



Demystified Memories: The Politics of Heritage in Post-Socialist Guinea

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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 Touré (1976:90, my translation)

The Baga-speaking peoples of coastal Guinea have known a long succession of violence. Almost every narrative they provide a visitor about their history as an ethnic group is linked to one form or other of violence: the violence of the Muslim *jihād* of the eighteenth century, when Muslim Fulbe herders pushed non-Muslim farmers out of the Fouta Djallon mountains and forced them to move to the coastal mangroves where their descendants live today; the violence of the coastal slave trade, which is still today remembered in the villages; the violence of French colonialism, when a bunch of Baga people were given immense power over others (normally considered their 'strangers'); the violence of an iconoclastic religious movement led by the Muslim preacher Asekou Sayon; the memories of the anticolonial movement led by the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*; the violence of Sékou Touré's first Republic, with its socialist 'demystification campaigns', 'cultural revolution', and oppressive policies (1958–1984). But not everything in Baga cultural history is related to disruption. Baga farmers are in fact much better known to the wider public for their impressive art and material culture than for their traumatic history. Most of the most famous pieces of African art in Western museums do come from this Guinean people, an art to which scholars are now paying a deserved attention (Berliner 2002a, 2002b; Curtis 1996; Curtis and

Sarró 1997; Lamp 1996). The entanglement among disruption, destruction, and creativity is an element not only of Baga history but also of their everyday life in today's Guinea, a daily life marked by a strong ambivalence to materiality, art, and 'tradition'. But, to understand this present-day situation, we must first recall the rudiments of Baga cultural history.

Landlords, Strangers, and Iconoclasts

Historians have identified a recurrent settlement pattern on the Upper Guinea Coast, where Baga live, based on the relationship between 'landlords' and 'strangers' (Brooks 1993; Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962; Rodney 1970). According to this pattern, people placed themselves under the aegis of a landlord who offered protection while enriching his social capital. In 2003, when discussing the relationships between landlords and strangers, Mahmoud, a 75-year-old Muslim man, told me that most of the people composing any Baga village today were late arrivals. 'Now we are outnumbered', he concluded, meaning that there were more late arrivals than landlords. And he added, 'we say we are all Baga, but in reality there are more strangers than Baga'. He also insisted that everybody in the Dabaka (the territory that Baga speakers occupy) was landlord and stranger to someone else. According to his explanations, a person in need of protection might go to a village and place him- or herself under the protection of a descent group or of a whole ward. If the people of this ward accepted the stranger, the ward's spirit would grant protection. Even if the strangers had strong enemies in their original village, or if they were escaping punishment, nobody would do anything to them once a descent group had promised protection.

It is unclear whether Baga had chiefs in precolonial times. While some documents present them as a clearly decentralised, segmentary society, oral tradition in fact speaks of a ceremony called 'to settle a chief' through which groups of landlords appointed a chief from a descent group of late arrivals. Whatever the case, since 1886 the Baga were under French rule, mediated through chiefs appointed by the French, sometimes referred to as 'Baga kings' in colonial sources. In 1922, the French created a 'Canton Baga', and until 1956 they continued to appoint elders to be 'traditional' or 'customary' chiefs of the Baga.

The institution of the traditional chieftaincy as promoted by the French soon became rather tyrannical. It reified notions of gerontocracy and patriarchy that most likely had a long history in precolonial Upper Guinea coast but had probably never been as rigid a structure 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 very hard at 'customary' celebration of marriages, funerals, and initiations as well as the occasional visits of chiefs and colonial officials. For the youth, Baga 'custom' became more and more oppressive: Not only did they have to tap massive amounts of palm wine for all the celebrations, but they were also subjected to forced labour, 'rice campaigns', and other abuses that were channelled through the customary chieftaincy and therefore perceived (and today remembered) as part of the 'Baga custom'. Under French rule, Baga were enclosed upon themselves in their Canton Baga, which to all effects worked as both a magnifying lens and as a fence; it amplified the local and provided a buffer against outside forces, particularly those of Islam, which since the early twentieth century was becoming a strong subaltern voice in many other Guinean cantons. Traditional rituals, which served to legitimate the status quo in which traditional chiefs and their relatives would enrich themselves and oppress the youths, were clearly protected by French colonialists, particularly worried about the anticolonial content of some varieties of Islam. Interestingly, among the Baga Sitem subgroup, Christianity became an unexpected ally of tradition. Many of the 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. As from 1946, the anticolonial movement *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* fought for the full citizenship of Africans, as promised by De Gaulle at the Brazzaville Conference (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 anticolonial message (Morgenthau 1964:237). In much of the West African territory, Islam became the real agent in the modernizing opening-up of the villages. Its followers denounced unfair chieftaincies as well as all those 'customs' that were keeping Africa behind: 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 the French.

Into this volatile situation appeared in 1956, at the very end of French colonialism, the iconoclastic jihadist figure of Asekou Sayon. Sayon marked the junction between two eras in Baga history, and he is remembered as a real agent of transformation, almost as a 'trickster' figure, as Charles Jedrej kindly observed (personal communication 1999). Sayon was a Muslim converter, a witch-finder, a 'fetish' destroyer, an RDA sympathiser, an unsatisfied people's leader, among other things. Almost immediately after the work of the jihadist,

President Sékou Touré deployed the State in a forceful campaign to establish a modern Guinean nation and identity and to ban regional forms of ethnic identity and local religious cults (it was possible to be only Guinean and Muslim). Thus, the deeds of Sayon are recalled today as a turning point in the history of the Baga.

Sékou Touré and the Politics of 'Demystification'

Sayon's movement was a complex one in which there were different religious, political, and other agendas at play. It was 'destructive' in that it represented the end of some rituals and of a religious identity linked to these rituals. The very places where sacred groves existed previously were now to harbour Muslim mosques, modern schools, or cash crop plantations. 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 sacred groves to be reintroduced and their rituals to return. The tragedy for Sayon was that, although he helped destroy the 'fetishes', he did it from the wrong side. To Touré and other politicians, men such as 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, as were many other *marabouts* (Kaba 1976:65). 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, essentially destructing 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.¹

In such a 'de-maraboutizing' context, shortly after leaving prison in 1958, unsurprisingly, Asekou Sayon tried as hard as he could to maintain a low profile and to live off peanut farming instead of the production of charms and antiwitchcraft rituals. Asekou Sayon's life and deeds represented the transition from one period 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 manipulate the oppression that 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.

The RDA led Guinea toward Independence (1958) and remained in power in the first Republic of Guinea (1958–1984). For RDA leaders, early proponents of the kind of ideology and social engineering James Scott has called 'high authoritarian modernism' (Scott 1998), traditional beliefs and the modernity of the state could not go hand in hand. Moreover, according to the philosophy of the RDA, these beliefs were no more than a 'mystification' by male elders to maintain control of gullible young men and women. Consequently, in independent Guinea a strong programme of grassroots 'demystification' was put to work that 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 (Rivière 1969), said it started in 1961. In a more recent case study, however, Michael McGovern has argued that already in early 1959 there were demystification policies in the region known as *Guinée Forestière* (McGovern 2004). Sankhon, on his part, 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' started in August 1968, following the socialist cultural revolution that was launched on 2 August 1968, inspired by the Chinese example (Sankhon 1987). In writing about the Guinean Cultural Revolution, Sékou Touré explained:

The 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. (Touré 1978:33; my translation)

Abdoulaye Tyam has argued that the 'educative' programme of the RDA to demystify local practices and beliefs had several phases (Tyam 1975:73). By 1975, he writes, anybody found wearing amulets or practising any sort of either 'fetishism' or *maraboutism* would be sentenced to fifteen years of jail.² Many other practices were also deemed irrational and banned: long and expensive funerals, certain agronomic practices, and polygamy.

In these demystifying programmes, officials were sent to the villages to prove that elders 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, as Sankhon says, without having disclosed 'the *nimba* in its true nature of man' (Sankhon 1987:42); otherwise, they would be in trouble vis-à-vis their superiors in town. Following a

common Guinean usage, Sankhon uses the word *nimba* as a generic term for 'mask', 'cult', or 'spirit' – in any case, nothing but a disguised *man* (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' iconoclasm ordered by Touré had female cults as targets for destruction, and, as some authors have argued, this fact has actually greatly intensified the strength and importance of female cults in postcolonial Guinea (see Berliner 2005 for the Bulongic; McGovern 2004 for a similar situation among the Loma).

State-monitored iconoclasm seems to have been particularly intense and violent in the forest region neighbouring Sierra Leone and Liberia, especially among the Loma (Højbjerg 2002; McGovern 2004). Among coastal Baga, probably because of the thoroughness of Sayon's iconoclastic movement only one year before decolonisation, there was no need for the state to pursue iconoclasm. The demystification campaigns were not as strongly remembered among my interviewees as they were among interviewees of Højbjerg and 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 scientific examination (Sankhon 1987:43). 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' (Bender 1991; for the making of Guinea's folklore see also Kaba 1976; Lamp 1996; Miller 1990). It was 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* (for a history of this company, see Miller 1990; Rouget 1956) 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 manifestations of the Peoples' struggle for 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'. By 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 Guéré race, the Landuma or Kissi race. The Susu, Malinké Toma, Guéré, 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. (Touré cited by Mazrui and Tidy 1985:91)

For the Baga, it was impossible to revive the practice of initiation, in contrast to 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 (McGovern 2004). The Bassari could go to Senegal to have their initiations, and maybe people along the Guinea Bissau border also went to their neighbours in that country. Unlike them, Baga had nowhere to go, other than 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' instead of Muslim sacrificial rules (Bangoura 1972:71–72). 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 had only 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.

Once Were Landlords

In their effort to destroy any sort of inequality and 'feudalism', the PDG reversed the power structure of the old canton and village chiefs. Descent groups that had wielded power in colonial times (and most probably in pre-French times, too) had no saying whatsoever about who the chiefs were going to be in postcolonial days. When I asked old Mahmoud why there had been no more 'crowning' ceremonies (*kides wube*) ever since the arrival of the PGD, he replied: 'You need a [secret] place to do the *kides wube*; with colonialism we had such a place, with the RDA we did not have it anymore'.

Distinctions between 'Baga' and 'stranger', which in colonial times had been so relevant in mapping out the political field of coastal cantons, became politically unsound and dangerous. All Guineans were to be seen in equal terms. Differences on the basis of ethnicity or seniority were not allowed; nor could age, gender, ethnicity, or migration narratives be used to differentiate Guinean citizens. As Sékou Touré wrote against Senghor and other *négritude* intellectuals, in an Africa inhabited by human beings not even colour could make people different (Touré, N.d.). The discourse against feudal prerogatives was particularly humiliating for those groups who only recently had based their ethos in genealogy, land accumulation, and ethnic seniority.

Geopolitical divisions also played an important part in the delegitimization of some of these inherited privileges. The independent Guinean state accepted some of the colonial boundaries. For instance, the two *cercles* of Boffa and Boké were transformed into prefectures with the same names. 'Cantons' disappeared, however, and they were replaced by *arrondissements* whose boundaries did not match the previous cantons. Villages also disappeared and were transformed into 'districts', each one divided into sectors. In a democratic sense, each sector was to have the same form of representation, which meant a complete reversal of the power relations in Baga Sitem villages.

In colonial times, Baga Sitem lived in some fifteen villages in the 'Canton Baga'. This canton became the *arrondissement* of Bintimodia, with the capital in Bintimodia, which had been a Susu place subordinated to Baga landlords. Each Baga village was divided into *sectors*. Let us look at the village of Mare, for instance. In colonial times, this village had three wards: Kareka, Kambota, and Katengne. Each one of these wards had some adjacent inhabited territories. For instance, some people in Kareka were the owners of Dukulum (literally, 'the bush'), a place where some Susu farmers had settled, as well as of Bakiya, where Jakhanke had settled in the mid 1950s. The people of Kategne and Kabota also had their strangers' areas. These places belonged to Baga, and, to some extent, so did their inhabitants: They were strangers of Baga landlords. With the new political structure, however, Mare found itself divided into eight *secteurs*, of which only three were inhabited by Baga farmers (the three original wards) and the other five by Susu, Jakhanke, and other strangers whose lands had previously 'belonged' to Baga. However, such phrasing was not allowed by the new government. Baga could still think of, say, Dukulum as being part from Kareka, but the new administration made Dukulum a proper *secteur*, and its citizens had the same importance, rights, and duties as those from Kareka. The situation created by the new administration of the 1960s still prevails today. In 1994, I met a Baga man in Katako who heard me say that Mare had eight wards; we were speaking in French and following a common usage. I used

the word *quartier* instead of the administrative *secteur*. He said ironically: 'Mare grew up fast; it had only three last time I was there'. I later realised that most Baga think of their village in a very different way than its Susu inhabitants do. For Baga, there are only three main divisions in Mare (with subdivisions); for Susu, there are eight. The few Baga people living in Dukulum, to stick to our example, say they live in Kareka because that is where the 'big house' of their descent group is located and because they see Dukulum as part of Kareka. Susu people living in Dukulum insist that they live in Tanene (the Susu name of Dukulum; it means 'new village') and speak of the three central *secteurs* of Mare as the *Bagatai* (in Susu, Bagaland) as though they, the Susu, were not living on the Baga territory. This example applies to all Baga Sitem villages.

As some interviewees put it, the tragedy for Baga was that they became a 'minority group' in their own villages. Furthermore, land was nationalised by a series of decrees, starting in 1959 but culminating in 1967. Baga could no longer prove that they were the landlords of the lands on which the Susu were working. One of the outcomes of the new political conjuncture was that being 'Baga' in independent Guinea was not a great advantage. If in the past there had been conversions from stranger status to Baganess and if in the colonial period being Baga meant being closer to power, in postcolonial Guinea, strangers in the Dabaka were clearly better off by remaining strangers and by accusing Baga (ex-)landlords of claiming to be their 'feudal' *seigneurs*.

The Politics of Tradition in Post-Socialist Guinea

Against the political background of Sékou Touré's repressive regime, the situation changed dramatically after the installation of the second republic by President Lansana Conté in 1984, with increasing liberalization and decentralisation. Instead of the monitoring of a national heritage from top to bottom, specific ethnic groups now became involved in claiming what they perceived as their own cultural heritages. Already in the 1980s, some groups resumed their initiations and other ritual practices that had been banned under Sékou Touré. The Landuma, for instance, who neighbour the Baga to the north, publicly celebrated the reopening of their sacred bush in the early 1990s. Another characteristic of post-Touré Guinea was the increasing involvement of *ressortissants* (urban dwellers who trace their origins to specific villages or regions) in village affairs and in reintroducing ethnic idioms that would have been unacceptable in Touré's Guinea.

Like any other Guinean people, Baga were eager to express their cultural difference by any possible means and to freely practice whatever they felt was their custom. The art historian Frederick Lamp, who conducted pioneering

field research as soon as Guinea opened up to Western researchers, witnessed this cultural reinvention and its internal problems. In fact, as he was well aware (Lamp 1996:256), he unwillingly became part of the revitalization process he was observing by making Baga aware and proud of a heritage that had been despised during the previous regime. In 2003, I met a Baga Sitem carver who used Lamp's book on Baga art as a source of inspiration to recreate the lost art of his people.

However, the enthusiasm with which Baga engaged in cultural reinvention in the 1980s decreased in the mid 1990s, when I conducted my initial fieldwork. Dances, masquerades, and other celebrations were often promised by my hosts but rarely performed. Apart from some isolated cases (such as the D'mba masquerade witnessed in the village of Tolkoc in 2001, see illustration), overall the landscape I got to know was icon-free and, even, iconophobic. Baga territory seemed to me to be more thoroughly 'demystified' than any other part of Guinea, and Baga subjectivities more fully modernised than others. Thus, when I asked interviewees why Baga had not reactivated their initiation rituals after Sékou Touré's death, as had been done in other parts of Guinea, a common answer was that Baga preferred schooling to bush initiation, by and large perceived as part and parcel of a past from which modern subjects must free themselves, very much as Sékou Touré would have put it in his demystifying language.

The reluctance to bring masks, performances, and objects into the public sphere had to do not only with the perception that these things were not compatible with education and modern life but also with the initiatory logics and its age structure. The Baga ceased their initiations in the late 1950s, and, unlike the Kissi or the Loma, who continued their initiations during Sékou Touré's times by sending their youths to Liberia or to Sierra Leone, they could not continue their initiations in any other country. This meant that the generational gap between elders (*wubeki*, pl. *abeki*) and youths (*wuan*, pl. *awut*) was, and still is, frozen. *Abeki* are those who were initiated in the pre-independence times, and *awut* are those who were not. This generational divide creates competing views on what aspects of Baga material culture are accessible, and to whom. Baga materiality becomes a precious resource, and many negotiations are required to have access to it and to have it displayed. The degree to which villagers let cultural goods be displayed not only depends on villagers' age and knowledge but also differs enormously from village to village. While some villages, mostly those enclaved in the mangroves, hold on to a strict distinction between a secret sphere and a public domain, other villages, situated closer to the urban centre of Kamsar, have created *troupes de théâtre* that offer a 'folklorised' display of Baga masquerades for tourists, political visitors, and filmmakers.³



Figure 9.1 'Nimba' (or d'mba) masquerade, Tolkoc, 2001 (photograph: Ramon Sarró)

Here I am using the notion of 'folklorisation' as a self-conscious objectification of what people perceive to be their folklore or tradition and its display in cultural performances. The concept was coined by the German anthropologist Herman Bausinger (Bausinger [1961] 1990). In West Africa, the analytical possibilities of the concept have been explored by Peter Mark (Mark 1994) and by Ferdinand de Jong (de Jong 1997) in their analyses of the Jola *troupes folkloriques* (not dissimilar to the Guinean *troupes de théâtre*). It is true that the Baga do not use the concept of folklore very often, although it is a well-known term in Guinea, and Catholic Baga do use it. Sometimes it is used as a synonym for theatre, and sometimes as a category explicitly opposed to notions of secrecy, as when a Catholic man told me in 1995 that all the filmmakers making films on Baga masquerades were getting only Baga 'folklore', not their 'secrets'. In fact, the existence of an objectified 'folklore' is often used by Baga interviewees not only to proudly show that Baga do have a cultural heritage but also to argue that whatever is seen in public performances is just the tip of the iceberg. In the early 1990s, for instance, I was told about a meeting in a village in which the elders were asked by the youths and the *ressortissants* to recreate *amanco ngopong* (the biggest Baga object, not seen in any village since the late 1940s or early 1950s), so that it could be displayed at a visit of President Lansana Conté to the village. Showing important masks to honour political visitors is of course a widespread African practice. Yet, in this particular case, the elders decided not to do it, and they instructed younger

villagers to show the often seen *nimba* headdress instead (undoubtedly the most widely known Baga object). As I was told, the elders knew that reintroducing the *amanco ngopong* in the public arena would be to downgrade it from *tolom* to *powolsene*, two concepts that are structurally opposed. *Tolom* (pl. *molom*) may mean 'secret' (as in the secrets learnt in initiation, not to be revealed), but it is also used to refer to masks, and especially to masks to be seen only by initiated people. *Powolsene* (pl. *yowolsene*) means 'toy' and refers to masks that are mainly used to entertain, such as *nimba*, *sibondel*, and some others. To downgrade *amanco ngopong* from *tolom* to *powolsene* would imply that the elders gave it to the youths and would lose the power they have by keeping it secret.

Whether the meeting I was told about really took place or was just one way to let me know that Baga could (if they so wanted) recreate such solemn things as *amanco ngopong* is impossible to determine, but it is also beside the point. Even if the meeting was invoked only as a rhetorical device, the effect was, precisely, to create the awesome presence of *amanco ngopong* in the imagination of those who were listening to the conversation, me included. It was, in fact, a group of elders who reported to me about the meeting, and they did so in the presence of some young people who, probably, felt simultaneously proud of their elders' powerful 'secrets' and angry at their unwillingness to give them away. The cunning way Baga elders get away with *not* materializing *amanco ngopong* reinforces the theoretical point made by Elisabeth Tonkin, according to which nonmaterial masks are in many ways more effective masks than material ones: Material masks conceal through revealing something else; nonmaterial masks conceal through sheer concealment, and by doing so they evoke extremely awesome spiritual entities.⁴

The fate of Baga cultural heritage is inevitably linked to such entanglements between secrecy and display. Some members of the community, especially the *ressortissants*, would like to have a cultural heritage displayed and propagated to the wider world. Others, however, have a centripetal view of knowledge, more in tune with initiatory notions of secrecy and personhood. Accordingly, they prefer to keep things secret and to remain silent about their past and their religious convictions. In 2001, I was told by elders of one village that they had sworn an oath to *amanco ngopong* to punish any materialization of spiritual forces; whoever carved a mask or a ritual object, or reintroduced rituals in the public sphere, would be punished by death by the fearsome spirit. Sometimes, however, there are some compromises. Thus, in 1995 the *ressortissants* negotiated an agreement with the elders about which particular dances could be taught to young children to perform at a Baga football tournament (Sarró 1999). As one *ressortissant* pointed out to me, Baga will get funds from international donors only if they show that they are a minority ethnic group in

danger, and they can prove this only by performing traditional dances, not by playing football.

Ressortissants are asking the elders to teach dances and performances to the youths, but teaching these would be like opening Pandora's Box. By asking elders to do things that would have been punished by the demystification campaigns of Sékou Touré, the *ressortissants* have started a process explicitly opposed to such campaigns. While in the demystification campaigns state monitors were sent to the villages to police ritual activity and to make sure that nothing 'irrational' happened, in post-socialist Guinea *ressortissants* often aim at reintroducing such practices and logics and make sure that nobody is punished for that. The national law and the international sympathies are now with them. So far, formal initiations and sacred groves have not been reintroduced, at least not in the Baga Sitem villages I know of, but in at least two of these villages there have recently been reactualizations of contracts with local spirits that had been neglected since 1958. This spiritual empowerment may be saluted, especially since Baga do have a rich heritage that they have unnecessarily despised for too long. Unfortunately, however, among his many wrongdoings, Sékou Touré was right in at least one crucial thing: In colonial times masks, rituals and spirits ('fetishes' in his Marxian language) were used as mechanisms to oppress people (mostly youths, women, and strangers) and were intertwined with local practices of landlordship (or 'feudalism', as he would have it). The challenge for Baga farmers is to live with their rituals and their spirits without claiming autochthony and power over youths, women, and strangers. If they do not meet this challenge, they will not be reclaiming their heritage but remystifying it. How to have one without the other is probably a challenge Baga share with many other peoples in today's Africa.

Notes

1. Circular No. 21/BMP/PDG-RDA, 16 October 1959, addressed to all the sections of the Party. Cited in Sankhon (1987:43; 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.
2. *Horoya* Num. 2200 (November 1975), p. 40.
3. For a particularly interesting documentary on Baga art and dances filmed in the mid 1990s, see Laurent Chevalier's *Aoutara* (France and Guinea, 1996) about a troupe of Baga women based in Conakry.
4. Tonkin develops her points about masks that are only 'a cry in the night' in her survey of masks and masquerades (Tonkin 1979a), a rare document that unfortunately has become difficult to get hold of and that I have not been able to consult. I am grateful to her for a recent conversation in Beucha (Germany), and I apologise for any possible misrepresentation of her views. As I understand her, the points she

makes in this paper are consistent with her other theoretical work on masks and power (Tonkin 1979b, 1988).

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