

Elders' Cathedrals and Children's Marbles: Dynamics of Religious Transmission among the Baga of Guinea

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Baga Parents and Susu Children

In 1954, French anthropologist Denise Paulme and ethno-musicologist André Schaeffner were among the first social scientists ever to visit the coastal mangroves of Guinea, an area inhabited by different groups of rice farmers known as Baga, and the first to produce scholarly work about these people (Paulme 1956, 1957, 1958; Schaeffner 1962, 1964).¹ At that time the Baga were famous in the West for their art and ritual objects, but the social context of the objects stored in Western museums was not well known. Unfortunately, Paulme and Schaeffner could only make a few short visits and were unable to find out much about the ritual context of Baga objects. In fact, Paulme wrote that many of her interviewees were starting to feel detached from their own past. For instance, upon asking a young Muslim man about the culture of his elders, in which he expressed a distinct lack of interest, Paulme was told: 'Our fathers were Baga, but we are Susu' (Paulme 1956: 102). The Susu, who speak a completely different language to the Baga, are a neighbouring ethnic group; they have been spreading over the Guinean coast since at least the eighteenth century, encroaching on other peoples, in a process normally called 'Susuisation', which involves the others adopting the Susu language as well as converting to Islam and abandoning their previous religious identity.

Paulme took her young interviewee's statement to mean that Baga culture and society were disappearing. Accordingly, she wrote some rather pessimistic articles announcing their imminent dissolution. Whilst her articles show a lucid understanding of the tensions Baga were experiencing under French rule, her prediction proved wrong. Baga people did *not* disappear, although it must be said that only two years after her visit, in 1956–1957, the internal tensions

that she so perceptively noted led to an iconoclast movement that completely changed their religious culture. In 1996, a year before she passed away, Paulme told me how surprised she was to know that the Baga were still alive and kicking, and she became very interested in the work that Frederick Lamp, Marie-Yvonne Curtis and I were producing about Baga topics (Lamp 1996, Curtis 1996, Curtis and Sarró 1997).

And alive and kicking they certainly are. However, in 1999 an elderly man, a Christian schoolteacher, was talking to me about the past of the Baga Sitem (the subgroup among whom I conducted my fieldwork), precisely around the time when Paulme was there, when men were initiated in the sacred bush, when people did not tell lies, and when overall – he clearly thought – *everything* was better. He had been initiated when he was twelve years old, in 1948, in what was the last manhood initiation of the Baga Sitem in his village (in other Baga Sitem villages, the last manhood initiation took place in 1952). Like Denise Paulme fifty years before, the man finished his discourse with a rather pessimistic statement: 'This is the past. Our generation was the last one to be initiated. This is why we say that we are Baga, but our children are Susu'.

This was a statement about the loss of cultural values. Indeed, Baga elders view their Susu neighbours very negatively. They claim that the Susu lack moral education; that the Susu do not know what 'Baga' means and that they 'cannot keep secrets', an essential feature of any grown-up Baga man or woman. According to the Baga, the Susu are mostly liars and, properly speaking, they do *not* grow up. Thus, when a child is very tall for her age, Baga elders will say humorously that 'she is growing up like a Susu', meaning that there is no correspondence or equilibrium between her physical growing up and the process of becoming a thoughtful adult human being (which is, according to many, what the word 'Baga' means). She is growing up *too fast*.

The statement that the elders are Baga and the children are Susu is quite a common one, and the occasion I have just recalled is only one of many in which I have heard it. Men and women repeat it often in conversation, always with reference to a lack of moral integrity and the inability to keep secrets. 'A Baga knows how to shut up, a Susu does not' an elderly woman told me in April 2001. Indeed, secrecy seems to be at the core of the generation gap between youth and elders and between Baga and Susu. But secrecy is here to be understood not only as the unwillingness or prohibition to talk about one's inner convictions. It is also the *impossibility* of verbally discussing what has been lived through. 'We have our way of doing things', an old man said, 'which the young cannot understand'. He was not referring to things they know, not even really to things they do. Rather, he was talking about the *way* things are done by the elders, a *habitus* that only time and growing up can provide. Interestingly, the expression 'our way of doing things' (*kiyo kosu*) was sometimes translated as 'our secrets', thus supporting Bellman's point that secrecy has more to do with the way things are done than with a corpus of knowledge to be set apart (Bellman 1984). However, it is not my intention to support the view that secrecy is form only with no content. As I will discuss below, the concept of *tolom* (pl. *molom*), which can be translated as 'mask' or as 'secret', gives a very substantial content to Baga notions of secrecy.

Contrary to what one would probably expect, the youths, too, are quite convinced about the Baga-Susu divide. Even if they speak Baga, and even if they think that there is an objective cultural and historical difference between their community and the Susu's, most Baga young people agree with their elders that they are becoming Susu. 'Our elders had a *tolom* [cult] called *amanco ngopong* that made them Baga; we do not have it anymore and we do not know our customs' a forty-year-old man told me in 1999, referring to the cult of *amanco ngopong* (see below) and placing it at the core of the difference between elders and youths. Seniority is thus a fundamental aspect of Baga Sitem identity. The very word *sitem* stems from the root *tem*, which means 'old' or 'elder'. Thus, the Baga Sitem say that all the Baga are Baga but that they alone are the *abaka atem* (sing. *wubaka wutem*) the 'elderly Baga'. Looking at it from this point of view, not only are the Susu seen as junior and inferior but even other Baga are looked down upon as not being as elderly – and therefore not as Baga – as the Baga Sitem.

Being (or becoming) Baga is a process of maturation. From a Baga point of view, those who do not achieve it are just 'Susu'. Probably Paulme's mistake was to take the statement about the Susu-ness of youngsters too literally, as though 'Baga' and 'Susu' could only be used as ethnonyms (which is the case in our Western languages). When Baga claim that their youngsters are Susu, not Baga, they probably do not mean by 'Susu' the same thing we do, and therefore we should not conclude too hastily that the coast is Susu-ising without further examining the contested meanings and re-semantisations of these concepts we use exclusively to designate 'ethnic' groups.²

As with many an African society, the 'becoming-a-Baga' process involved, in the past, an initiation cycle composed of many stages. An individual started when he or she was very young and was gradually initiated into a series of cults (*tolom*, pl. *molom*). The last *tolom* for men was *kebere amanco* or *kidi amanco* (literally 'to join *amanco*', or 'to eat *amanco*'), an initiation whose full content was never revealed to me, but in which the participant was told that once he had 'eaten' *amanco* he could be considered a proper *wubaka*, that is, 'Baga'. Women had a counterpart cult, *ateken*, but their initiation into it did not make them become *wubaka*, rather it opened up the possibility for them to produce Baga people. I have elsewhere explored the structural opposition between these two cults (Sarró, in press). The initiatory cycle was called *kidi molom*, literally 'to eat *molom*'. The concept of *tolom* is quite difficult to translate as its semantic field does not match that of any Western concept, and as it happens with the 'empty' concepts so common in all religious cultures (Boyer 1986) it is more oriented towards provoking a reaction than to transmitting encyclopaedic bits of knowledge (see Berliner 2002 for a cognitive analysis of similar concepts among the Bulongic). For our purposes, it could sometimes be translated roughly as 'secret', other times as 'cult' and other times as 'ritual object'. In an interesting conversation I had in 1996, an interviewee glossed *tolom* as 'pain', and pain was indeed an essential component of most initiations of the cycle. When speaking in French, Baga translate *kidi molom* either as *manger les secrets* or, more commonly, as *initiation*.

From a Baga point of view, then, 'initiation' is not just a learning process, but one in which knowledge is eaten and embodied. We should not rule out the possibility that the *kidi molom* cycle included a final stage in which initiates literally ate the ritual objects, either smashed or burned to ashes. Although we do not have evidence to sustain it, we know that such is a common practice in other West African initiation cycles. When men had accomplished the whole cycle of initiation they became *alipne* (sing. *wulpine*, 'he who has finished'). I do not know whether in the past there were *alipne* in all Baga Sitem villages, but today the institution of the council of *alipne* exists only in the village of Bukor.

All these initiatory cults were abandoned in 1956, mostly as the outcome of the iconoclastic movement led by the Muslim charismatic preacher Asekou Sayon Keira.³ This iconoclastic event marked a transformation in Baga society and especially in its religious culture. It is therefore legitimate for Baga elders, especially those who lived in pre-iconoclastic times, to think that people born since 1957 are not as well versed in the 'mysteries' of being Baga as *they* are. However, if we look at the context in which the old village schoolteacher told me that he and his contemporaries were Baga while their children were Susu, we can see that this context itself nuanced the very lack of cultural transmission he was talking about. Indeed, there was the old man recalling his memories for me, with the children in front of us, listening to the elderly man (their teacher), and thus indirectly learning about their past as well as about how adults introduce themselves to strangers like me. In short, they were growing up and, inevitably, becoming Baga.

Both in 1954 – when Denise Paulme was doing her fieldwork – and today it seems that the elders claim *they* are Baga while their children are Susu (a claim shared by the children, both in Paulme's days and today). There is a structural continuity in this generational-cum-ethnic divide, but there is also a major difference, because the end of initiations in the late 1950s resulted somewhat in a structural transformation. Being an adult in today's Baga Sitem society consists not only of having been initiated but also of having gone through those traumatic events of 1956 that mark such an important watershed in the historical imagination of the Baga. Indeed, it is quite rare to discuss Baga history or culture with Baga people without them taking 1956 as the starting point, whether it is to condemn the iconoclasts or to thank them for having got rid of 'evil things'. The generational divide between those who lived in the pre-1956 religious culture and those who did not is huge and it always revolves around the issue of secrecy. Many elders (*wubeki*, pl. *abeki*) consider those who were born after 1957 as youth (*wan*, pl. *awut*), even if they are over forty years old and married. However, it is clear that despite the secrecy and the lack of formal initiations, there is a basic religious culture which is passed down from generation to generation, not through 'initiations', since these have been abandoned, but rather through informal mechanisms such as games, songs, proverbs, overhearing or comments about the landscape.

Cathedrals and Marbles: The Margins of Religion and Religion in the Margins

In my research on Baga issues, begun in 1992, I have been equally interested in documenting the ruptures and transformations of Baga history as in showing the continuity of religious structures, both in knowledge and in practice. One fascinating thing about religious transmission among the Baga is that as an outcome of an iconoclastic movement in 1956/57 the transmission of some non-Muslim and non-Christian elements has moved from the 'centre' to the 'margins'. In fact, the centre has been 'colonised' by hegemonic Muslim and Christian religious cultures, and in order for us to search for previous religious elements, we must, as a huge body of recent anthropology has taught us, pay a close attention to mechanisms of cultural inheritance that go beyond the explicitly written or told.⁴ Although I have been inspired by these contemporary authors, for the sake of the argument in this paper I want to follow an invitation made by Marcel Griaule almost seventy years ago. For several reasons, Griaule is an author I would normally follow with caution, if at all. Yet I must admit I was rather fascinated by a phrase I read in his book on Dogon games, when he stated that 'A revolution can destroy cathedrals, but one cannot see how it will deter children from playing with marbles' (Griaule 1938: 2). Having done fieldwork in a place where a revolution did destroy the big icons of religious culture, I found this quotation powerful for two reasons: on the one hand, it suggested that religious transmission could be achieved away from the centre of socio-religious activity (what Griaule metaphorically referred to as the 'cathedrals'), but it could also be achieved through a practical logic that pervaded the whole of society, including such 'marginal' things to religious activities as are children's games. On the other hand, it offered an *avant-la-lettre* agency to children, since in Griaule's times there were not many studies on the ways children's actions could transmit religious notions or practices.

For the Baga, the revolution that put an end to sacred bushes, icons and initiations happened in 1956, but its roots can be traced to much earlier than that, and certainly to the years when Denise Paulme conducted her fieldwork. She was, in fact, the first author who announced that Baga were in a complete state of anomie and that there were so many tensions in the society that it would sooner or later 'explode', to use her own words. The pessimistic impression of Baga society with which she was left in 1954 can be gauged in a few quotations:

Baga society appears condemned by a lack of solidarity, by a lack of internal cohesion, and by a lack of natural pride too; neighbouring, healthier societies will soon have absorbed it. As it is now, one can still observe some institutions that the sociologist will regret not to have studied in more detail. (Paulme 1956: 102; my translation)

In another article, she expressed her perception of anomie by stating that:

A Baga can only conceive of his society in terms of divisions: the Bangoura against the Camara, the *asuto* against the *kulokinkaykosi*, youths against elders, men against women – the atmosphere is of a constant rivalry. Let a pressure from the exterior intervene and switch on this factor of internal disunity and the explosion will soon come. (Paulme 1957: 277; my translation: in Paulme's writings, the *asuto* and the *kulokinkaiyosi* were two categories of people: the *asuto* were first arrivals and wife-givers whereas the *kulokinkaikosi* were newcomers and wife-takers)

Muslim Youth vs the Tyranny of Custom

Let us see, albeit briefly, how all this 'exploded'. In pre-colonial and colonial times, Baga rice farmers were, from a strictly religious point of view, conspicuously non-Muslim and they were known for their rich ritual life and associations (sometimes referred to in the literature as 'secret societies'), most of them linked to unique forms of art and material culture. There are disagreements in the sources about the political structure in pre-French times. Some indicate that Baga were acephalous, while others seem to suggest that they had chiefs appointed by land-owning descent groups. Probably, the reality was an oscillation between these two modes of political organisation. What seems clear from oral history and regional comparison is that the prevailing system was based on what I call here an asymmetric settlement pattern, according to which groups of putative 'first arrival' (although this is a manipulable category) accumulated more land, people and power than those considered 'late arrivals'. Whatever the case, since 1886, Baga were ruled by a chief appointed by the French, sometimes referred to in colonial sources as the 'Baga king'. In 1922 the French created a 'Canton Baga' and until 1958 they continued to appoint elders to be 'traditional' or 'customary' chiefs of the canton.

The institution of traditional chieftaincy as promoted by French administrators soon became tyrannical. It reified notions of gerontocracy, patriarchy and ethnic territory that most likely had had a long history in the Upper Guinea Coast, but that had probably never been as rigidly applied as it came to be in colonial times, when it was sanctioned and enforced by French laws and officers. Under this regime, youths had to work hard at 'customary' celebrations of marriages, funerals, initiations as well as visitations of chiefs and colonial officials. For youths, Baga 'custom' became increasingly oppressive: not only were they to tap massive amounts of palm wine for all the celebrations but they were also subject to forced labour, 'rice campaigns' and other abuses that were channelled through the customary chieftaincy and therefore perceived – and today remembered – as part of 'Baga custom'. Under French rule Baga were enclosed upon themselves in their Canton Baga, which effectively worked both as a magnifying lens and as a fence: it amplified the local reality and avoided the entrance of other forces, particularly those of Islam, which since the early twentieth century had become a strong alternative voice in many other Guinean cantons. Traditional rituals legitimating the status quo in which chiefs and their relatives would enrich themselves and

oppress the youths were clearly protected by the French colonialists, who were particularly worried about the anti-colonial content of some varieties of Islam. Interestingly, among Baga Sitem, Christianity became an unexpected ally of 'tradition'. Many landowning elders converted to Christianity in order to articulate an opposition to Islam, the strongest critical voice against tradition, palm-wine drinking, secret cults and unfair chiefs to be heard in the colonies.

After the Second World War, a refreshing wind was felt all around French West Africa. From 1946, the anti-colonial movement *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA) fought for the full citizenship of Africans, as promised by De Gaulle at the Conference of Brazzaville (1944). Although at its beginning the RDA had links with European left-wing parties, in some parts of West Africa it eventually found that Islam was a secure medium to propagate the anti-colonial messages (Morgenthau 1964: 237). In much of West Africa, Islam became a strong agent in the modernising and opening-up of villages. Its followers proclaimed the establishment of a community based on universal values and denounced unfair chieftaincies as well as all those 'customs' that were keeping Africa backward: alcohol, masks, ritual elders and secret societies. Since the early 1950s, committees of the RDA were, in every Guinean village, a parallel and antagonistic institution to the increasingly obsolete 'customary chieftaincy' endorsed by – and in the Baga instance created by – the French.

Into this volatile situation, at the very end of French rule, appeared the iconoclastic *jihadist* figure of Asekou Sayon (1956). Sayon marked the junction between two eras in Baga history, and he is remembered as a real agent of transformation, almost like a 'trickster' figure, as Charles Jedrej kindly pointed out to me. Sayon was a Muslim convert, a witch-finder, a 'fetish' destroyer, an RDA sympathiser, a dissatisfied people's leader (see Sarró 1999a for a whole description of this truly fascinating person). Almost immediately following the work of the *jihadist*, President Sékou Touré deployed the state in a forceful campaign to establish the reality of a modern Guinean nation and identity, and to ban regional forms of either ethnic or religious identity (it was only possible to be Guinean and Muslim; local forms of Christianity were also accepted, but not so Western priests).

For all that, the deeds of Sayon, which overlapped with Sékou Touré's policies, are recalled today as a turning point in the history of the Baga. His movement was a complex one in which there were religious, political and other agenda at play. It was 'destructive' in that it did represent the end of some rituals and of the religious identity linked to them. The places where sacred bushes previously existed were now to harbour Muslim mosques, modern schools or plantations. You may object that I am not talking about destroying cathedrals but rather about building them, and certainly Sayon's movement could be analysed as part of the creation of a public Guinean space, much as Dozon, in a fine study on religion and politics, analysed the role that Harrist churches played in the making of the nation state in Côte d'Ivoire (Dozon 1995). There would be sound reasons to take such an angle, but in this chapter I want to concentrate instead on the destruction of the alleged 'Baga religious culture' and not on the making of this Guinean public space attempted by the RDA, Islam and the logics of modern state building.

In order to do so, I will build a narrative around one single 'thing': *amanco ngopong*. In colonial times, *amanco ngopong* was the most important spiritual agency in the Baga lived-world. Baga elders I interviewed, who had seen the huge *amanco ngopong* for the last time in 1948 or 1952 (when they were young initiates) claimed that *amanco ngopong* could take the form of a twenty-metre high wood-and-raffia construct with a bird-like headdress on its top. This huge construct used to appear in the village every time there was a manhood initiation, that is, every twelve to fifteen years. *Amanco ngopong* was a heavy palm-wine drinker (a clear objectification of anti-Muslim feelings), as well as the regulator of what could be done and said and the articulator of the differences between men and women, between elders and youth, and between the private knowledge only to be discussed in the secluded bush (*afan*) and the public knowledge to be openly discussed in the public sphere (*abanka*).

The Arrival of Sayon: Lessons on How to Sleep

The first Baga Sitem village that Asekou Sayon ever visited was Bukor, then in the *Cercle* of Boffa. It was at the end of July 1956 that the Baga of that village first heard of him, while he was performing *kalimas* (rituals of conversion to Islam and of destruction of evil things) in the village of Yampon, a bit farther south. Because he was a *sayon* ('born after twins') he was supposed to have 'second sight', that is, extra-sensorial abilities, and to detect evil-doers. 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, but one of them seemed crucial and is typical of the accounts I gathered: that the elders did not want them to attend the *soirées dansantes* (dancing parties) of the *Jeunesse du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (JRDA). Because the elders had also prohibited the *soirées dansantes* of the recently introduced *Jeunesse Agricole Catholique* (an organisation that otherwise was rather antagonistic to the JRDA), the Catholic youths also joined in the rebellious team that wanted Sayon in the village.

Some young people of Bukor, angry at their despotic elders, went to attend the *kalima* at Yampon and invited Sayon to go to Bukor to perform the *kalima* there as well. Sayon agreed to their request and told them that in a few days he would be going to Bukor, provided they brought him enough wood and money. A crucial aspect for us to remember, and to which I shall return, is this. While Asekou Sayon was still in Yampon, one of the elders of Bukor is reported to have exhorted his age mates with these words: 'Asekou Sayon is coming to Bukor. Take care about the way you sleep, so that he finds you in a good sleeping position'. This genre of hidden speech is called *capafo* in Baga Sitem, and by its very nature a *capafo* has different readings. 'Take care about the way you sleep' can be a direct exhortation, since for the Baga it is at night that witches abandon their human bodies and go to celebrate 'cannibalistic' feasts in an invisible realm called *dabal*, which is also the realm of dreams. To find someone literally sleeping in a strange position might denounce his or her evil dreams. But the virtuosity of speaking in *capafo* is that the message conveyed can have

different readings, and this one in particular has other meanings, as will be shown.

Asekou Sayon arrived in Bukor in September 1956 surrounded by the young men and women from Yampon singing religious songs. Sayon stayed in Bukor for about one month, performing the *kalima*, converting people to Islam, clearing the sacred bush, cutting down the big silk-cotton trees, destroying whatever non-Muslim objects or products were surrendered to him, inviting evil-doers to confess and acting with violence toward those accused of witchcraft who refused to confess. One of the leading men behind his official invitation and welcome in Bukor was Sheikh Amadou Haidara, the imam of the little mosque of the village. In 1956 the young Sheikh Amadou was not only a well-educated member of the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood but also a member of the RDA committee in Bukor. This confluence of religion and politics, although not always as clear as in the case of Sheikh Haidara, should not surprise us. In many ways, such a confluence was the very *zeitgeist* of the late colonial period, at least in that part of French West Africa where the RDA had the upper hand in local politics. I interviewed Haidara in 1994 and again in 2001. In both occasions he explained to me that he had invited Sayon to Bukor because the latter was, like himself, a member of the Tijaniyya and because he (Haidara) was horrified to live among so many *kafir* people.

Most of the discussions I had with my interviewees concerning Asekou Sayon's stay in Bukor inevitably revolved around the issue of whether he had destroyed *amanco ngopong* or not. Some elders recalled the first encounter between them and Sayon in the following anecdotal terms. As soon as Sayon arrived in Bukor, according to them, he asked the population to bring *amanco ngopong* to him. In a rather apologetic manner, someone explained to him that this would not be possible, since *amanco ngopong* was not a 'thing' that could be carried from one place to another, but rather a being with his own will, who came to the village whenever *he* wanted and not whenever *they* wanted. Sayon believed him, and let things go. *Amanco ngopong*, according to this version, still existed in the days I conducted the interviewees.

Yet this is by no means how Sayon himself presented things when I interviewed him in a series of talks in between 1993 and 1994, when he was more than seventy years old, and with a very clear memory. Sayon claimed that the first thing he did in Bukor was to go to the sacred bush and get in and out of it several times. Many observers were astonished because they thought that a non-initiated stranger could not go into the bush and return alive. He then invited the youth of the village to do the same thing and enter the sacred bush ('I always addressed the youths' he said to me at that point). Once such central space had been appropriated by him and his followers, Sayon started his destructive actions, particularly the destruction of *amanco ngopong* and the beating up of the ritual elders responsible for it. Sayon acknowledged that he was after *amanco ngopong*, of which he had heard long before reaching the Baga region, and he also claimed to have destroyed it. According to his description, inside the sacred bush there was a hut surrounded by human skulls and guarded by some very old men with long beards. It was inside this hut that *amanco ngopong's* head was kept. Sayon gave orders to some of his followers to

burn the head. In the village, he entered the ri' houses of different descent groups and took out many of their objects, including the rest of *amanco ngopong* (*amanco ngopong* had three parts, once described to me as the 'head', the 'trunk', and the 'feet', and each one of them was kept by a different descent group and therefore in a different ritual house). 'When I did that', Sayon recalled with a tone of victory, 'people said that the *Baga fe* [in Susu: 'Baga things', sometimes glossed as 'Baga culture'] were finished'.

It is worth emphasising this identification implicit in Sayon's words between *amanco ngopong* and 'Baganess'. Asekou Sayon clearly stated that he destroyed the 'Baga things' by materially destroying *amanco ngopong*. This identification was one of the few things on which Sayon's and Baga accounts agreed. Yet Baga interviewees most strongly sustained the opposite view: that Sayon could not have destroyed *amanco ngopong* and that he certainly did not. In fact, Sayon frankly acknowledged to me that the head of *amanco ngopong* was not burnt by him personally, but by his followers, who afterwards showed the ashes to him. But those were the ashes of what? Sayon seemed convinced enough that his followers were faithful to him and that he had persuaded them into his particular way of seeing things. But, as became apparent in my interviews with them, many of the youngsters who followed him back in 1956 did so reluctantly and with fear. On the one hand, they were eager for a change and for getting rid of sorcery, elders' abuses, tyrannical chiefs and many other things, but on the other hand they could not give up believing in the power of such spirits as *amanco ngopong*. This makes the historian's task difficult. More than a clear picture, we have an event and competing, even contradictory interpretations – a 'rashomonian' situation probably as complex as what really happened. In any case, what is clear to me is that reading the iconoclastic movement as a simple 'destruction' and conversion is simplistic. Underneath this stereotyped narrative, there lies a multilayered interplay between concealment and disclosure not easy to grasp. I shall try to unearth it, so let me return to Sayon's arrival.

The Events Revisited: Further Lessons on How to Sleep

We have already seen that while Sayon was in Yampon, an old man from Bukor exhorted his age fellows: 'Asekou Sayon will come to Bukor, take care about the way you sleep, so that he finds you in a good sleeping position'. The first time I was told this *capafo* my understanding of it was rather literal, as an invitation to abandon certain practices and beliefs. Yet, the *capafo* has other readings; an alternative interpretation was given to me by the very person who had told it in the first place, but one year later. According to him, what the old man had meant was that the Baga elders had to pretend to be sleeping while in fact being well awake; in other words, they would have to pretend to follow Sayon while still keeping their secrets. In a neighbouring village where I also conducted interviewees, I had a similar experience. The first time I gathered a narrative about Sayon's actions there, I was told: 'Asekou Sayon did not do any harm to us because he found that we were sitting properly'. In an identical pattern to

that of Bukor, I was told that while Sayon was in a previous village, an old man went to spy on him and came back advising people 'to sit properly'. Only months later I was told that 'to sit properly' meant to be prepared not to let Sayon and the youths following him get away with their plans. In yet a third village I obtained an even clearer case of reluctance to follow Sayon. In this village, the head of the *Jeunesse Agricole Catholique* wrote a letter to the Catholic missionaries in September 1956 asking them to go to the French authorities so that Sayon's entrance to the Canton Baga would be forbidden. However, the French authorities did not do anything about it, and Asekou Sayon entered the Canton Baga and in six months he reached the village at stake. But six months is a long time to 'learn how to sit', if I may use the Baga *capafo* I just quoted. As it happens, the head of the JAC was also a member of the descent group who were in charge of *abol*, a female spirit sometimes described as '*amanco ngopong*'s wife'. Sayon, who knew it, immediately asked them to surrender *abol*. They accepted, but instead of giving him *abol*, they gave an ordinary piece of wood, slightly similar in shape to the real thing. Sayon and his followers happily burnt the object, probably thinking they were, once again, destroying the *Baga fe* when in fact they were just burning a piece of wood. Two questions may come to mind. First, what happened to the real *abol*, the one Sayon did *not* burn? Second, why did other people not reveal that someone was fooling Sayon?

The answer to the first question is that the real *abol*, like so many other objects that Sayon did not take away, was probably put somewhere safe. The answer to the second question is twofold. On the one hand, I think that many of Sayon's followers did not reveal the sheikh was being fooled because they were afraid of later punishments.⁵ On the other hand, I think that many of them, being mostly youngsters, women and strangers, were probably as unaware of what the real *abol* looked like as Sayon himself.

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Today, many people say that Sayon put an end to Baga culture and/or religion, and that it is a tragedy that a whole people decides to abandon their initiations and to live unaware of its tradition. Different degrees of this 'afro-pessimism' are found in scholarly views as well as among Baga people. My slightly more optimistic contention, however, is that what happened among the Baga was a translation from a visible religion with conspicuous icons in the public landscape ('masks', headdresses, objects, sacred bushes, silk-cotton trees, and so on) to the concealment of all non-Muslim or Christian religious elements. To put it in Baga words: Sayon could destroy the objects, but not the words you need to make the objects work, since the latter come out of people's bellies, and Sayon did not open them. According to the *alipne* of Bukor, the only reason why today there are no masquerades and objects in the public sphere is not because Sayon destroyed them, but because they (the *alipne*) do not allow it. Anybody who would want to go back to pre-iconoclastic public religion would be punished by them – or directly by *amanco ngopong*. According to this view, iconoclasm was one effective way to 'eat their secrets'. However, not even the *alipne* have a strict control on what people know or construct about their past.

embedded as it is in the very world Baga live and talk about. Thus, in one Baga village where I conducted field research, one of the trees cut down by the iconoclastic youths was a silk-cotton tree that is still there, lying down yet not rotten, and from which nobody dares take wood; likewise, in this and other villages I noticed that even young non-initiated people knew very well that some stones, even if they were located near churches or mosques, had in the past a strong importance in the celebration of *amanco ngopong* masquerades and therefore they reacted with awe towards them. My friend Lamin (thirty-five years old in 1994), once told me that he had never seen *amanco ngopong*, but that some time ago the elders of the descent group had taken him on a tour around the village and neighbouring regions, and explained to him the meanings of each tree and of each rock and their relationship to *amanco ngopong*. But such 'explaining' is not always necessary. As someone else once put it, quite in an Austinian way, it is not what elders explained about *amanco ngopong* that made you feel fear, but the very way they pronounced the word *amanco ngopong*, a way that, he clarified, made you *not* want to know any more. And he added: 'it is like the chameleon: you say that it is not a dangerous animal and that we could touch it without any harm, but we do not want to waste our time verifying whether this is true or false; we hear the word "chameleon" pronounced by anyone and we simply avoid the place where the animal has been spotted'.

Today, then, Baga people no longer have initiations into manhood, but this does not mean a lack of transmission of knowledge. To start with, I think that to see initiation as a transmission of encyclopaedic knowledge and initiatory bushes as 'libraries' or as 'bush schools' is problematic, no matter how much these metaphors are used in African studies. Initiation is not a process of learning and storing information, but an experience.⁶ Likewise, the iconoclastic rebellion was more a collective experience than a change in the cosmological premises. An experience that, today, opens a generational gap between those who went through it and those who did not. The destruction of the objects did not represent the end of any form of knowledge. Baga people today 'know' as much about *amanco ngopong* as Baga of the past. In fact, *amanco ngopong* seems to be equally powerful now that it has no physical support as it was in the days when it was – so they recall – represented by a twenty metre high headdress.

In 1957, Baga abandoned their 'animism'. However, in the mid-1990s and early 2000s *amanco ngopong* was still an object of constant fear, both to elders and to youths. You only had to live in a Baga Sitem village for a short time to realise that *amanco ngopong* lay behind an otherwise strictly Muslim or Christian religious landscape. But it was not really 'religion' that provided me with the evidence for this tenacity of a religious representation, it was a rather more 'profane' activity, namely, football.

Football, Carnivals and the Generation Game

Many things have happened in the Baga Sitem region since 1957. Amongst them, let us single out the creation of Kamsar (a mining port born in 1973,

with more than 30,000 inhabitants today), the readmission of Catholic missionaries since 1984 (they had been expelled from Guinea in 1967), and the subsequent creation, linked to them, of football tournaments among the Baga villages.

The football tournaments were started in 1989 by the Catholic youths. Very much like Catholicism, football may appear as a globalising practice and discourse, and indeed it is so, but, very much like Catholicism too, it also has a Protean tendency towards 'inculturating' itself and collaborating in the everyday production of locality. Due to its own playful structure, the football tournaments generate territorial boundaries much stronger than vague notions of ethnicity or history.

Elsewhere I have discussed and analysed the history of these tournaments (Sarró 1999b). Suffice to recall here that at the beginning they were just a 'playful' activity that youngsters did far away from the elders. Accordingly, elders did not become too interested in it. However, as football became more and more important for the development of villages, for the image of the Baga in the Guinean state, and so on, the elders started to appropriate it. Little by little, football abandoned its aspect of 'game' to become something much more 'serious'. In doing so, the life story of the football tournament reminded us of the life story of some Baga cults. Indeed, in the past Baga used to distinguish between masks and objects called *powolsene* (lit. 'toys' or 'games') from those considered as *tolom*. Some cults I know of started as *powolsene*, simple things children played with, until the elders realised their power and, fearful of their children's agency, stole the 'toys' from them. In other cases the opposite was the case, and cults that belonged to elders were copied by children. Either way, the fact is that many a Baga mask or headdress had two distinct versions: one for adults (*tolom*) and one for children (*powolsene*). One of the cults I know of which was transformed from children's *powolsene* to adults' *tolom* was *tonkure*, a cult invented by the male children of Mare around 1945 and then taken to Bukor, where the male elders 'stole' it, although later it returned to the youths and, in fact, empowered them. The youths who had the *tonkure* in the 1940s and 1950s eventually became the respected *alipne* of today, constituting a council in charge of ritual activities and behind most political decision-making.

And it was Bukor, the very village we have already visited and revisited in this chapter, that had to host the annual football tournament in 1995. This particular tournament was prepared in a climate of fear. Not all the events surrounding it were 'playful'. Some of them were actually very tragic. In the previous year the tournament had taken place in Mare. That year (1994), a young boy who was observing one match fell from a tree and died. This death was said to be a sacrifice to *amanco ngopong* made by the people of Bukor in order to win the cup. The fact that subsequently Bukor *did* win the cup against all predictions reinforced this gossip about their witchcraft. Since Bukor was to organise the next tournament (1995) all these rumours had to be taken very seriously by the inhabitants of Bukor.

People from other villages were afraid of going to Bukor because of witchcraft actions and sacrifices to *amanco ngopong*, whose presence in Bukor is said to be stronger than in other villages anyway. Some young people from

Mare and other villages told me that they would go to the tournament. 'People in Bukor do not understand that football is just a game', someone told me. People from Bukor had to take action against this predicament (the point of the tournament being of course to gather as many people as possible and not to scare them away).

To bypass the problem, Bukor *ressortissants* in Conakry⁷ decided that in order not to let witchcraft attacks happen during the three weeks that the tournament normally lasts, they would let the *alipne* or council of initiated elders take care of the situation. The *alipne*, accordingly, performed the series of rituals known as 'the closing of the land'. These are very solemn actions that are very rarely performed and that theoretically make it impossible for people to die from witchcraft attacks. In the days when there were long initiation rituals, the closing of the land was linked to them and to the appearance in the village of *amanco ngopong* (*amanco ngopong* could only appear on a closed land). To my knowledge, the last time the land was closed was also in Bukor, in 1986, when a solemn sacrifice to *amanco ngopong* was made in the village to bless the *ressortissants* of Conakry. The closing of the land for the 1995 tournament had nothing to do with *amanco ngopong*, but rather with prevention of witchcraft during the tournament, but of course the association between the two elements (that is, this ritual and *amanco ngopong*) was in the minds of all Baga people. And the fact that the *alipne* of Bukor dared close the land in order to hold the football tournament did indeed frighten many people. The outcome was that some villages did not allow their children to compete in such a dangerous village. This may seem a bit contradictory, since such a closing of the land is nothing 'bad' in itself, but we have to take into account that the elders of these other villages were afraid that their 'irresponsible' kids would not know the importance of a closing of the land and they would not respect it, having to 'pay' deadly consequences later. When a village is ritually 'closed', for instance, unmarried people are not allowed to have sex, nor can any married person have illicit adventures. Yet, sex is obviously part of the fun youths search for on such occasions as a football tournament.

It was also decided that the *alipne* should be in charge of the preparation of the carnival, so that the outcome would be better than the poorly prepared *nimba* performance of the previous year in Mare. This year it had to be done properly. When the opening day arrived, there were a few dances and two masks: *nimba* and *saebondel*, which were danced under the direct control of the *alipne* and, as many people interpreted, 'in the old way'. But for the *ressortissants* of Conakry, these two masks were not enough. I remember talking to a few of them before the tournament took place. They insisted on the inclusion in their carnival of the old initiation dance (*kaekenc*), which had not been performed in the village since the early fifties. They sent a special commission to Bukor to discuss the issue with the *alipne*, who at first did not show an open opposition to the idea, and people in Conakry were very excited about it. I was somewhat hastily told by one of them that a group of young people had already been chosen by the *alipne* in order to be taught how to dance the *kaekenc*. But then, as the tournament approached, the *alipne* refused to teach the youths the secret *kaekenc*. They said that football is just a game and that in consequence only

games can be played; *nimba* and *saebondel*, two headdresses that beyond any doubt fall into the category of *powolsene* and not to that of *tolom*. But even these toys had to be danced according to their strict directions. Despite the lack of the *kaekenc*, the outcome was a success of which the Baga of Bukor felt very proud, with the visit of the first lady of Guinea (the wife of President Conté, a Baga herself) and National TV coverage into the bargain.

Towards an End (or Maybe Not)

Where does religious transmission take place? We have seen in this paper that the religious field of the Baga and the institutional differences attached to it are built through an interplay between religiously 'marginal' activities (Islam and youth movements in the 1950s; football and carnivals in the 1990s) and a religious centre (cults in colonial days, Islam and Christianity today). Today, even if there are no longer initiations and therefore Baga no longer 'eat' their secrets, the fact remains that whenever they deem it necessary, they are quite able to perform rituals that had remained concealed for a relatively long time. By converting to world religions such as Islam and Christianity, they have created a religious landscape that, contrary to what a foreigner might think, conceals a rich activity of non-Muslim or Christian religious activity. Although interviewees often told me that the iconoclasts destroyed the religious landscape of the past because it was too 'pagan', my contention is rather that the main legacy of the iconoclastic movement was not an abandonment of Baga religious culture, but an increase of its secrecy and ambiguity and therefore of its manageability. In fact, one of the most difficult things to assess about Baga perceptions of their history is the degree to which they believe past activities and beliefs have been 'lost'. In my research I was always confronted with two parallel and antagonistic discourses: one according to which Sayon 'destroyed' Baga things (*e na leser mes mabaka*), and another one which claimed that he did not do any harm at all and that the *dabaka* (lit. 'Baga country') is still there (*dabaka deyi de*). Sometimes the same interviewee could say one thing first and the opposite one only a few minutes later. In general, elders who lived through the 1956 episodes tended to blame Sayon for having destroyed (*kileser*) Baga things in their first interviews. Yet many of them, in subsequent interviews, would reveal that in fact Sayon did not do that much harm, and that the Baga things, including many of the ritual objects, are still there, somewhere, well hidden and looked after. The youths I interviewed, on the contrary, and no matter how strongly they could also believe that the *dabaka* is somehow still there, blamed their elders for not passing it down to them: as we have seen, they admitted being 'Susu' and not Baga, but precisely by subscribing to this divide, as they already did in the 1950s, the youths were participating in the construction of this religious field in which secrecy and the management of ambiguity play such fundamental roles. I shall not be too surprised if one day I learn that my younger friends in the *dabaka* realise that they too are becoming Baga, and if I hear them contemptuously claiming that their children are 'Susu'.