

THE ART OF THE BAGA: A PRELIMINARY INQUIRY

FREDERICK LAMP

The Baga people of the Atlantic coast of Guinea are among the least well-studied groups of Africa, yet their art, though little understood, is probably among the most prominently recognized of the African arts. In the past century, they have produced some of the most monumental and complex forms, with a visual repertoire that draws upon a consideration of the ancestors, of the development and structure of the cosmos, of the relationship of man to the zoological and botanical world, of the arts of physical and mental healing, of divination, and of the steps to man's harmony with his universe.

Nearly every catalogue of African art begins with an object of Baga art with a vague description, usually a reference to the so-called Simo association as its context. No monograph has ever been published on Baga art. Most essays on the subject deal with only a specific object and are usually based on secondary sources. The most important field research on Baga art, though brief, was conducted by Denise Paulme at mid-century, and her several notices remain the

most thorough and reliable. There are, on the other hand, quite a few good theses written by Guinean university students on the art, history, and culture of these people. Although included in many exhibitions of African art, Baga objects have never been the focus of a show anywhere in the world.

The study of Baga art and culture is now of urgent priority in the wake of the deterioration of Baga ethnicity and artistic production. The state of the traditional culture is such that very few elements now remain in effect, and what little can be salvaged is now largely in the form of impressions in the memories of elderly men and women.

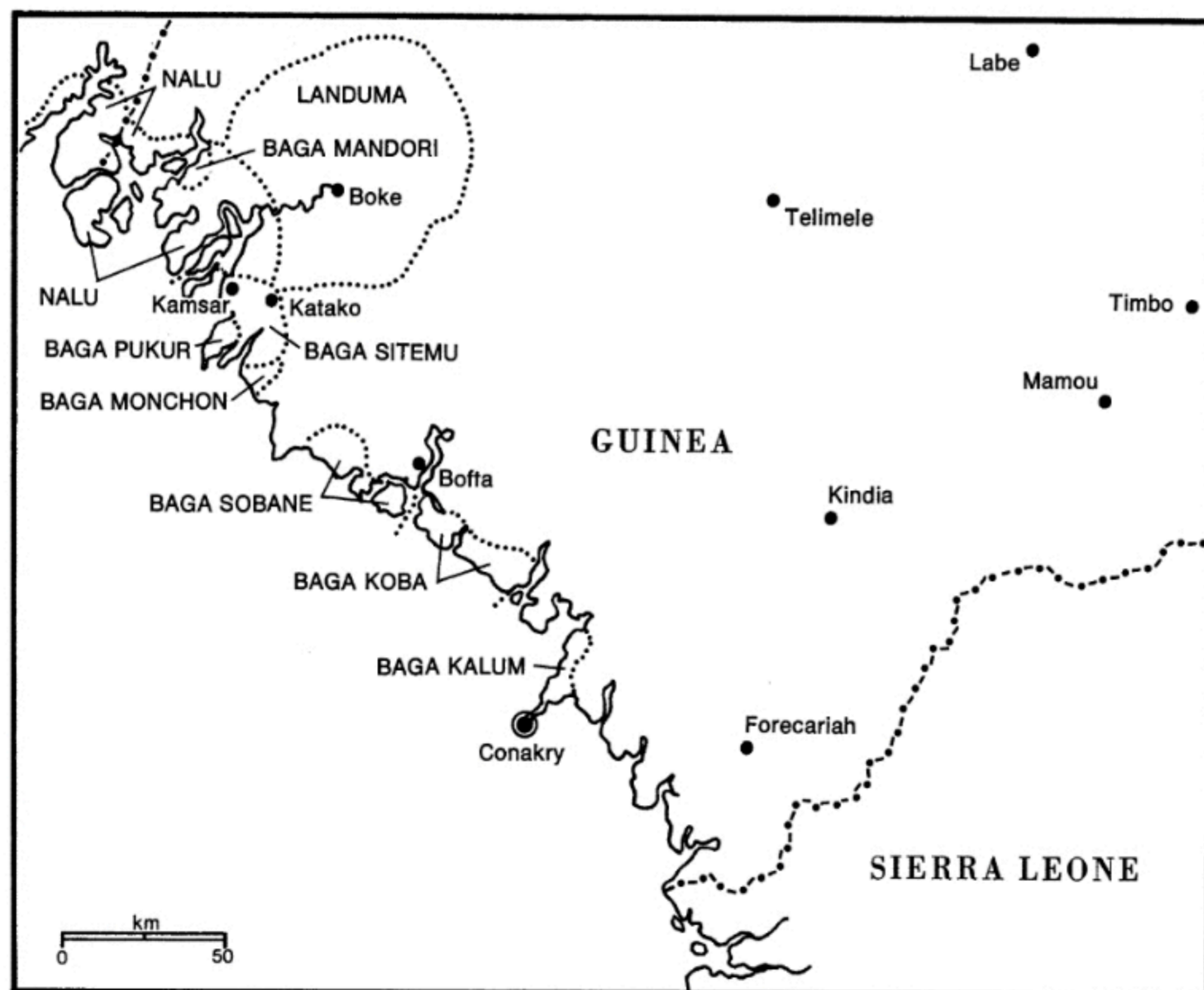
In March and April, 1985, I spent six weeks in fieldwork among the Baga, concentrating specifically on the subgroups of the Kalum, on the outskirts of Conakry, and the Sitemu, in the north near the Nunez River.¹ My purpose was to study the feasibility of further research and to prepare for a major traveling exhibition of the art of the Baga to begin in 1989. This report is presented as a brief sketch of the Baga artistic system in the hope

that others (collectors, former administrators, missionaries, etc.) with information on the culture will respond with data, perhaps stored in their mental attics, by which an exhibition, with catalogue, may be produced.

The Baga are part of the Temne cluster of the Mel language group, and they share their historical development with the Temne people of northern Sierra Leone. A people known as Baga have been at their current location in some form since at least the fourteenth century. At some unknown era, they began their migration probably from the interior highlands of the Futa Djallon with their linguistic kin, the Landuma, Tyapi, and Temne. This process seems to have culminated by the early eighteenth century, consisting of a great number of independent waves of movement and probably incorporating small elements of other neighboring ethnic groups. From the fourteenth century to the twentieth, they have been invaded by the Nalu, Susu, Djalonke, Maninka, and Fulbe. Their geographical division from the Temne began first with the Susu and Loko-Gbandi (Mani) invasions of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, when these groups settled the coast from Conakry to the Great Scarcies River at the border of present-day Sierra Leone and subsumed the Baga linguistically and culturally. The division was finally sealed with the defeat of the Baga-Temne by the Fulbe in the early eighteenth century in the area just north of the Sierra Leone border between Mamou and Forecariah, when these groups were forced west and south.

In the late nineteenth century, the French began their domination of Guinea. The 1950s saw the final conversion of the Baga (at least nominally) to the Muslim religion, although some inroads had been made by the French Catholics. Finally, with the coming of independence and modernization, the Baga and other groups seem to have abandoned most of their traditional ritual and have been enjoined in the struggle to achieve modern Guinean nationalistic and technological stature.

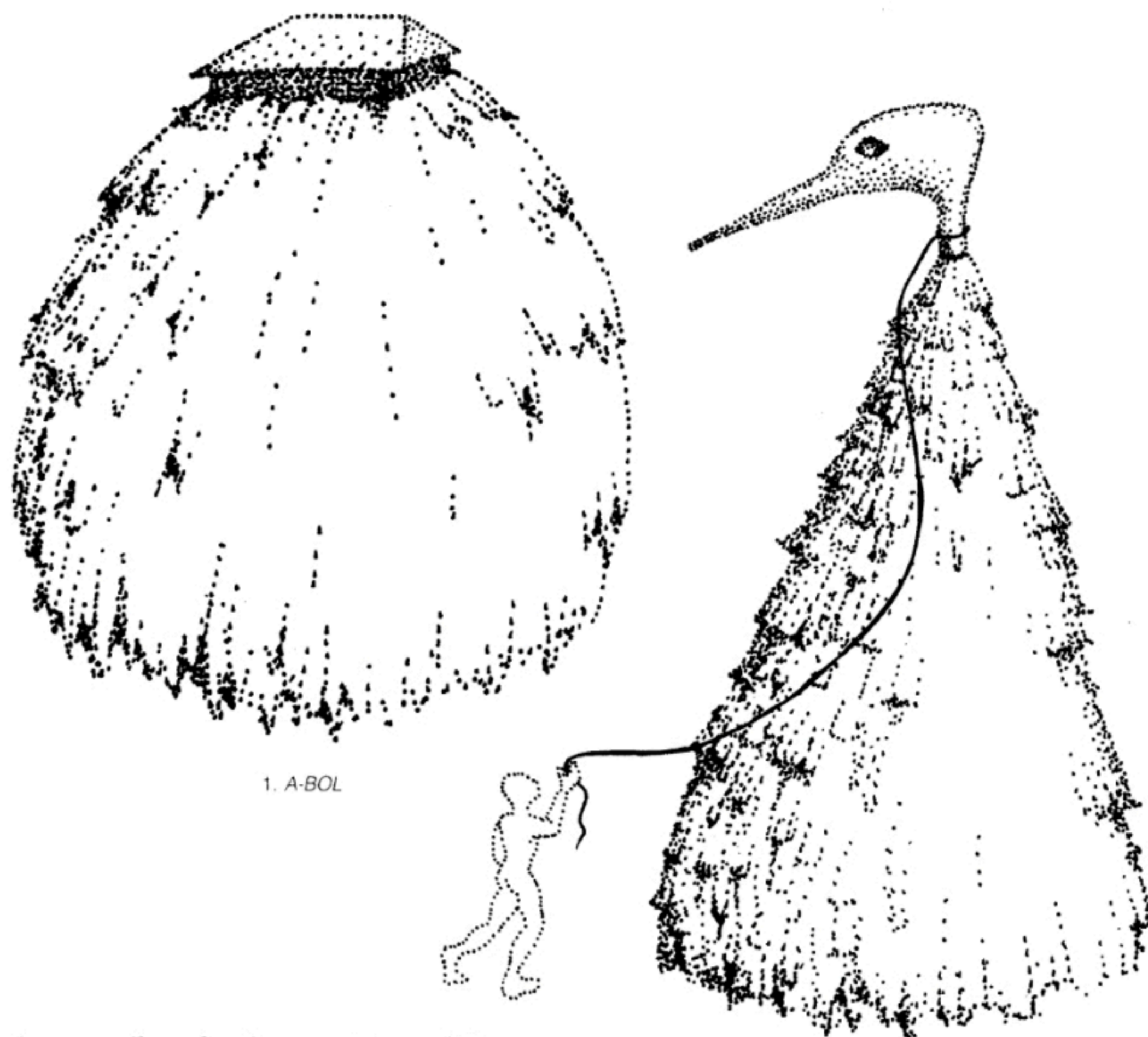
The current map of Baga territory has yet to be drawn definitively, but we can outline the general areas of occupation, which are continually in flux (see map).



Basically the Baga occupy the coast of Guinea from the Kalum Peninsula north to the Rio Compony, divided into at least six different dialect groups. Most of this territory, however, has been overwhelmed by the Susu people and their language, so the actual area dominated by Baga-speaking people has been reduced to no more than 300 square kilometers located in the north (south of the Rio Nunez), an area largely of mangrove swamps, sparsely populated. This is the location of the Baga subgroups of Sitemu and Pukur (with Binari and Mboteni). The Baga Mandori appear to be subsumed by the Nalu in the north, and I was unable to gain much information about them. The southern Baga groups—the Sobane, Koba, and Kalum—are today Baga primarily in concept only, as little of their ritual remains intact, only a few elders in any village remember the language, their area is heavily occupied by the Susu, and there seems little left to describe for them a Baga identity other than their own historical sense of ethnicity.

I have identified the subgroup Sitemu (meaning in Baga, "Those who speak the ancient language") as the most promising group on which to concentrate my extended period of research next year because of their independent occupation and cultural integrity. Five small villages—Tolokuts, Katako, Talbunto, Kouffin, and Maré—remain centers of Baga culture, and although Susu is spoken by everyone, Baga is still the principal language used in the home. It will be important also to make field trips to the other areas listed above to identify the origins of works of art not traceable to the Sitemu, and to assess the current state of the ritual arts comprehensively.

Other peripheral areas associated culturally with the Baga must also be explored in order to gain a fuller view of the arts of the Baga historically. The Nalu to the north are described by the Baga as their cultural relatives. The Landuma, who occupy a large area inland, centered around Boké, are both linguistic and cultural relatives, although they seem to have had less use for the sculptural arts. The "Baga Fore," or Baga Monchon, linguistically are enigmatically unrelated, but they share a cultural identity with the Baga proper. Their language bears some similarity to Nalu. The area south of Conakry northeast to the town of Mamou and south to the Sierra Leone border has been described as a Baga-Temne area prior to the early eighteenth century, although nothing remains of this identity today. And all Baga groups claim to have once occupied the Futa Djallon in the areas of Labé and Timbo. It will be important to build a historical picture of the Baga occupation of these areas and to try to place some obscure works of art



1. A-BOL

2. SOMTUP

that are alleged to have originated there, especially in the south.

While previous European scholarship on the Baga covers some important traditions no longer extant, it became clear through my interviews that something is fundamentally amiss in the existing literature. The principal error has been linguistic; it seems that none of the previous researchers learned the Baga language, and all information was received in either Susu or French. Thus most of the terms used to describe Baga art and ritual are Susu terms, with the corresponding Susu interpretation. To be fair, it should be pointed out that no previous researcher spent more than several months in Baga fieldwork.

All Baga speak the Susu language commonly; most, especially in the south, speak Susu as a first language, French second, and hardly a word of Baga. This situation apparently has existed throughout most of this century. I found that when the Baga talk in Susu or in French, they automatically slip into an entirely foreign system of ritual terminology almost unconsciously, and it is only when they are cross-examined that they come to grips with the error of the terms.

In the Baga language, a whole new world of terminology reveals a distinctly Baga interpretation of the meaning of this ritual. Indigenous terminology is essential to an understanding of original significance, as Marcel Griaule insisted. For this reason, I endeavored to receive my information from the Baga in their Baga language, and I see my first task as the compilation of a Baga grammar and dictionary—which currently does not exist—and the acquisition of a reasonable speak-

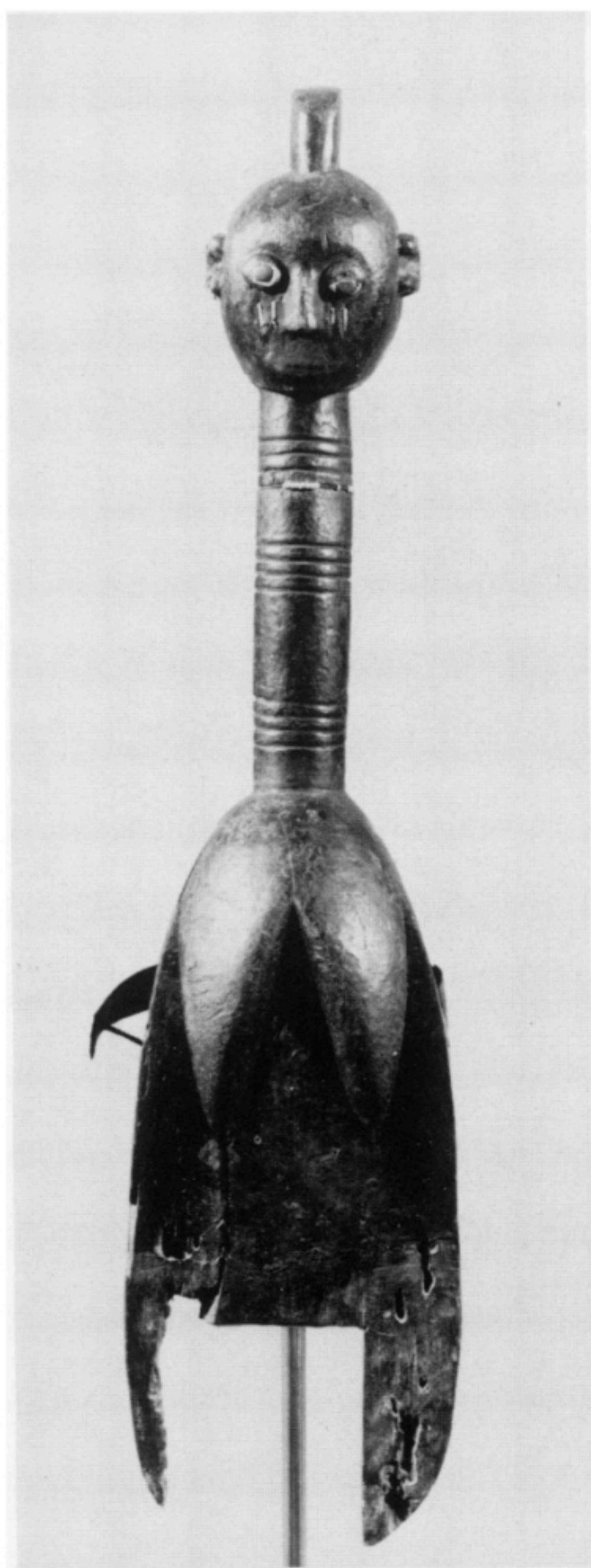
ing facility in the language. Because I speak Temne, which is as closely related to the Baga dialects as Portuguese is to Spanish, I was able to conduct some inquiry in terms familiar to the Baga.

The most glaring error in the existing literature is the emphasis on what has been described as the foundation of Baga ritual, the sodality known as the "Simo society." The Baga categorically insist that no such association exists, nor has it ever existed. Simo is merely the Susu term for anything "sacred," and is applied to all initiation ritual, masks, masquerades, and shrines, little of which the Susu have themselves. This was confirmed also by all my Susu informants. Most informants knew that European writers have persisted in perpetuating this error, and have found it rather amusing.

Briefly, I would like to outline the traditional Baga ritual system as found among the Sitemu, which applies to some extent to the other subgroups, and to provide a basic identification of artistic forms. The basic ritual unit is the initiation society, which follows two fundamental lines, one masculine and one feminine in principle, under which fall, in both categories, the men's and women's rites. These masculine and feminine lines are based upon lineage, although it is not as simple as a Bangoura/Camara delineation (after the two principal Baga family names), but seemingly upon the history of immigration and patrimonial status.

The highest spiritual being recognized by the Baga, after the creator god, *Kanu*, is the male spirit, *Somtup*. Alternate

names are *wu-Them* (the Patriarch), *a-Mantsho-ngö-Pön*² (the Great *Mantsho* ["Master" in Manding?]), and *a-Paran* (the Grandfather). The Susu name for the same spirit is *Kakilambe*, and this is the term generally given by the Baga when speaking in Susu or French. *Somtup* was represented in the past by a portable construction (Fig. 2) approximately twenty meters high consisting of a massive cage covered with raffia surmounted by the form of a bird head. The cage was supported underneath by approximately twenty men. This is the spirit of the masculine line. In certain areas of the Baga Sitemu, *Somtup* is replaced by a similar spirit by the name of *Bogäläns*. In either case, the initiation society is known by the name of its patron spirit, or by the term *to-Lom* (the Sacred).



3 DAMBA PA-FET 67cm ARTHUR COHEN COLLECTION. ELIOT ELISOFON ARCHIVES. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART. RIGHT 4 THONGKONGGBA. LENGTH 83.5cm HAROLD ROME COLLECTION. ELIOT ELISOFON ARCHIVES. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART.

The feminine line is governed by the spirit *a-Bol*, the wife of *Somtup*. Her alternate name is *u-Thembra* (the Matriarch). *A-Bol* was represented by another large, portable construction (Fig. 1) consisting of a huge cage covered with raffia surmounted by a reed construction ostensibly in the form of a Baga house (although Denise Paulme, who likewise had never seen this spirit, was told by a French missionary that it was a giant tortoise shell). The association devoted to *a-Bol* goes either by the name of the spirit or by the term *a-Tékän*, and has, likewise, its male and female initiations and devotees.

Neither of these spirits has ever been illustrated in the literature, and the Baga insist that photography would have been frustrated by the spirits' elusive nature. It is claimed that one researcher attempted to photograph *Somtup*, but his film recorded nothing. I would be interested to hear from anyone who witnessed the dance of these spirits when they were still extant, as they are no longer represented in dance today.

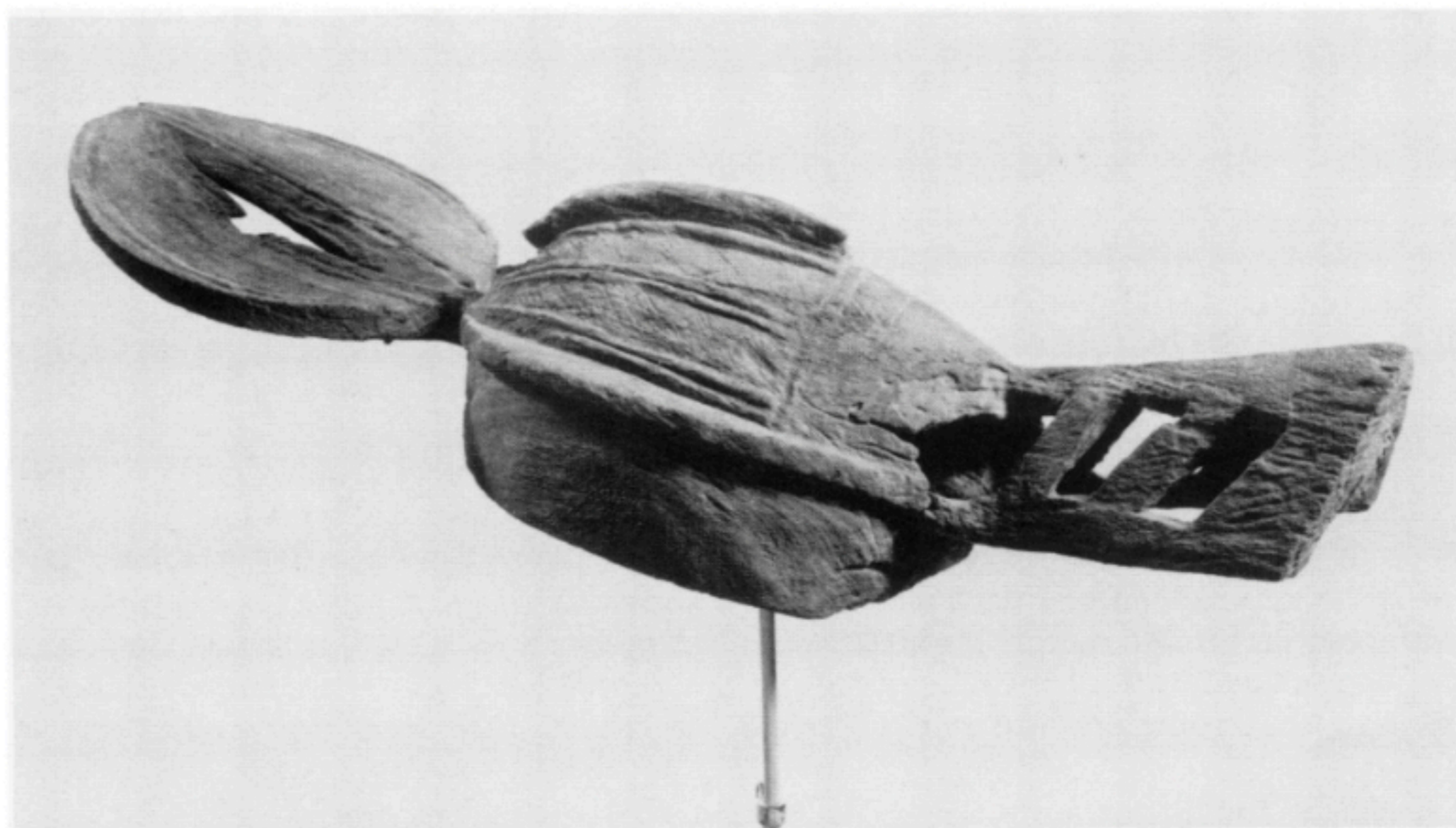
Under *Somtup* and *a-Bol* ranks the spirit *a-Mantsho-nga-Tshöl* (the *Mantsho* of Medicine), known alternately by the Susu name of *Bansonyi*. This is the spirit represented by the tall wooden serpent headdress well known to collectors of Baga art. Although exhibition catalogues often use the Susu term, *Kakilambe*, interchangeably for this headdress, that term is incorrect, and applies, if one wishes to speak Susu, only to the spirit I have described as *Somtup*. *A-Mantsho-nga-Tshöl* is the patron of the lower two ranks of the initiates of *to-Lom*. The principal ritual involving this spirit consists of two (or three at *Katoko*) masqueraders, each representing a lineage group of the village, identifying each with the male or female principle.³

A-Tshöl (Medicine) is the generic term given to the spirit represented by a long, horizontal, wooden head resembling a bird head with a long beak, but with an anthropomorphic face (Fig. 5). Alternate

names are *Èlèk* (in Baga Monchon), *a-Nok* (distribution undetermined), *Matshioli Kuye* (in Susu), *Mbelekete* or *Ninte-Kamatshöl* (in Nalu)⁴. *A-Tshöl* is not necessarily under the control of the initiation society, although its practitioner would naturally be a member of that association. It is rather the possession of a lineage group or village and is controlled by the eldest member of that group for the general protection of the group against evil forces.

A mask that has been ambiguously identified by the name of *Numbe* (a variant pronunciation of *Nimba*?) in the past, and which is usually attributed in exhibition catalogues to the *Landuma*, is claimed by the Baga Sitemu and called, according to several informants, *Thongkonggba* (Far-Speaker) or *Tafo* (Fig. 4). Although it can be danced, it seems to function primarily as a shrine piece, as in a case I witnessed. Other learned Sitemu informants denied knowledge of these names, and I deduce that it operates under heavy prohibitions. No photograph has ever been published of the mask *in situ*, and I was not allowed to photograph it myself.

The famous wooden headdress known through the world as *Nimba* has been quite thoroughly misrepresented in the literature. Let's begin with the name, which is properly, among all the Baga, *Dämba* or *Dämba-ko-Pön* (the Great *Dämba*). *Nimba* is its Susu corruption. *Dämba* was not under the control of an initiation society and had nothing to do with initiation, but was rather the property of the secular village, and seems the patroness more of the women than of the men. She is not to be regarded as a "goddess of fecundity," as she is usually described in the literature; she represents simply the idea of a woman who has borne children, and the Baga insist that she is not even of the status of a spirit (*wi-kärfin*). Nevertheless, her veneration was considered of utmost importance in celebrating and promoting both human and agricultural fertility and growth, through the medium of her male dancer, who is considered to





5. A-TSHÖL. 62cm. MUSEUM OF THE PHILADELPHIA CIVIC CENTER. ELIOT ELISOFON ARCHIVES, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART.

have been a spirit while in masquerade. *Dämba* has not been danced in authentic ritual since the mid-1950s, when the last examples were exported by the French.

Dämba-pä-Fët (the Young *Dämba*) is a masquerader among the Sitemu and Binari with a small, wooden headdress representing a female bust with full breasts (Fig. 3), worn in the same manner as the Great *Dämba*. A similar headdress is known as *Yokui* (in Susu) in the south, among the Kalum, or as *Kömö* (a Susu name used by the Nalu, Baga Monchon, and their neighbors, the Mikifore). All informants said that this type of headdress appears for entertainment only, but I suspect that this is a recent development. *Dämba-pä-Fët* is described as the "*Dämba* for the elders," whereas the Great *Dämba* is under the control and veneration of the young men and women.⁵

A-Bëmp (the Bird) is a masquerader with a wooden headdress representing a bird (perhaps the hornbill), often in combination with other forms such as smaller birds, a serpent, model houses, and even airplanes. The Susu term for this headdress is *Koni* (also meaning "Bird"). I have not been able to determine the antiquity of this tradition (it may be a twentieth-century introduction created by a Baga man of Koba by the name of Khanfory Kimson,⁶ but there is clearly

some antecedent) or any ritual significance beyond its purely entertainment value today.

Dudu (also known as *i-Bo*, or *Lumbe* among the Koba) is a mask worn by male initiates to disguise themselves when they appear in the village from their hideaway in the sacred initiation grove. It is a wooden mask in the form of a human face, often more or less grotesque. There is some evidence that in initiation masquerades it opposes *a-Bëmp* in dramatic acts.

There are several headdresses apparently of recent invention, used mainly in public celebration. The most intriguing of these is a large wooden construction, brilliantly painted, resembling a cart containing a melange of figures, called the *Säbondel*. Like the *A-Bëmp*, this is said to have been created around 1935 by Khanfory Kimson. The cart is provided at the front with the head of a rabbit, alluding to the quality of cunning.⁷ Another similar construction is in the form of the Muslim winged horse, called *al-Baraka*.

Tiyambo and *Yombofissa* are wooden headdresses in the form of a young woman with firm breasts. They seem to be variations on the same theme, and the Baga are often confused as to the distinction. One style bears an elaborate coiffure, with two high sagittal crests of hair,

one fore and one aft, enigmatically in the form found frequently among the Fulbe. The other is cornrowed, with horns protruding from the top of the head. Although these are said to have originated in the 1940s, some similar pieces exist in collections that clearly are of some antiquity.

Many other masks, drums, figures, and utilitarian objects have been investigated, too numerous to detail in this brief survey. References exist to the following spirits and masquerades, which I would like to pursue:

- Bambagbali*: a crocodile missing one leg
- Bingo*: a Nalu figure?
- Boli*: causes earthquakes;
from Baga Sobane
- Doko/Daga/Dakwi*: a mask from
Sobane/Koba; same as *Dudu*?
- Gbani*: a mask
- Kanke*: janus mask
- Korogba*: spirit of war
- Koyilo*: a mask; same as *Dudu*?
- a-Mantsho-nga-Wut*: a children's spirit
- Mbantyon*: a mask/headdress
- Mbare*: a mask
- N'tene*: a mask?
- Pende-Pende/Pande-Pande*: variation
of the Nalu *Banda*?
- Pore*: a mask of boys' initiation
- ka-Rängka*: human figures
- Saba*: cloth mask
incorporating a wooden serpent
- Santa-Bo*: in the form of a bird-canoe
- Soko*: stilt dancer
- Sorsorne*: children's *Dämba-pä-Fët*
- Thambalën*: Manding-influenced *Dämba*
- ta-Tshbaronka*: boys' initiation mask
- an-Thesa*: female forest spirit
- Tomalong*: a mask danced at harvest
- Wakärba*: boys' initiation mask
- Yete*: leopard spirit

Within all this seeming disarray of form, style, and function, I hope to search for some common denominators, diachronic as well as diametric, that have enabled the Baga, though severely fragmented by language and by a history of internal and external political conflict, to persevere with a surprising degree of cultural unity and ritual fraternity. From the cultural distillation that informs art, one may be able to deduce a distinct message about Baga cosmological thought, and a way of life that threatens to disappear within our lifetime.

Although the readers of this magazine will be, in general, those who have had no experience with the Baga specifically, it is hoped that word will reach some who have, and might have seen things that will never be seen again. I would be interested, also, to hear from collectors who may have unusual objects from the Baga area, in order to form the most comprehensive picture of the Baga artistic corpus. □

Notes, page 92

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Statement of ownership, management and circulation (Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

1. Title of Publication: *African Arts*.
2. Date of filing: 9/23/85.
3. Frequency of issue: Quarterly (February, May, August, November).
4. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: African Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1310.
5. Complete mailing address of the headquarters of general business offices of the publisher: African Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1310.
6. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor, and managing editor: African Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1310. John F. Povey, African Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1310. None.
7. Owner: Regents of the University of California, 405 Hilgard, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1310.
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9. The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes have not changed during preceding 12 months.
10. Extent and nature of circulation: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: A. Total number of copies printed: 5500; 5400. B. Paid and/or requested circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales: 235; 308. (2) Mail subscription: 3684; 3694. C. Total paid and/or requested circulation: 3919; 4002. D. Free distribution by mail, carrier or other means: samples, complimentary or other free copies: 110; 108. E. Total distribution: 4029; 4110. F. Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, left over, unaccounted, spoiled after printing: 1471; 1290. (2) Return from news agents: 0; 0. Total: 5500; 5400. 11. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete (Signed) John F. Povey, Editor.

ten by undergraduate students in my African art history courses. It is available for \$6.00 (tax, postage, and handling included) from the Barnes and Noble Bookstore, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH 44115.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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LAMP, notes from page 67

1. My field research was sponsored by a grant from the Special Foreign Currency Program, Smithsonian Institution, 1985.
2. For technical reasons, *African Arts* is unable to use the International Phonetic Alphabet in type. Therefore the following substitutions are used here: \bar{a} = the sign of the inverted \bar{c} , pronounced like the u in "untie," often more or less elided; \bar{e} = the open e , epsilon; \bar{o} = the open o , pronounced like the "au" in "author"; \bar{u} = the nasal u , as in the French "avons."
3. Denise Paulme, "Structures sociales en pays baba," *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N.*, vol. 18, sér. B, nos 1-2, 1956: pp. 106-12.
4. Fernando Galhano, *Esculturas e Objectos Decorados da Guiné Portuguesa no Museu de Etnologia do Ultramar*, Lisbon, 1971: figs. 94-96.
5. Bohumil Holas, "Dances masquées de la Basse-Côte," *Etudes Guinéennes (Conakry)*, vol. 1, 1947: pp. 63-64.
6. Holas, "Dances masquées," pp. 64-65.
7. Holas, "Dances masquées," p. 64.

HAMMER, notes, from page 73

1. More data exist concerning the documentation of individual carving styles among the Yoruba than any other people in Africa; however, the systematic documentation and cross-referencing of this material is yet to be completed. Among those who have written on the identification of Yoruba carvers are Bascom (1973), Carroll (1961, 1967), Drewal (1980), Fagg (1963, 1982), Pemberton (1982), and Thompson (1971).
 2. Contributors to a book (forthcoming) on *Ere Ibeji, Yoruba Carving Styles* include: Wande Abimbola, T.J.H. Chappel, Henry Drewal, Margaret Drewal, Ekpo Eyo, William Fagg, Lamidi Fakeye, Deborah Stokes Hammer, Jeffrey Hammer, Marilyn Houlberg, Babatunde Lawal, Mikelle Smith Omari, John Pemberton, John Picton, and Robert Thompson. Two symposia on the subject have been held in Lagos, Nigeria.
 3. In light of our style analysis, our conclusions regarding the existence of a unique hand are supported by several Yoruba scholars, among them William Fagg, (personal communication, 1983, 1984), Marilyn Houlberg (personal communication, Sept. 1983) and John Picton (personal communication, Aug. 1984), who did extensive field research in the Igbomina region.
 4. William Fagg, personal communication, 1984.
 5. William Fagg, personal communication, 1984.
 6. Compare an *oshe shango* from the Igbomina area in Drewal (1980: 30, fig. 17), an example from Omu-Aran in Vogel (1981: 92 pl. 46, erroneously catalogued as Owo), and one from Aran-Orin (Carroll 1967: pl. 37). The last *oshe shango* displays not only the motif of double heads but also their placement on either side of a sloping ax head.
 7. In 1964, John Picton interviewed a carver of the Agbegi compound in Oro named Andu Salami, who said that he was the son of the Owu master and that he had been dead for some thirty years. We cannot say for certain if this is true as Picton is somewhat skeptical. Despite its distance from the master's birthplace, we suggest Owu as the town attached to his work.
 8. Marilyn Houlberg, personal communication, 1983.
 9. An *oshe shango*, nearly a duplicate of that illustrated here but clearly by a different hand, was recently brought to our attention by Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Ray of Dallas. Its existence suggests that the Owu master did indeed have apprentices. Other carvings by this apprentice hand were carved in Ila-Orangun according to Olonade, junior brother of Andu Salami of the Agbegi compound (Murray Archive neg. 61. XII. B4 20, photo by John Picton).
 10. Examples from Omu-Aran, by Onigemo, are in the William Fagg Archive (1940-50/47.3); and from Oke Onigbin, in the National Museum, Lagos (68.3.85. 70.2.10, 67.14.63) and Fagg (1968: pl. 126, 127).
 11. In Oke Onigbin, for example, particularly in the style attributed to Ogunkayode (Fagg 1968), males often wear an apron. This motif is also found in the Egbado area.
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ARTIFACTS

Arrowheads, one complete lower grinding-plate and upper grinding-stone of Sahara Neolithic age. Four Acheulian hand-axes, lower Paleolithic age. Private collectors only. Call or write Elaine Olszewski, 6423 Bowwood Dr. N.W., Calgary, AL T3B 2G5, Canada. (403) 288-9268.

NGUNI BEADWORK

Joan Broster, author of *Tembu* and other studies, wishes to sell her large documented collection of traditional Nguni beadwork and dress. Enquiries to 34 6th Ave., Gonubie 5256, South Africa.

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The following articles in this issue have been accepted for publication after being refereed by members of the *African Arts* review panel:

- "Aron Arabai: The Temne Mask of Chieftaincy," page 41.
- "Women and Masks among the Western We of Ivory Coast," page 46.
- "The Master of the Owu Shango Shrine," page 70.
- "The Dodo Masquerades of Burkina Faso," page 74.

OPPOSITE PAGE: COTTON ROBE (DETAIL). HAUSA, NIGERIA. WIDTH OF WHOLE ROBE 239cm. COLLECTION OF THE GLASGOW ART GALLERY AND MUSEUM. GIFT, 1950. SEE PAGE 28.