villages' – Sayon told me – 'there used to be some round huts with no doors or windows; it was in these houses that sorcerers met.' When I said I had never seen such a house in the Baga territory the old man replied: 'No, they are not there anymore; I destroyed them all.' Some of my interviewees in the Baga villages also told me that such huts existed in

the past, and that they were destroyed by Sayon and his young followers in 1956–57.

Beyond its historical reality and function the image of the hermetic hut works as a wonderful metaphor for the secrecy that pervaded much of Baga society, as well as for the closure Baga were experiencing in colonial times. The destruction of such huts on the other hand epitomizes the construction of a wide, open space, far away from secret meetings and unchecked decisions by ritual elders. The Republic of Guinea that Sayon and many others had helped to build by destroying the 'fetishes' and by creating a common Guinean public space was not going to permit such huts to be rebuilt and for their rituals to return. The tragedy for Sayon was that while he helped to destroy the 'fetishes', his anti-witchcraft rationale became a problem for the post-colonial authorities. To Touré and other politicians, men like Sayon were just as 'fetishistic' and obscurantist as the sorcerers they were chasing. In a modern state there was no room for them. Sayon became a marginal nuisance, and could consider himself fortunate not to have been imprisoned like many other *marabouts*.¹⁹ No words could express better what Sékou Touré and his party thought of the *marabouts* than this official note written as early as 1959:

We must fight against swindler *marabouts*, fight against religious fanaticism, by essence a factor of destructive trouble for fraternity and solidarity, fight efficaciously against *maraboutage*, *maraboutisme*, charlatanism and all the forces of exploitation linked to obscurantist entities, in sum, we must attain what we could call the *de-maraboutisation* and de-intoxication of the masses.²⁰

In such a 'de-maraboutizing' context, it is no surprise that, shortly after leaving prison in 1958, Asekou Sayon tried as hard as he could to maintain a low profile and to live off peanut farming instead of charms and anti-witchcraft rituals.²¹ Asekou Sayon's life and deeds represented the transition from one era to another. He was born and educated at a time and in a region of *grands marabouts*, and he used, and was used by, the RDA. He learned how to use the oppression people felt and their thirst for social change, and in so doing he collaborated in the creation of a new political order in which, however, there was no room for him.

For RDA leaders, early promoters of the kind of ideology and social engineering James Scott has called 'high authoritarian modernism',²² traditional beliefs and the modernity of the state could not go hand in hand. Moreover, according to the general philosophy of the RDA, these beliefs were no more than a 'mystification' (to use Sékou Touré's own wording) of male elders to maintain control of gullible young men and women. Consequently, in independent Guinea a strong 'campaign of demystification' was put to work by the state which in many cases was as, if not more, violent than Sayon's movement. There is some confusion among scholars as to when

exactly the campaign started. Rivière, who wrote what for many years was the only available source about this largely undocumented campaign, said it had started in 1961.²³ In a more recent case study, however, Michael McGovern has argued that in early 1959 there were already demystification policies in the region known as *Guinée Forestière*.²⁴ Sankhon claims that from 1960 to 1968 there were reforms aiming at putting an end to customs, but they were not taken too seriously by local populations, and, therefore, a proper 'campaign' did not start until August 1968 when the socialist cultural revolution was launched, inspired by its Chinese precursor. Sékou Touré explained: 'Cultural Revolution had to attack fetishism, charlatanism, religious fanaticism, any irrational attitude, any form of mystification, any form of exploitation, with the aim to liberate the energies of the People and engage them in the consolidation of the rational bases of its development.'²⁵ Abdoulaye Tyam argued that the 'educative' programme of the RDA to demystify local practices and beliefs had several phases; he singled out 1960, 1961, 1963 and 1975.²⁶ By 1975, he wrote, anybody found wearing amulets, or practising any sort of either 'fetishism' or *maraboutism* would be sentenced to 15 years of jail.²⁷ Many other practices were also deemed against normal rationality and banned: long and expensive funerals, 'irrational' agronomic practices, and polygamy.

In these demystifying programmes, officials were sent to the villages to prove that elderly men were using masks, initiations and 'irrational' beliefs to empower themselves and keep other people under their control. The men sent to the villages could not come back to their bases without having, as Sankhon says, showed 'the *nimba* in its true nature of man',²⁸ otherwise *they* would be in trouble vis-à-vis their superiors in town. Following a common Guinean usage, Sankhon used the word 'nimba' as a generic concept for 'mask', 'cult' or 'spirit' – nothing but a disguised *man*. It must be said that 'man' here means a male individual, not the generic human being. As Sankhon recalls, women were actually happy to be shown by the forces of the state that men had been fooling them and they felt quite empowered by this unexpected knowledge. Neither the 'popular' iconoclasm instigated by Sayon nor the 'state' one ordered by Touré had women's cults as targets for destruction, and, as some authors have argued, this has actually greatly intensified the strength and importance of women's cults in post-colonial Guinea.²⁹

State-monitored iconoclasm seems to have been particularly intense and violent in the forest region neighbouring Sierra Leone and Liberia, especially among the Loma.³⁰ Among the coastal Baga, probably because of the thoroughness of the iconoclastic movement of Sayon only one year before decolonization, the post-colonial state did not need to be as strongly iconoclastic as it was among the Loma, a people who continued with their initiation cults after Independence. As a result, the demystification campaigns of Sékou Touré were not as traumatic or as vividly remembered among my

Baga interviewees as they were among Loma people interviewed by Højbjerg or McGovern.

Educational theatre was to replace ritual initiations. This theatre was to show that *marabouts* were nothing but swindlers and that traditional healers had no reason to exist, since the state had hospitals and doctors. In any case, should traditional healers have any effective secret plants or products, their duty was to deliver them to the state for it to deal with them scientifically.³¹ Masks and other ritual objects, together with dances and songs, were to be appropriated by the state with the purpose of creating a 'national' folklore, in what Wolfgang Bender has called a 'bureaucratisation of culture'.³² It was mostly a folklore made up of elements from different regions, publicly displayed in national museums and projected to an international audience via Keita Fodeba's famous company *Les Ballets Africains*³³ and Aboubabar Demba Camara's orchestra *Bembeya Jazz National*, the country's official *griot*. Despite the iconoclasm in the villages, a new hermeneutic project arose at state level, one in which masks and other objects were going to be interpreted according to the true spirit of the Guinean people: not as representations of obscure bush spirits, but as the manifestations of the Guinean people materializing the difficulties of cultural liberation.

If initiations and masks were one mark of the 'irrational' elements that a modern nation could not afford to live with, so was ethnicity. The constitution of the newly independent Guinea made ethnic particularism illegal. Article 45 declared that 'every act of racial discrimination as well as all propaganda of a racial or regional character shall be punishable by law'. In 1962 President Sékou Touré wrote that:

There is no more in the Republic of Guinea the Malinké race, the Susu race, the Fulbe race, the Guerzé race, the Landuma or Kissi race. The Susu, Malinké, Toma, Guerzé, Fulbe, Landuma or Kissi have taken up their language differentiation as a means of communication between men. Thus, every youth of Guinea, every adult of Guinea asked about his race will reply that he is an African.³⁴

The impossibility of returning to previous initiations was stronger for the Baga than for other Guinean groups, especially those living closer to boundaries. Loma, for instance, could continue their initiations by sending their children to their relatives' villages in Liberia, even if this was subject to legal punishment.³⁵ The Bassari could go to Senegal to have their initiations, and perhaps people along the Guinea Bissau border also went to their neighbours in that country. Unlike them, Baga had nowhere to go other than into their memories. At times, Baga tried to bring to life these memories. Sékou Beka Bangoura mentions and analyses a solemn sacrifice that took place in Bukor in October 1971 in which people had to perform the ritual according to 'custom' and not to Muslim sacrificial rules.³⁶ There were probably other such attempts, but

they were dangerous. In Mare, roughly at the same time, some men trying to revive a cult were denounced by some vigilante neighbours, good Party fellows, and punished by the state, as one of them explained to me in 2003. If iconophilic Baga had thought they only had to hide their objects, wait for Sayon's departure, and then bring them back again, they were wrong. After Sayon's exploits, another kind of iconoclasm arrived, and it arrived to stay.

Surviving iconoclasm

In 1957 the iconoclasts cut down sacred bushes (the 'black box' of elderly power) expecting the spirit *amanco ngopong* to literally 'be' there. It was not. They demolished hermetic houses hoping, once again, to find some secret object or spirit that they could expose in public and get rid of. Again they found nothing. The secret remained intact, and the only thing iconoclasts found was the beginning of their own 'melancholy and gloom', like Baudelaire's child, who opened up the toy only to find out the soul was not there.³⁷ Today, Baga live in what a scholar has termed a 'ruptured landscape' through whose fragmentation a past of glory survives.³⁸ As in the past, the 'device' of power remains hidden, not beyond a dense bush, nor inside a hermetic hut, rather just underneath a landscape whose religious interpretation is taught by elders to younger people. A manioc field is a manioc field, but everybody knows it used to be a sacred bush. A mosque is a mosque, but everybody knows it used to be a place where old masquerades took place, and sometimes, a stone is there to remind people at prayer of pre-Muslim awe.³⁹ In 1994 a football pitch was built over an old initiatory camp. How do young people know the religious significance of such places? In 1994, a 35-year-old told me that some time ago the elders of his descent group had taken him on a tour around the village and neighbouring regions, explaining the meanings of each tree and rock and their relationship to *amanco ngopong* and other spirits. The sacred bush may exist no longer, but its very absence is now used by elders as an initiatory tool: *they* are the masters of decoding the signs scattered around the lived-world, and in doing so, they are keeping alive the spiritual beings so necessary for them to stay on top of the social structure.

Some scholars have argued that because iconoclasm implied the end of initiations, masks, objects and sacred bushes, it was a rupture in the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next, and indeed quite a lot of practices, places and objects are gone – probably forever.⁴⁰ If, however, instead of seeing religious knowledge as a 'corpus' to be passed down, we look at its role in recreating and structuring differences between youths and elders and between men and women, we could reach less

pessimistic conclusions.⁴¹ Discussing the persistence of religious beliefs among Loma despite iconoclastic politics, Christian Højbjerg has argued that iconoclasm among Baga was 'effective', whereas among Loma it was not. Baga abandoned their pre-iconoclastic rituals forever, while Loma took them up as soon as Guinea became more open towards religious pluralism after the death of Sékou Touré in 1984 and, especially, as a result of the democratizing processes of the 1990s.⁴² Højbjerg is right in that the politics of cultural revival in the two Guinean regions at stake (the coast and the forest) in the 1990s were very different. However, if Baga did not resume their initiations and reinstate their sacred bushes, it was not because iconoclasm had been effective in effacing people's beliefs; rather, Baga acquired an attitude similar to what one scholar has termed 'silent iconoclasm': not active destruction, but simply the passive rejection of images.⁴³ In 2001, a ritual specialist told me that if Baga had not revived their initiations it was not because the elders did not know how to perform them, but rather because an iconoclastic attitude gave the elders more control over these beliefs, as expressed in their formal oath to *amanco ngopong* to ban material representations from the public space.⁴⁴ Today there are vivid discussions among Baga as to whether or not is useful to return to old ritual practices. Some see the silent iconoclastic attitude of their betters as an acceptance of 'cultural loss'. Others, however, know that silence can also be one way towards empowerment, and prefer to let the spirit lie behind a tree or underneath a rock rather than making it up again only to have yet another stranger appear wanting, again, to unmask it and show it 'in its true nature of man'.

Notes

1. Frederick Lamp, *Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention*, New York and Munich: The Museum for African Art and Prestel Verlag, 1996; Marie Y. Curtis, 'L'art nalu, l'art baga de Guinée: approches comparatives', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Paris I, 1996; Marie Y. Curtis and Ramon Sarró, 'The Nimba headdress: art, ritual and history of the Baga and Nalu peoples of Guinea', *Museum Studies*, 23 (2), 1996, pp. 121–33.
2. Yu-fi Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979.
3. Jack Goody, 'Icônes et iconoclasme en Afrique', *Annales ESC*, 6, pp. 1235–51.
4. I interviewed the charismatic initiator and leader of the iconoclasts several times in 1994.
5. Although devoted to a case study in Cote d'Ivoire, Jean Pierre Dozon has offered one of the deepest theoretical insights on iconoclastic politics in West Africa; Jean-Pierre Dozon, *La Cause des Prophètes: Politique et Religion en Afrique Contemporaine*, Paris: Seuil, 1995.
6. Dates established thanks to the missionaries' *Journal de Katako*, Archives des Pères du St.-Esprit (Chevilly Larue, France), Box 297.
7. Shortly after the First World War, the French divided the colony of Guinea into chiefdoms called cantons. Each canton was to be ruled by an African 'traditional chief'. (Sometimes its election was based on pre-colonial chieftaincies, but most of the time the chiefs were clearly imposed by

the French.) There was a tendency to identify territory with ethnicity; many cantons bore ethnic names (Canton Baga, for instance) and their chief was a member of the majority ethnic group within the canton. The Canton Baga incorporated ten Baga Sitem-speaking villages and two Baga Pokur-speaking ones (but it was also home to many non-Baga farmers). Its neighbouring Canton Monchon-Bigori (the name of its two biggest villages) was more clearly multi-ethnic: it included Baga Sitem, Bulongic and Susu-speaking communities. Because cantons were a channel of colonial power, their abolition (in 1958) became a major goal of anti-colonial political movements in the 1950s.

8. *Kalima* is the basic form of the Islamic creed or *shahada*. It is recited in Arabic in this way: *la ilah ill'Allah; Mohammed rasul Allah* ('there is no other God than Allah; Mohammed is the messenger of Allah'). It is possible that the ceremonies jihadists like Asekou Sayon (and others) performed against the enemies of Islam were called *kalima* because they kept singing the *kalima* while inviting people to surrender their objects and denounce evil doers. By joining a *kalima* and reciting the formula in front of witnesses one is *ipso facto* converted to Islam.
9. The *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA) was an anti-colonial political movement in French West Africa; it had been created in 1946 in Bamako. It was particularly antagonistic to the 'traditional chiefs' imposed and endorsed by the French.
10. The reader interested in locating these villages can find precise maps, as well as a wonderful collection of pictures of Baga objects, in Frederick Lamp, *Art of the Baga*.
11. Whistles, flags, police, and *tabala* were typical elements of the colonial state power. Like many other religious movements in colonial situations, Sayon's movement was partially based on a mimetic appropriation of the oppressive power.
12. The 'big house' is the oldest house of a descent group, where the founding ancestor and his family lived and where he is buried. Baga farmers sometimes referred to these houses as 'sanctuaries'. Each descent group has a 'big house' where solemn sacrifices to the ancestors are made. Ritual objects are kept in these houses and strangers are not normally allowed to enter. Despite the metaphorical name, 'big houses' are not bigger than any other house.
13. September and October have always been the hardest months for Baga farmers.
14. Sékou B. Kouressi was in fact Asekou Sayon's Qur'anic master, who at the time was based in the city of Kindia, some 300 km from the place where the event took place.
15. *Lailas* and *lailalas* were the derogatory terms Catholics used to refer to Sayon's ceremonies, mocking the continuous repetition of the *kalima* formula they consisted of.
16. This exchange took place in Mare on 24 February 1957, as recorded in the *Journal Katako*. Anonymous, *Mission de Katako: Journal de la Communauté, 24 February 1957*, Archives générales de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit (Chevilly Larue, France), Box 297.
17. Anonymous, *Mission de Katako: Journal de la Communauté, 15 May 1957*, Archives générales de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit (Chevilly Larue, France), Box 297.
18. Sékou Touré, 'Dire la vérité et dénoncer nos défauts', *R.D.A. : Revue du Parti-État de Guinée*, 98, October 1976, pp. 83–103, p. 90; my translation.
19. Camara Kaba-41, *Dans la Guinée de Sékou Touré: cela a bien eu lieu*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998, p. 65.
20. Circular No. 21/BMP/PDG-RDA, 16 October 1959, addressed to all the sections of the party. Cited in Allahssory Sankhon, 'Contribution à l'histoire des Baga de Conakry', Mémoire de diplôme de fin d'études supérieures, University of Conakry, 1987, p. 43 (my translation). *Marabout* here does not mean a Muslim man of learning, as it may do in other contexts, but a Muslim who relies on magical practices and not on the strict letter of the Qur'an. Strictly Qur'anic masters were tolerated by the regime.
21. Sayon told me that he conducted two more *kalimas* on the coastal regions after his release from prison, following instructions of Sheikh Kouressi, but they soon realized times were not good for these practices and gave them up.
22. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
23. Claude Rivière, 'Fétichisme et demystification: l'exemple guinéen', *Afrique Documents*, 102–103, 1969, 131–68.

24. Michael McGovern, 'Unmasking the state: developing modern political subjectivities in twentieth century Guinea', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Emory University, 2004.
25. Sékou Touré, 'Discours d'ouverture', 'Colloque idéologique international de Conakry sur le thème l'Afrique en marche', *Parti-Etat de Guinée*, 24, Conakry: Bureau de Presse de la Présidence de la République, 1978, pp. 21–46, p. 33 (my translation).
26. Aboudulaye Tyain, 'Les rites funéraires en pays baga (Baga Foré de Boffa)', *Mémoire de diplôme de fin d'études supérieures*, Conakry: IPGAN, 1975, p. 73.
27. *Horoya*, 2200, November 1975, p. 40. *Horoya* was an official bulletin of the Party-State.
28. Sankhon, 'Contribution à l'histoire', p. 42.
29. For the Baga subgroup known as Bulongic, see David Berliner, 'La féminisation de la coutume: femmes possédés et transmission religieuse en pays bulongic (Guinée-Conakry)', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 45 (1), pp. 15–38; a similar situation among Loma is reported by Michael McGovern, 'Unmasking the State', pp. 422–7.
30. Christian Højbjerg, 'Inner iconoclasm: forms of reflexivity in Loma rituals of sacrifice', *Social Anthropology*, 10 (1), 2001, pp. 57–75; McGovern, 'Unmasking the State'.
31. Sankhon, 'Contribution a l'histoire', p. 43.
32. Wolfgang Bender, *Sweet Mother: Modern African Music*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991 (first German edition 1985); for the making of Guinea's folklore see also Lansiné Kaba, 'The cultural revolution, artistic creativity, and freedom of expression in Guinea', *The Journal of African Studies*, 14 (2), 1976, pp. 201–18; Christopher L. Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990; Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, pp. 233–9.
33. For the early history of this company, see Gilbert Rouget, 'Les Ballets Africains de Keita Fodéba', *Présence africaine*, 7, 1956, pp. 138–40.
34. Sékou Touré; cited by Ali A. Mazrui and Michael Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa*, Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1985, p. 91.
35. Michael McGovern, 'Unmasking the state', p. 429.
36. Sékou B. Bangoura, 'Croyances et pratiques religieuses des Baga Sitému', *Mémoire de diplôme de fin d'études supérieures*, Kankan: IPJN, 1972, pp. 71–2.
37. Charles Baudelaire, 'The Philosophy of Toys', *The Painter and Modern Life and Other Essays*, London: Phaidon, [1953] 1995, pp. 198–204; cited in Simon Schaffer, 'The Devices of Iconoclasm', in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds, *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002, pp. 498–522.
38. Eric Gable, 'The decolonization of consciousness: local sceptics and the "will to be modern" in a West African village', *American Ethnologist*, 22 (2), 1995, pp. 242–57.
39. Together with silk-cotton trees, stones were a common element in pre-iconoclastic religious culture. Many post-1957 mosques were built over such awesome stones; see, for instance, Mohamed M. Bangoura, ed., 'Patmé: traditionalisme Baga', Conakry: La commission culturelle, n.d. [c.1991], p. 36. In some villages I visited, the stone was still there, next to the mosque, and was used by the elders to make obscure comments on the ritual past in front of their youths.
40. Lamp, *Art of the Baga*; Marie Y. Curtis, 'Art baga, art nalu'.
41. Sarró, 'Elders' cathedrals and children's marbles: dynamics of religious transmission among Baga of Guinea', in João Pina-Cabral and Frances Pine, eds, *On the Margins of Religion*, Oxford: Berghahn, forthcoming; cf. also the interactionist angle at religious acquisition among young Bulongic in David Berliner, 'An "impossible" transmission: youth religious memories in Guinea-Conakry', *American Ethnologist*, 32 (4), 2005, pp. 576–92. Berliner argues that we should pay less attention to the putative knowledge passed down than to the passing down of interactions between different actors, for it is these interactions that generate knowledge.
42. Christian Højbjerg, 'Inner iconoclasm'.
43. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, 'Iconoclasm', in Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 2nd edn, 14 vols, Detroit and New York: Thomson Gale, vol. 6, pp. 4279–89.
44. Ramon Sarró, 'The Iconoclastic Meal: Eating Secrets and Destroying Objects among the Baga of Guinea', in Latour and Weibel, eds, *Iconoclasm*, pp. 227–30; the elder was from the village of Bukor and belonged to a group of ritual specialists who kept strict control of the village. I do not know whether the oath he mentioned applied to all Baga Sitem villages or only to his village, but in any case the 'silent iconoclastic' attitude is common to all Baga Sitem villages.