

***EQUATORIAL GUINEA 1927-1979:
A NEW AFRICAN TRADITION***

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PhD HISTORY

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Abstract

This work focuses on the history of the Fang people of Equatorial Guinea between 1927 and 1979 in an effort to shed some light on the so-called process of retraditionalization that African societies have been undergoing for the last three decades. Contrary to those views that expected that independence would consolidate the process of modernization initiated by colonialism, many African countries, including Equatorial Guinea, have seen how traditional structures have gained ground ever since. This process is often explained as a result of the so-called crisis of modernity. It is argued that, due to the instability provoked by rapid modernization and the failure of modern structures, Africans are recovering their old ways in search for solutions. This explanation, however, stands against those views that considered that colonial conquest put an end to African traditional systems. This thesis argues that, although traditions are certainly back, this is, in fact, a new phenomenon, which started with the advent of colonial conquest.

This work shows how colonial structures and the changes that followed resulted in the collapse of the traditional social model. In response to such situation, a new socio-cultural tradition, rooted in the old one, took form – being the development of modern Fang identity its most salient element. Research specifically focuses on transformations in authority, religious beliefs and identity, as well as their relationship. Much emphasis is put on the historicity of the process, covering three main historical stages such as the second half of the nineteenth century, the period of colonial conquest and domination between the 1910s and 1968, and the aftermath of independence between 1968 and 1979.

This work does not only examine a peculiar colonial model, the Spanish, on which very little has been written, but also an African society that the English language literature has largely ignored. In so doing, research has relied on both oral sources and documents. Interviews were conducted in Equatorial Guinea. Archival sources were examined both in Alacalá de Henares (Madrid), where Spain's public records are based, and Rome, where part of the documents of the Claretian missionary order can be found.

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– *Wǎ só ma dze?*

– *Mǎ só wǎ nlân*

Acknowledgements

For anybody ever involved in a research project of this nature, the first thing that one learns is that this is a lonely task. Long gone are the days in which going to college was very much a socializing experience. In addition to the solitude, one also learns to work on a long-term project, the rewards of which, being blurred by the distance, look everything but encouraging. This type of work, however, consists of numerous stages in which one comes across many challenges and, more importantly, numerous people. After almost five years of work, I am totally aware that this project would not have been possible, had it not been for those who, at different times, offered me their collaboration and support. In this respect, this is not an individual work even though, in the end, I am the one who, for better or for worse, takes full responsibility for its contents.

At the genesis of this work is the Equatorial Guinean people. This project was born out of the necessity to understand a reality that, very often, seems to overcome us, while we are unable to provide adequate responses. It was clear to me that Equatorial Guineans should play an important role in this work and their voices should, somehow, be heard. In spite of all the warnings I received about reluctance and lack of cooperation, I must say that it is difficult to remember a case in which somebody refused to lend me part of his or her time to sit down and talk – sometimes for up to four hours. For this, I am forever indebted to all of them, the interviewees and the non-interviewees. They shared their memories, their knowledge and their company; I did enjoy all of it. I can only hope that this work can reward them, because, in a way, they symbolize the voices and faces of an Equatorial Guinea that we ourselves often ignore and are unaware of.

Looking back, I realize that most memories of this project are associated with my family. Inspiration, support, comfort... all this I found in them. Those close to me can understand how much I owe to my family because, without them, this work would never exist. It would not be fair to name each of you. In addition to making this an endless list, I would run the risk of leaving some of you aside. In Equatorial Guinea, in Spain and in Jamaica: *akiba, gracias* and thank you.

Five years leaves room for all kind of experiences and moods. Throughout this time, Dr. John Parker, my supervisor, and I have shared and, at times, suffered many of them. In spite of everything, we stayed together, we got the work done, and the friendship survived. It has been a learning experience and, if I am a better scholar, it is, to a great extent, thanks to his teachings.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the School of Oriental and African studies for recognizing the value of this project and offering me the financial support I needed to make this project a reality.

Note on Spelling

Fang or Beti languages are spoken, in multiple variations and dialects, across most of southern Cameroon, northern and Central Gabon, Río Muni and the northwestern corner of the Republic of Congo. Although mutually understandable, the languages both lack a standardized and written version, and it is always difficult to decide how to best transcribe Fang-Beti vocabulary. In addition to the difficulties posed by the existence of numerous dialects, the languages have traditionally been transcribed according to the phonetic rules of the language of the colonizer; namely French, German and Spanish. For the purpose of this work, I have followed, the transcription model used by Julián Bibang Oyee in his book *Curso de lengua fang*. For reasons of clarity, however, I have replaced the sign - η , representing the characteristic nasal Fang-Beti phoneme, for -ng. Furthermore, I have maintained the accepted spelling of public figures, such as Macías Nguema, whose name should actually be transcribed Ngema.

Glossary

Abáá: palaver house

Administrador territorial: District officer

Afri Kara: Fang-Beti mythical ancestor

Ayong: Clan

Benga: Coastal people of Río Muni

Beyele: Pigmy people of Río Muni

Beti: Name of the Cameroonian Fang

Bieré: Ancestor statue

Bisio / Bujeba / Osyeba: People of Río Muni and Gabon

Bubi: Indigenous people of Bioko

Bulu: Fang-Beti dialectal group of Cameroon

Bwiti: Religious movement of Gabon and Río Muni

Demarcación: District

Dirección General de Marruecos y Colonias (DGMC): Head Office for Morocco and the Colonies

Dirección General de Plazas y Provincias Africanas (DGPPA): Head Office for African Towns and Provinces

Dzaá: Village

Ekwelé (pl. **bikwelé**): Sanaga-Ogowe currency

Emancipado: African with full citizen rights

No-emancipado: African without citizen rights

E'Lat-Ayong: Fang-Beti affirmative movement

Evú: Living being responsible for witchcraft powers

Ewondo: Fang-Beti dialectal group of Cameroon

Fang-Fang: Fang-Beti dialectal group of Gabon and Río Muni

Fernandino: Creole people of Bioko

Fernando Po: Present-day Bioko

Claretian: Catholic missionary order

Indígena: Native African (no-emancipado)

Jefe: Chief

Kombe: Coastal people of Río Muni

Mbwo: Witchcraft, sorcery

Mebe'e: One of the Sanaga-Ogowe names for God

Melän: Sanaga-Ogowe ancestor cult

Mínnama / mfdzaá: Sanaga-Ogowe community leader

Mvók: Village

Mvok-e'bot: Extended family with a common polygamous grandfather or great-grandfather

Ndá-e'bot: Smallest family structure

Ndowe / Playero: Modern name of Río Muni's coastal peoples

Nkúkúma (pl. mikukuma): Administrative chief

Nnem (pl. beyem): Sorcerer, witch

Nswa: Bridewealth

Ntángán (pl. Mitángán): European

Ntángán-ngóngóó (pl. mitángán-mingóngóó): Missionary

Ntem: River at the border between Cameroon and Río Muni

Ntóó (pl. botóó): Elder

Ntumu: Fang-Beti dialectal group of Cameroon and Río Muni

Nzamá: One of the Sanaga-Ogowe names for God

Ñyáamboro (pl. beñyáamboro): Elder

Obän: Period of raids

Ogowe: Gabonese river

Okak: Fang-Beti dialect group of Río Muni

Pahouin / Pamue / Pangwe: Colonial name referring to the Fang-Beti

Patronato de Indígenas: Guardian institution for no-emancipados

Prestación personal: Compulsory communal work for Africans

Reducción: Missionary sub-station

Rio Muni: Mainland Equatorial Guinea

Só: Sanaga-Ogowe initiation rite

Tribunal de raza: Colonial native court

Wele: River of central Río Muni

Introduction

Six years ago I had the opportunity to attend a lecture at King's College, London, in which Patrick Chabal outlined the main ideas of his and J.P. Daloz's book, *Africa Works*. Chabal explained that we should analyse present political conditions in Africa from an outlook in which African political actors have been able to elaborate an effective political system through the 'instrumentalization of disorder'. In other words, by internalizing the climate of apparent chaos, Africans have found local tools to deal with disorder and obtain the maximum benefit from it.¹ Indeed, I could lay numerous parallels between Chabal and Daloz's analysis and the political situation in Equatorial Guinea, from where I had returned only a few months before. Nonetheless, Chabal's presentation left me with a few unanswered questions and an undeniable sense of discomfort. For some time, I wondered if indeed Africa works and I had been mistaken all along. Yet, whenever I tried to answer this question, the same image always came up in my mind, an expensive vehicle on the unpaved tracks that crisscross Equatorial Guinea. This vehicle is sometimes broken-down and sometimes stuck in the mud, but it always carries a bunch of politicians and top government officials, who see through the windows how they are moving, thinking that the car works just fine. At the rear, however, a group of villagers laboriously push the vehicle forward and silently wonder why these powerful men cannot find another way to make the car move.

Equatorial Guinea does not work: it is a dysfunctional society that struggles to deal with daily challenges and often fails in finding solutions to pressing difficulties. Like many other countries across the continent, Equatorial Guinea suffers from a so-called crisis of modernity. This term seems to refer to the difficulties that

fundamentally traditional societies experience as a result of modern transformations, such as those deriving from the establishment of the nation-state model or the capitalist economy. The most obvious consequence of this crisis is the process of retraditionalization or Africanization that the continent has been experiencing since independence and which has attracted the attention of political scientists and anthropologists for nearly two decades. This process does not only involve the revival of 'traditional' institutions such as kinship ideology, clientelism and most notoriously witchcraft beliefs, but it has also affected 'modern' institutions inherited from the colonial era, which have been re-appropriated or Africanized, as Bayart pointed out in his pioneering study at the end of the 1980s.²

Scholars were generally caught by surprise by a phenomenon that very few could foresee in the immediate aftermath of the independence process. Certainly, some authors, such as Fernández, were aware of the existence of lingering institutions of precolonial origin, yet most views interpreted this as remains of a transitional period that modernization, now boosted by sovereign governments, would eventually eliminate.³ Since the 1980s, inspired by the emergence of so-called authenticity or Mobutu-style regimes across Africa in the previous decade, historians turned their attention to traditions, which had been almost exclusively studied by anthropologists until then. In 1983, Ranger's seminal study focused on the historical development of traditions in the last century, questioning the historicity of modern African traditions, which he considered to be the outcome of a process of 'invention' or manipulation that followed colonial conquest.⁴ Ranger's analysis was influenced by the dominant historiographic view that portrayed the colonial conquest as a watershed in the history of Africa. The pervasiveness of traditions across most of the continent, however, led scholars to question this approach, as the growing influence of traditions in Africa

suggested a pattern of continuity between precolonial and postcolonial African societies.

Today, very few have doubts about the retraditionalization of African societies. In Equatorial Guinea, the influence of so-called traditional institutions and ideas is rather obvious, to the point of shocking Equatorial Guineans who return home after having lived abroad for the last few decades. At a theoretical level, I had been inclined to think that African societies needed to re-appropriate European institutions so they could better suit local needs. Nonetheless, the reality on the ground appeared to contradict the theory. Despite the absence of active dissatisfaction, one can perceive Equatorial Guineans' discontent with the current social, political and economic conditions – and the recent oil boom has barely changed the situation. Amongst the Fang majority, whenever someone expresses his frustration with Equatorial Guinea's condition, it is not uncommon to hear expressions such as *wǎ kóbo abé, wǎ kóbo politik* (literally, 'you are talking bad, so you are talking politics'). The mere complaint about the lack of running water or electricity is interpreted as a political comment or criticism against the government and it is likely to be punished. For those who argue about the continuity between precolonial and postcolonial societies, problems in Africa are to a large extent explained by the presence of precolonial values that are at odds with the hegemonic institutions inherited from colonialism.⁵

Although I believe that cultural issues play an important role in the problems of African societies today, it is hard to accept the continuation of precolonial elements as a major factor. In fact, my experience in Equatorial Guinea reveals that there is not a clear-cut connection between precolonial and postcolonial traditions. Although it is not commonly admitted, Equatorial Guineans of a certain age are able to identify clear changes in traditional institutions and beliefs over the course of their lifetime. To Jan

Vansina, the colonial conquest was a turning point in the history of Equatorial Africa, as the 'tradition' that ruled these societies for almost a millennium came to an end due to the loss of sovereignty.⁶ In *Paths in the Rainforests*, Vansina describes Equatorial African societies as complex realities in which social, political and economic institutions maintain an intimate relationship thanks to the interplay of people's ideas and actions. To claim that certain areas of precolonial societies remained untouched by colonialism, as Feierman and Gray do, amounts to ignoring the effect that, on the one hand, material transformations have on 'discourse', and, on the other, the relationship that authority structures maintain with the 'invisible realm'.⁷

If indeed colonial conquest put an end to the system of traditional institutions and ideas that dominated Equatorial African societies, the question that remains to be answered is how is it possible that the process of retraditionalization is taking place. I shall show how the revival of traditions is, in fact, part of a process that followed colonial conquest and that resulted in the development of new yet 'traditional' institutions and ideas – what I call the new tradition. For this purpose, I shall focus on the Fang of Equatorial Guinea between 1927 and 1979. Although I agree with Vansina that the loss of sovereignty of Equatorial Africans resulted in the collapse of the existing tradition, I shall argue that local communities managed to retain enough autonomy to transform traditional institutions and ideas, so they could adapt to the conditions imposed by colonial domination. In this respect, the new tradition is an example of continuity, despite the fact that the colonial state first and the postcolonial state later imposed a series of limitations that have strongly influenced this ongoing process.

To question the impact of the imposition of the colonial state upon decentralized societies like those of Río Muni (the mainland of Equatorial Guinea) is only

reasonable insofar as it helps us to qualify previous statements that characterized this event as a sharp historical break. The Spanish conquest of Río Muni in the 1920s triggered off a series of transformations that resulted in the formation of the modern Fang society. As Vansina argues, in the past, local communities in this region enjoyed a large degree of autonomy that very much shaped their social and cultural structures. From the beginning of the twentieth century, these communities became, for the first time, subjects of a centralized political structure, the state, as the Spanish moved further into the interior. As subjects of an authoritarian regime, these communities lost a large part of their autonomy. The end of colonial domination in 1968 did not bring this situation to an end. If anything, it made matters worse because the postcolonial state became much more invasive than its predecessor. Both in the colony and the postcolony, Equatorial Guineans have been characterized for being more reactive than proactive; that is, their decisions are mostly dictated by the actions and obstacles of an illegitimate political power. As Ranger points out, in understanding Africa today, we need to look at colonial Africa because 'its dynamics have continued to shape postcolonial society'.⁸ For this reason, this work continues into the first decade after independence (1968-1979) in order to explore social and cultural transformations during the infamous regime of Macías Nguema.

One of the driving forces behind colonial domination was the economic exploitation of African societies. For this purpose, social and economic transformation – the modernizing project – became the main priority of colonial administrations. Young, in his comparative study of the colonial state, stresses the hegemonic nature of colonial administration, which, under the dominant notion of 'progress', portrayed Africans as 'malleable clay' that needed to be reshaped.⁹ The so-called modernising project consisted of the establishment of a series of administrative,

educational, economic and infrastructural measures that sought to assimilate the African to the European. In Africa, modernity became the conceptual paradigm of the modernization process; a notion, as J. and J.L. Comaroff argue, 'toward which non-western peoples constantly edge – without arriving.'¹⁰ Modernization in Equatorial Guinea, like in the rest of colonial Africa, was always a partial project, since it mostly sought to benefit the interest of a small sector of the colonial society, the European colonizers. The final outcome of ambitious modernization was clearly at odds with foreign domination. Consequently, Africans came to know a different modernity – as the mental image of what a modern society is like – than its metropolitan version. Throughout this work, we should understand modernity as the socio-cultural paradigm constructed during the colonial period and which, in many respects, Africans still pursue today.

Colonial Africa was characterized by the antagonistic relationship between rulers – Europeans – and subjects – Africans. In fact, colonial modernity was born out of the opposition between the so-called modern or civilized European and the so-called traditional or savage African.¹¹ Tradition, therefore, became synonymous with African culture, whereas modernity became synonymous with European civilization. These two sectors formed what we know as colonial society and their parallel coexistence determined what Balandier refers to as 'the colonial situation'.¹² By using this term, Balandier seeks to emphasize the abnormal conditions of life in colonial Africa and which resulted in the series of dysfunctions that we observe today across most of the continent. Indeed, we should wonder if the present process of retraditionalization is, in fact, a different type of modernity. Geschiere, who has studied the emergence of witchcraft beliefs in eastern and southern Cameroon for the last few decades, shares this opinion and considers that witchcraft, far from being a

lingering phenomenon, has experienced deep changes, being mostly a response to the transformations that modernization has brought about.¹³ Jean and John Comaroff also argue that there are many 'modernities', and 'witches are modernity's prototypical malcontents', since they 'embody all the contradictions of the experience of modernity itself'.¹⁴

From this point of view, the development of new Fang traditional structures should be considered as Fang modernity instead of a new tradition. This might well be the case had it not been for the lack of integration that has characterized Fang society for the last century, and which has led to a division of social and cultural structures into two realms – the modern European and the traditional Fang. Although colonial domination imposed a set of new institutions and ideas as part of the modernizing project, this incomplete system required the maintenance of traditional structures. In Equatorial Guinea, the main symbol of the hybrid and dividing character of colonialism was the development of two legal systems, one for Europeans and *emancipados* (Africans with full legal rights) and another for '*indígenas*' (natives), who were deprived of full legal rights due to their 'primitivism'. Colonial policies set Africans and Europeans – along with their respective cultures – on parallel levels, contributing to the development of a sort of dualism that I shall refer to as the 'double realm'. As has been noted, the nature of colonialism in Africa resulted in confusion between skin colour and culture.¹⁵ To the Fang, therefore, witchcraft and science do exist but they are not incompatible, since one takes place within the traditional realm and the other within the modern realm.

In order to show the development of a new tradition, I shall focus on Fang authority, identity and religious beliefs and the transformations they experienced over the last century. Chapter 1 will examine a series of theoretical issues that will be

relevant throughout this work as well as the different character of traditional organizations in Río Muni previous to colonial domination. In chapter 2, I shall examine the Spanish conquest of Río Muni during the first quarter of the twentieth century and its impact on traditional structures across the entire region. This was a turning point in the history of Fang society, since it gave way to a series of rapid transformations that changed social and cultural structures drastically. Chapter 3 will look at some of the most significant characteristics of the Spanish colonial organization and how they often hampered Africans' initiatives. Throughout chapter 4, we shall see how, during the 1930s and 1940s, the numerous clans of Río Muni that today form the Fang developed a common identity on the basis of their old socio-cultural tradition, while trying in vain to maintain their authority and religious structures. Chapter 5 will examine how during the 1950s and 1960s the Fang began to accept modernity as the goal they should aim at, and in so doing the minority of acculturated individuals realized that only the country's independence would bring about this goal. Far from it, as we shall see in chapter 6, Equatorial Guinea's independence in 1968 did not consolidate the so-called modernization project. Colonial modernity immediately proved ineffective before the challenges that independence posed and modern structures rapidly collapsed, giving way, throughout the 1970s, to the process of retraditionalization that the country is still undergoing today.

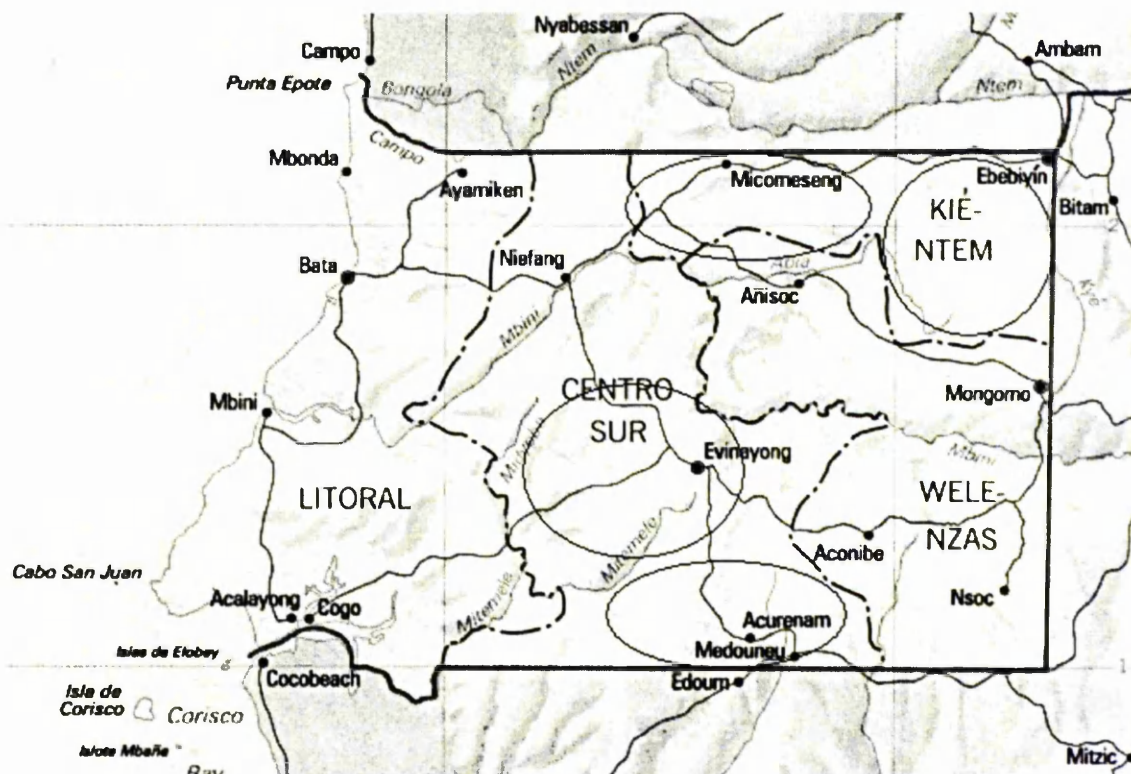
Equatorial Guinea, being the only Spanish-speaking country in Africa, has usually been ignored by modern Africanists. With the exception of the colonial period, it is not common to find abundant information written about this country. During this period, colonial officials, settlers and a few academics produced most of the material on the former Spanish colony. Very often these works are more revealing in terms of

the mentality of the Spanish colonizers than academically rigorous – Panyela and Sabater being the main exception. Nonetheless, one can find abundant interesting material in the journal of the Instituto de Estudios Africanos (IDEA), which was the official institution for the study of African issues in Spain. After independence, Spain lost all interest in its former possession and this resulted in a significant reduction in the number of works published on Equatorial Guinea. For this reason, I have been forced to rely on material written on neighbouring countries, especially on Gabon and Cameroon as cultural similarities made extrapolations more reliable. Since Fang identity stretches beyond the borders of Río Muni into these two countries, and the Fang have traditionally attracted the interests of academics, I was able to find many valuable sources. During the course of my research, I was fortunate that two key works on the Fang were published in Spanish. The first was Tessmann's ethnographic monograph, *Die Pangwe*, first published in German in 1913 and the result of intensive research in the interior of Río Muni during the 1900s. The translation to Spanish was initially an individual initiative of Erika Reuss Galindo, a Spaniard of German origin who lived in Equatorial Guinea during the late colonial period. The second work is the translation of *Dulu Bon be Afri Kara* (The Journey of the Children of Afri Kara), which is a modern historical account of the history of the Fang, written in 1948 by Ondo Enguru. This work, first published in Bulu – a dialect variety of Fang – at the American Presbyterian Mission of Ebolowa (southern Cameroon), was part of the *E'Lat-Ayong* protest movement, which was key in the construction of modern Fang identity. In Equatorial Guinea, many claim to have read or owned this book, but I never came across it, therefore I was especially happy to learn that Julián Bibang had published a Spanish version of *Dulu Bon be Afri Kara* – I still long for a reprint of the original version, nevertheless.

Due to the nature of the topic, this research has relied heavily on oral sources. During the course of seven months, I conducted some eighty interviews throughout Equatorial Guinea. Research in this country is not simple, since political conditions make this kind of work particularly suspicious. However, once they had overcome their initial apprehension, people were by and large extremely cooperative. Although the interviews did not cover topics that might be considered politically sensitive, in order to overcome people's fears and to ensure their cooperation, I promised that their identity would be kept anonymous. I have made an exception, however, only in those cases where I had certainty that the informant had passed away. Fieldwork was carried out in two geographic areas, north of the river Wele in the districts of Ebibeyin and Mikomeseng and south of this river in the districts of Akurenam and Evinayong. This choice was not arbitrary, as I tried to cover the two dialect and cultural areas in which the Fang of Río Muni are divided. Later I learnt that such rigid division is, in fact, rather modern and deceptive, due to the extremely fluid character of identities in the region. Throughout the research I chose to interview people born before 1960 so as to see the differences between younger and older individuals as well as the pattern of change between the 1920s and the 1970s. Although I intended to talk to men and women alike, I must admit that the number of women I interviewed was significantly smaller because they were somewhat reluctant to talk about a subject, 'history', about which they believed they knew little.

Oral sources are balanced with an array of documents, which have been especially valuable in contextualizing the information that I gathered on the ground. For the colonial period most sources on Equatorial Guinea are based at the Archivo General de la Administración (AGA, Public Record Office) in Alcalá de Henares (Madrid), where it is also possible to find a few documents on the immediate post-

independence period. Unfortunately, access to numerous records, especially for the period between 1955 and 1979, continues to be restricted. The study of the period after independence is particularly difficult due to the lack of documentation. In addition to the restrictions imposed by the current political situation in Equatorial Guinea, documents are carelessly piled on shelves, if not misplaced, and rapidly destroyed by the humidity and woodworm. Regarding missionary sources, I had the opportunity to visit the central archives of the Hijos del Inmaculado Corazón de María (Claretians) in Rome only to learn that, I had been misled in Equatorial Guinea and that the bulk of the documentation is in fact in Malabo. Fortunately, the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid keeps all the issues of *La Guinea Española*, the fortnightly magazine that the Catholic order published in Equatorial Guinea between 1904 and 1969, which has been a valuable source.



Main areas where interviews were conducted
MAP 1

NOTES

¹ P. Chabal & J.P. Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford, 1999), xviii-xix.

² J.F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London, 1993).

³ J. Fernández, 'Christian Acculturation and Fang Witchcraft', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 2, 6 (1961), 244.

⁴ T. Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', in E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁵ Bayart, *The State in Africa*; J. Lonsdale, 'African Past in Africa's Future', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 23 (1989); M. Rowlands & J.P. Warnier, 'Sorcery, Power and the Modern State in Cameroon', *MAN*, 23 (1988).

⁶ J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (London, 1990), 247, 251, 259.

⁷ S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (London, 1990), 3-12; C.J. Gray, *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa: Southern Gabon, c. 1850-1940* (Rochester, NY, 2002), 195-217.

⁸ Ranger argues that 'colonial Africa was much more like postcolonial Africa than most of us have hitherto imagined.' T. Ranger, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Identities', in R. Werbner & T. Ranger (eds.), *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London, 1996), 280.

⁹ C. Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (London, 1994), 75-76.

¹⁰ J. Comaroff, & J.L. Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (London, 1993), xii.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² G. Balandier, *The Sociology of Black Africa: Social Dynamics in Central Africa* (London, 1970), 52.

¹³ P. Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (London, 1997).

¹⁴ Comaroff & Comaroff, *Modernity and its Malcontents*, xi, xxix.

¹⁵ P. Curtin, 'African Reactions in Perspective', in P. Curtin (ed.), *Africa and the West: Intellectual Responses to European Culture* (London, 1972), 234; J. Guyer, & S. Eno Belinga, 'Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 36 (1995), 118.

Chapter 1

The Sanaga-Ogowe Tradition

In his study of Equatorial African societies, Vansina points out that traditions 'have no beginning, although they do come to an end. It is the observer who determines when a tradition begins, that is, when its basic principles have become sufficiently different from the tradition out of which it grew'.¹ This chapter will examine the society from which the Fang of Río Muni developed a new tradition following the Spanish conquest of this territory in the late 1920s. The analysis will reveal a tradition – which I shall refer to as Sanaga-Ogowe – which in its fundamental elements was not only different from the modern Fang tradition, but more importantly, could not survive as a whole after the colonial conquest. By carefully examining Vansina's complex notion of tradition, in which change and continuity, autonomy and the connection between past and present are fundamental concepts, we shall be able to comprehend why the loss of sovereignty had such a big impact on the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition. All these theoretical concepts will be more easily understandable by looking at different aspects of the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition, such as migration, family-based communities and ancestor-based beliefs, which contributed to the shape of Sanaga-Ogowe societies over the centuries.

Although this long-lasting tradition covered a wide geographical area, this chapter will focus mainly on those sections of Sanaga-Ogowe society living south of the river Ntem – the natural border between present-day Cameroon and Río Muni and Gabon. The southern Sanaga-Ogowe, in addition to being more relevant for the study of the modern Fang of Río Muni, also shared a greater socio-cultural cohesion. Nonetheless,

I shall refer to other geographic areas when necessary. Given that most of the information – European observations and local accounts – on the Sanaga-Ogowe was gathered in the second half of the nineteenth century, the following reconstruction of their history will be mainly valid for the period immediately prior to the European occupation.

Byá tsia'a: "our tradition"

Tradition, past, change and continuity and autonomy are some of the important concepts that Vansina uses in his seminal study of Equatorial African societies, *Paths in the Rainforests*, and which have proven to be extremely useful in framing an analysis of the history of the Fang people of Equatorial Guinea. Vansina applies the term tradition to describe the societies of Equatorial Africa prior to the European conquest. The people of this region developed a unique social model, the 'equatorial tradition', the key features of which were shared across the entire region.² The equatorial tradition was the outcome of the historical processes that followed the migration of these Bantu-speaking people from the northern savannah habitat in which they shared what Vansina calls a 'common ancestral tradition'.³ As a result of the major transformations that these people went through, the interaction with a new environment – the rainforest – and the encounter of different societies, the old socio-cultural model had to readapt in order to face new challenges, giving way to the equatorial tradition. Despite these changes, the equatorial tradition still kept features of its predecessor.

It is somewhat surprising that Vansina does not provide a clear definition of the term tradition. Rather, the reader is left to interpret what the concept means in the context of his work. This is even more surprising if we consider the problematic use

of such a word in the last century and a half by historians and anthropologists alike. The constant reference to the 'cognitive' and 'physical realm' in *Paths in the Rainforests* offers us a clue as to what tradition means in Vansina's analysis. To him, a tradition is made up of its material culture as well as its mental construction. It is suggested that these two realities maintain a somewhat symbiotic relationship, though, in his view, the cognitive reality has a greater importance because it provides the intellectual tools which allow the community to either adopt, transform or reject material innovations.⁴ The reader has to wait until almost the end of the book to find the closest thing to a definition of tradition:

[T]raditions are self-regulating processes. They consist of a changing, inherited, collective body of cognitive and physical representations shared by their members. The cognitive representations are the core. They inform the understanding of the physical world and develop innovations to give meaning to changing circumstances in their physical realm, and do so in terms of the guiding principles of the tradition.⁵

Indeed, such an open definition leaves plenty of room for interpretation as well as misunderstanding, a risk that Vansina perhaps consciously takes. However, it is possible to track similarities between his view and those of Equatorial Guineans for whom such term has become the order of the day. Like Vansina, Equatorial Guineans have no clear definition for the term tradition. It is simply a term that has developed a common understanding through usage. Interestingly enough, people only use it in its Spanish version – *tradición* – even when they are speaking in any of the vernacular languages of the country. When asked about this word, people refer to the ancestors; that is, the tradition is what their forefathers used to do or the society they built. Nowadays, very few people are aware whether there exists a Fang term for tradition. Soon after starting my fieldwork, I learnt that there is a similar term in Fang that can be translated as tradition: *tsia'a*. Although this word is not used by the younger

generation or urban dwellers, village elders still know it. *Tsia'a*, unlike tradition, is not really a noun and very often it is used as a kind of adjective that implies a sense of both past and prestige. However the term can also be used as a noun, as in the form *byá tsia'a* (our tradition).

In Fang, as in English, tradition primarily denotes a relationship with the past, and this is the key when applying this term to define the peoples that I shall deal with in this work. Vansina's 'tradition' could otherwise be translated as 'culture' in its anthropological sense – the sum of activities and ideas of a group of people with a common history – and it would certainly be much less controversial. By applying the term tradition, I seek to stress the paramount role of the past in present-day Equatorial African societies. Any culture – or tradition – develops a mental representation of itself, which is an artificial and volitive creation. This is what Zahan calls 'the experience of the human grouping', which in his own words would represent 'the totality of the acquisitions which the successive generations have accumulated'.⁶ In the case of the tradition, its mental representation relies on the past and the ancestors as the main – though not only – source of legitimacy and validation.

The past is not only central in Equatorial African societies but in most societies across the continent, and, indeed, in all so-called traditional societies. Within these cultures there exists a conscious effort to establish and maintain a link between past and present; this is what to be traditional amounts to.⁷ According to Booth, time is not an abstract concept but a tangible one since it is made up of events, which, once they happen, move into the past.⁸ Nonetheless, events do not constitute the past by themselves, it is ultimately up to human actors to decide which events are relevant – thus worth storing – and which are not. The connection between present and past is established through the ancestors, whose family character not only bridges the gap but

also puts a known face to the events of the past, hence making it real.⁹ Amongst the inhabitants of Río Muni, the ancestors acquired a central role that was reinforced by religion. The ancestors, and the tradition which they created, became sacred. In so doing, it regulated and sanctioned almost every aspect of people's lives. Traditional life had to be carried out in accordance with tradition and not doing so would risk breaking the bond between present and past. Legitimacy, therefore, came from the past or its human manifestation, the ancestors. Not surprisingly, these principles suited the interest of the elders whose proximity to the ancestors made them the ideal agents between the forefathers and the rest of their kinsfolk.¹⁰

In order to maintain the order imposed by the ancestors, the elders needed to deny the notion of change within their society. Nowadays historians and anthropologists know how misleading this idea has been. In their encounter with African societies, especially those of the equatorial region, European observers and scholars carried with them a long array of prejudice born out of the Enlightenment era regarding the relationship between material underdevelopment and lack of change. These ideas seemed to be confirmed by an ideology which, as in the case of the inhabitants of Río Muni, maintained that their society had preserved the same structure and ways as that of their ancestors; in other words, the 'tradition' had remained the same since time immemorial.

The realization that change is in fact part of any human society drove scholars to remove terms such as 'tradition' or 'traditional' from their respective fields. Despite the connotations attached to this term, it is important to emphasize that, in no sense, does modern scholarship reject change within traditional cultures. Both Vansina and Booth in their study of traditional societies pay special attention to change. Booth explains the nature of change amongst traditional peoples, whereas Vansina

introduces an interesting idea by making 'change' and 'continuity' part of the same concept. According to Vansina, a tradition, as any culture, must have a self-reproducing nature, and change and continuity – though apparently contradictory – is the instrument that allows the tradition to survive. The emergence of an innovation creates a contradiction between the physical and cognitive realms. Vansina and Booth agree that change takes place whenever an innovation is accepted and integrated as part of the broad culture. The cognitive realm provides the mechanisms creating the appearance that the innovation has always been part of the tradition. The adoption of innovations – 'change' – makes it possible for the tradition to adjust to changing circumstances and hence survive – 'continuity'. A specific group of elders with the necessary expertise – Feierman's peasant intellectuals – usually carries out this complicated process.¹¹

There are serious doubts concerning the ability and pace of so-called egalitarian societies such as those of Equatorial Africa to implement change. Several European observers describe the Fang before the colonial conquest as a people willing to accept those innovations the Europeans brought with them. Dynamism as well as pragmatism seemed to have been rather common in a society where there was no institution strong enough to impose standardized views. The same 'circularity' that, according to Geschiere, allows witchcraft discourses to replace old and exhausted rituals by new and fresh ones without undermining the underlying principles of witchcraft beliefs, makes it possible to adopt new ways without questioning basic cultural principles.¹² This made the tradition relatively permeable to innovations of all kinds. The small size of political communities, in which authority rarely went beyond village limits, provided the necessary 'autonomy' to deal with changing circumstances. To Vansina,

autonomy was vital to keep a traditional culture alive, as the carriers of the tradition must be free enough to decide what does and does not become part of their culture.¹³

Such a high level of autonomy makes one wonder whether it was possible to develop something similar to a common tradition. Such was the case of the peoples sharing a common language who lived in southern Cameroon, northern and central Gabon and Río Muni before colonial conquest. Most scholars – such as Alexandre, Fernández, Laburthe-Tolra and Mbana – agree that these peoples constituted a homogeneous entity in spite of internal differences. The sections living south of the river Ntem, for example, had a lesser degree of social centralization and political hierarchy than those north of the Ntem. It is difficult to know how long some of the features observed in this period by Europeans had been around. Joaquin Mbana argues that numerous and deep changes took place as a result of European trade in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ In spite of these transformations, the principles of the tradition, which I shall describe, *mvók*, *mínnama* and *Melăn*, were still recognizable at the time of the Spanish conquest.

Mitok or the great migrations

Pahouin, Pangwe, Pamue, Fang or Beti are just a few of the long array of names that have been applied to the groups that share a common language and culture and live in the wide area covering southern Cameroon, northern and central Gabon and most of mainland Equatorial Guinea. This confusing situation is common to many places across the African continent.¹⁵ The study of ethnographic material, especially that written before the mid twentieth century, still puzzles the reader due to the multiplicity of names that a single group could receive. Very often this confusion was the outcome of the colonial state's enthusiasm for imposing its ideological order on a

reality that it barely understood. At times, as Samarin shows, this trend could escalate into inventing ethnic groups that were simply a product of European imagination and their image of Africans.¹⁶

Pahouin, *Pamue* or *Pangwe* are simply European variations of the same word, that the French, Spanish, and German applied, from the second half of the nineteenth century, to what they considered to be the same social entity. Scholars agree that nineteenth-century European traders learnt this term from their African commercial partners on the coastal region – the Mpongwe in Gabon or the Benga in Río Muni amongst others.¹⁷ There are several interpretations regarding the origin of this name, although it is commonly understood that it derives from the term *Fang*. Being spread across such a large area, the Sanaga-Ogowe were divided into several sections or subgroups speaking different dialects; the Fang were only one of them. It was the Fang with whom coastal groups established contact for the first time and, depending on their language, the name was pronounced in different ways such as Pango, Pangu, Pamu, Pamo, Panwè, etc.¹⁸ In addition to the transformation of the name, the term was also applied to the entire Sanaga-Ogowe population.¹⁹

Some thought that using the native name that the Sanaga-Ogowe applied to themselves could easily solve the discussion about their actual name. In 1863 and again in 1904, two European observers, Burton and Roche, claimed that this people called themselves Fang, hence this is the name that should be used.²⁰ More recently Equatorial Guinean intellectuals have argued in favour of using the term Fang claiming that it was always this culture's name.²¹ Unfortunately, the solution is not so simple because neither the whole group called themselves Fang nor was there such a unique term. On the contrary, it appears that there were multiple names across the different regions in which this people lived before the European conquest.

Mbana is perfectly aware that the Fang were only one of many subgroups, and yet he supports the use of the term Fang when he classifies 'the Fang group as the name adopted by the people with a common culture sharing the same geographic territory.'²² He acknowledges that the naming of a group is an artificial choice and, as such, it is up to the people who form this group to decide what name should be applied to them.²³ Whereas in present-day Equatorial Guinea and Gabon the members of this group call themselves Fang, this is not the case of Cameroon, where the accepted term is Beti, which, to Mbana, is equivalent to Fang. Beti is the plural for *ntí*, that can be translated as noble or civilized man. Fang has a double origin; on the one hand, *fām*: man or male; and, on the other, *mfang*: genuine or completed man.²⁴ Tessmann's approach to this problem was very similar, though his solution was a different one. During the course of his work as trader and researcher in the 1900s, he realized the difficulties of labelling this culture. Thus Tessmann opted for applying a foreign name, such as the German term Pangwe.²⁵ Fernandez also applies the French version of the term – Pahouin – for the whole group, while using Fang only to refer to the southern sections.²⁶

Other attempts to solve this problem vary from conciliatory to neutral approaches. Alexandre, for example, sought an intermediate solution, which recognized realities on the ground while reducing the multiplicity of internal social divisions: the *Beti-Bulu-Fang* group. According to him, dialect and cultural differences amounted to three main subgroups: Beti, Bulu and Fang.²⁷ This classification added another unresolved problem. As I shall show later, the reduction of all internal differences to only three subgroups is debatable. Vansina, however, prefers to use the term Sanaga-Ntem group, which refers to the two main rivers in the area.²⁸

Regardless of what choice we make, the decision is always questionable. Using a term such as *Fang* appears to be 'ahistorical', in the same way that nobody would refer to the peoples living in central Europe two thousand years ago as Swiss or Austrians. A term like *Pamue* – in any of its European versions – does not seem appropriate because many Equatorial Guineans and Gabonese consider it derogative, given that it was used by the colonizers and Africans never identified themselves with this foreign name. The Sanaga-Ntem group, though not ideal, is a good solution that needs to be slightly revised. The tradition we are dealing with covered a larger area, going as far south as the river Ogowe. Therefore the term 'Sanaga-Ogowe' group seems more suitable. I shall only refer to this group as 'Fang' after the Spanish controlled Río Muni in the late 1920s, for this is the identity they began to develop ever since.

Both Alexandre and Panyela claim that the Sanaga-Ogowe shared some kind of 'national' consciousness, yet this view was clearly based on mid-twentieth century observations.²⁹ The name confusion reflects a reality on the ground; that is, the Sanaga-Ogowe group did not constitute a single political entity. In fact, we can interpret the absence of local terms referring to any social entity beyond the *ayong* or clan level as a sign of how insignificant the subgroup and ethnic division, terms for which there is no local equivalent, was in their daily lives.³⁰

Who then are the Sanaga-Ogowe? By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the Europeans, the answer appeared to be quite simple. The Pamue or Pahouin, often represented as cannibal and extremely warlike, embodied the stereotypical image of the African of the interior migrating like 'hordes' to the coast.³¹ Although they appeared to be easily identifiable, a close look at the material and reports written in this period shows a very different reality. On the ground, Europeans

did not always find it easy to determine who was and was not part of this group. As a result, small groups of the interior, whose identity was uncertain, were normally integrated into the larger Pamue people. One of the most remarkable examples is the Bisio – also known as the Osyeba, Bichiwa, Bujeba, Makina or Mokuk – a group whose actual identity and name are yet to be clarified by scholars. Whereas Tessmann and Raponda Walker argue that the Bisio were part of the Pamue, Spanish colonialists preferred to consider them as a different group pushed to the coast by the latter in the second half of the nineteenth century.³² Weinstein indicates that, nowadays, the Gabonese census includes the Bisio or Osyeba amongst the Fang, yet in Equatorial Guinea they are still a distinctive people.³³

Over several centuries, the Sanaga-Ogowe people developed a tradition that shared a common worldview and religious rites as well as social and political institutions. This was the result of a dynamic process in which they not only acculturated the peoples they encountered during the course of the series of migrations that fundamentally shaped the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition but were also acculturated themselves.

Historical accounts collected by Avelot, Largeau and Trilles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show that ‘migration’ was a central element of the Sanaga-Ogowe culture.³⁴ This view was reinforced by the late arrival of sections of this group to the coast, which was witnessed by European observers. Historians and anthropologists acknowledge the importance of this phenomenon and have tried to uncover the numerous enigmas surrounding the Sanaga-Ogowe migration. Mbana’s PhD thesis claims that the dynamic nature of this culture can only be understood in the light of this long migratory movement.

The geographical origin of the migration is still unknown. Local accounts dating from the early twentieth century did little to clarify the possible origin of the migration. Like most old narratives, they acquired a mythological character over time, making it difficult to separate fact from fiction. The few names mentioned as the migration's point of origin cannot be realistically located on a map. Tessmann, for example, was told that Mvokeji was the original country, whereas Largeau alludes to Mooketanga.³⁵ These accounts, however, provided some information that scholars have used in order to locate the possible origin. Many of them relate to a mountainous area outside the rainforests, which was probably located close to a large river or lake. They also indicate that the migration generally followed a westward path. Thanks to this information, scholars have traditionally argued that, at some point, the Sanaga-Ogowe lived in a savannah habitat northeast of their present location.

Early studies of the Sanaga-Ogowe group claimed that this area was probably located in the Egypt-Sudan area. Trilles specifically points at the Bahr-al-Ghazal plateau as their original country.³⁶ This was part of what Mbana calls the 'romantic interpretation', which either sought to deny the Bantu origin of the Sanaga-Ogowe or link them to so-called superior people.³⁷ Such was the case that some authors even wanted to see in this African people the descendents of an old Germanic tribe.³⁸ Europeans dealing with this group in the early stages of contact were certainly amazed by the long genealogies that they were able to recite. According to Alexandre, this was the underlying reason for a supposed historical link between the Sanaga-Ogowe and the ancient Egyptians. Furthermore, Europeans were interested in portraying the Sanaga-Ogowe as an invading group, who, coming from a distant place, had recently arrived in modern-day Río Muni and Gabon displacing weaker peoples in their march. In an effort to legitimize colonial conquest, this type of

approach was commonly used by Europeans – the Afrikaner being the most notorious example – trying to represent Africa as a continent in which, until recently, large areas remained uninhabited.

The Egyptian-Sudanese theory has not survived the passage of time.³⁹ Only within Fang mythological accounts created in the twentieth century one can still find references to the Egyptian origin of the Sanaga-Ogowe. Tessmann, Balandier and Alexandre argue in favour of southward migration, which would situate the origin of the migration in a savannah area bordering present-day Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria. As early as 1913, Tessmann supported this view based on the environment described by historical accounts as well as the direction that elders pointed at when asked about their forefathers' country.⁴⁰ Further, the existence of terms related to a savannah environment in the Sanaga-Ogowe language would help to support a theory for which evidence is rather scanty. Mbana, for example, disagrees with this view and argues in favour of a more specifically Central African origin. According to the information that he collected in Fang villages of Río Muni, Southern Cameroon and northern Gabon, most old settlements could be found within the rainforest, being the most northern villages in a region around the rivers Sanaga and Nyong.⁴¹ This information along with the cultural similarities between the Fang and coastal groups of Río Muni lead him to state that Sanaga-Ogowe presence in their present-day habitat is much older than initially thought.⁴²

Mbana's thesis is somehow denied by an overwhelming consensus amongst scholars, which claims that Sanaga-Ogowe presence in the Río Muni and Gabon area is quite recent.⁴³ It is suggested that this group probably crossed the river Ntem sometime between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century. According to Mbana, however, such ideas are based on the misconception that the Sanaga-Ogowe

migration was a continuous phenomenon. Furthermore, Vansina argues that conventional hypotheses about Sanaga-Ogowe migration were misled by the migratory movement to the coast of sections of the Sanaga-Ogowe from the 1830s.⁴⁴ Local historical accounts as well as early European observations suggested that this was a unique, long and massive migration. Depending on the source, such movement would have been triggered off by the attack of military superior people – the Mvele – a desire to acquire European goods, or the search for the creator-god on the coast. Therefore, it was assumed that the migration must have started in a fairly distant place.

Like Mbana, Vansina also argues that Sanaga-Ogowe presence in their present-day territory is much older than it has been assumed, as shown by the presence of iron-smelting sites, probably of Fang or Ntumu origin, in the upper Ntem area dating back to about 1600.⁴⁵ Tessmann says that the Ewondo, from the Yaounde region, imported raffia, which was a key construction material for the Sanaga-Ogowe.⁴⁶ Raffia mostly grows in the rainforest and it is scarce on the outskirts of the equatorial forest where the Ewondo live. The heavy dependence of the northern Sanaga-Ogowe sections on this material appears to indicate that their presence around present-day Yaounde dates back to the days when the landscape was dominated by rainforest vegetation, which was gradually destroyed as a result of human activities. Vansina rightly argues that it is not possible to pinpoint a moment in time in which the Sanaga-Ogowe lived in a savannah-like environment, due to the lack of evidence. He, however, claims that, based on population density and linguistic data, the core of the Sanaga-Ogowe culture must have been developed in the Sanaga Valley area no later than the thirteenth or fourteenth century.⁴⁷ The geographical expansion of the Sanaga-Ogowe and subsequent 'linguistic diversification' was likely to have taken place in

the fourteenth or fifteenth century, according to glottochronological dating.⁴⁸ Mbana and Vansina's view is, so far, the most convincing one with regards to Sanaga-Ogowe migration, nonetheless, neither Mbana nor Vansina explain why the 'piercing of the adzap' (*Tigemella Africana P.*) – the big tree that symbolizes the passage into the rainforest – is such a recurrent theme in those historical accounts collected by early European observers.

Therefore, to Mbana, the migration time span was long not because it started in a distant place, but rather because we are dealing with a series of successive migrations by which the Sanaga-Ogowe moved back and forth within their present-day habitat. This view is also shared by Fernández, who argues that 'the notion that there was a steady migration southwestward is countered by evidence of reflux and return.'⁴⁹ Certainly, the Fang of Equatorial Guinea refer to this period using the term *mitok*, a plural form, which can be translated as migrations.⁵⁰ Furthermore, scholars have drawn attention to the cultural similarities between coastal groups of Río Muni and the Sanaga-Ogowe – even a neophyte like myself can notice clear language connections between Kombe and Fang of Río Muni.⁵¹

Mbana's conclusions, though not conclusive, are certainly interesting. By taking into account the 'discontinuous interpretation', that is, the idea that migration was not a continuous process but a series of intermittent phenomena that went back and forth over a large territory, the long debate as to the causes of the exodus becomes more comprehensible. We should not look for 'the cause' but rather for a series of causes behind the numerous migratory movements. Therefore, at times this phenomenon was said to have been triggered by warfare, natural disasters, trade or even myths. Alexandre points out that amongst northern sections military invasion is often

mentioned as the reason for migration, whereas in the south similar accounts are much more vague, emphasizing commercial reasons instead.⁵²



Some of the regions that have been suggested as origin of the Sanaga-Ogowe migration
MAP 2

There were periods of greater stability in which settlements only moved every 15 or 20 years to find suitable land for farming, followed by periods of turmoil in which settlements moved rapidly over longer distances, as the Europeans witnessed in the second half of the nineteenth century. Though apparently massive to the eyes of coastal groups and Europeans, this drive to the coast was not organized; rather it followed the same pattern of previous migration movements. That is, a single village or a few individuals decided to leave their old site and found a new settlement a few kilometres away.⁵³ As Fernández points out ‘villages moved forward in a leapfrog fashion’ and only very rarely did movements involve long distances.⁵⁴ Although this pattern became more frequent in times of greater turmoil, it did not differ greatly from those periods of calm and stability in which villages regularly changed their location.

The Sanaga-Ogowe has often been characterized as a semi-nomadic group, for their settlements never remained in the same location for more than 15 or 20 years. As Chamberlin explains, this was due, amongst other reasons, to shifting cultivation and poor soils, which forced people to search for untouched lands.⁵⁵ Sanaga-Ogowe expansion throughout such large area must have followed this model, allowing the gradual acculturation of those groups they encountered in the process. Constant village resettlement was key in shaping the social structure. A fission-fusion model contributed to the endless creation and disappearance of different family groups.⁵⁶

For a long time, scholars have tried to understand the formation and the structure of the series of subgroups amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe. Panyela and Sabater refer to these subgroups as 'dialectal cultural sections'.⁵⁷ Fang historical accounts seemed to indicate that they were the outcome of the original group's first division. The migration would have started with a single cohesive group and, at some point, it split up into different sections that followed different routes. Each of these initial sections would be the embryo of the subgroups that we know today. This approach assumed that the formation of subgroups predated that of clans. That is, successive divisions within each section gave birth to numerous clans. Each clan would be ascribed to one particular subgroup, because they shared the same origin.

It is not clear how many subgroups would have originated from the initial division. The lists vary depending on the author, yet it was understood that the number of original subgroups was limited at first, and more subgroups grew out of the original ones. Tessmann names the Eton, Muele, Yaunde [Ewondo], Ntum [Ntumu], Bene, Bulu, Mwai, Fang and Mokuk [Bisio] as the main 'subtribes' of the Sanaga-Ogowe.⁵⁸ To Alexandre, however, the list should be limited to three main subgroups: Beti, Bulu, and Fang; each of them divided into several 'tribes'.⁵⁹ Regardless of the

number of subgroups all these authors, except Tessmann, agree that the development of clans followed that of subgroups. Undoubtedly, historical accounts like *Dulu Bon be Afri Kara*, written by Ondo Enguru in 1948, influenced the views of scholars working on the area by the mid twentieth century.

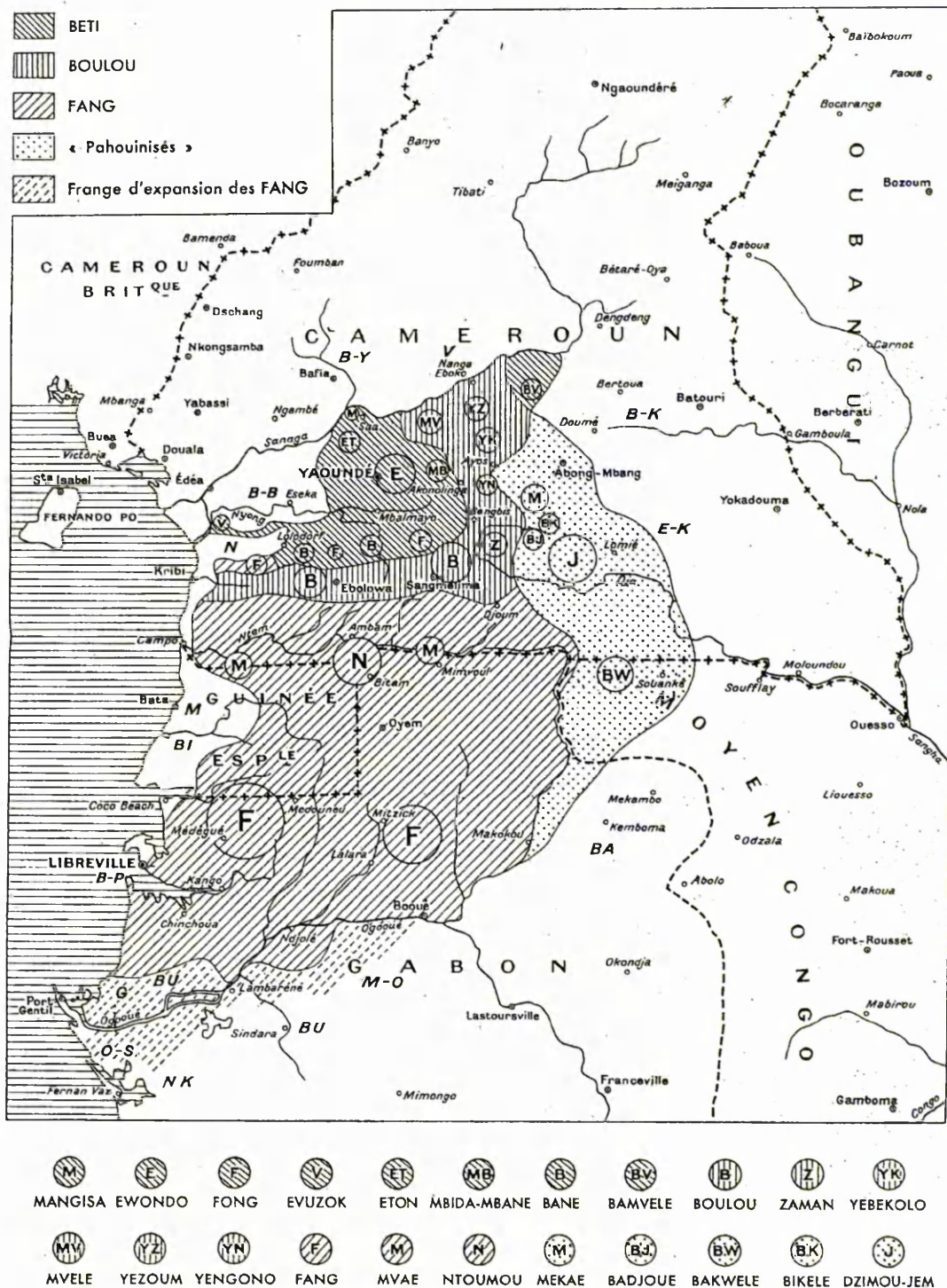
James Fernández also pays attention to historical accounts and believes that certain clans can be clearly ascribed to a particular subgroup. Yet he is aware of the obstacles that this interpretation faces on the ground, as many clans can be found through several sections of the Sanaga-Ogowe.⁶⁰ A close look at any genealogy reveals that clans, which are usually ascribed to different subgroups, shared the same origin at some point. European observers soon learnt of this phenomenon called *e'lat-ayong* (literally, the 'sewing' of a clan). This concept was used to remember the common origin of those families that split up in the past and formed different clans. In Río Muni, one of the best-known cases is that of the Nzomo and Amvom clans, whose genealogies tell us of the historical link between both of them. To Mbana, this clearly proves, first, that the *ayong* or clan predates the subgroup and, second, that the nucleus of the Sanaga-Ogowe group was unique, for, in no other way, the presence of a given clan within several sections can be explained.⁶¹ In an interview conducted by a Spanish missionary in 1919, an elder explains that Murenzamá or God created the Sanaga-Ogowe and their clans simultaneously.⁶²

The formation of a series of subgroups amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe was a result of migration. On a tentative level, I shall explain how this process took place. A limited group of families moved into a new area of the rainforest where they founded several settlements. The area could be previously inhabited by non-Sanaga-Ogowe people or not. The initial settlements soon multiplied as a result of natural growth and the arrival of new families. Living in closer relation and perhaps in contact with other

linguistic groups, they would develop a distinctive dialect and certain cultural peculiarities. Families living in the area, though known by the names of their original clans, would probably develop new identities amongst the dwellers of the area.⁶³ The origin of a clan or subgroup name is not clear, but it seems likely that they were usually given names by outsiders on the basis of a distinctive peculiarity or unusual custom.⁶⁴ While conducting research in Río Muni, I heard completely opposite versions about names of clans and villages – sometimes derogatory and others complimentary.

We can see from this description that, often, the 'birth' of new clans and subgroups may have been an overlapping experience. In fact, we should consider it as a process rather than an event. Certain clans would be ascribed to specific subgroups, for their existence has long been associated with a given dialectal section. Newcomers could initially maintain their original identity, but as time went by their identity would dilute within the subgroup. Amongst all the social divisions that we find within the Sanaga-Ogowe, the subgroup identity was, and still is, the most fluid. Due to migration, subgroups and clans appeared and disappeared constantly; this is why we find so many distinct cultural sections.⁶⁵ Unlike clans or lineages, belonging to a subgroup was not determined by biology. Families arrived and left continuously, so anybody could eventually be considered part of a given subgroup. Therefore it is not possible to state accurately how many or which clans constituted a subgroup. The truth is that any interpretation of this phenomenon is highly speculative and confirms how little we know and how difficult it is to grasp these concepts.

LE GROUPE PAHOUI



PEUPLES VOISINS :

B-B : Bassa-Bakoko, **B-Y** : Bafia-Yambasa, **V** : Babouté [Vutéré], **B-K** : Baya-Kaka, **E-K** : Essel-Konabembé, **BA** : Bakata
M-O : Mitshogo-Okandé; **BU** : Bapounou, **NK** : Nkomi, **B-P** : Benga-Pongwé, **BI** : Balengi; **M** : Mabéa; **BT** : Batenga; **N** : Ngoumba

Geographic distribution of modern-day Fang subgroups. P. Alexandre & J. Binet, *Le Groupe dit Pahouin: Fang-Boulou-Beti* (Paris, 1958).

MAP 3

Mvók-e'bot or the village of people

The Sanaga-Ogowe has been classified as a patrilineal society. The central role of the paternal figure was also reflected in migration accounts, in which he was often described as a sort of foundation hero in charge of leading the series of migrations. As family head, his duty was to found a *dzaá*, village or settlement, which, in due time, would become *mvók*, community village or home village. The *dzaá* is simply the physical representation of the village, whereas the *mvók* is the social concept of the village as home of the family. The Sanaga-Ogowe social organization was almost exclusively consanguineous; that is, people grouped together in villages according to blood ties. The *mvók* was exclusively the home for *botóo* (plural for *ntóó*, eldest) or family heads, their wives, descendents, and, in some cases, male dependents who were not biological members of the family.⁶⁶

Sanaga-Ogowe life revolved around the *mvók*, where people's daily activities took place. Every important decision in the life of an individual was taken in relation to her or his *mvók*. During the course of Spanish occupation, the Governor-General Ángel Barrera acknowledged the *abáá* or 'palaver house' as the central space of village life.⁶⁷ Upon founding a new settlement, each *ntóó* had to build the family's *abáá*, a place where adult men gathered and developed many of their social and work activities outside of the forest. It was in the *abáá* where important decisions for the community were taken. Immediately after founding the village, one of the most important issues was to allocate farming land amongst the *botóó*, who subsequently distributed it amongst their wives. Adulthood was not necessarily associated with age but, more importantly, with being married and having children. Each season elders decided which section of the forest should be cleared for cultivation and allocated each parcel; the first wife of the family head played a fundamental role in this

decision, since women knew what are the best lands to cultivate.⁶⁸ In this respect, it appears that, while he was alive, the village founder had a prominent role in these decisions.⁶⁹ Once sons got married, they also became part of the land distribution process, for only married men were entitled to land. The reason for this was that women were in charge of growing food for their husbands and children. Land distribution had to be made in the most equitable way possible in order to avoid conflict and disruption in the community.

In case of conflict, *medzó* ('matters' or 'questions') were publicly discussed in the village forum, where elders tried to restore peace.⁷⁰ One of the most important issues addressed in this space was marriage. The arrival of a new member was a matter that concerned the whole village community. Legal marriage required the payment of *nswa* (bridewealth) a subject that, very often, involved long negotiations conducted at village level between the two families. When quarrels between wife and husband turned serious, the issue was also taken to this public space. By discussing matters openly in the *abáá*, it was guaranteed that an important part of the community was involved in the decision-making process – namely male elders, though exceptionally women and youngsters could also participate.⁷¹ At the same time, they avoid raising suspicions, since in this society secrecy and mystery often fell in the realm of witchcraft. Whenever elders considered that a certain problem required a solution which could not be treated openly, this often involved the celebration of cult rituals.



Photograph 1: Modern-day abáá

In his recent study of southern Gabon, Gray claims that colonialism brought a purely territorial definition of space, which amongst equatorial peoples had been defined purely on the basis of social relations between its dwellers.⁷² This is the underlying concept behind the Sanaga-Ogoe *mvók*, which was not so much a physical space but a place for human relations – primarily of the family group. The settlement could be abandoned, but people's attachment to the members of *mvók* was kept for generations through the recollection of genealogies and celebration of *Melān* – the ancestor cult.

However vague and empty concepts such as ethnic group or subgroup may be, consanguinity involved much more meaningful relations with clearly defined borders. The importance of family ties is revealed by the existence of numerous terms indicating several degrees of proximity between family members: *ndá-e'bot*, *mvók-e'bot*, *ayóm-bot*, *etungá-bot*, and *ayong-bot* or *ayong*. When I asked Joaquín Mbana about the meaning of these terms, he replied that all of them reflect aspects of the same concept: *familia* – a term widely used today by the Fang of Río Muni. This

answer is true and false at the same time. It is true in the sense that all its members recognized a common ancestor, from which originates some sort of solidarity amongst them. Yet, it is also false because it does not reflect that solidarity degrees vary with the level of proximity. That is, the closer the biological relation, the stronger the solidarity is. There have been several attempts to define what type of relationship each of these terms entail, yet none of them is entirely convincing. Ndonga and Panyela translate them, respectively, as nuclear family, large family, lineage, stock or ancestry, and clan.⁷³ It is difficult to know whether there were ever any clear-cut definitions, especially nowadays after the introduction of new cultural concepts and lack of use – only *ndá-e'bot*, *ayong*, and, to a lesser extent, *mvók-e'bot* are still regularly used.

The *ndá-e'bot* is to the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition what the 'house' is to the equatorial tradition described by Vansina; that is, the basic social organization.⁷⁴ In search for fertile land or autonomy, a settlement could originally be formed by single *ndá-e'bot*, which comprised wives and children under the authority of the *ntóó*. Whereas the family head's control over his daughters ended once they got married and moved out of the village, sons remained under his authority for as long as he was alive. Alternatively, sons could emancipate themselves from paternal authority by moving out and founding their own settlement. Although not uncommon, it appears that that only happened in those cases in which father and son could not reconcile their differences.⁷⁵

The *ntóó*'s control over family matters, labour, or land distribution made him a central figure within this culture. Yet, all this could be temporary or relative; as we shall see later, very often he found it very hard to keep a tight grip on his so-called dependents. It was patrilineality that made his role essential, since the father

determined family and clan ascription. Fatherhood was not a biological concept but a legal one, which required the payment of bridewealth. It is relatively common to hear a woman's name be recited amongst the long array of male ancestors that formed genealogies. Whenever fatherhood was not sanctioned by *nswa*, the child was ascribed to the mother's line under the control of the *mvám*, grandfather, or the *ñyáandom*, maternal uncle. In his essay about *nswa*, Nze Abuy recalls a Fang saying that highlights the triviality of biological concepts: '*mon as'é mon mbié, ane mon nsoa*' (the child is not of the one who gave birth to him, but of the *nswa*).⁷⁶

Despite its essentially patrilineal character, women seemed to have played an important role with regards to descent, especially in cases of significant polygamy. After the death of a polygamous father, the original *ndá-e'bot* would split up in several *mendá-me'bot* (plural for *ndá-e'bot*) depending on the number of mothers. Each *mendá-me'bot* would be led by one of the sons, though the mother would keep a special position as originator of that particular *ndá-e'bot*, as revealed in *Melän* where female and male ancestors were worshiped together.⁷⁷ Understandably, this process did not take place each generation because polygamy, as we shall see later, was not always widespread. A few generations later, that polygamous ancestor would be considered as the founder of a *mvók-e'bot* or group of *mendá-me'bot*. Thus, in order to know which family in a clan one belongs to, the Sanaga-Ogowe ask: *o ne mvók e za?* (literally, you are of the village of whom?) After some generations and successive divisions, the descendants of that polygamous ancestor would consider themselves as belonging to the same *ayóm-bot*, *etungá-bot*, and eventually the *ayong* or clan.

It has been suggested that northern sections were less fragmented in terms of social structures than those south of the Ntem, where migratory movement was more intense.⁷⁸ This would, somehow, explain why lesser entities like the *ndá-e'bot* and

mvók-e'bot were especially prominent in the south.⁷⁹ Tessmann points out that in the north of the Sanaga-Ogowe territory there were fewer villages but they were bigger. A similar phenomenon could be observed in Río Muni, where, according to Captain Roche, who explored this area in the 1900s, the biggest villages were located in the northern section, close to the river Ntem.⁸⁰ Most descriptions indicate that villages were usually made up of several settlements.⁸¹ During an expedition across Río Muni's interior in 1911, Governor Barrera mentioned that they passed through several villages next to each other which had the same name.⁸²

Although Sanaga-Ogowe ideology indicates that villages were founded by a single man, in reality this effort was usually carried out by several brothers. One man, the *ntóó*, was recognized as the single founder. If there was a good relationship between the brothers, they would live in the same settlement or *dzaá* – this was more likely amongst uterine brothers – otherwise they would build adjacent settlements. This group of settlements formed a *nnam* (extended village), known by a single name attached to that of its founder. Should the population increase due to natural causes or the arrival of relatives and friends, they would stay in one of the existing settlements or, more likely, they would construct a new one. Tessmann claims that villages were rarely extended, even if it was required for the children of the *ntóó*, the preference being to build a new settlement nearby.⁸³ Several nuclear families could inhabit the same extended village, but they were usually of the same *mvók-e'bot* or, at least, clan. In the rare case that families from different clans lived in the same village, there was probably some sort of matrilineal connection.

The threat of superior military enemies favoured stronger and more cohesive settlements in the north, yet this was not the only factor. The south also suffered invasions such as the *obǎn* and yet large settlements were not developed. The *obǎn* is

known as the period of warfare in which northern sections of the Sanaga-Ogowe – some sources mention the Bulu – raided and displaced southern groups.⁸⁴ It is described as a unique period, which, according to Mbana, took place between 1880 and 1890.⁸⁵ Yet it is probable that this was only the last of several periods of warfare. Oral accounts claim that Mbo Ba, an elder of the Nzomo clan, was the person who ‘stopped’ the *obăn* after defeating Bulu raiders.⁸⁶ The Nzomo’s genealogies suggest that this person was probably born in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Thus the famous *obăn* should have taken place in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁸⁷ We know through European accounts that the last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a period of warfare, probably associated with coastal migration, commerce and German occupation of southern Cameroon, which one of my informants referred to as the time of *kiang*.⁸⁸

The importance of autonomy amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe was based on two interconnected notions. On the one hand, the rejection of strong leadership was behind strong egalitarian tendencies in this society. On the other, practical experience taught that communal life involved a great deal of tensions. In order to avoid disrupting conflicts intensified by permanent contact inside a small setting, families preferred to live in separate settlements. Part of Sanaga-Ogowe ideology aimed at having big settlements in which large families lived together, yet in reality this was not often the case. In discussing this issue, Fernández says: ‘one of the principal precepts of the social order is... that each man should remain in his own house with his own family tending to his own affairs and making use of that which clearly belongs to him.’⁸⁹ Commitment to this idea would avoid conflict and ultimately guarantee the unity of the family. Should problems persist, a few would leave the village and found a new settlement in a distant location.

We should not infer from this that social dislocation was exclusively due to the desire for autonomy. Family divisions might be triggered by natural causes, such as famine or epidemic outbreaks, which forced people to find more prosperous settlements. The state of disarray described by many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European accounts might also split up entire families. An informant described one of those moments:

We left Aseng because a group came and attacked us; this group was called *kiang*. Whenever this band arrived, people had to run away through the forest. This is why eventually my family left that place and came to this region. People escaped in such a frantic state that not even wife and husband knew where each other were. Everyone fought for their own survival... My father came out first around this area, and my mother came out through another village carrying a baby with her... Then my father was warned that should go to pick up my mother who was alive in another village. This is how we arrived in this region.⁹⁰

The *ayong* or clan was the social organization which grouped together different *movók-me'bot* under a common identity. Somehow, the *ayong* counteracted Sanaga-Ogowe inclination for autonomy because, along with a desire for independence, there existed a need to establish and maintain family union beyond time and space. Social segmentation was overcome through consanguinity. After a series of migrations and successive divisions, all those families that recognized a common distant ancestor were considered to belong to the same clan.⁹¹ It was the *ayong* that determined people's identity, not language, territory, or religion. Identity was humanized, for it was only through people that it was passed down. Thus, in order to know someone's clan, the Sanaga-Ogowe ask: *o ne za ayong?* (literally, of whose clan are you?).

Although consanguinity provided some sort of stability to communities, Copet-Rougier explains that social units based on blood ties could be rather fluid.⁹² Genealogies were usually readapted in order to suit realities on the ground. It is well

known that an individual or family could change their clan affiliation, but, as Vansina puts it, 'ideology was and still is so strong that this continues to be denied by most people.'⁹³ We know that, right before European domination, a war captive, despite being integrated within the family group as dependent, was regarded as *oloó* (slave) amongst the northern Sanaga-Ogowe.⁹⁴ The descendents would later become part of the family, though maintaining a different status, which reminded members of their foreign origin.⁹⁵ No data suggest that this kind of phenomenon developed in the south; at least, not on a large scale.

Being the largest social unit, the *ayong* has also been seen by many as the most important political entity within the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition. Legal ruling did not extend beyond the boundaries of the clan, except in certain cases that we shall see later. However, it is not all that clear whether we should consider it as the most important political unit. In spite of all the series of obligations between clan members, it lacked a recognized leader or ruling institution. Decisions were usually taken at the level of the *ndá-e'bot* or the *mvók*, thus, these institutions, though not the largest, should be considered as the most important political bodies. Bot Ba Njok maintains that, as a result of migration and social dislocation, the *ndá-e'bot* surpassed the *ayong* in importance.⁹⁶ It seems quite likely that, at some point, clan members lived next to each other, which made it easier to maintain some sort of political cohesion. Amongst the northern clans cited by Tessmann, we find that many clans have the word *mvók* attached to their name, which suggest that clans still shared the same space.⁹⁷

It is not all that clear to what extent *ayong* solidarity was effective. Referring to the Mkako, another decentralized society of south-eastern Cameroon, Copet-Rougier points out that clan solidarity could be rather weak.⁹⁸ Amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe, there were also cases in which clan solidarity appeared to be a faint concept.

Governor Barrera, referring to a military expedition against a Sanaga-Ogowe leader in 1915, said: 'of course not all the Samangones [i.e. Esamongon, a clan from Río Muni] support Domakoa [Ndongo Mange], for some of them have volunteered to join the forces to punish Domakoa'.⁹⁹ This is somewhat surprising, if we consider that use of force against clan members was strongly prohibited. However, rather than being the rule, this example seems to suggest that in situations of extreme social upheaval, like colonial conquest, clan solidarity could become quite fragile. Generally, the *ayong*'s greatest success was the strong solidarity it generated, reminding all its members of their family ties and mutual obligations, which compelled them to help each other. Tessmann highlighted how clan families kept 'extremely active' contact thanks to mutual hospitality; this situation was also extended to allied families.¹⁰⁰ In fact, many inter-clan conflicts were the result of such solidarity. A report in *La Guinea Española* describes a skirmish that started after a man of the Yenvi clan killed a man who was beating a Yenvi woman.¹⁰¹

Nzamá-Dulu was the incest transgression that all members of the clan universally avoided. This term – 'Nzamá's walk' or 'do like Nzamá' – reflects the principle of exogamy that tied together the whole clan.¹⁰² Regardless of the genealogical distance, this law called attention to the fact that clan members were all part of the same family, and should be regarded as brother and sister. The principle was so strong, that the Sanaga-Ogowe actually practiced double exogamy; that is, a man could not marry a woman of the clan of his father or mother. There was certain flexibility with regards to the second case, and sometimes unions between a man and a woman of his maternal clan was allowed, provided that genealogies reveal a considerable gap. Incest was so strongly despised, that it was also extended to all those clans that were seen to have split up in the past – *e'lat-ayong* – even if they were non-Sanaga-Ogowe

clans.¹⁰³ It is not clear how it happened, but certain clans can trace their counterpart amongst *Bilobolobo* – a term applied to non-Sanaga-Ogowe speakers.

Exogamy guaranteed the creation of a large social network, which made possible all sorts of exchanges between allied families. Such ties were indispensable within a climate of constant insecurity and mistrust as that of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mbana drew my attention to the fact that most marital unions were carried out between couples living in the vicinity, and, often, numerous marriages took place between the same two clans, like the case of the Nzomo and Esen of Río Muni.¹⁰⁴ By doing so, it was not only possible to integrate different people, but also to know if they have good habits – *bumba fulu*.¹⁰⁵ Marital alliances and socio-economic relations between neighbouring families helped to create a sense of district, which, though not recognized in the figure of a leader or institution, was acknowledged by its dwellers.

Mínnama or the eyes of the village

The history of the Sanaga-Ogowe appears to have been characterized by the constant struggle between the desire to consolidate strong leadership and rejection of centralized power. The latter was so intense that strong leaders rarely succeeded in extending their power to the next generation. Leadership was rarely acknowledged at clan or lineage level within this segmentary society. The *mvók* and the *ndá-e'bot* were the only recognizable political units, but leadership was permanently challenged, in such a way that most scholars have described the Sanaga-Ogowe as an egalitarian acephalous society.

European accounts are full of examples describing the weak nature of leadership amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe. Nonetheless, this was not an anarchic society, as some

early European observers described it.¹⁰⁶ It did manage to develop a series of mechanisms which made it possible for decisions to be taken and implemented within village communities. Whereas in the south strong leadership was almost nonexistent, amongst northern sections more centralized power structures were developing by the late nineteenth century. The nature of power, however, remained the same throughout the whole Sanaga-Ogowe territory; that is, power was only effective at a family level. Only sporadically, authority and legal ruling could be extended beyond family borders, such as the case of the anti-witchcraft cult *Ngíí*.

Like so many aspects of Sanaga-Ogowe society, political structure was highly flexible, and it is possible to find multiple interpretations regarding authority and leadership. Bôt Ba Njok claims that this society had a pyramidal structure based on three types of prominence: biological, intellectual and religious, and political.¹⁰⁷ Mbana, based on the legends of the *Mvét* or troubadours, argues that there existed a triple division of power:¹⁰⁸ *Mínnama* or village representative, *Ndzwée* or village judge, and the *Akamayong* or military chief.¹⁰⁹ In fact, there was no clear conceptualisation or strict division of power. Although these concepts may have existed as part of Sanaga-Ogowe ideology, they were vaguely defined and often could not be matched by tangible institutions.

The *mvók* was usually made up of *mendá-me'bot*, meaning that each village had more than one family head. This group of elders, called *botóó* or *beñyámboro* (plural for *ñyámboro*), acted as principals.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless each village generally acknowledged a single representative known as *mínnama*. This figure received different names depending on the region, such as *ntóó* or *midzáá*. All these terms reflect the same sense: the representative or principal of the village. In Río Muni during the colonial period, *midzáá* and *mínnama* were often translated as the owner of

the village, yet it literally means the 'eyes of the village', from *mís* (eyes) and *dzaá* (village).¹¹¹ This translation is much more faithful to what the village leader was supposed to be amongst the southern Sanaga-Ogowe. The *mínnama* was simply a *primus inter pares*, chosen by the elders for his qualities to represent his village. Referring to the role of the community head, Tessmann said: 'A chief... does not represent a sole individual, but the whole senior members of the families, and the corresponding family head will only represent them outside the village.'¹¹² To represent the village involved speaking on behalf of his *mvók-e'bot*, village community, in case of external conflict or during the burdensome negotiations which preceded marriage. Tessmann claims that the principal's role was broader, for he acted as a sort of leading judge in the village tribunal and moderator during elders' discussions in the *abáá*.¹¹³

No doubt, *mínnama*'s executive power was very limited. Numerous sources referred to village leaders' inability to carry out their commands. In fact, Europeans were often asked to intervene in the solution of conflicts, since the *mínnama* was not always capable of achieving consensus amongst the elders.¹¹⁴ Even after solving a dispute, according to Tessmann, chiefs had little or no power to make their rulings effective.¹¹⁵ The village leader was not necessarily the wealthiest person. Mbana argues that in Sanaga-Ogowe ideology, a rich man could not be considered as *mínnama*, because his condition would make him primarily look after his own interests and not those of his community. Furthermore, wealthy men usually had numerous enemies and conflicts, which would not serve the benefit of the *mvók-e'bot*.¹¹⁶ The *mínnama* based his position on his personal qualities, which, somehow, made his position temporary.¹¹⁷ He was supposed to look after his fellow villagers, solving conflicts and restoring peace whenever it was broken. Informants described

him as a fair, unselfish person who had to have the 'gift of word' or eloquence in order to make everybody listen. The term *mí-nnama* was applied to this figure because he had to have eyes 'to see beyond' or 'to know'. Whenever there was a person with such outstanding qualities, he was often respected and regarded as an arbitrator by different clans within a region. Barrera explains how in the case of a serious dispute between two villages it was necessary to 'resort to the decision of arbitrators designated by both sides, usually chiefs from other villages who are known amongst the natives for properly solving these matters'.¹¹⁸

A deep-rooted rejection of both central power and individual success has led many scholars to describe the Sanaga-Ogowe as a strongly egalitarian society. Elders' council and witchcraft beliefs are often viewed as two examples of this egalitarian ideology. In the last few decades, however, scholars have learnt that reality as well as ideology was rather more complex. Egalitarian tendencies were also counteracted by an opposing ideology, which, as we can see in *mvét* legends, praised the idea of strong rulers capable of keeping their people together.¹¹⁹

Many believe that the strong emphasis on egalitarianism is a result of the subsistence economy. For several centuries, before the rise of European coastal trade in the mid-nineteenth century, individuals found it quite difficult to accumulate wealth and excel over the rest of the community. Rowlands and Warnier explain that, under these circumstances, material success was seen to happen at the expense of the community: 'social life is perceived as a zero sum game: what someone possesses must be appropriated at the expense of someone else.'¹²⁰ Along with these economic notions, the Sanaga-Ogowe developed an ideology in which excessive individual success and accumulation of power was considered to be evil. This belief was based on the idea of a 'natural order' created by God. Economic equality was part of the

natural order. Therefore, those excelling over the rest of the community were thought to go against it. *Mbwo* (witchcraft) was the explanation for human success, and possession of *evú* – seen as a living being inside people – made it possible to control hidden forces.¹²¹

The Sanaga-Ogowe, however, did not believe in total equality. In reality, what we find is the existence of some sort of hierarchical order. European missionaries and officers became almost obsessed with the denunciation of women's inequality and elders' rule. Women were very often described as slaves, whereas elders were portrayed as tyrants who oppressed their people through all kinds of pagan beliefs.¹²² Although such descriptions were exaggerated, age and gender were undoubtedly the two main factors in determining social hierarchy. To a lesser extent, we could also add wisdom, for, as we shall see later, it played an important role in the Sanaga-Ogowe political order. Male elders, especially the most knowledgeable ones, occupied the top position within the flat pyramid of the Sanaga-Ogowe social order. Women and youngsters had a secondary role, being subject to elders' control. In this respect, we could argue that absolute egalitarianism was only real amongst elders.¹²³ Nonetheless, Fisiy and Geschiere wisely point out that hierarchies were somewhat flexible because of the lack of central institutions.¹²⁴ The subordinate position of young men was only temporary, since they would eventually achieve the same status as their fathers. Until then, it was not uncommon for youngsters to challenge elders' authority.¹²⁵ As regards women, they kept control over their production, which made their role not as secondary as missionaries insisted on describing. Referring to chiefs' control over women, Tessmann said:

The worst part is when he [the chief] appears even subjected to his wives... he has to stoop to ask for permission to his wives to kill a chicken and offer it to a visitor; he

becomes then a caricature of the masculine gender, and, especially, of what a leader is supposed to be like.¹²⁶

The notion of separation of powers, though vague, seemed to have existed amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe. What we could consider as positions of authority required completely different personal characteristics. Thus, the qualities of the persons in charge of keeping the ancestors skulls' for *Melăn*, the village representative, or the rich man, were generally contradictory, making it not viable for an individual to accumulate several positions. Within a society where power was based on individuals, not institutions, such an accumulation would be interpreted as the concentration of power in the hands of a sole individual. Ultimately this figure would be able to impose his view upon the rest of the community, becoming a sort of uncontested tyrant.

Constant competition between elders prevented the over-concentration of power. Instead, what we find is the government of *beñyámboro* or elders. The term did not refer as much to biological age, as to experience and wisdom. This concept derived from Sanaga-Ogowe beliefs, in which the *bongus* (initiated men) are given access to secret or hidden knowledge. The *bebin* (non-initiated), are also called *bedzími mam* – those who ignore things – because they remain ignorant of the secrets. The initiated man, because of his access to secret things and age is considered to be a 'real person' – *ñyáa-mot* – who knows what is best for the community.¹²⁷ Such a notion was not so far from reality, because elders' authority was, in fact, the rule of those who knew most – *beyem* – and with enough strength of character to make their views heard.¹²⁸

Knowledge of the tradition was crucial within a context of competition between elders. Generally, the decision-making process involved long discussions. Therefore, the most knowledgeable had greater chances to put across their views and convince

their audience. During discussions, speakers had to try to reach consensus, for there was no other way to decide. In a 1910 article, Father Nicolás González explained how this process worked: 'When an important matter has to be dealt with, neighbouring chiefs [family heads] gathered, and, in common agreement, determine whatever is appropriate on each case.'¹²⁹ Probably, these kinds of scenes led Captain Roche to describe the Sanaga-Ogowe political process as democratic.¹³⁰ However, this system had to face numerous problems. The need to convince the majority of the elders, made the decision-making slow. Furthermore, as a result of rivalry between elders, it was very difficult to impose long-lasting views. Moreover, they often failed to reach an agreement, which, if serious, could cause the splitting up of the village community.

Age and intellectual prominence were not by themselves enough to guarantee elders authority. Any political system must be able to have some capacity of coercion in order to defend itself as well as to impose its decisions. Copet-Rougier, in her essay about violence in acephalous societies, distinguishes between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate violence'. The former seeks to support the social order, whereas the latter aims at destroying it. Amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe, legitimate violence rests on the *beñyámboro*. Any use of force by an individual against a fellow villager or manipulation of hidden forces for his or her sole benefit would be considered as illegitimate violence. Elders' power depended on their capacity to exercise two forms of indirect force: 'open' and 'symbolic violence'.¹³¹ Their control over land and the series of economic obligations derived from it are clearly a form of open violence. Through their control over religion, they exercised a form of symbolic violence, as they subtly imposed a series of moral obligations on the rest of the community through a combination of impenetrable ceremonies and discourse. Within Sanaga-Ogowe culture, religious beliefs were used to perpetuate the existing social order. As

we shall see in the next section, Sanaga-Ogowe religious beliefs maintain that the ancestors created the existing social order, thus, if the community wants to keep their protection and avoid their anger, they had to follow the ancestors' ways. The elders, being closer to the ancestors, became their legitimate spokespersons, and religious cults were a mechanism to facilitate their social control.

Nonetheless, we should not interpret that economic and religious control were enough to guarantee elders' power. Migration, for instance, could clearly limit elders' economic preponderance. Although the village elders shared some common interests, they were not a cohesive group, for they had to compromise between the interest of the entire village and those of their own families or themselves. Disagreement was, therefore, a factor in weakening *beñyáamboro*'s moral authority, especially when they lacked the sorts of qualities that their moral leadership required. Unlike north of the Ntem, in the south leadership was not broadly recognized by the entire village community, and, very often, it depended on the personal character of the head. Only at *ndá-e'bot* level were leaders almost universally recognized. Each *ndá-e'bot* had its family head who was in charge of solving its problems as well as representing it. The limits to authority amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe were not so much due to lack of leadership qualities, as Tessmann suggested, but as to the difficulty in finding the balance between strong authority and egalitarian ideology.¹³²

The rise of European coastal trade from the mid-nineteenth century brought about new instruments to strengthen leadership. Along with commercial wealth, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an increase in warfare and violence, which helped leaders to consolidate their power. These factors were behind the emergence of the *nkúkúma* or 'big man' amongst the northern sections of the Sanaga-Ogowe and, sporadically, in the south. *Nkúkúma* originally meant rich person. According to

Mbana, these were a new type of leaders who thanks to war and trade were capable of concentrating political, economic and military power.¹³³ Although we have no definitive data, it appears reasonable to think that the impact of European trade contributed to an increase in violence throughout the Sanaga-Ogowe territory. Warfare did not only happen as a result of leaders' competition for the new source of wealth, but also because of problems related to the payment of growing bridewealth prices. In a society where conflicts between families had been historically difficult to settle, the new situation appeared to escape the control of its leaders.

Early colonial reports draw attention to the large number of conflicts and wars originated by bridewealth disputes. Yet a careful examination of *nswa* payments reveals that these were not simply 'matters over women', as were often described. Along with high prices, such payments included a wide variety of goods such as: spear heads (*bikwelé*, sing. *ekwelé*), muskets, gunpowder, cattle, cloth, kitchenware, machetes, spears, tobacco and beads.¹³⁴ This suggests that *nswa* was not only a mechanism to exchange people, but also facilitated commercial exchange between different families. It is well known that the payment was not limited to *nswa*. The future husband offered several gifts before the final arrangement and throughout his marriage. It is not surprising then, that *nswa* negotiations could degenerate into bitter and long-lasting disputes. Lacking formal markets and in a context of permanent mistrust and hazard, commerce amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe was based on personal relations. Tessmann also describes how friends used to pay visits to each other in which gifts were mutually exchanged.¹³⁵

The development of *ekwelé* as a currency shows that trade activities were more developed before the arrival of the Europeans than has previously been thought. There

existed several types of *bikwelé* that were used both as ordinary payment and bridewealth.¹³⁶ Regarding these activities, an article in *La Guinea Española* noted:

One of the most surprising things for all those who penetrate into our continent [Río Muni] for the first time and visit Pamue villages are the commercial transactions and arrangements, which after long discussions and no little ostentation they carry out... they walk around the place setting [*abáá*] in which they shelter, placing little piles of old iron pieces [*bikwelé*] over here and little sticks or pieces of banana leaves over there.¹³⁷

Family heads were in control of most commercial activities, for they were in charge of *nswa* negotiations and organizing trade caravans. Furthermore, they were also behind the production of *bikwelé*. European observers indicate that forges were usually located in the *abáá*.¹³⁸ *Bikwelé* manufacture was somewhat limited because it involved a long and burdensome technical process as well as a severe ritual preparation for those taking part in the task.¹³⁹

Due to low production, local trade was never capable of generating the kind of economic growth necessary to strengthen leadership. European commerce, however, did not only offer a much larger quantity but also different types of products that local production could not match. Control over such products laid the foundations for the emergence of the *nkúkúma* as a political leader. Although European commerce facilitated certain processes which already existed, it did not alter the socio-economic core of the Sanaga-Ogowe society, since people still remained as the main asset. 'Wealth in people' was very much alive even after colonial conquest.¹⁴⁰ People's economic value was recognized through a series of compensation mechanisms which include the payment of a varying quantity of goods. *Nswa*, for example, was a way to compensate the woman's family for the loss of one of its members as well as her potential offspring. Murder or accidental killing also had to be compensated, if subsequent revenge killings were to be avoided.¹⁴¹ Women's high value was based on

their role as food producers, but above all, as child bearers for the family group. A woman could be extremely hardworking in the field, but if she was not capable of conceiving, she was often returned to her family. The *nkúkúma* was considered a rich man primarily due to his wealth in people. Such wealth and prestige could eventually lead to recognition as a leader.¹⁴² Late nineteenth-century *mikúkúma*, however, did not succeed in extending their power to the next generation, because power had a personal rather than an institutional base. After his death, material wealth was divided between his dependents, weakening his accumulated power.¹⁴³

Melăn or "god below"

'Nzam 'e yo, Fam a si; Nzame Nzame, Fam e Fam' (Nzamá – God – is above, man is below; Nzamá is Nzamá, man is a man) is an old saying, which wisely summarizes the role of religion in Sanaga-Ogowe society.¹⁴⁴ Often characterized as not being a religious people by early European observers, especially missionaries, the Sanaga-Ogowe developed a worldview in which the earthly realm was symbiotically connected to the supernatural one. The latter held many of the answers to the occurrences of the former. Yet, such conceptions did not translate themselves into an extensive and profound religious life. If the natural order was not altered, the Sanaga-Ogowe did not see the need to celebrate their cults. Religious beliefs were, nonetheless, a central pillar of their tradition.

To the Sanaga-Ogowe, religion was not an identifiable category, but an indistinguishable part of their whole culture. This represented an obstacle for those observers who tried to study this people in the late nineteenth century. By then, Christianity was seen as separate entity of European cultures, thus their questions were often not understood or awkwardly answered by Africans. The most common

error, as Tessmann points out referring to Father Trilles, was to mistake religious symbols for reality.¹⁴⁵ Such a tendency created the somewhat grotesque image of this society, which, as we shall see in following chapters, greatly influenced colonial attitudes during the conquest stage and thereafter.

Scholars studying twentieth-century religious movements have realized that, amongst Central African societies, ritual takes a priority over belief.¹⁴⁶ The same phenomenon has been observed amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe people. In his extensive and detailed study, Tessmann describes those rituals that he personally witnessed. Yet he admits that local interpretations were often sketchy or even mistaken. Instead, Tessmann provides his own interpretations based on his observations, talks with locals, and readings. At times, it appears that Tessmann tries to make Sanaga-Ogowe beliefs fit into his preconception of 'primitive' religions.¹⁴⁷

Tessmann's work, however, is important. His observations reveal a society with a rather sophisticated belief system, which was not evident to me during my fieldwork. Clearly, today's generation barely keeps memories about the complexity of the numerous cults and beliefs of the past. Like Tessmann, I also found that only a few individuals master this sort of knowledge. In the past, villages used to have one or two elders with a special inclination for knowledge and reflection.¹⁴⁸ These 'intellectuals' played a very important role not only as storekeepers of knowledge, but also as interpreters and creators of it. In a society where most people merely took part in rituals without fully understanding them, this granted them some sort of hegemony over the community. Cults and principles were very much the same throughout the Sanaga-Ogowe territory, yet European observers gathered numerous versions and views on common beliefs and rituals. Due to the lack of centralized institutions, orthodoxy was virtually nonexistent, and interpretations and views depended on

multiple village intellectuals. They would also decide when rituals were needed as well as conduct them.

Such heterogeneity determined the difference in emphasis of cults from one region to another. Tessmann points out that what he called 'benevolent cults' were much more common in the south than in the north.¹⁴⁹ Whereas some cults such as *Melăn*, *Só*, or *Ngîi* were widespread across the entire Sanaga-Ogowe country, some others, such as *Enikö* and *Schib*, were limited to a single subgroup.¹⁵⁰ According to Tessmann, elders' recollection of cults, which no longer existed in the 1900s, indicates that cults were more prolific in the past.¹⁵¹ The study of modern religious movements shows that they usually have a temporary character, remaining alive for some twenty or thirty years, until they lose their vitality.¹⁵² In the case of those well established throughout a large area, such as *Melăn* or *Só*, it is reasonable to think that they survived for much longer. In spite of valuable comparisons with twentieth-century movements, we should not take for granted that these modern phenomena are an exact replica of old religious cults. For instance, social protest is usually linked to religious movements, yet such a connection is not so clear in the past, where centralized power was non-existent.

The Sanaga-Ogowe developed a non-theocentric religion. This led most early observers to think that the Sanaga-Ogowe did not believe in the idea of a supreme God. In the course of their evangelical work, missionaries soon learnt that, in fact, such an idea was not foreign.¹⁵³ In 1912, Trilles published one of the numerous legends of the creation, which he had been collecting since his arrival in the region in 1892.¹⁵⁴ The Creator receives different names depending on the source. The most common name is *Nzamá*, which is today accepted as the name of God amongst the Fang of Gabon and Río Muni. Fernández, along other scholars, claims that *Nzamá*

was not the real name of God. According to him, missionaries erroneously translated Nzamá for God, though this was actually the name of *Mebe'e's* – God's – first son.¹⁵⁵ The discussion about the term used for God amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe is a long and inconclusive one. Whether God receives numerous names in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it would be logical to think that the Sanaga-Ogowe, an extremely decentralized society, also used multiple terms. *Mebe'e*, *Nzamá*, *Nkom-Bot*, *Nkwa*, *Elofek*, *Nti-Bise* are just a few of the names mentioned to reflect the same concept.¹⁵⁶

In Sanaga-Ogowe cosmogony, God is not really a creator but an 'organizer'. Tessmann explains how God organized the 'inert chaotic matter'. In doing so, He provided this substance with life and shaped it into the visible and invisible reality as the Sanaga-Ogowe knew it.¹⁵⁷ Although this is not the place to deal with such myths in detail, it is worth considering a few aspects of these beliefs. Sanaga-Ogowe religious conceptions were based on the concept of a 'natural order' established by God at the moment of the 'organization'. Such a concept was a product of the observation of nature and society. To the Sanaga-Ogowe, the natural order was no other thing than the regular working of nature and society – the seasonal rains, the day after the night, the village as home of people, elders ruling over youngsters, etc. Anything which did not follow the regular run of events falls into the 'unnatural' order. Consequently, the natural order was associated with Good, whereas the disruption of it was considered as Evil.

The natural order exists and recreates itself thanks to the action of God. When organizing the chaotic matter, Tessmann explains, God gave to every element a 'special force', which made each of them to be exactly what they are and transmit these exact characteristics to its kind.¹⁵⁸ Narrowly connected to this idea is what Tessmann calls 'sensitive' and 'visible radiation'.¹⁵⁹ It derives from the special force,

and is capable of affecting other objects and beings in one way or another. This is the same principle that lies behind *byang*. This term is frequently translated as *medicina* in present-day Río Muni, though remedy would be a more accurate translation, for the ‘radiation’ of an object was used to have either a positive or negative impact on people. Contrary to missionaries’ belief, the influence of these objects – fetishes in colonial jargon – was not due to some form of ‘spirits’ living inside, but to the radiation of that special force bestowed by God.¹⁶⁰

There are several mythological variations about the creation of the first man or human being. Some myths say that Nzamá created the first man, *Mot-Zamá*, along with several animals, usually the gorilla, *Ngi-Zamá*, and chimpanzee, *Waa-Zamá*.¹⁶¹ Other myths also add three more human characters: *Nkwi-Zamá*, the Beyele; *Akút-Zamá*, crazy or fool; and *Ngomwenio*.¹⁶² In these myths we observe that God abandoned his children due to their disobedience. As a result, people had to face numerous difficulties without the help of their father. Most observers agreed that God was rather irrelevant in the daily lives of the Sanaga-Ogowe. In an article in *La Guinea Española*, a missionary complained about the role of God amongst locals in the following terms:

It is not that, generally speaking, they do not admit a Supreme Being and Creator of all things, but they err about its Providence, because they do not admit Him in ordinary events, though they do in exceptional cases.¹⁶³

Local concepts saw in God a very distant being, so great that He did not worry about human affairs. After being abandoned by God, Sanaga-Ogowe could only resort to the ancestors for mediation and protection.

For the Sanaga-Ogowe, respect for ancestors was almost reverential. If they worshiped anything it was the family ancestors through the celebration of *Melän* – or

Bieré as scholars generally know it. Trilles argued that *bieré*, referring to the ancestors statues, were a sort of national God.¹⁶⁴ Europeans used to mistake the statue for the real object of worship; the ancestors' skulls. Most of my informants told me that *bieré* was simply a statue, which had no value in itself. It was used as a distraction, in order to keep women and children attention away from the skulls.¹⁶⁵ In 1911, Father Nicolás González said this about the ancestor cult:

Amongst the Pamue the idol, (or more appropriate, the principal fetish) is a skull of their forefathers, for they suppose the dead person's soul dwells in it. The skulls are kept in a round box, longer than wider, of barrel shape, made up of tree bark; on top of it they usually put a figure, shaped, sometimes, as a man, and, at times, as a woman.¹⁶⁶

As noted above, the Sanaga-Ogowe saw the disruption of the natural order as a threat to their survival. From the social point of view, communal life was considered to be the natural state in which humans live. That is how Nzamá had established it in the beginning, and how ancestors continued ever since. *Melăn* sought to maintain this system by strengthening family links. The role of the ancestors was to reinforce the sense of belonging; all members of the village have the same origin, thus, are one sole thing. Regarding the name of the cult, Tessmann explains that it comes from the root -*la*, to be united.¹⁶⁷ Whatever problem affected the community, it could only be solved by maintaining the unity of the village. The ancestors, also called *betsíra* (fathers) or *bot* (people), did not look after individuals but the whole community.¹⁶⁸

Generally only initiated men took part in *Melăn* rituals. It appears there was no established age to be initiated and it was up to the elders to determine when there were enough youngsters who could be initiated. Tessmann mentions that, exceptionally, women could also be initiated. This could happen either in those cases in which women had accidentally seen the skulls, or when there was no close male relative alive of one of the ancestors.¹⁶⁹ During *Melăn* rituals, the skulls were

introduced to the group of youngsters who had to be able to recognize them thanks to the previously learnt genealogies, which were an essential part of boys' education. While reciting the names of the ancestors, the conductor of the ceremony also mentioned the extraordinary facts associated with that particular person. As Mbuy points out, in ancestor cults not everybody could qualify as an ancestor.¹⁷⁰ This person had to be regarded as somebody of exceptional value for the community. In this respect, both men and women could reach this status and be worshiped in *Melăn*. The aspiration of most leaders was to achieve the sort of fame that would eventually qualify them as *ngunmelăn* (the ancestors honoured in *Melăn*).¹⁷¹ During the initiation ceremony, neophytes consumed *alan*, a hallucinogen which allowed them to see beyond the visible world and enter into contact with the ancestors.¹⁷² The initiation ceremony eventually sought to strengthen the village community by joining together three different generations: ancestors, elders, and youngsters as past, present and future of the family.¹⁷³

According to my informants, each village had a special person in charge of looking after the ancestors' remains. This person was considered to be of an exceptionally good character, from whom no hurt was expected. Since the force of this cult rested in the family nature of the ancestors, those who were closest in time were especially worshiped. It was to them that most petitions were addressed, for they would listen more carefully to the needs of their children. Should the natural order be disrupted, elders would have to ask the ancestors for their mediation. They did not intervene unless they were asked to. The ancestors would only look after general problems affecting the community such as poor crops, child mortality or drought. The leading elders, thanks to their knowledge and experience, would assess when it was

necessary to *akom adzaá* or *akom melăn* (literally to prepare – repair – the village or *Melăn*).¹⁷⁴

All Sanaga-Ogowe religious manifestations seek to oppose evil and to restore the natural order disrupted by it. *Melăn*, however, was not the only community rite. The Sanaga-Ogowe also developed other cults, in which the initiated tried to fight more specific problems and purify the community. *Só* and *Ngíí* were arguably the most popular ones, for they were widespread through most of the Sanaga-Ogowe territory. The former was a universal initiation rite, symbolizing the passage of boys into sexual maturity.¹⁷⁵ This was considered to be the first step of adulthood. From then on, youngsters were no longer children. Tessmann argues that, amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe, sex, somehow, had negative connotations, because, according to legends that he gathered, God abandoned humans when they started to practice sex.¹⁷⁶ Amongst the southern Sanaga-Ogowe, such connotations were reinforced through the combined celebration of the *Só* and *Ndong-Mba* rituals, in which the latter was designed to combat incest, the main sexual taboo amongst clan members, that could eventually destroy the community.

Ngíí has long attracted the attention of scholars due to its social implications. It is considered to be an anti-witchcraft cult, which sought to eradicate activities that endangered the community. For this reason, Alexandre regarded *Ngíí* as a sort of police and judicial body.¹⁷⁷ Members of this cult were supposed to find and punish those violating the peace of the community. The Sanaga-Ogowe realized that certain problems did not only affect isolated communities, but also different family villages alike. Therefore, the celebration of *Ngíí* was often carried out by people of different clans together. They shared similar problems and joined forces in fighting against them. *Ngíí*'s power was limited nevertheless. Tessmann points out that its effect only

reached close villages within a few hours.¹⁷⁸ Unlike *Melăn* or *Só*, *Ngii* was not a compulsory rite that all male Sanaga-Ogowe had to be initiated into.¹⁷⁹ Due to its special character, it appears that access to this cult was restricted to a few individuals who had the leadership and knowledgeable qualities required. Alexandre argues that, in spite of being ruled by a council, hierarchical structures inside *Ngii* were more distinguishable than in any other aspect of this culture.¹⁸⁰

Tessmann argues that people only resorted to *Ngii* for crimes such as theft, sexual offences, and especially murder. It appears from his descriptions that, when such cases took place within a village, an initiated elder took the case before the *Ngii*'s council, where the matter was discussed and resolved. The murderer of a relative could be executed, though this had to be done without spilling his blood, for such a thing was not tolerated amongst family members.¹⁸¹ We do not know to what extent *Ngii* was successful in preventing these kinds of crimes. Although Tessmann maintains that many people believed in the frightening power of *Ngii*, we need to keep in mind that it was mainly a deterring tool.¹⁸² By the time Tessmann conducted his research, *Ngii* appeared to be quite active amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe. Mbana claims that this cult became prominent in the late nineteenth century.¹⁸³ It is possible that the constant internal violence of the period favoured the expansion of this semi-judicial cult amongst southern Sanaga-Ogowe.¹⁸⁴

There existed a large array of cults that were practiced on a much smaller scale in fewer regions. The south was more prolific regarding these minor cults.¹⁸⁵ They had a much more specific character, and usually sought to address a particular type of problem. Tessmann mentions several cults such as *Schok*, *Bokung*, and *Elong* that were practiced in more than one region, whereas some others were limited to one subgroup such as *Eniko* of the Ntumu, and *Schib* and *Odschoe* of the Fang.¹⁸⁶

Tessmann describes in great detail the rituals and interprets the symbols associated with them. Unfortunately, he does not pay as much attention to the reasons which led to the celebration of religious ceremonies on each occasion. He does say, however, that most individuals were only initiated into one cult, which means that many of them had an extremely minor character even within the regions where they were more popular.¹⁸⁷

Although many of the cults were generally restricted to men, women were not totally excluded from religious life. As noted above, at times women could be initiated into *Melān*. Tessmann also mentions that in some regions women took part in *Ngii* rituals.¹⁸⁸ One obstacle for adult women's greater involvement in male cults was their family character. Women usually lived in their husbands' villages and were not considered part of the *mvók-e'bot*. Those who for some reason remained in their own family village found it easier to participate in these rituals, especially if there were no old members alive of their *ndá-e'bot*. Amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe there were also exclusively female cults in which only initiated women could take part. As late as 1922, they were still present, as we can see in an article in the Claretian magazine that referred to them as secret societies.¹⁸⁹ Sadly we do not have much data on them, because women kept such information away from predominantly male European observers. The latter had to rely on male informants who, very rarely, had first hand accounts on these rites. Female cults, like their male counterparts, were covered by a layer of secrecy whose details were hidden especially from men.



Photograph 2: Melän or Bieré statue



Photograph 3: Ngíí mask

Mewungo is the best-known female cult and it appeared to have been the most important, though Tessmann also mentions several others, such as *Mekang*, *Endaluma*, *Ewud*, and *Akang*.¹⁹⁰ According to Alexandre, *Mewungo* was very useful in reinforcing women's cohesion within a setting where most married women came from different clans.¹⁹¹ Female cults also sought to deal with specific problems that affected women such as infertility, infant mortality, or neglectful husbands. Berger argues that female cults were a perfect example of how before colonialism cults could also play a resistance role, providing some form of counterbalance to male power.¹⁹² During the celebration of *Mewungo*, Tessmann explains how women walked around the village hurling all kinds of insults and jokes on men, who stayed indoors.¹⁹³ Female cults could also offer valuable protection against male abuse, for they were feared by many men who ignored the inside nature of these cults. Like in the case of male rituals, we do not know on which occasions they were celebrated, though it seems that they were not as frequent.¹⁹⁴

Somehow, all cults sought to boost good fortune while protecting the community and its members from evil and *mbwo*. Part of the problems that affected the Sanaga-Ogowe was blamed on the ancestors' neglect, but generally it was attributed to *mbwo* or individuals' use of magic for their own benefit. Witchcraft was often thought to be behind someone's recurring misfortune. The price that someone had to pay for benefiting from witchcraft was usually the death of a close relative. People deeply believed in such practices to the point that, except in the case of old people, death was not considered to be natural, as Father González explained in 1911.¹⁹⁵ From the point of view of this work, the most interesting aspect of such belief is that witchcraft, defined as individual's ambition, was considered to be the greatest enemy of the community. Witchcraft was not only an instrument to prevent excessive accumulation

of power or material wealth in the hands of a few people, but also a way to protect the cohesion of the group. The Sanaga-Ogowe learnt that individuals' excessive ambitions tended to cause jealousy and tensions, which eventually ended in the splitting of the family village. In this respect, we can see how the use of magic per se was not necessarily evil. Great leaders were believed to owe their position to magic. Communal cults also resorted to magic in order to achieve their goals. The difference in both cases is that magic was openly used for the benefit of the community. As we shall see in the following chapters, increasing individualistic beliefs as well as forced secrecy made certain rituals fall into the realm of witchcraft, which by then met no opposition from vanished or declining religious cults.

Conclusion

Autonomy, the ability of human groups to make fundamental decisions regarding their societies, was a vital principle in the configuration of the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition. In this respect, the *mvók-e'bot* played a major role because it retained decision-making within the limited boundaries of the community. A strongly egalitarian culture, represented in the figure of the *mínnama* as a *primus inter pares*, made it possible to keep personal ambitions under control, preventing communities from losing their political autonomy at the hands of authoritarian characters. Limited economic development also contributed to maintaining the status quo, because individuals were unable to accumulate enough wealth to institutionalize their authority. When families found personal leadership too pervasive, they could always recover their autonomy by migrating and founding a new *mvók-e'bot*. In so doing, the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition expanded over a large area, and was enriched through contact with different cultural groups and natural environments. Since migration was

a back-and-forth phenomenon, innovations could be transmitted to other sections of the Sanaga-Ogowe. Change was, subsequently, legitimized through the semi-sacred past or its humanized representation, the ancestors, whose commitment was ensured through the participation of the male members of the *mvók-e'bot* in *Melăn* rituals. By bridging the gap between past and present, *Melăn* guaranteed the existing social order and strengthened family ties.

NOTES

¹ Vansina, *Paths*, 259.

² Ibid, 5-6.

³ Ibid, 57-58.

⁴ Ibid, 259-60.

⁵ Ibid, 259-60.

⁶ D. Zahan, *Religion, spiritualité et pensée africaines* (Paris, 1970), 80, cited in N. Booth, 'Time and Change in African Traditional Thought', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 7 (1975), 90.

⁷ Booth, 'Time and Change', 88.

⁸ Ibid, 82-83.

⁹ Booth points out the difficulty of thinking in future terms within traditional societies, because the future lacks events to make it real. Ibid, 84.

¹⁰ Rowlands & Warnier, 'Sorcery, Power and the Modern State', 125.

¹¹ Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*.

¹² Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*, 57-60.

¹³ Vansina, *Paths*, 259.

¹⁴ J. Mbana Nchama, 'La emigración Fang', PhD Thesis UNED, Madrid, 1994, 256-57.

¹⁵ In 1919, an article in *La Guinea Española* analysed the origin of the name of the native inhabitants of the island of Bioko (Fernando Po), the Bubi, pointing out that locals never used this name to refer to themselves. Botchobotche or Motchomoritcho are mentioned as two of the terms used by them, depending on what part of the island they came from. *La Guinea Española* (25-1-1919), 7; idem (10-2-1919), 8-9.

¹⁶ W. Samarin, 'Bondjo Ethnicity and Colonial Imagination', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 18 (1984).

¹⁷ The Mpongwe are a coastal people of central Gabon and should not be mistaken with the Pahouin, Pangwe or Pamue. Mbana, 'La emigración', 27; G. Tessmann, *Los Pamues (Los Fang): Monografía etnológica de una rama de las tribus negras del África occidental* (Madrid, 2003), 30; A. Raponda Walker, *Notes d'histoire du Gabon suivi de. Toponymie de l'estuaire Libreville, et. Toponymie du Fernan-Vaz Port-Gentil* André Raponda Walker (Libreville, 1996), 215.

¹⁸ In many languages of the Gabonese and Río Muni coast, the phoneme *f* is often transformed into *p*. See Raponda, *Notes*, 215.

¹⁹ Mbana, 'La emigración', 27.

²⁰ R. Burton, 'A Day Amongst the Fans', in R. Burton, *Selected Papers* (London, 1924), 98; J-B. Roche, *En el país de los pamues: de Río Muni a Camarones* (Paris, 1904), 111.

²¹ J. Ndongo, *Los Fang: cultura, sociedad y religión* (Madrid, 1985), 15-17; R. Nze Abuy, *Breves datos históricos del pueblo Fán* (Madrid, 1984), 14.

²² Mbana, 'La emigración', 37.

²³ Ibid, 22.

²⁴ Ibid, 23-25.

²⁵ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 31.

²⁶ J. Fernández, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton, N.J., 1982), 51.

- ²⁷ P. Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire du groupe beti-bulu-fang: essai de synthèse provisoire', *Cahiers d'études Africaines*, 5 (1965), 506-07.
- ²⁸ Vansina, *Paths*, 337.
- ²⁹ Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 521-22; A. Panyela, 'El individuo y la sociedad fang', *Archivos del IDEA*, XI, 46 (1958), 63.
- ³⁰ Nowadays people use the word *ayong* to refer to ethnicity, race or nationality.
- ³¹ In the late 1850s, the explorer Du Chaillu contributed to the stereotypical portrait of a people, which until then, was almost unknown by the European. For more details, see K.D. Patterson, 'Paul B. Du Chaillu and the Exploration of Gabon, 1855-1865', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 7, 4 (1974); Governor-General to the Minister of State, 17-4-1911. Archivo General de la Administración (hereafter AGA), box G4.
- ³² Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 31. Raponda, *Notes*, 12; *La Guinea Española* (10-2-1910), 8-9.
- ³³ B. Weinstein, *Gabon: Nation-Building on the Ogooué* (London, 1966), 102-03.
- ³⁴ R. Avelot, 'Recherches sur l'histoire des migrations dans le bassin de l'Ogooué et la région littorale adjacente', *Bulletin de géographie historique et descriptive*, 20 (1905); V. Largeau, *Encyclopédie pahouine* (Paris, 1901); H. Trilles, 'Chez les fang', *Les missions catholiques*, XXX (1898).
- ³⁵ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 60-61.
- ³⁶ Trilles, *Chez les fang, ou Quinze années de séjour au Congo français* (Lille, 1912), 74.
- ³⁷ Mbana, 'La emigración', 61-80.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, 80.
- ³⁹ Still in 1983, Ropivia argues in favour of the Egyptian-Sudanese thesis. M. Ropivia, 'Migrations Bantu et tradition orale des Fang (Le Mvett): interprétation critique', *Le Mois en Afrique: Etudes politiques, économiques et socioologiques africaines* (1983), 125.
- ⁴⁰ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 27.
- ⁴¹ Mbana, 'La emigración', 97.
- ⁴² *Ibid*, 147-51.
- ⁴³ For a detail analysis of these views, see: C. Chamberlin, 'The Migration of the Fang into Central Gabon during the Nineteenth Century: A New Interpretation', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 11 (1978).
- ⁴⁴ Vansina, *Paths*, 137.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 136.
- ⁴⁶ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 101.
- ⁴⁷ Vansina indicates that, even today, most Sanaga-Ogowe speakers are located north of Yaounde. Vansina, *Paths*, 134-37.
- ⁴⁸ Glottochronology is a technique for calculating the date of linguistic change amongst languages in the same family. This technique is based on the assumption that 'basic vocabulary' changes at a regular speed. *Ibid*, 16, 136.
- ⁴⁹ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 84.
- ⁵⁰ Nze Abuy, *Breves datos*, 22.
- ⁵¹ For more details, see A. de Veciana, 'La Organización familiar de los Kombe', *Archivos del IDEA*, IX, 36 (Madrid, 1956); 'La estructura sociológica del mosaico étnico de la Costa de Guinea (Guinea Española)', *Archivos del IDEA*, X, 40 (1957).
- ⁵² Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 534-35.

- ⁵³ For more details on village formation, see Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 65.
- ⁵⁴ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 52.
- ⁵⁵ Chamberlin, 'The Migration', 433.
- ⁵⁶ Vansina's study on the Equatorial tradition is clearly the most detailed analysis of this model of population expansion. Vansina, *Paths*.
- ⁵⁷ Panyela, 'El individuo y la sociedad', 61-62.
- ⁵⁸ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 31.
- ⁵⁹ Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 506-07.
- ⁶⁰ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 76-87.
- ⁶¹ Mbana, 'La emigración', 488, 491.
- ⁶² Murenzamá is one of the multiple names that God or the Creator receives amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe. *La Guinea Española* (10-1-1919), 15-16.
- ⁶³ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 72.
- ⁶⁴ The Sanaga-Ogowe, were extremely sensitive to phonetic variations, thus they easily identified themselves on the basis of dialect while labelling those with peculiar pronunciations and customs.
- ⁶⁵ Mbana, 'La emigración', 37.
- ⁶⁶ *Botóó* is usually translated as the elders. In its singular form, it mainly refers to the person in charge of the family (family head), who was not necessarily the eldest son. Within the context of a village, *botóó* refers to the group of adult brothers and cousins living in the *mvók*.
- ⁶⁷ Governor-General to the Minister of State (2-7-1911). AGA, box G-168.
- ⁶⁸ The Sanaga-Ogowe year, *mbú*, equals approximately half the solar year. In this region there are two rainy seasons and two dry seasons per solar year; each rainy season is predated by the clearing of the forest and sowing. For more details see Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 111-30, 527; A. Panyela, *Esquema de Etnología de los fang ntumu de la Guinea Española* (Madrid, 1959), 14-18.
- ⁶⁹ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 545.
- ⁷⁰ Nze Abuy claims that the term 'palaver house' is an erroneous translation of the term, *ndáá medzó* (literally house of matters or questions), applied to the *abáá*. Nze Abuy, *Breves datos*, 21.
- ⁷¹ On the *abáá*, Roche said: 'national sovereignty became evident and was exercised in the most democratic fashion at the public square, with the concourse and universality of all citizens. The Athens's *agora*, the Roman *forum* is the *palaver house* of the Pahouin.' Roche, *En el país*, 84-85.
- ⁷² Gray, *Colonial Rule*.
- ⁷³ Ndongo, *Los Fang*, 43-47; Panyela, *Esquema de Etnología*, 47.
- ⁷⁴ Vansina, *Paths*, 73.
- ⁷⁵ Trilles transcribed a legend from the lips of a Sanaga-Ogowe elder on the migration of the Sanaga-Ogowe. This legend shows how the first chief, Ngurangurane, led his people in their exodus escaping from the abuses of his father, Ombure. Trilles, *Chez les fang*, 83-94.
- ⁷⁶ R. Nze Abuy, *Nsoa o dote africana* (Madrid, 1984), 17.
- ⁷⁷ Based on the Ngurangurane legend, Trilles argued that, at some point, the Sanaga-Ogowe recognized the maternal family as their own. *Chez les fang*, 92; A. Panyela, 'Los cuatro grados de la Familia en los Fang de la Guinea española, Camarones y Gabón', *Archivos del IDEA*, X, 40 (Madrid, 1957), 13, 17.
- ⁷⁸ Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 517.

- ⁷⁹ H-M. Bôt Ba Njok, 'Prééminences sociales et système politico-religieux dans la société traditionnelle bulu et fang', *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 30, 2 (1960), 167.
- ⁸⁰ Roche, *En el país*, 210-11.
- ⁸¹ *La Guinea Española* (10-10-1915), 12.
- ⁸² Governor-General to the Minister of State (2-7-1911). AGA, box G-168.
- ⁸³ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 545.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 63.
- ⁸⁵ Mbana, 'La emigración', 90.
- ⁸⁶ I. de Aranzadi, 'Tradiciones orales del bosque fang', *Archivos del IDEA*, IX, 41 (1957), 73-77.
- ⁸⁷ Tessmann's description of the *obăn*, in the 1900s, also indicates that this was not a recent event. Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 63.
- ⁸⁸ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 8.
- ⁸⁹ Fernández, 'Christian Acculturation', 250.
- ⁹⁰ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 8.
- ⁹¹ Panyela claims that, after four generations, relatives do not considered each other as members of the family but the clan. Panyela, 'Los cuatro grados', 16.
- ⁹² E. Copet-Rougier, ' "Le Mal Court": Visible and Invisible Violence in an Acephalous Society -Mkako of Cameroon', in D. Riches (ed.), *The Anthropology of Violence* (Oxford, 1986), 57.
- ⁹³ Vansina, *Paths*, 82.
- ⁹⁴ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 531.
- ⁹⁵ Panyela points out that the *oloó* was ascribed to the family not the chief. Panyela, 'Los cuatro grados', 13.
- ⁹⁶ Bôt Ba Njok, 'Prééminences sociales', 167.
- ⁹⁷ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 67.
- ⁹⁸ Copet-Rougier, ' "Le Mal" ', 56-57.
- ⁹⁹ Governor-General A. Barrera to the Sub-Governor of Bata (26-12-1915). AGA, box G-4.
- ¹⁰⁰ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 533.
- ¹⁰¹ *La Guinea Española* (10-7-1912), 10-11
- ¹⁰² Some Sanaga-Ogowe legends claim that Nzamá, the first man, married his sister.
- ¹⁰³ J. Mbana, personal interview.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁰⁵ It was in the interest of everybody not to bring into the community problematic people. Mbana, 'La emigración', 521.
- ¹⁰⁶ Governor-General Barrera constantly referred to the state of anarchy before the Spanish occupation. AGA, boxes G-168 (8-9-1911); G-4 (13-12-1915); G-9 (12-11-1922).
- ¹⁰⁷ Bôt Ba Njok, 'Prééminences sociales', 152.
- ¹⁰⁸ Mvét is an epic literature genre characteristic of the southern Sanaga-Ogowe, which narrates the heroic stories of the Echang clan in the Engong country. It is sometimes translated as troubadour due to the similarities with this medieval European figure. C. Mve Bengomesama, *Tradiciones del pueblo fang* (Madrid, 1981), 149.
- ¹⁰⁹ Mbana, 'La emigración', 266-69.

¹¹⁰ *Beñyáamboro* is also translated as elders, though it has broader connotations. It derives from *ñyáa* (literally mother but, as a prefix, it means important or real), and *mot* or *mbot* (person); literally *beñyáamboro* could be translated as important or real people.

¹¹¹ Panyela, 'El individuo y la sociedad', 53.

¹¹² Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 66.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 532, 562.

¹¹⁴ M. Iradier, *África: Viajes y trabajos de la Asociación Euskara La Exploradora*, v. I (Madrid, 1994), 312.

¹¹⁵ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 563.

¹¹⁶ Mbana, *La emigración*, 269.

¹¹⁷ According to Mbana, once this person lost the necessary qualities or proved to be incompetent, he was no longer considered village head. *Ibid*, 275.

¹¹⁸ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (12-11-1922). AGA, box G-9.

¹¹⁹ The protagonist of the *mvét* legends, 'the Echang are neither gods nor demigods... they simply are the most perfect men'. Mve Bengomesama, *Tradiciones*, 149.

¹²⁰ Rowlands & Warnier, 'Sorcery', 123.

¹²¹ These concepts will be explained further in this chapter and, especially, in chapter 4.

¹²² *La Guinea Española* (25-5-1909), 6-8.

¹²³ Rowlands & Warnier, 'Sorcery', 125.

¹²⁴ C. Fisiy & P. Geschiere, 'Sorcery, Witchcraft and Accumulation; Regional variations in South and West Cameroon', *Critique of Anthropology*, 11, 3 (1991), 269.

¹²⁵ Tessmann claims that bold youngsters could easily frighten some village chiefs. He also points out that, although father-son relationship was generally quite good, it tended to deteriorate when the son gets older. Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 532, 617.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 532.

¹²⁷ For more details see Bôt Ba Njok, 'Prééminences sociales', 153-54; Fernández, 'Christian Acculturation', 246; Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 454-58. See also the view of M. Ndongo Mba, 'El "Totem" Pamue', *África*, 195 (1958), as well as the interpretation of one of the historical accounts: J. Bibang Oyee, *La migración Fang: según Dulu Bon be Afri Kara*, O. Enguru (Salobrelejo, 2002), 55-67.

¹²⁸ Those who know, from the verb *a yem* (to know), which some people relate to the verb *a yen* (to see). Therefore 'to know' would be the same as 'to see', or 'to see beyond' (hidden things). Bôt Ba Njok, 'Prééminences sociales', 154.

¹²⁹ N. González, *La Guinea Española* (10-3-1910), 7-8.

¹³⁰ Roche, *En el país*, 84-85.

¹³¹ For more details see Copet-Rougier, ' "Le Mal Court" '.

¹³² Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 66-67.

¹³³ Mbana, 'La emigración', 254-77.

¹³⁴ Governor-General Barrera's memo on the situation of the colony (14-5-1911). AGA, box G-167. Tessmann mentions one transaction with a list of products with a total value of 753 marks. Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 586.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 533-35.

¹³⁶ Tessmann explains that before the *ekwelé* the Sanaga-Ogowe used to have another currency called *awumbekie* that was an axe-shaped piece of iron. The *ekwelé* valued depended on its size, the largest one was exclusively used to pay for bridewealth. *Ibid*, 535-36.

- ¹³⁷ Father Leoncio Fernández, *La Guinea Española* (25-11-1926), 7-9.
- ¹³⁸ Roche, *En el país*, 200.
- ¹³⁹ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 247-57.
- ¹⁴⁰ See J. Guyer, 'Wealth in People and Self-Realization in Equatorial Africa', *MAN*, 28 (1993); 'Wealth in People, Wealth in Things –Introduction', *Journal of African History*, 36 (1995); Guyer & Eno Belinga, 'Wealth in People', in *ibid.*
- ¹⁴¹ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (29-1912). AGA, box G-7; Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 555-56.
- ¹⁴² The sons of a deceased chief explain to Barrera: 'they had no other option than follow their customs. The more wives one had, the richer the Pamue was.' Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (29-1912). AGA, box G-7.
- ¹⁴³ Tessmann explains that the first-born child has the preference in the allocation of the inheritance, yet all close male relatives are entitled to part of the inheritance. He points out that there is no fixed system, but they try to take into account everybody's needs. Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 532, 549-53.
- ¹⁴⁴ Trilles, *Chez les fang*, 137.
- ¹⁴⁵ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 20.
- ¹⁴⁶ W. De Craemer, J. Vansina and R. Fox, 'Religious Movements in Central Africa: A Theoretical Study', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 18 (1976), 469.
- ¹⁴⁷ Tessmann believed that all Sanaga-Ogowe cults derived from four primeval ones: Moon and Water (evil cults), and Sun and Fire (benevolent cults). Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 372.
- ¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 326.
- ¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 372.
- ¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 373.
- ¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 421.
- ¹⁵² De Craemer, Vansina, and Fox, 'Religious Movements', 467.
- ¹⁵³ Already in 1872, Aymes mentioned the Creator God that he referred to as Nzamá. A. Aymes, 'La situation des populations autour de l'Estuaire' April 1872, A.O.-M., Gabon iii, 1; cited in Chamberlin, 'The Migration', 452.
- ¹⁵⁴ Trilles, *Chez les fang*, 135-40.
- ¹⁵⁵ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 54. Alexandre and Bôt Ba Njok also argue that Nzamá is the first ancestor, who, due to his condition, was deified. Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 515; Bôt Ba Njok, *Prééminences sociales*, 159.
- ¹⁵⁶ Ondo Enguru's *Dulu Bon be Afri Kara* suggests that each subgroup knew God under a different name. Bibang, *La migración*, 43.
- ¹⁵⁷ For more details on creation myths, see Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 333-42.
- ¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 336.
- ¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁰ *La Guinea Española* (25-7-1922), 4-5.
- ¹⁶¹ *Mode* comes from *mot*; i.e. person or human being. *La Guinea Española* (10-1-1919), 15-16; Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 359-60.
- ¹⁶² The Beyele is a Pygmy group living on the border between south-western Cameroon and north-western Rio Muni. The origin of Akut-Zamá and Ngomwenio is unknown. *La Guinea Española* (25-5-1926), 9-10; Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 351-55.
- ¹⁶³ N. González, *La Guinea Española* (10-10-1910), 8.
- ¹⁶⁴ Trilles, *Chez les fang*, quoted in Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 21.

- ¹⁶⁵ Alexandre and Fernández, however, use the term *bieré* to refer to the ancestor cult. It might be the case that the cult received different names depending on the region.
- ¹⁶⁶ N. González, *La Guinea Española* (26-6-1911), 7-8. Tessmann confirms that the role of the statutes was to distract the attention of curious people. Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 444.
- ¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 443.
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 442.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 444-50.
- ¹⁷⁰ T.H. Mbuy, *Understanding Witchcraft Problems in the Life of an African* (1992), 10.
- ¹⁷¹ Mbana, *La emigración*, 270; Roche, *En el país*, 136.
- ¹⁷² According to Fernández, *Melän* initiation rituals were called *adzi melän*, to eat *Melän*. Fernández, *Bwiti*, 256.
- ¹⁷³ Booth, 'Time and Change', 87.
- ¹⁷⁴ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 256.
- ¹⁷⁵ Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 520.
- ¹⁷⁶ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 365-65.
- ¹⁷⁷ Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 520.
- ¹⁷⁸ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 417.
- ¹⁷⁹ Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 520-21.
- ¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 521.
- ¹⁸¹ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 416-17.
- ¹⁸² Ibid, 421.
- ¹⁸³ Mbana, 'La emigración', 43.
- ¹⁸⁴ Tessmann points out that this cult was born in the south, and it was not practiced by the Ewondo or Mwele (northern subgroups). Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 407.
- ¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 372-73.
- ¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 373.
- ¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 426.
- ¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 407.
- ¹⁸⁹ *La Guinea Española* (25-11-1922), 6-7.
- ¹⁹⁰ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 423.
- ¹⁹¹ Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 520.
- ¹⁹² I. Berger, *Religion and Resistance* (Tervuren, 1981), 1, 90; cited in T. Ranger, 'Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa', *African Studies Review*, 29, 2 (1986), 42.
- ¹⁹³ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 423-24.
- ¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 423.
- ¹⁹⁵ N. González, *La Guinea Española* (10-3-1911), 6-7.

Chapter 2

The “Death” of the Old Tradition

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Sanaga-Ogowe of Río Muni witnessed how growing European penetration into their territory culminated in the loss of their sovereignty at the hands of the Spanish. From 1910, under the leadership of Governor-General Barrera, Spain launched a series of military campaigns against Sanaga-Ogowe clans, and, by 1927, Río Muni had been completely pacified. More importantly, colonial conquest resulted in an offensive against key pillars of the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition. Colonial impact on *minnama* authority, *mvók-e’bot* organization and *Melăn* rituals undermined Sanaga-Ogowe capacity to integrate and legitimize the changes taking place between 1901 and 1927. One must not assume that the Sanaga-Ogowe socio-cultural organization disappeared completely as a result of colonial conquest. We must understand this as a process in which elements of the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition were able to survive through a process of re-adaptation that gave birth to the new tradition. This chapter intends to show how the deep transformations of this period altered the basic structure of Sanaga-Ogowe society to the point of changing the core of the old tradition and laying the basis of the new. 1927 is simply a symbolic landmark of a process that in northern and coastal Río Muni was well underway before this date.¹

The transformations of this period predated the Spanish conquest, as Sanaga-Ogowe clans increasingly got involved in the European trade from the late nineteenth century. Behind the final migration to the coast during this period was Sanaga-Ogowe desire to trade with Europeans. This did not, however, include the handover of their

sovereignty. As a result, the Spanish were forced to make greater use of violence to conquer the territory than is commonly admitted. Colonial violence had an exemplary character, being often disproportionate and arbitrary. One of the first symbols of Sanaga-Ogowe submission was the appointment of the *nkúkúma* or administrative chief, which was intended to replace the traditional *mínnama*. Even in those cases where traditional leaders were appointed, the Spanish acknowledgement undermined the existing authority structure, which, from then on, relied on the Colonial Guard as the coercive instrument to enhance chiefs' authority. During this process, the *mvók* lost its sovereignty as decision-making was removed by the state. After colonial conquest, decisions would no longer respond to the needs of the *mvók-e'bot* but those of the government. As we shall see, all this was possible thanks to existence of disaffected sectors within Sanaga-Ogowe society. This, along with the instability that characterized this period, was skilfully exploited by the Claretian missionaries, whose role would be key for the colonial enterprise in eroding the unity of the *mvók-e'bot* and undermining the existing social order.

The last migration

Migration to the coast was accelerated in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a result of increasing Sanaga-Ogowe interest in European goods. Chamberlin quotes information that indicates that at least from the 1840s, southern sections of the Sanaga-Ogowe were trading ivory in exchange for European goods through semi-coastal intermediaries.² When they found out that they received much less than Europeans paid for ivory, some groups decided to get rid of intermediaries. Growing European presence on the coast and, especially, the rise in wild rubber demand brought about a greater Sanaga-Ogowe involvement in so-called legitimate trade.

Commercial caravans were increasingly replaced by a will to establish permanent settlements close to the source of wealth. Governor Barrera described this population movement in the following terms:

Through the north-eastern section of our territory, [Sanaga-Ogowe] hordes were entering after being pushed away by stronger ones. These hordes were crossing a river called Kero [probably Kie] and, according to the reports that I obtained during my expedition, they descended towards the south up to the Benito's [Wele] basin, encamping between the river and Bata's mountains, Crystal Mountains... after surveying the area, they started to advance towards the sea using the rivers as guides, especially the Benito. These hordes, being stronger than the tribes that they encountered, displaced others out of their way... both the Esamongon and Amvom Pamue were forced to move forward after being pushed out by others.³

Whereas ivory was not abundant and was dangerous to obtain, wild rubber along with other forest products such as palm oil, ebony and other valuable woods made it possible for the Sanaga-Ogowe to participate in expanding legitimate trade. European trade brought about a series of changes, but, for the most part, the Sanaga-Ogowe way of life was completely independent from foreign powers. In spite of the partition of the territory between Spain, France, and Germany, the Sanaga-Ogowe kept moving relatively freely across the area, as they had always done. Only local social relations, such as clan rivalries and alliances, limited freedom of movement. In 1901, a Spanish report pointed out that most trade activities were carried out at the mouths of the rivers Ntem, Benito or Wele, and Muni, as well as in Bata. The bulk of products from the interior, however, were diverted to German factories in the interior due to the lack of communications from the Spanish coastal stations.⁴ The Germans penetrated into the interior of southern Cameroon in the mid 1880s, founding the Yaounde station in 1888. Up until the 1910s, they maintained small commercial stations in the interior of Río Muni from where they conducted commercial and policing activities.⁵ The French

carried out similar activities on the Río Muni coast, where they had been present from the 1890s. In fact, coastal trade declined in this region after the French handed over sovereignty to the Spanish in 1901.⁶



Photograph 4: Spanish trader buying ebony

The impact of European trade was soon recorded within Sanaga-Ogowe culture through a series of mythological accounts that established a fraternal relation between the Sanaga-Ogowe and the *Mitángán* (plural for *Ntángán*, term generally applied to Europeans). Often, these legends explained that the Sanaga-Ogowe was the brother of the European, who thanks to his obedient character was given knowledge by Nzamá.⁷ This was the secret behind Europeans' wealth. The Sanaga-Ogowe remember this period through the celebration of *Ngón-Ntángán*, a ritual which, although often translated as 'the white young woman', can also be translated as 'the time of the white', since *ngón* literally means moon and subsequently lunar month. The same

term is also applied to adolescent women because of the link between the lunar month and female menstruation.



Photograph 5: Ngón-Ntángán mask

During the 1900s, Spanish activities were limited to the Río Muni's coastal strip. In addition to Spain's lack of resources, Spanish occupation of the interior of Río Muni was also hampered by the belief in the fierce character of the Sanaga-Ogowe, who, in the colonial imagery came to symbolize Europeans' deepest fears regarding Africans. Thus the Pamue were depicted as the savage cannibal, whose cultural and moral depravation justified European colonialism. This stereotype, along with that of the recent Sanaga-Ogowe invasion, was not only held by the Spanish but also by the

German and French in the neighbouring territories. Although much has been said about the mental images of European coming into contact with Africans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this question still continues to fascinate scholars, as they try to assess the extent to which such images were true. Part of this fascination has to do with the endurance of such stereotypes. As we shall see in following chapters, the association between the Fang and anthropophagy continued throughout the entire colonial period and beyond independence.

As far as the European is concerned, the origin of the myth of Fang cannibalism dates back to the late 1850s and the writings of the explorer Paul du Chaillu. Although du Chaillu was not the inventor of a myth, which predated his arrival in Gabon in 1855, it was through the publication of his book, *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*, in 1861 that the so-called cannibalistic nature of the Pamue became popular amongst Western explorers and missionaries. It appears that Sanaga-Ogowe reputation as an anthropophagous people was originally spread by coastal Africans, such as the Benga and Mpongwe, who sought to scare Europeans, so as to stop them from trading with the Sanaga-Ogowe directly.⁸ Such an interest was rooted in their role as middlemen in the growing trade between European and forest goods. During his expedition to the interior of Río Muni in 1884, the Spanish explorer Manuel de Iradier was told that the 'Pamue were unhappy with the whites, because they do not want to give them directly the goods they bring from Europe', and he wondered whether the frightening stories told by coastal Africans about the Pamue intended to stop his march to the interior.⁹ In understanding the development of the cannibalistic reputation of the Sanaga-Ogowe, we also have to keep in mind Central African conceptions regarding power and its relationship to witchcraft. That is, the power of a fearful rival, such as the Sanaga-Ogowe, rests on supernatural forces, which are

associated with witchcraft and the symbolic eating of their victims.¹⁰ It is no surprise, then, that coastal Africans used this type of expression when referring to the Sanaga-Ogowe, especially after observing the effect that such images had on Europeans.

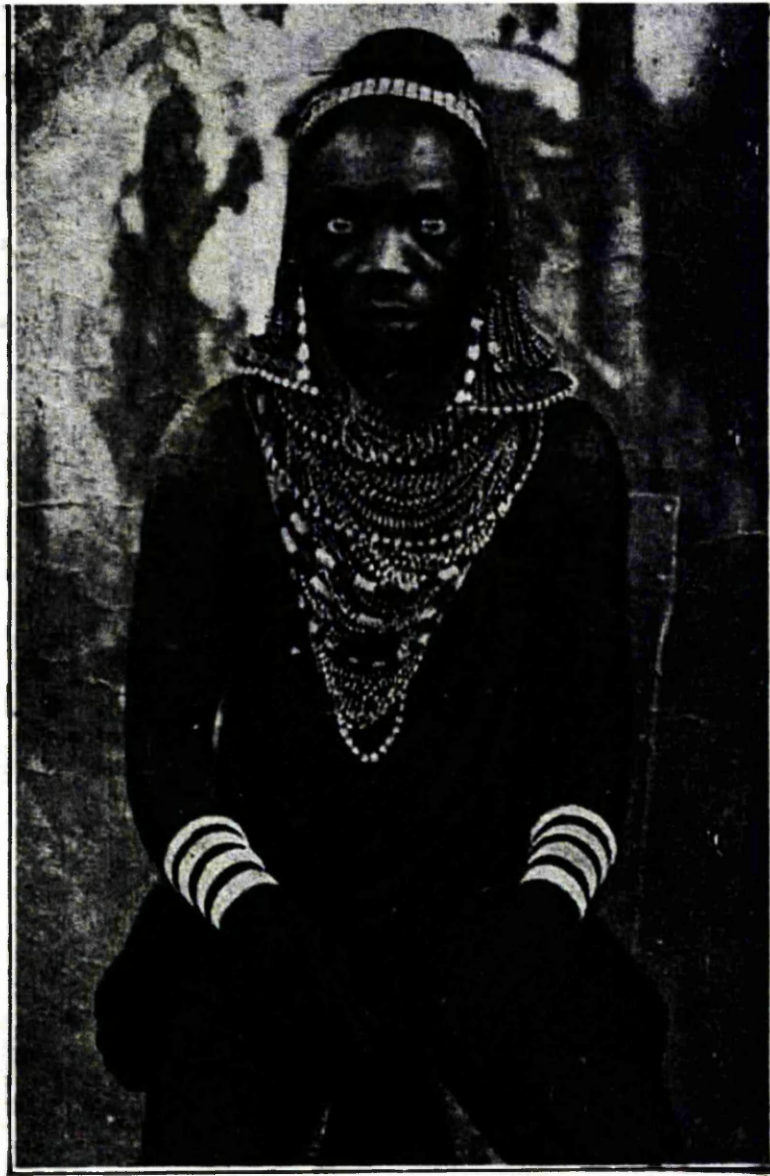
In 1863, Richard Burton toned down du Chaillu's previous statements, stating that 'the cannibalism of the Fans is by no means remarkable, limited, as it is, to the consumption of slain enemies'.¹¹ Tessmann was even more critical with du Chaillu, accusing him of exaggeration and inaccuracy in his reports about the Pamue.¹² Tessmann's criticism was especially acute because he was aware that, six decades after the publication of *Explorations and Adventures*, du Chaillu's sensationalist views on the Pamue still held sway amongst Europeans, for whom the 'Pamue were considered the most savage and dangerous cannibal people of the western [African] coast'.¹³ According to Tessmann, cannibalism was nonexistent amongst the northern sections of the Sanaga-Ogowe, and only amongst the southern sections could one find traces of this habit, as they could 'exceptionally' eat their 'fallen enemies'.¹⁴ There is no indication that Tessmann witnessed such episodes firsthand. Most likely, he based this statement on reports from northern Sanaga-Ogowe clans and European traders, and, having a high concept of the Pamue, as he did, Tessmman explained the existence of cannibalism as a result of contact with 'neighbouring tribes'.¹⁵

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Spanish described the Pamue as a cannibal and violent people, yet such descriptions were somewhat qualified in the light of the lack of evidence. In 1901, a Spanish officer, after referring to the Pamue as a 'fighting, unruly and anthropophagous' people, wrote: 'although I have visited many Pamue villages, I have not seen any proof of this brutal habit'.¹⁶ In 1902, Martinez de la Escalera went a step further, as he questioned the so-called ferocity of the Pamue and considered their 'fondness for human flesh more than dubious'.¹⁷

Nonetheless, efforts to qualify the so-called cannibal character of the Sanaga-Ogowe were overshadowed by a campaign in the opposite direction, which was mostly led by the Claretian missionaries through their magazine, *La Guinea Española*. In a series of articles written during the 1910s and 1920s, the Spanish missionaries described how anthropophagy and human sacrifices played an important role in the religious life of the Pamue.¹⁸

As Florence Bernault correctly points out, such misconceptions were partly rooted in Central African beliefs and practices with regards to the dead human body, which, in some instances, was considered to be a fetish, since 'power could be achieved through the manipulation of sacred power sheltered by material bodies'.¹⁹ Perhaps, Europeans' imagination of cannibal Africans partly took root, as Bernault also suggests, due to the existence of atavistic European beliefs regarding the supernatural nature of human remains – the worship of relics of saints is common amongst European Catholics. Undoubtedly, this was reinforced by tangible images, such as the presence, in most Sanaga-Ogowe villages, of ancestors' skulls and other remains that were used in religious ceremonies, and the exhumation of corpses in order to perform the ritual autopsy that sought to establish whether there was any link between someone's death and witchcraft. Sanaga-Ogowe custom, consisting in filing their front teeth for beauty purposes, certainly contributed to the myth of Pamue cannibalism. Neither precolonial nor colonial testimonies show any conclusive evidence that anthropophagy was a common phenomenon amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe or the Fang. Whether or not symbolic anthropophagy ever gave way to isolated cases of actual ingestion of human flesh is almost impossible to say, yet, as we shall see in chapter 4, the nature of such rumours seems very farfetched. In 1927, for example, *La Guinea Española* attributed a so-called case of cannibalism to

members of 'certain secret societies, known as *nvueti* [*Bwiti*] or *malan* [*Melān*]', when in reality neither of these cults had anything whatsoever to do with anthropophagy.²⁰



Tipo **Pámue** de la raza negra de antropófagos que se comieron una mujer de su tribu que estaba al servicio de una casa española en Fernando Póo (de cuyo asunto ha hablado el señor Soriano en el Congreso de los Diputados).

GUINEA ESPAÑOLA

SERIE J. NÚM. 1

Photograph 6: Press cutting referring to the anthropophagous character of the Sanaga-Ogowe

The appointment of Governor-General Ángel Barrera was a significant step in the final occupation of Río Muni by the Spanish, because, in contrast with his predecessors, he stayed in office for a long period, between 1910 and 1925. Barrera believed that the 'ferocious childishness' of the Pamue undermined Spanish interests, thus it was necessary to pacify and civilize the territory in order to bring about economic prosperity.²¹ His appointment boosted colonial ambitions in the area, especially from 1915 when the Spanish founded several military posts in the interior of Río Muni, making it possible to impose Spanish rule over the whole Sanaga-Ogowe region by the end of the 1920s.

The consequences of similar processes across the African continent are still unclear, for historians disagree as to the extent to which colonialism reshaped African societies. Moving away from views that tend to describe colonialism as a strongly pervasive phenomenon, in the last two decades scholars have sought to give African agency a larger weight. According to this trend, it is not possible to understand the colonial period without recognizing people's agency. We are now aware that Africans were not simple puppets whose behaviour was determined by colonial officers pulling the strings. However, it is yet to be determined to what degree agency was allowed under different forms of colonialism. This is a fundamental question because, if anything, colonialism was primarily about the control over agency. Colonized people generally tried to retain their autonomy, while colonial powers sought to remove it from them.

Spanish colonial conquest undermined Sanaga-Ogowe capacity to make fundamental decisions with regards to their society. To Vansina, this was a key episode, for it is autonomy which enables people to make decisions and changes ensuring the survival of their tradition.²² Although Gray is right in pointing out that

there were areas, such as the occult realm, where Africans did not lose total control as a result of colonial conquest, every sphere of the Sanaga-Ogowe culture felt, to some degree, the effects of the new colonial order.²³ We shall see later how the banning of certain religious practices and the spread of the Catholic faith deeply affected Sanaga-Ogowe religious views. Indeed, it is difficult to accept that transformations in vital elements of the Sanaga-Ogowe culture, such as *mvók*, *mínnama*, or *Melăn*, remained isolated without affecting the whole tradition, especially within a context in which the Sanaga-Ogowe were no longer in command.

The “peaceful” penetration

Spain believed it had legitimate historical rights on the lands of the Gulf of Guinea as a result of the signature of the Treaty of San Ildefonso with Portugal in 1777. The Treaty awarded Spain a few islands in the Gulf of Guinea and rights over the mainland. These rights were weak, since Portugal controlled neither these islands nor the mainland. Spain’s claims remained nominal until the second half of the nineteenth century, when it began to assert its rights over the islands of Fernando Po and Annobon. However, the mainland and the tiny islands in front of the River Muni’s estuary remained ignored until the 1890s. Deep political instability in Spain throughout the nineteenth century and the loss of its last important colonies in the 1890s – the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Cuba, in what came to be known as the ‘1898 disaster’ – prevented it from paying sufficient attention to a continent to which, in spite of its proximity, it had no historical tradition beyond Morocco. Perhaps pushed by the resentment caused by the loss of the colonies, some sectors in Spain turned their attention to Africa. A few Spanish economic lobbies and intellectuals became aware that Africa had turned into the new arena where colonial ambitions

were pursued. This movement was led by the *Asociación de Africanistas*, which sought to encourage the Spanish government to make effective their rights over the territories in the Gulf of Guinea.²⁴ By the late 1890s, however, the European powers had already partitioned most of the continent. The Berlin Conference stated quite clearly that any territorial claim on Africa had to be made effective through occupation. As a result, Spain was left without arguments to support its claims based on a dubious eighteenth-century treaty.

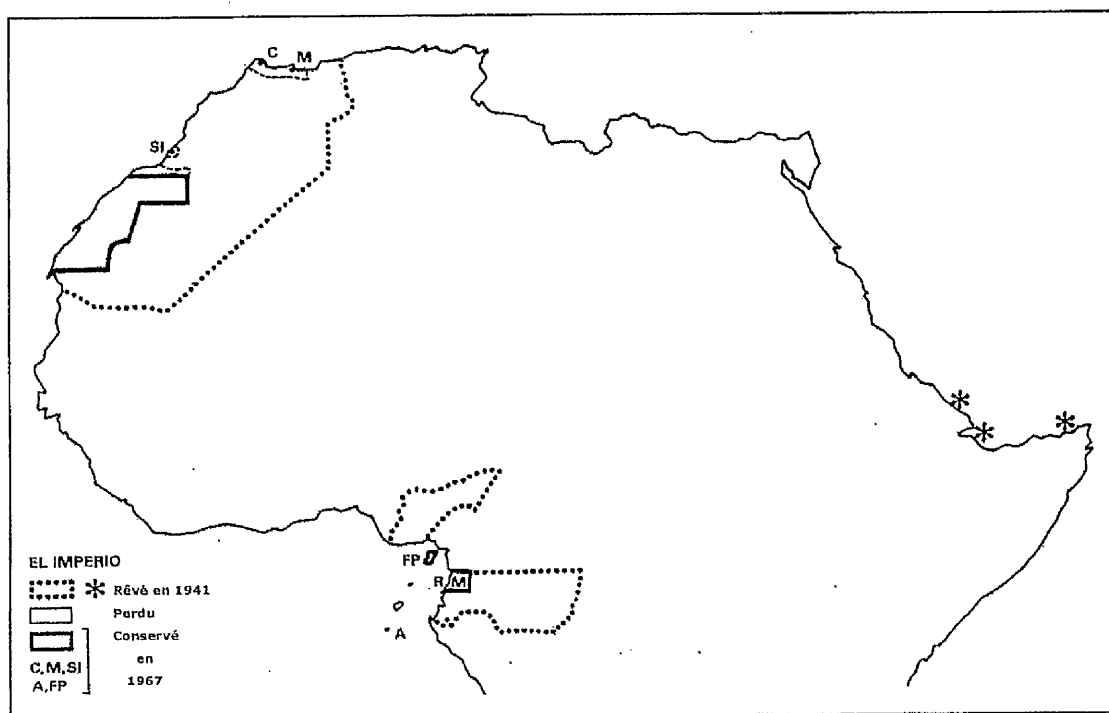
By the end of the century, Spain only occupied a short coastal strip in the south of present-day Río Muni and the tiny islands of Corisco, Elobey Grande, and Elobey Chico. On these grounds, France agreed to negotiate with Spain its rights over a small portion of continental land. The outcome of these negotiations was the signature of the Treaty of Paris in 1900 by which France recognized Spain's sovereignty over a territory bordering French Gabon and German Cameroon. A commission was set up to establish the exact limits of the Spanish colony. Spain's initial claims over some 180,000 square kilometres were finally reduced to about 26,000 square kilometres. This outcome did not satisfy many people in the metropolis, who considered that the nation's interests had been severely harmed.²⁵ This resulted in a sense of dissatisfaction with the colony that was hardly overcome throughout the whole colonial period.

By the 1900s, the Sanaga-Ogoe of the newly designated territory of Río Muni were influenced by the three colonial powers depending on the area they inhabited. Until the First World War, the Sanaga-Ogoe living in the interior of Río Muni north of the river Wele principally maintained relations with the Germans. This was a major concern for the Spanish officers, not only because the Germans did not respect the colony's borders, but also because Sanaga-Ogoe products were diverted into

German territory instead of being traded on the coast, as Governor Barrera complained in 1911:

The colony... can be said to be completely German, since it is the Germans who exploit it. They trade in the interior, and speak against us, depicting us as a weak nation, with no resources, and worthless. I insist, I have come back [from the expedition to the interior] believing that the German forces enter our territory, punishing and exercising sovereignty'.²⁶

Barrera also complained that similar activities happened in the southern section of the colony, where the French carried out commercial exchanges with Sanaga-Ogowe groups.²⁷ As a matter of fact, only those Sanaga-Ogowe based on the coast and its immediate hinterland traded with the Spanish. It was not until the late 1920s that the colony's borders had a more effective character.



Carte extraite de René PÉLISSIER : *Don Quichotte en Afrique. Voyages à la fin de l'Empire espagnol*. Pélissier, Montamets, 78630 Orgeval (France), 1992.

Spain's historical claims in Africa
MAP 4

As early as 1903, we have information that refers to the return to their villages of the first group of Sanaga-Ogowe and Bisio labourers recruited during the first official expedition to Bata's hinterland.²⁸ Yet, because of both instability in the area and lack of Spanish determination, similar expeditions were not repeated until the 1910s. The lack of recognition of Spanish sovereignty along with economic goals were the two main factors that drove forward Spain's determination to make effective their control over the interior of Río Muni in the 1910s. In 1911, Governor-General Barrera carried out his first expedition deep into the interior seeking to exercise Spanish sovereignty as well as to open the interior to commerce by encouraging the Sanaga-Ogowe to stop violent disputes, clear forest paths, resume trade caravans, and take part in labour recruitment for Fernando Po's plantations.²⁹ This initial expedition was followed by several punitive missions to pacify semi-coastal Sanaga-Ogowe clans between 1911 and 1913.

Sources show how the Spanish felt that the nation's pride was being hurt by constant German and French incursions into Río Muni, fuelling the injuries caused by the 1900 treaty.³⁰ When in 1914 the Europeans moved the battlefields of the First World War onto African soil, the number of incursions into the Spanish colony escalated significantly. Spain's neutral position during the war was being clearly undermined by its lack of control over Río Muni, as was evident when the war spread into the Spanish territory and Sanaga-Ogowe clans took sides with opposing European forces. The situation became critical when a few clans began attacking German refugees from Cameroon. Spanish officers learnt from local informants that the Allies were providing weapons and ammunition and encouraging attacks upon caravans of German refugees.³¹ The British captain of the Allied forces not only denied this point, but also accused the Spanish of supporting Germany.³² Such

developments deeply worried colonial officials, especially after an incident in which the members of the Esamongon clan led by Ndongo Mange reportedly murdered two German citizens. As a result, the Colonial Guard launched a punitive expedition against the Esamongon clan. This operation caused numerous deaths to Ndongo Mange's group, driving him to ask for forgiveness. His position seemed to vary soon after, resulting in successive punitive operations by the Colonial Guard.³³

For the Spanish, the situation created by the war represented a double danger. On the one hand, it set a bad precedent because it would suggest to the Sanaga-Ogowe that it was possible to attack white people, as Barrera explained to the Minister of State:

All this will be one of the consequences that this war will leave behind: the loss of respect for the white man, the realization that he can be killed and that the very same white men encourage such deaths. This makes it necessary to become determined to occupy the territory [Río Muni], which we should have long occupied. It is essential to do it as soon as possible, as I proposed to this Ministry on 8 April 1912, in order to avoid incidents and open this country to exploitation.³⁴

More importantly, contrary to the Brussels Agreement of 1908, the Sanaga-Ogowe were acquiring arms that could eventually be turned against the Spanish.³⁵ Because of the increasing instability in Río Muni, Spanish officials were afraid that either France or Britain might attempt to take over the colony on the grounds that Spain had not made effective their rights, or that the continuous instability might jeopardize their position in their own colonies. In response to these circumstances Governor Barrera reported:

It was necessary, in order to guarantee our neutrality [and] defend those belligerents who asked for our protection... to establish, in May 1915, military posts in Yenge, Meloko, N'Guamban, and Mikomesen... and one month later it was also necessary to create another in Ayameken, in the light of the attitude of the natives who contributed to the assassinations [of the two Germans].³⁶

The Mikomeseng post, some 130 kilometres from the coast, represented a significant step, because, for the first time, Spain could claim to have a real presence in the heart of the Sanaga-Ogowe territory.



Photograph 7: Group of Sanaga-Ogowe of the Catholic Village of San José de Banapá

At the beginning of the century, it was very clear that Spanish interests were mainly focused on Fernando Po, where most Spanish settlers and the emerging cocoa plantations were based. For the Spanish, the mainland's only appeal was as a source of labour for the island's plantations, whose chronic lack of manpower was hampering further development.³⁷ Colonial officers and plantation owners' hopes rested on examples such as the Portuguese islands of São Tomé and Príncipe and Angola. In 1894, the Claretian missionaries were already experimenting with migrant labour when they founded on the island the village of San José de Banapá with a few coastal Sanaga-Ogowe people.³⁸ The missionaries aimed to create a model village to Christianize and civilize Africans, yet the scheme did not continue due to lack of economic means as well as internal rivalries amongst colonizers.³⁹

Initially, Spanish officers sought to control the existing coastal trade networks consisting of scattered European factories in which trade caravans exchanged their goods. The French had profited from this trade in the late nineteenth century. The Spanish were aware that the Sanaga-Ogowe were keen to barter their forest products with the Europeans, thus, they expected the trade volume to grow bigger over time. They held similar expectations regarding the recruitment of Sanaga-Ogowe workers. In this respect, Governor Barrera wrote: 'the future of the island of Fernando Po... depends on the domination and control over the mainland territory, from where labourers will have to come to save the agriculture'.⁴⁰ The 1911 expedition to the interior was followed by a steady flow of young men recruited as labourers. Colonial officers expected that it was only a matter of time before the number of labourers would increase after the Sanaga-Ogowe realized the economic benefits.⁴¹ The Spanish believed to have found in the Sanaga-Ogowe the perfect African partner who would provide them with forest products as well as cheap labour.

Spanish plans were blocked by the internal dynamics of Sanaga-Ogowe society, which, from the 1900s, prevented normal development of trade due to the re-emergence of internecine violence in Río Muni. Local trade was rarely organized at clan level. Instead, caravans were usually formed by a few close families. The nature of this trade required a large number of people in order to carry the bulky goods, but, more importantly, to diminish the risk of being attacked during their journey. Sources suggest that the withdrawal of French troops from Río Muni's coast in 1900 was followed by a decline in commerce and a rise in violence, making coastal trade much more difficult and dangerous. In 1911 several coastal chiefs complained to Governor Barrera:

In the old days, we used to go very far into the interior, very happily and without any problem. Since the Spanish arrived, one cannot walk fifteen minutes into the bush, and we cannot trade either for fear that the *Pamue* take away our stuff easily or by force.⁴²

Strong Sanaga-Ogowe clans sought, first, to displace intermediary groups, and, second, to prevent other clans from trading directly on the coast.⁴³ Between 1900 and 1916, the Esamongon, Esambira, and Atamake clans became the principal middlemen between coastal factories and the people of the interior.⁴⁴ During this period, they were behind much of the violence in the region. Those caravans that managed to reach the coast were usually forced to pay some form of duty on their way back.

The Spanish knew that many Sanaga-Ogowe families were willing to trade on the coast. Such a good disposition was, to a large extent, part of the problem because it exacerbated competition between different clans and families for the control over trade routes. This rivalry was hampering Spanish hopes to develop trade and labour recruitment, for people were likely to lose either their lives or goods when marching to and fro. Generally, small clans were left aside from coastal trade for fear of being assaulted by larger groups like the Esamongon. Furthermore, by the mid 1910s, some elders began to refuse to allow youngsters to enrol as labourers for Fernando Po's plantations. Governor Barrera reports on an incident in which a 'chief' of the Esabeng clan, Mange Makina, tried to prevent youngsters from going to the coast.⁴⁵ In a separate incident, during the last Esamongon uprising in 1915, one of the rebel leaders demanded other clans not to go to Bata or Fernando Po to work.⁴⁶ Spanish sources do not explain this change of position, but it might be possible that elders realized some of the consequences of migrant labour. Elders' social prominence partly rested on their economic control, especially over those goods used as payment for bridewealth. A youngster working for a limited period of time on the cocoa plantations could,

somehow, escape his father's control by saving enough to get married. Regardless of elders' rejection, the main factor preventing people from enrolling as workers was insecurity. Sources refer to numerous incidents in which migrant workers were attacked and deprived of their goods on their way back to their villages. Between 1912 and 1914, for example, the semi-coastal Sanaga-Ogowe clan Yenven carried out two attacks against migrant workers, driving the Claretians to express their concern about the effect that such attacks might have for future recruitment of manpower in Río Muni.⁴⁷ In response to such a situation, Governor-General Barrera ordered the Colonial Guard to escort returning Sanaga-Ogowe workers by the mid 1910s.⁴⁸

Barrera understood that short-term solutions would not make Río Muni profitable. The occupation and pacification of Río Muni would facilitate the establishment of the effective colonial administration that was required to develop the commercial and labour scheme that he had in mind. The Spanish were aware of how precarious their situation was, for their authority did not usually extend beyond a one-hour walk from their military posts.⁴⁹ The situation created by the First World War and the subsequent creation of military stations in the interior showed the way to effectively occupy the territory. In 1916, Barrera explained his strategy to the Minister of State, consisting of the creation of posts, which, after consolidating the control over the surrounding area, would be replaced by others further in the interior.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Spanish occupation proved to be an arduous task due to the Sanaga-Ogowe social structure, which forced them to impose their authority village by village.

Contrary to colonial rhetoric, which was created later in the century, Spanish conquest was far from being peaceful. Certainly, the Spanish did not usually confront major opposition in the form of large Sanaga-Ogowe alliances capable of presenting a substantial challenge to the Colonial Guard. The same social structure, which made

conquest such a time-consuming process, hindered the formation of strong alliances. In fact, there was not a unique perception amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe as to who the enemy was. Such perceptions varied over time and from one clan to another. On the one hand, to small clans, whose access to the coast was denied by more powerful rivals, the Spanish penetration was an opportunity to change this situation. We also know from Spanish sources that many Sanaga-Ogowe welcomed the Spanish as an opportunity to end the continuous climate of violence and insecurity, which was taking such a large toll.⁵¹

On the other hand, some actively confronted Spanish authority, and even developed inter-clan alliances in order to fight them. The most notorious case was Ndongo Mange's uprising, who along with other leaders of the Esamongon, Esambira, Esakunan, Esandon and Asok clans joined forces against Spain in 1915. This revolt was probably motivated by the Spanish policy which aimed at ending the privileges of intermediary clans and drawing a larger number of clans from the interior into the colonial economy. In addition, the Esamongon rebels demanded that nobody worked in Bata or Fernando Po for the Spanish.⁵² Allied Forces' support, providing arms and ammunition, gave the rebel clans the opportunity to fight. It took the Spanish more than a year to put an end to the rebellion. A great part of the Colonial Guard's success was due to the initial support of smaller clans and, ultimately, of sections of the rebel clans, which, after severe punishment, chose to join the Spanish.⁵³ By the autumn of 1916, many rebel leaders had escaped to Cameroon because of the combined harassment of the Colonial Guard and their local allies.⁵⁴ Some could not cross the border, such as Mbo Nso'o (known by the Spanish as Bongo Roko), who was forced to surrender by members of his clan after a military operation

that caused some 90 casualties.⁵⁵ Although Spanish sources do not refer to this, Fang informants, as we shall see, claim that he was eventually executed by the Spanish.

The rebellion led by Ndongo Mange, however, was unusual. Many Sanaga-Ogowe families were initially passive towards the Spanish penetration, for they saw more advantages than disadvantages. Generally, Sanaga-Ogowe opposition was undertaken by isolated extended families that, intentionally or unintentionally, did not comply with the orders of the government. During this period, most families kept resolving their conflicts as they had in the past. Colonial archives contain numerous documents about skirmishes between rival clans, and a few against Europeans, such as the death of a Spanish trader in 1908, which was immediately punished by the Colonial Guard. Referring to this incident, the Governor wrote:

Vela, fearlessly and despotically, dealt with a native, and, being abusive in his business with him, pointed a gun at the Pamue man and threatened to kill him. The latter shot at him and killed him... the killer was handed in to the authority... The Pamue tribe of the killer, Jessa, was severely punished by the Colonial Guard because the victim was a European'.⁵⁶

Spanish officers were strongly opposed to Sanaga-Ogowe retaliation, because they understood that Spain was the only sovereign power to resolve existing conflicts. In 1913, Barrera advised the Sub-Governor of Elobey to 'recommend the natives again to take their "palavers" to be resolved before the Authority, unless they wanted to face punishment'.⁵⁷

Like the Germans in Cameroon and the French in Gabon, the Spanish had to confront multiple political entities in what would become Río Muni. Much to their distress, the lack of centralized institutions made it necessary to conquer the Sanaga-Ogowe almost village-by-village. Spain's conquest over a given *mvók-e'bot* was not automatically followed by the surrender of the remaining sections of the clan. Barrera

soon learnt that only heavy human and material losses would convince the remaining sections to accept Spanish authority. As the Spanish realized, the segmentary structure of the Sanaga-Ogowe could also be played to the advantage of Spain, preventing the development of solid alliances. After the death of an Atamake individual at the hands of a sergeant of the Colonial Guard and, in order to avoid the alliance between the Atamake and the maternal clan of the victim, Barrera instructed the Sub-Governor of Elobey:

Try to exploit the differences between the Atamake and Esemvus [Esambus], making the former see the convenience of not allowing the latter to control and direct them. Let them see, without promising anything, that, since they are the weakest side, we shall protect them and help them with our forces against the Esemvus [Esambus] if necessary... Without making it evident, try to boost the differences between both tribes.⁵⁸

There were two contrasting perceptions as to what was going on in Río Muni in this period. To the Spanish, treaties with local rulers meant recognition of Spain's sovereignty on the part of the Sanaga-Ogowe. The latter, however, interpreted such treaties as personal agreements of a temporary character. It is not surprising that certain clans were willing to ally themselves with the Spanish, who had both the military capability as well as the manufactured goods that they were so keen to acquire. Should the conditions change, Sanaga-Ogowe clans would turn their backs against the Spanish and compete for the control of certain trade routes. This partly explains Spanish officials' tendency to depict the Sanaga-Ogowe as traitors and people who could not be trusted. Whereas to the Sanaga-Ogowe, partnership could be purely economic, to the Spanish, cooperation meant that the Sanaga-Ogowe had freely given up sovereignty.

Although by the mid 1910s the Spanish were seriously committed to finalizing Río Muni's occupation, the lack of means and support from the metropolitan

government lengthened this process for more than a decade. Whereas in the northern and coastal areas the effects of Spanish domination were visible by the early 1920s, in the southern and central-eastern section of Río Muni, the Sanaga-Ogowe still retained their independence.⁵⁹ The northern border was the first inland region to be pacified, partly, because of the developments of the First World War. Moreover, the present-day districts of Ebibeyin, Mikomeseng and Niefang were not only the most densely populated, but also where the bulk of trade activities took place. The central-eastern border, however, was less developed in terms of trade, and so was ignored by the Spanish. In the south, pacification was mostly delayed due to the numerous swamps and rivers, which made access extremely difficult.

Following the example of Fernando Po, Spanish authorities decided to use the so-called *política de atracción* (attraction policy) in order to pacify Río Muni. During the conquest period, colonial officers' actions were determined by the so-called attraction policy, which sought Sanaga-Ogowe cooperation in trade, clearing forest paths, and labour recruitment within a non-confrontational climate.⁶⁰ However, this strategy was criticized throughout the 1900s from several colonial sectors, which did not see any clear progress in the occupation:

This [pacification] will only be achieved with the army and expeditions to the interior, since those who, like me, have been there are convinced of the failure of the attraction policy, which has been interpreted as weakness of the government.⁶¹

The attraction policy was, somehow, born out of necessity, for it was acknowledged that Spain lacked the necessary means to conduct a more aggressive strategy. It was also argued that direct confrontation had to be avoided, if they were to make the Sanaga-Ogowe understand about the mutual benefits of economic cooperation.

Violence could only deter the Sanaga-Ogowe, thus, colonial officers were advised to use force only as a last resort.

By the late 1900s, Sanaga-Ogowe lack of recognition of Spanish sovereignty, along with growing criticism as to the advance of colonization in Río Muni led the recently appointed Ángel Barrera to pursue a more aggressive strategy. The attraction policy remained as the official approach regarding natives, but it was now to be complemented by a policy of carrot and stick. Barrera explained that it was necessary to make 'the natives understand that their real interest is on our side, because we desire their good and progress. Because we are fair, we punish them when they deserve it, while encouraging them when their behaviour is excellent'.⁶² Colonial Guard officials had to severely punish those who challenged Spanish authority to avoid the prolongation of uprisings or similar examples in the future. Punitive operations did not only seek to cause human casualties but also material destruction in order to create as much disarray as possible. Governor-General Barrera instructed Colonial Guard officers in the following terms: 'This part of the district [northern border] will shortly be pacified if punishment does not exclusively concentrate on the burning of villages, but we must also seek to be as forceful and hard as possible'.⁶³ After an operation, in which fourteen villages were reportedly destroyed, the Governor-General wrote:

This Governor-General regrets to say that is not satisfied, at all, either with the way in which the operation was conducted, or its outcome... You do not mention anything about the destruction of the *Pamue*'s crops. You have only focused on destroying plantain trees... which were not the crops you had to destroy, but the fields of cassava, pumpkin, peanut, etc.⁶⁴

Punishment operations were not considered to be successful until the so-called rebels asked for forgiveness and surrendered their weapons. It was probably in this period

when the military came to be known under the term *mon-bisima*, which was originally applied to Bulu raiders during the time of the *obăn*.⁶⁵

If the objective was to create disarray, this policy was certainly effective. Minor offences were subsequently castigated with disproportional measures, and entire clans were punished as a result of 'offences' committed by fellow clan members.⁶⁶ According to Colonial Guard reports the number of Sanaga-Ogowe casualties during punitive operations against a given village rarely exceeded ten, however, within a context of small social units, such losses had a deep impact. The Spanish approach was totally different because most of their casualties were not Spanish. In 1912, Governor Barrera threatened a Sanaga-Ogowe family, arguing that, unless they followed his orders, he 'would punish them severely, regardless of the number of casualties, because, as deplorable as this can be, they represent nothing in a war, and will soon be replaced'.⁶⁷ Throughout most of the conquest period most colonial guards were from West Africa, especially Senegal, and it was only from the mid 1920s that the number of local guards increased.

The repressive measures of this period left a deep scar amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe. A Fang elder from Mikomeseng referred, in particular, to two brutal episodes in the interior of Río Muni in the mid 1910's and early 1920s. One had as a main character an elder called Mbo Nso'o, the above-mentioned Esamongon leader who fought against the Spanish conquest and for the control of trade routes. According to my informant, he was eventually beheaded in public in the district capital: 'after this, everybody was overwhelmed with fear and they resigned themselves.'⁶⁸ The second episode, though details are known by few, has become part of Fang collective memory, for it involved the elimination of almost an entire clan. According to the informant, the brutal repression was triggered by the murder of a Spanish soldier at

the hands of members of the Osumu clan, leading Lieutenant Ayala to such drastic measures.⁶⁹ The elimination is not confirmed by colonial sources, though a few documents refer to an incident that took place between 1921 and 1922 involving the same officer and clan, and which might have been whitewashed by the colonial officer. In a letter to the Minister of State, Governor-General Barrera explains how he had to restrain Lieutenant Ayala from launching an immediate punitive campaign around present-day Mongomo district in response to the attack against two colonial guards.⁷⁰ Ordered to wait for reinforcements, Ayala finally marched against the rebel clans in April 1922. Ayala's report to the Governor enumerates the number of weapons and ammunition confiscated without mentioning any deaths, suggesting the possibility that he acted outside the Governor's orders.⁷¹ According to collective memory, the Osumu clan eventually disappeared as survivors had to integrate into the Bekpweñ and Esakora clans in order to escape from repression.⁷² This episode does not only show how flexible local identity could be, but also how it was possible to manipulate it in response to critical situations.

Between 1919 and 1923, the situation created by the military occupation was aggravated by famine, which affected large areas of Río Muni. Several reports indicated that either insects or wild animals were behind the food shortages, yet it appears that military activities and the disruption they brought about could have played a major role.⁷³ Subsequently, famine was complicated with an epidemic outbreak in central areas south of the river Wele by mid 1922.⁷⁴ In the face of these events, remaining resistance began to crumble.

During the 1910s and first half of the 1920s, Spain's main priority was to disarm the Sanaga-Ogowe. This policy did not only seek to prevent further attacks against colonial forces, but also fights between Sanaga-Ogowe clans. This became the first

indication that newly appointed chiefs' authority was quite limited. Although many had accepted Spanish penetration into Sanaga-Ogowe territory, they proved to be much more reluctant when they were asked to hand over their muskets. Often, appointed chiefs looked for support from the Colonial Guard to disarm their fellow villagers as well as neighbouring communities.⁷⁵ Eventually, the examples set by the Colonial Guard drove many to surrender their arms peacefully. To counteract dissatisfaction, the Colonial Guard started building schools next to their posts, and conducting vaccination campaigns against smallpox in the 1920s.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, in the second half of the 1920s colonial decisions had a much deeper impact on the Sanaga-Ogowe, when the population was mobilized to construct a road network throughout Río Muni. If there was any doubt as to whom the real ruler was, the road construction made it clear.

From mínnama to district officer

Initial contacts between Spain and mainland Africans in the Gulf of Guinea date back to 1858, when a Spanish expedition to the Muni Estuary got in touch with coastal groups and established a series of treaties with the chief of the Benga people, Bonkoro II. Although Spain did not resume its efforts in the area until later in the century, this set a precedent in its dealings with coastal Africans of Río Muni. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Spain's main concern in Río Muni was to identify Sanaga-Ogowe counterparts with whom to negotiate the terms of their relationship. Recognition of Spanish sovereignty was to be the first stage before resolving what eventually to do with the territory. Spain believed that by signing treaties with local chiefs, they would secure Africans' acceptance of Spanish rule. Colonial officers were

in charge of conducting a policy of *nombramientos* (appointments) amongst leaders who accepted Spanish rule.

Experience with the numerous coastal and semi-coastal groups of Río Muni taught Spanish officers that the appointment of chiefs would not result an easy task. Unlike the Benga, whose political authority was somewhat centralized, the social and political structure of the so-called Ndowe and Bisio was clan based, having no political institutions that ruled the whole community.⁷⁷ As a result, Spanish officers were forced to sign numerous treaties and appoint more chiefs than they had initially expected; a necessary evil to secure the submission of the entire native population. Initially, this was not a major obstacle for Spain, because coastal groups, accustomed to the European presence, were keen to establish alliances with them in order to maintain an economy, which relied on European commerce. Further, coastal groups, being very inferior in number, were very much concerned about the growing arrival of Sanaga-Ogowe clans from the interior, which had recently pushed groups, such as the Bisio and Baseke, towards the coast. After a punitive expedition against the Esen, a Sanaga-Ogowe clan, the Sub-Governor of Bata wrote:

It has caused an immense joy amongst the coastal peoples... some [chiefs] have told me that they will no longer be afraid of trading in the interior. It is well known how much fear most of these dwellers feel towards the *Pamue*, after having been pushed away and forced by them several years ago to leave their villages and settle on the coast under the protection of our government.⁷⁸

By the turn of the century, many Sanaga-Ogowe families were well established on the coast and its hinterland, sharing, in some cases, the same space with the so-called *Bilobolobo*. Colonial documents of the 1900s often refer to Sanaga-Ogowe people who either lived on the coast or regularly came up to coastal commercial factories.⁷⁹ The Spanish approach towards the Sanaga-Ogowe was not significantly

different from the one used with other coastal groups. One of the main difficulties for the Spanish was that, by the early 1900s, they knew very little about Sanaga-Ogowe society. Their information relied mainly on coastal groups' accounts, as well as European explorers and missionaries who had ventured into the interior from the second half of the nineteenth century. Colonial officers had little firsthand information that could give them a clearer idea about what to expect. They appeared to be somewhat sceptical about the veracity of existing reports. On the one hand, colonial officers did not hold coastal groups in high esteem, which prevented them from giving too much credit to their informants. On the other, they were also aware of the exaggerations that often surrounded European accounts.⁸⁰ Colonial officers, therefore, opted for a much more empirical approach based on their direct dealings with the Sanaga-Ogowe.

It remains unclear whether Spanish officials respected existing local leaders during the occupation of Río Muni, or whether they appointed other individuals as administrative chiefs. Spanish sources seem to suggest that existing Sanaga-Ogowe local authorities were maintained in most cases. Whenever local leaders accepted Spanish authority, they were officially acknowledged as village leader and appointed as representatives of the colonial government. To Spain, it was vital to avoid any major disruption or antagonism between them and Africans, especially during the initial stages of colonization, before carrying out more drastic changes, because its weak position did not allow it to challenge local structures directly. Consequently, numerous family heads were appointed as chiefs. According to Barrera, African coastal chiefs also shared this concern by 1911:

They [the Kombe] rightly complain about the excess of appointments of chiefs granted by Sub-Governors to numerous people, who only deserved such distinction for being owners

of a hut... instead of doing nothing other than granting appointments any old how, we could have accomplished much in these territories.⁸¹

Some of my informants also shared the view that, generally, the Spanish respected local authorities. According to them, on arriving in a village, colonial officers asked to meet the local leader who, after agreeing on the terms indicated by the Spanish, was subsequently appointed. They recall how, in this period, chief's appointment was symbolized by the handing over of *bingóm* or badges, a hat, and, at times, a Spanish flag.⁸²

However, not all Fang informants agree on the terms of the appointment of the first administrative chiefs. Accounts stating that precolonial leaders were respected were often contradicted by fellow villagers in subsequent conversations. In order to reconcile contradictory views, we need to understand that this was not a clear-cut process. One immediate problem that arises is to examine what the Sanaga-Ogowe and the Spanish understood by the term 'chief'. On the one hand, the Spanish had problems in understanding the concept of *primus inter pares* with limited executive powers that required constant negotiation between the members of the *mvók-e'bot*. The Fang, on the other hand, could not fully grasp the concept of a mediator chief whose authority lay outside the community and was primarily accountable to the Spanish. This is still problematic today, because, as I realized during my fieldwork, interpretations can be misleading if one is not aware that not only has this concept evolved within the Fang society in the last century, but elders also tend to manage precolonial and postcolonial concepts equally. Often, it was necessary to clarify whether informants were referring to the *nkúkúma* (administrative chief) or the *mínnama* (traditional leader) – clearly different to them. Nowadays, the Spanish term *jefe*, chief, is translated in Fang as *nkúkúma* (originally, that who has wealth or rich

person). In translating a figure, which did not quite exist before, they resorted to an approximate term.

At the turn of the twentieth century, very few Sanaga-Ogowe individuals in present-day Río Muni could be considered as *nkúkúma*. Only amongst those clans close to the coast do we have clear information that suggests that a process of wealth accumulation was taking place in this period. After visiting various coastal Sanaga-Ogowe villages in 1909, a Claretian missionary explained: 'I know more than one chief, well supported by Spain, who already owns more than twenty [wives].'⁸³ According to Governor Barrera, Nso'o Mbo, the Esamongon leader who offered stiff resistance to Spanish attempts to open trade routes for clans from the interior during the first half of the 1910s and father of Mbo Nso'o, had more than thirty wives.⁸⁴ Even though these figures might be somewhat exaggerated – Barrera claimed that Nso'o Mbo was more than 100 years old – they indicate a growing connection between commercial wealth and political power.⁸⁵ However, this process did not seem to be so developed in the interior, where neither polygamy nor trade had reached the same scale as in coastal and semi-coastal areas. Tessmann, who worked in the interior of Río Muni in the 1900s, claims that polygamy was not widespread in the area, and most men could only afford one wife.⁸⁶

In most areas of Río Muni, the *minnama* continued to act as representative of the elders. Wherever the process of accumulation had not taken place, colonial officials chose to recognize as leaders those villagers who, somehow, stood out for their economic position, in spite of the presence of accepted community leaders. Many informants recall how, when arriving in a village, the Spanish appointed as chief to 'someone who moved much, who had the capacity to host foreign guests, and who could associate with them'; the person who proved to be most dynamic amongst the

villagers.⁸⁷ Colonial documents refer to Sanaga-Ogowe chiefs marching to the coast during the course of commercial expeditions or simply to report upsetting incidents in their area.⁸⁸ These reports, however, contrast with those of many of my informants, who claimed that community leaders could barely leave their village, for their presence was required to resolve any important incoming issue. The *minnama*'s position within the village very much depended on peoples' respect, which came from his commitment towards the whole community above his personal interests.

Individuals who had been in touch with the Europeans on the coastal factories or the Fernando Po's plantations were better prepared to deal with the Spanish, and knew what was expected from them. Nzang Okenve from the Mikomeseng district explained how his father, the brother of the existing *minnama*, was appointed as chief, because the Spanish officer considered him to be more appropriate due to his command of Pidgin English and economic position, obtained on the Fernando Po's plantations.⁸⁹ Whenever it suited their interests, Spain appointed administrative chiefs without consulting local communities, as Barrera himself explained:

I knew that Mba Obama had the same father and mother as Obama... he has great prestige amongst his people. I told him that if he promised me to keep building the village in Congue and make the Atamake come down to form a large village, if he promised me to make his people obey him and obey the Sub-Governor, and if he promised me to resolve the 'Palavers' justly within his tribe, I would appoint him chief of his tribe. He promised me everything I told him, and I granted him the appointment... after assuring him that the same way I granted him the appointment...⁹⁰

In some cases, elders chose to send decoys in order to protect the actual leadership. Around 1910, the Amvom of Akurenam, Evinayong district, were involved in a conflict with the Spanish after murdering the manager of a commercial factory who refused to return the goods that members of their clan brought back after working on Fernando Po. Following an intense retaliation campaign the Spanish

decided to summon the Amvom leader to put an end to the conflict. Not trusting the intention of the Spanish, they send the *mínnama*'s youngest brother, who 'had neither wife nor children'. The Spanish agreed to end the conflict and appoint him as chief on condition that all firearms were handed over, which the Amvom consented to.⁹¹

As we shall see, the appointment of chiefs often resulted in the coexistence of the administrative chief and *mínnama*. Initially, the appointment of chiefs across Río Muni did not necessarily undermine local authority structures, because such a figure was simply seen as a mediator between the Spanish and the actual village authority. Sources suggest that the chief, as such, was not endowed with any special recognition in the village; in fact, one informant referred to them as 'secretaries' or 'interpreters'.⁹² Nonetheless, this process was not the same in all villages since it depended very much on the circumstances of each particular community and its leaders. Whereas some *be'mínnama* (plural for *mínnama*) actually accepted their appointment by the Spanish, acting as mediators between the colonial government and their fellow villagers, others despised such a position and chose to assign that responsibility to someone else. Whenever the Spanish required it, administrative chiefs were summoned to attend meetings with colonial officers that involved long journeys by foot to the district headquarters. Understandably, this subordinate position was not attractive to Sanaga-Ogowe elders, who considered such treatment unacceptable for respected leaders.

Right from the beginning, colonial officers had to deal with the problem resulting from chiefs' limited authority. To begin with, the authority of precolonial leaders was only acknowledged within the small community of his *mvók*. Even in the case that traditional leaders were actually appointed as chiefs, their authority was still rather limited because of the existing checks and balances that guaranteed that decisions

were made amongst all family heads. This was especially so in cases that escaped the boundaries of traditional authority, such as labour mobilization or the handing over of firearms. The infamous African despot of European myth, capable of forcing his people to obey, did not exist in Río Muni.

Barrera was aware of the fragile position of Sanaga-Ogowe chiefs, admitting: 'unless we empower them... we cannot count that, once gained their will, that of their conditional subjects will be also gained.'⁹³ During the 1910s and 1920s, Barrera aimed at creating unified leadership for each clan, an institution which would be later known as *Primer Jefe* (First Chief).⁹⁴ By doing so, he sought to 'empower chiefs in order for them, as efficacious auxiliaries of the government, to support the administration in the task of civilization and progress'.⁹⁵ These clan chiefs were supposed to solve the numerous 'palavers' and violence in Río Muni and, if unable to do so, to refer the case to the colonial officer, who would be the final arbiter. Paradoxically, by killing those Sanaga-Ogowe leaders who rejected Spanish rule, Spain eliminated the strong and prestigious rulers that they would long for during the early colonial period. Although Barrera was aware that colonial officers had created an administrative problem by appointing too many chiefs, this subject was not resolved during his time in office.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, Barrera set the basis for the colonial chieftainship organization.⁹⁷

Unfortunately, we do not have firsthand accounts that might shed some light on the stance of administrative chiefs during this period. From Spanish sources and people's memories, we can gather that chiefs' position was often ambivalent. As Sanaga-Ogowe men of their time, they understood how the role of leader was defined in their tradition. At the same time, they were aware that they owed their new status to the Spanish. Indeed, this caused a major crisis within Sanaga-Ogowe authority, which

under colonialism came to mean two different things. On the one hand, they maintained the old concept of authority as protector of the welfare and interests of the *mvók-e'bot*. On the other, administrative chiefs had to enforce colonial government's orders, which very often contradicted with the interests of the *mvók-e'bot*. Faced with such a dilemma, chiefs tended to adopt three different positions.

First, some decided to become simple mediators between the colonial state and their village community, while respecting the authority of the *mínnama*. This was not an easy task, since the responsibilities of the *nkúkúma* and *mínnama* often entailed overlapping functions that were hard to coordinate. In addition, district officers usually punished those chiefs who did not prove to have a strong grip on their community, as Barrera warned: 'I would remove it from him if he fail in his promises, and did not make his people obey him.'⁹⁸ A Claretian missionary referred to this dual hierarchy in 1923, when he described an incident in which a village elder did not allow the appointed chief to baptize his daughter. Being reprimanded by the angry Father, the *nkúkúma* explained:

Father, I wanted to baptize the little girl but I could not. I act like the chief, but I am not. The actual chief is somebody else, whose orders I have to obey compulsorily. He is the one who has not allowed me to baptize the little girl.⁹⁹

Second, there were those colonial chiefs who saw the new situation as an opportunity to fulfil their personal aspirations. In the past, strong egalitarian tendencies as well as elders' competition prevented ambitious individuals from accumulating excessive power. In the light of Spanish occupation, some expected to bypass those check-and-balance mechanisms and become powerful chiefs. Nso'o Mbo, for example, was glad to accept Barrera's offer to create a unified clan leadership, and 'demanded' that Barrera provided him with shotguns and gunpowder to overcome resistance amongst other Esamongon families.¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately for him

and other similar leaders, the Spanish had a different type of strong leader in mind. Nso'o Mbo's attempt to control trade activities through the imposition of a commercial duty on all caravans marching through his area of influence, in the hinterland of Bata, was resisted by the Spanish, who, in 1913, launched a series of punitive expedition against his clan, causing numerous losses. As a result, other Esamongon leaders decided to hand him over to the Spanish authorities.¹⁰¹

Finally, there were those who tried to recreate the Sanaga-Ogowe leadership, as envisioned in Sanaga-Ogowe ideology, with the help of the Spanish. That is, serving the interest of the community, while being strong enough to protect his *mvók-e'bot* and keep it together. Their personal ambitions were matched by a strong concept of the tradition. They believed that it was possible to look after their community, while satisfying the will of the colonial state. To them, it was feasible to preserve the autonomy of the village if orders were implemented, and matters were resolved within the village, without having to ask district officers to mediate. This approach could work, to some extent, in those cases where an individual with enough strength of character and charisma could persuade his fellow villagers. Nevertheless, the price to pay was high, because, as we shall see in chapter four, these individuals tended to rule on their own, overlooking the authority of their peers.

Governor Barrera's communications to the district officers also insisted that it was important to show consideration for the chiefs when dealing with them, especially in front of other natives. This obviously put district officers, whose first priority was to develop the colonial infrastructure and economy, in a difficult position. To them, chiefs were in no sense different from the rest of the 'backward' *Pamue*. Consequently, chiefs were often ignored and overridden by district officers. Village chiefs had to be the first ones to follow orders, and, during the road construction, they

could be seen working hand in hand with the rest of their fellows. It was not only district officers who bore mixed feelings regarding native chiefs. Governor Barrera also had doubts as to the extent to which chiefs could be trusted, being afraid that strong chiefs could take advantage of the situation. The necessary balance to empower colonial chiefs while limiting their ambitions was difficult to achieve and, as in many other cases during the colonial domination, this attempt at social engineering never succeeded.

Although lack of massive dissent has been a constant feature since colonial pacification, the first stage of colonization was very different, as people, in general, had a very hard time trying to adjust to the new situation. Nowadays people seem to be relatively understanding about the position that early administrative chiefs were put in. When asked why people did not resist their orders, most informants tend to exonerate administrative chiefs who, in their eyes, had no other option but making people follow the government's orders. Understanding of the situation, however, did not go hand in hand with the strengthening of chiefs' position. On the contrary, the situation deteriorated in a process stretching to the present day. Colonial officials' multiple attempts to boost the authority of native chiefs mostly backfired. To the Spanish, the backing of chiefs' authority, in essence, was reduced to the use of force – the Colonial Guard – to impose their power. As early as 1911, the Spanish were aware that their policies had weakened chiefs' authority in coastal areas: 'With regards to the Kombe and other peoples who live on the coast, chiefs' authority is very weakened and their people successfully resist any order that they dislike due to what we have done.'¹⁰² This policy was clearly unfortunate, because it increased the state's difficulties in dealing with communities, and institutionalized the use of violence as a legitimate tool for state control. The colonial chief could be more authoritarian and,

indeed, enjoyed a greater coercive backing than ever before in the history of the Sanaga-Ogowe, but this very support transformed him into a simple mediator between the state and the *mvók*.



Photograph 8: Sanaga-Ogowe nkúkúma from Kogo along with his family



Photograph 9: Sanaga-Ogowe nkúkúma from Misenge with his numerous wives

From mvók to state

Sanaga-Ogowe responses to the Spanish conquest were largely determined by internal contradictions, since some individuals were unhappy with the existing social and political structures. Those willing to challenge the old system saw in the Europeans an alternative to the existing situation. It would be too adventurous to claim that they sought to challenge the whole tradition, but, at least, they tried to overcome some of its limits. People understood these transformations within a social context that made change possible through constant negotiation. They were not aware, however, that the situation was much more critical because the Sanaga-Ogowe were losing political control over the affairs of their own community. Change was no longer a response from within the *mvók-e'bot*, but, above all, a result of state policies that aimed at transforming Sanaga-Ogowe society.

Most resistance against some elements of the Sanaga-Ogowe culture came from youngsters and women. When openly asked as to whether the relationship between youngsters and elders was somewhat problematic, Fang informants firmly deny this. Nevertheless, there are numerous anecdotes that show that such relationship was not always smooth, especially – though not exclusively – regarding marriage issues. In 1912, Governor-General Barrera expressed his views on the situation:

I talked to them about how negative the fact of having numerous wives and demanding high prices for them was. As a result of this, only old men could marry and this was the reason why... they had very few children and many of them were weak. Due to this, they were vanishing little by little.¹⁰³

The increase in the price of *nswa* resulted in a rise of violence between Sanaga-Ogowe families. To the Spanish, polygamy and bridewealth were the underlying reasons behind endemic violence in Río Muni, hampering their goals of spreading trade activities across the region. Barrera did not wish direct confrontation with the

Sanaga-Ogowe, therefore, instead of banning bridewealth practices, in 1911 he established a limit of 300 pesetas on it in the belief that this would end internecine violence.¹⁰⁴ Tensions between fathers and sons over access to marriage are not exclusive of this period. Some *Mvét* legends, such as *Moneblum*, show that this was relatively common well before the arrival of the Europeans.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, this sort of dispute could bring about the division of clan lineages into further sections. This is why elders normally disapproved of those fathers who were not able to restore peace and harmony within their own compound. Barrera's policy, however, was not very effective in limiting bridewealth prices, and, throughout the whole colonial period, *nswa* negotiations were usually carried out on the fringe of the colonial administration. This limit on bridewealth did not encourage youngsters' marriages either, especially if they were economically dependent on their fathers. An elder woman, married to Okenve Mituy, an important *mikúkúma* of Mikomeseng district in the late 1920s, recalled how, despite having seventeen wives, he did not allow any of his sons to get married.¹⁰⁶ As Balandier argues, the colonial order facilitated youngsters' marriages by offering new economic alternatives to escape from elders' control, but it also exacerbated tensions between generations.¹⁰⁷ Barrera admitted that, since most adult Sanaga-Ogowe had their needs satisfied, marriage was the main incentive for young men to work for European businesses.¹⁰⁸ This combined with access to education proved to be very valuable as young men were able to reach unprecedented positions of power. In 1910, *La Guinea Española* referred to José Maveña, a young man who had been 'recently appointed chief of the Isen [Esen] tribe' and how he 'dressed up with all the authority insignias, and even a formidable revolver.'¹⁰⁹

A more silent discontent came from the ranks of women. Unfortunately, today it is difficult to know what their demands were at the time of European occupation of Río Muni. Admitting that they had a limited scope to speak for themselves within the Sanaga-Ogowe society, the situation did not change greatly with the arrival of the Spanish, as colonial officers and, especially, Claretian missionaries proclaimed themselves women's spokesmen. From the European point of view, there were three interconnected issues that mainly affected Sanaga-Ogowe women: labour exploitation, polygamy, and adolescent marriage.¹¹⁰ Along with the opening of the interior to trade and the clearing of paths, ending polygamy became one of Governor Barrera's principal demands when meeting Sanaga-Ogowe chiefs in his visits to the interior. Whether or not women shared these demands, we cannot know. Yet, there are data that suggests that they aimed at having a greater say, especially, on matters, such as marriage, that affected them directly. Marriage was often arranged between family heads. Generally, this procedure implied that the husband had sufficient capital to meet the other family's demands. Due to inflationist tendencies in the value of *nswa* during this period, it was mostly mature men who could afford such prices.¹¹¹ As a result, increasingly younger women were getting married to older men. Arrangements could also be made at a very early stage to avoid potential rises in price, or to obtain needed incomes for a father to get another wife for himself or for one of his sons. Young girls, as early as nine years old, could be handed over for marriage. In such cases, they were kept under the care of their mothers-in-law, who acted as adoptive mothers until they were old enough. No matter how good the relationship between young wives and their mothers-in-law was, informants recall this experience as highly traumatic because they were taken away from their home and close relatives at a very early age.¹¹² Under these circumstances, *abóm*, an institution

wrongly translated as kidnapping, appeared to become increasingly common as a mechanism for marriage in the early twentieth century. Referring to *abóm*, an old couple, who got married following this procedure, explained:

A woman was, in no way, taken by force. Rather, she ran away with the young man she loved, hoping to later convince her father to consent such a union. If so, the father would agree on a reasonable brideprice, which would eventually sanction the marriage.¹¹³

La Guinea Española and colonial records refer to numerous conflicts regarding bridewealth disagreements, which indicates that not only *abóm* became common, but also that families rarely accepted any external imposition over brideprices. Women frequently found support from the colonial administration and, above all, from missionaries, who were keen to offer shelter for runaway wives.¹¹⁴

The imposition of the colonial state in Río Muni was undoubtedly a turning point in the history of the Sanaga-Ogowe. But, who or what actually was the State? Up until today, the answer remains unclear to most Fang. Its real nature and meaning was never completely understood and the state, or government, came to mean an elusive concept where power resides and which was initially controlled by whites and later by blacks. As we can easily imagine, at the time of Spanish penetration the answer was much more vague. The state could be either *mitángán*, the district officer, the Colonial Guard, *mitángán-mingóngóó* (literally, merciful whites; i.e., missionaries), or *Pañá* (i.e., España) – whomever or whatever it was. From the beginning of colonial domination, the state adopted a personal character rather than an institutional one. That is, the Sanaga-Ogowe learnt of the state through individuals who represented different spheres of the colonial apparatus, and who, in some cases, were narrowly linked to the administration, such as district officers and colonial guards, and, in some others, maintained an indirect relation with it, such as missionaries and traders. In the eyes of

the Sanaga-Ogowe they were all the same and the same term was used for them: '*colonialismo*'.¹¹⁵

We do know from colonial documents that reality was more complex. Very often colonial interests were rather diverse and disputes used to arise between all those sectors that came to be labelled as 'colonialism'. This is not to deny Fang perceptions, as district officers, colonial guards, European traders and, to a lesser extent, missionaries tried to present themselves as part of a monolithic block when dealing with Africans. Equally the government's political strategy also sought to show unquestionable support for all Europeans living in the colony regardless of their conduct towards Africans. Throughout the 1900s, the government was aware that European traders tended to deceive Sanaga-Ogowe individuals when trading in their factories and brutalize those who dared to complain, often with the support of the colonial guard. In 1901 a colonial official described this situation:

Needless to say, the native is exploited in all transactions, and one peso in goods is not worth more than two pesetas... Considering the risks and privations that the European has to suffer in this country, it is understandable that profits be of such a magnitude.¹¹⁶

Whenever clans decided to retaliate, they were severely punished by the Colonial Guard that inflicted severe human and material losses, as we can see in the following example in 1912:

They [the Colonial Guard] inflicted four casualties on the enemy. Two of them were very prestigious chiefs amongst the Atamake... the largest village between Bata and Benito... lays in ruins, and its dwellers cry for their sensitive losses. This will make them understand that nobody attempts against Spain's sovereignty and disobey its representatives freely. A small action like this, which was unusual due to the way it was carried out, has triggered off great effects for the Atamake.¹¹⁷

The aim of the colonial state was to defend the Spanish interest the colony, as well as to avoid divisions in front of the natives. Throughout the whole colonial period there

existed similar examples in which the state not only overlooked misconduct from European soldiers or missionaries but also publicly supported those actions. Not surprisingly, Africans came to identify all Europeans as part of the same entity.

Initial contact between the Spanish and the Sanaga-Ogowe was established at a personal level between colonial officers and Sanaga-Ogowe elders. Nonetheless, Spanish functionaries made clear that they were mere representatives of Spain in which name treaties were signed and policies carried out. The Sanaga-Ogowe understood that the Spanish came from a very distant place called *Pañá*, and learnt of names such as Alfonso XIII or Primo de Rivera whose orders colonial officers followed. As Fernandez puts it, 'the personal model of blood ties was replaced by a more abstract "natural" model of persons in structures.'¹¹⁸ Clearly the Sanaga-Ogowe had difficulties in adapting to such a system, because, in addition to losing sovereignty, political power became somewhat blurred and distant. Negotiation was impossible, as the people in charge presented themselves as simple intermediaries with no apparent capacity to decide. In this context, the relationship between the Sanaga-Ogowe and Spanish officers became a dialogue of the deaf. Personal based relations, so important in the past, became almost meaningless. On the one hand, the Sanaga-Ogowe had been disenfranchised and, on the other, colonial officers represented institutions whose power was beyond Sanaga-Ogowe control.

It is hard to determine when the Sanaga-Ogowe realized they had lost their sovereignty at the hands of the Spanish. Outside the coast and its hinterland, their lives were not greatly altered as a result of the Spanish penetration until the late 1910s. In the interior of Río Muni, only those settled in the immediate surroundings of the Spanish camps could notice deeper changes and greater intervention of the colonial agents in their ordinary affairs. The resolution of 'palavers' by Colonial

Guard officers was not extraordinary, since Sanaga-Ogowe families usually asked prestigious figures to mediate in difficult disputes. Nonetheless, the Spanish policy of disarmament of the African population in the late 1910s started to indicate that Spain's presence was of a different nature, being much more intrusive than they had anticipated. This became clearer when the Colonial Guard intervened in this process, by punishing those who opposed this policy. To the Spanish, disarmament policy was the natural outcome of the series of occupation campaigns that sought to put an end to internecine violence in Río Muni. Therefore, in those areas where the Spanish had consolidated their presence by the late 1910s, the coast and northern regions, appointed chiefs had to make sure that their fellow villagers surrender their firearms. As it was explained to them that arms were not necessary any more because Spain would mediate in all disputes and protect them in case of aggression.

The Sanaga-Ogowe did not only use muskets to fight against each other but also to hunt. The famine affecting many areas south of the Wele from the late 1910s was aggravated by an increase in wildlife that destroyed food crops. Sanaga-Ogowe chiefs demanded permission to use their old guns in order to get rid of animals, a petition supported by Claretian missionaries.¹¹⁹ The combined effects of famine, the casualties and destruction caused by the Colonial Guard's punitive expeditions, and the growing intrusive Spanish policies gave Sanaga-Ogowe families a clear sense that they were losing their autonomy. People in the southern district of Akurenám still remember vividly the great sufferings of this period, which forced them to leave their villages and look for shelter somewhere else.¹²⁰ Colonial documents also mention that, as a result of the chaos caused by disease and hunger, people from the Evinayong area moved towards Mikomeseng.¹²¹ The causes of the late 1910s and early 1920s crisis were never clarified by the colonial administration, which saw no direct link with the

military occupation. Instead, some officers suggested a probable relation with the rising timber industry in which many young Sanaga-Ogowe men worked in central and southern Río Muni. Amongst the series of measures announced by the colonial government to end the crisis, it was decided that 'village chiefs will be encouraged to make broad plantations of cassava, yam, cocoyam, peanut, plantain [etc]. These Crops are totally neglected nowadays, due to the censurable and refined egoism of the timber trade'.¹²² Jeanne Henn refers to a similar problem in present-day southern Cameroon, because extensive rainforest cultivation requires 'heavy forest clearing twice a year' and 'Beti men', having 'transformed their traditional food fields into cocoa plantations', have 'cut back their work on women's food fields'.¹²³ At the same time, 'women were forced to produce more food in order to supply the colonial administration and new urban markets, to feed forced labourers, and to provision the large gangs of merchants' porters who passed through the villages.'¹²⁴

Whatever the causes of these series of food crises, it is clear that this was a period of major disruption for the southern Sanaga-Ogowe. Gray, for instance, claims that in Gabon 'the first half of the 1920s appears to have been a peak of known leopard men activity, as ritual murders spread for the first time to the Fang-speaking clans of the Middle Ogooué [Ogowe] just when the effects of famine were being felt.'¹²⁵ Eventually, the Spanish authorities granted special gun permits to improve the situation. Nevertheless, these were exceptional cases, since one had to prove an 'excellent conduct and unconditional adhesion to the cause of Spain'.¹²⁶ Generally the use of firearms remained very restricted throughout the whole colonial period.

If there is one event that finally convinced the Sanaga-Ogowe that they were no longer in control and had become subjects of the Spanish, this was the road construction scheme of the mid-1920s. As in many other parts of Africa, in Río Muni

the road construction period is associated with painful experiences and it is generally described as an extremely humiliating event. From the beginning of colonial occupation, the clearing of a communication network became one of the main priorities of the Spanish authorities, so as to open the whole territory to commercial activities. Once the region was pacified, Spain mobilized the local population in order to construct the road network. As colonial officials expected, this policy met general opposition amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe, yet, to the Spanish authorities, there was no way back and they carried on with the road scheme. Such a project was the first major decision of a broader plan that aimed at transforming and civilizing the entire Río Muni. District officers had to make sure that the roads were built by any means. The Colonial Guard became crucial, as they were in charge of implementing the government orders and overseeing the construction of the roads.

Although Sanaga-Ogowe people had already experienced the brutality of the military during the conquest period, it is the memories of the violence and abuses of the 1920s road construction that have vividly survived until today. Colonial chiefs' cooperation in this project was key, since they had to provide the labour force for the construction of the roads. Otherwise, they ran the risk of losing their position, being physically punished or imprisoned. Of course, labour was free, since the colonial treasury could not afford to pay for work that was seen to be for the benefit of the natives. Throughout the colonial period, this compulsory communal work was known as *prestación personal*. Chiefs who succeeded in providing enough workers for the road construction received some sort of gratification. Road workers were not given any food, having to carry enough food to feed themselves for as long as their service lasted. Previous Spanish complaints about the heavy work and semi-slave conditions

of Sanaga-Ogowe women did no longer matter, and men, women and adolescents alike took part in the road construction scheme.

News of the hardships soon spread across the Sanaga-Ogowe country. It was not only the difficulty of clearing the forest and building the roads without proper tools or carrying heavy loads throughout the hilly terrain, but above all the brutality of the Colonial Guard. Some informants still remember cases of people who died during this period after being brutalized by the *mon-bisima*. Some tried to run away and look for shelter in the forest, but their desperation was more intense knowing that they could not hide in the neighbouring French territories, since they already knew compulsory work could be much worse over there. In fact, many had crossed the border from Gabon and Cameroon escaping from similar work schemes.¹²⁷ The Colonial Guard hunted down all those who escaped in order to show the rest of the population that there was no refuge within the colony. As a result of the massive discontent caused by the road constructions, the colonial government remained hesitant to call on further compulsory work until the early 1930s when it was regulated:

Being subject... to the pure arbitrariness of local authorities and those in charge of use it...abuses were inevitable, and in many cases, the native was cruelly humiliated... as a result they developed an open opposition to this system... [and] we were forced to cancel all compulsory work...¹²⁸

Initially, only villages close to roads were affected by labour recruitment. Soon it was clear that it would be necessary to bring in more people to the road construction. Once more, the Colonial Guard received orders to go deep in the forest and force people from distant villages to provide workers, despite the fact that they did not benefit directly from those roads.

Following the construction of the road network, the Spanish conducted a policy of resettlement, between the late 1920s and early 1930s, that aimed at grouping the

African population into larger villages in order to make local administration more efficient. Such a measure sought to put an end to the traditional settlement pattern, consisting of a myriad of small villages formed often by single extended families. Villages, left aside from new roads, were also told to abandon their present location and settle along the nearest road. This measure was not compulsory because the government was seriously concerned about how people might react against it. To the government satisfaction, however, many villages voluntarily moved towards the new roads, especially in the case of villages in the vicinity of the road network. Governor-General Nuñez de Prado explained this process:

Near the finished roads, we are carrying out the concentration of neighbouring villages. The natives attend without resisting because... [they are] convinced about the facilities, advantages, and wealth offered to them. The same organization plan will be followed in all areas where communication ways are to be established, appointing, at the same time, prestigious chiefs to lead an important contingent, seeking to give them authority and support so they can directly rule in villages and facilitate the government's task.¹²⁹

Whereas some families refused to resettle along the new roads, many others appeared to do so freely due to the economic advantages that colonial roads offered.¹³⁰ As far as they were concerned, this would offer them a possibility to sell their products without travelling for long distances as well as to purchase European goods more easily. Although moving a village was not a great change to the Sanaga-Ogowe, this measure now had two important changes: sedentarization of settlements and the sharing of the same space by several *movók-me'bot*.

Coexistence between different families within the same village under the authority of a single administrative chief was a partial success for the Spanish administration. It was partial, nonetheless, because the government could not overcome Sanaga-Ogowe reluctance to live with people from different clans. Only fellow clan families agreed

to live together – it would only be later in the 1960s when we can find different clans sharing the same settlement in some areas of Río Muni. As for those villages located far from colonial roads, a few decided to move their settlements, but many remained in their old location waiting until a road was constructed nearer to them. Today it is still possible to find villages located along old paths, which never moved near the colonial road network. This apparent auto-marginalization helped them to retain more decision-making within their communities than the majority of the Fang living along the colonial road network. Between the Evinayong and Kogo districts, numerous villages remained isolated from the road that connected Evinayong to Niefang and Bata. It was not until the 1950s that a road was constructed in the vicinity. When asked why they never decided to resettle close to the road built in the early 1930s, villagers answered that they were better off than those living along the road. Although relatively isolated from the Europeans, they were still close enough to the coast and had easy access to their goods.¹³¹



Photograph 10: The road Bata-Mikomeseng was the first road opened



Photograp 11: Most villages have maintained the same location since they moved along the roads

Conclusion

The non-centralized political structure of the Sanaga-Ogowe was unable to meet needs of the colonial administration. As a result, the Spanish authorities increased their interventionism in Sanaga-Ogowe affairs, eroding the autonomy of the *mvók-e'bot*. This, combined with Sanaga-Ogowe individuals' ambitions, resulted in the destruction of key traditional structures. In the process, the local authority rapidly lost his character as representative of the community to become a colonial instrument under the immediate supervision of the district officer and the constant backing of the Colonial Guard. By resorting to the use of coercive instruments to support local chiefs, Governor-General Barrera's office established a precedent that has survived until today. The *mvók-e'bot* stopped being an active political community, as its members became subjects of a state that could now force them to carry out almost all kind of undesired tasks.

NOTES

¹ In 1927 Governor-General Núñez de Prado announced the pacification of the southern border, the last area to be occupied in Río Muni. Governor-General Núñez de Prado to the Director General for the Dirección General de Marruecos y Colonias [hereafter DGMC Director General] (15-4-1927). AGA, box G-196, file 10.

² Walker to Anderson, 13 Sep 1848, *A.B.C.*, vol 203, no. 371; cited in Chamberlin, 'The Migration', 448.

³ Governor-General to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 17-4-1911), AGA, box G-7.

⁴ For more details on local trade see F. Vázquez Zafra, 'Memoria mercantil y agrícola de la posesiones españolas en el África Occidental' (Madrid, 12-12-1901). AGA, box G-166.

⁵ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of state (18-1-1913). AGA, box G-9.

⁶ See Governor-General Barrera's Annual Report (14-5-1911). AGA, box G-167.

⁷ For more details see: Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 515; Chamberlin, 'The Migration', 452-54; and Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 60.

⁸ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 29; Patterson, 'Paul B. Du Chaillu', 664-65.

⁹ Iradier, *Africa: Viajes y trabajos*, 214

¹⁰ I shall deal with these concepts in more detail in chapter 4.

¹¹ Burton, 'A Day Amongst the Fans', 99.

¹² Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 13-14.

¹³ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 167.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 168.

¹⁶ F. Vázquez Zafra, *Mercantile and Agriculture Report* (Madrid, 12-12-1901). AGA, box G-166.

¹⁷ The author states that a newspaper article about five soldiers eaten by the Pamue was a total fantasy. M. Martínez de la Escalera, *Los territorios del Muni: sus condiciones y colonización: conferencia dada en la sociedad geográfica de Madrid* (Madrid, 1902), 7.

¹⁸ *La Guinea Española* (25-2-1911), 8-10; *idem* (10-6-1923), 4-5; *idem* (25-1-1924), 9; *idem* (25-12-1926), 12-13; *idem* (25-2-1927), 12-13.

¹⁹ F. Bernault, 'Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 47, 2 (2006), 210.

²⁰ *La Guinea Española* (25-2-1927), 12-13.

²¹ General Barrera, Annual Report (Santa Isabel, 14-5-1911), 202. AGA, box G-167.

²² Vansina, *Paths*, 259.

²³ Gray, *Colonial Rule*, 202-03.

²⁴ Iradier's two expeditions to Río Muni in the late nineteenth century and the books that followed are the main legacy of this late effort. Iradier, *Africa: Viajes y trabajos*.

²⁵ This added a further grievance to what would be known as 'victimismo español' (Spanish victimhood), which during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries blamed many of the country's problems on foreign powers' hostility.

²⁶ Governor-General A. Barrera to the Minister of State (8-8-1911). AGA, box G-168.

²⁷ Governor-General A. Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 185. AGA, box G-167.

²⁸ *La Guinea Española* (28-5-1903), 4.

²⁹ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (8-8-1911). AGA, box G-168.

³⁰ *La Guinea Española* (25-5-1909), 6-8.

- ³¹ Communication of the First Lieutenant J. Cantón to the Governor-General (Ayamaken, 23-11-1915). AGA, box G-4.
- ³² Communication of the Chief of the Allied Forces in Campo to the Spanish officer of the Ayamaken post (20-12-1915). AGA, box G-4.
- ³³ First Lieutenant J. Cantón (Ayamaken, 23-11-1915). AGA, box G-4.
- ³⁴ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 21-1-1916). AGA, box G-4.
- ³⁵ In 1908, Britain, the Congo Free State, France, Germany, Portugal, and Spain signed the Brussels Agreement that banned the sale of firearms and use of powder by the native Africans. C. Crespo, *Notas para un estudio antropológico y etnológico del bubi de Fernando Póo* (Madrid, 1949), 168.
- ³⁶ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 29-6-1916). AGA, box G-9.
- ³⁷ Although initially resolved with the recruitment of Liberian and later Nigerian workers, this would remain a problem until independence.
- ³⁸ Known as *Claretianos* in Spanish, the official name of the order is *Misioneros Hijos del Inmaculado Corazón de María* (Missionaries Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary).
- ³⁹ *La Guinea Española* (25-3-1919), 6-7.
- ⁴⁰ Governor-General Barrera, *Annual Report* (14-5-1911). AGA, box G-167.
- ⁴¹ In 1915, Governor Barrera wrote that Sanaga-Ogowe labourers were coming, for the first time, from the eastern border. Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (8-3-1915). AGA, box G-4.
- ⁴² Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (8-8-1911). AGA, box G-168.
- ⁴³ An article mentions that in 1905 the Esamongon and Esambira launched a large attack to expel the Bisio from the river Ekuku. In 1910, they were getting ready again to attack smaller Sanaga-Ogowe clans living along the river Wele (Benito). *La Guinea Española* (25-10-1910), 12.
- ⁴⁴ Governor-General to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 2-7-1911). AGA, box G-168.
- ⁴⁵ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (8-6-1915). AGA, box G-6.
- ⁴⁶ Colonial Guard Report (10-12-1915). AGA, box G-4.
- ⁴⁷ *La Guinea Española* (10-7-1912), 10-11; idem (25-11-1914), 10-11.
- ⁴⁸ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (8-6-1915). AGA, box G-6.
- ⁴⁹ Governor-General Barrera, *Annual Report* (14-5-1911), 130. AGA, box G-167.
- ⁵⁰ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (29-6-1916) AGA, box G-9.
- ⁵¹ *La Guinea Española* (10-1-1910), 8-9; Governor-General to the Minister of State (8-9-1911). AGA, box G-168.
- ⁵² Colonial Guard Report (10-12-1915). AGA, box G-4.
- ⁵³ Governor-General to the Sub-Governor of Bata (Santa Isabel, 26-12-1915). AGA, box G-4. Report of the Lieutenant Chief of the Ayameken Post to the Governor-General (Ayameken, 27-5-1916). AGA, box G-4.
- ⁵⁴ Governor-General to the Commissioner of the French Government (Santa Isabel, 9-9-1916). AGA, box G-4.
- ⁵⁵ Sub-Governor of Bata to the Governor-General (Bata, 28-9-1916). AGA, box G-4; Sub-Governor of Bata to the Governor-General (Bata, 17-10-1916). AGA, box G-4.
- ⁵⁶ Governor-General's telegram to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 16-6-1908). AGA, box G-6.

⁵⁷ Report of the Ministry of State (Madrid, 31-10-1913). AGA, box G-4.

⁵⁸ Governor-General Barrera to the Sub-Governor of Elobey (Santa Isabel, 25-1-1912). AGA, box G-7.

⁵⁹ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 12-11-1922). AGA, box G-9.

⁶⁰ Governor-General to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 2-7-1911). AGA, box G-168.

⁶¹ Report on the Colonization of Mainland Spanish Guinea by the Commissioner for Colonization (Bata, 14-6-1904). AGA, box G-166. A similar criticism was expressed in an article in 1909. *La Guinea Española* (25-5-1909), 6-8.

⁶² Governor-General Barrera to Lieutenant of the Ayameken Post (Santa Isabel, 11-1-1916). AGA, box G-4.

⁶³ Governor-General Barrera to the Sub-Governor of Bata (Santa Isabel, 26-12-1915). AGA, box G-4.

⁶⁴ Governor-General to the Commandant of the Second Company in Bata (Santa Isabel, 19-2-1916). AGA, box G-4.

⁶⁵ This term is still used by the Fang of Equatorial Guinea to refer to soldiers. The term *mon-bisima*, son of Bisima, was originally applied to the raiders who pillaged southern Sanaga-Ogowe villages during the period known as *obăn*.

⁶⁶ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 30-4-1912). AGA, box G-7.

⁶⁷ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 29-2-1912). AGA, box G-7.

⁶⁸ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 28.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (4-12-1921). AGA, box G-9.

⁷¹ Lieutenant Ayala to Governor-General Barrera (30-4-1922). AGA, box G-9.

⁷² Although my informant talked of the Bokpweñ clan, Gustau Nerín told me that in different versions he had been told of the Esakora clan. Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 21, 28; Gustau Nerín, personal communication (29-4-2005).

⁷³ *La Guinea Española* (25-7-1918), 8-9; idem (10-9-1919), 9-10.

⁷⁴ The Spanish medical officer believed that lack of food caused strong anaemia, which eventually evolved into amoebaeal dysentery, causing so many deaths. Governor-General Barrera to the Ministry of State (Santa Isabel, 14-2-1923). AGA, box G-9.

⁷⁵ Colonial Guard Report, Lieutenant Ayala (Mikomeseng, 1922). AGA, box G-9.

⁷⁶ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 14-2-1923). AGA, box G-9; Governor-General Núñez de Prado to the DGMCD Director General (Madrid, 15-3-1928). AGA, box G-195.

⁷⁷ Despite their similarities, it does not appear that all coastal groups constitute a single socio-cultural identity. The Spanish tended to group all these peoples under the term *playeros*, people of the beach. In 1921, the Spanish Missionary Leoncio González referred to them as Ndowe. *La Guinea Española* (10-7-1921), 5-6.

⁷⁸ Provisional Sub-Governor to the Governor General (28-9-1913). AGA, box G-4.

⁷⁹ M. Martínez, 'Report on the project for the immediate colonization of the territories of the rivers Muni and Benito' (1-4-1901), 28. AGA, box G-166.

⁸⁰ Martínez de la Escalera, *Los territorios del Muni*, 7.

- ⁸¹ Governor-General Barrera's Annual Report (Santa Isabel, 14-5-1911), 195-96. AGA, box G-167.
- ⁸² Personal interview, Mikomeseng 2; Governor-General to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 29-2-1912). AGA, box G-7.
- ⁸³ *La Guinea Española* (25-5-1909), 6-8.
- ⁸⁴ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 2-7-1911). AGA, box G-168.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 587-88.
- ⁸⁷ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 6.
- ⁸⁸ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 18-1-1913). AGA, box G-9.
- ⁸⁹ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 0.
- ⁹⁰ Such an appointment took place as a result of the death of Obama Mbañe, an Atanke chief, at the hands of the Colonial Guard. Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 29-2-1912). AGA, box G-7.
- ⁹¹ Personal interview, Evinayong 14.
- ⁹² Personal interview, Mikomeseng 5.
- ⁹³ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (Santa Isabel, 14-5-1911), 203. AGA, box G-167.
- ⁹⁴ Governor-General to the Minister of State (8-8-1911). AGA, box G-168.
- ⁹⁵ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 2-7-1911). AGA, box G-168.
- ⁹⁶ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report, (Santa Isabel, 14-5-1911), 195-96. AGA, box G-167.
- ⁹⁷ In 1925, a document already refers to the figures of *Primer Jefe* and *Segundo Jefe*. The former came to be clan chief, whereas the latter acted as his assistant. General Secretary of the Governor-General to the Sub-Governor (Santa Isabel, 8-9-1925). AGA, box G-198.
- ⁹⁸ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 29-2-1912). AGA, box G-7.
- ⁹⁹ *La Guinea Española* (25-4-1923), 6-7.
- ¹⁰⁰ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 2-7-1911). AGA, box G-168.
- ¹⁰¹ For more details see A. Barrera, 'Operación Rokobongo, 1913' (Santa Isabel, 1913), in J. Creus (ed.), *Documentos de la Colonización*, 7 (Vic, 2001).
- ¹⁰² Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (Santa Isabel, 14-5-1911), 203. AGA, box G-167.
- ¹⁰³ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 29-2-1912). AGA, box G-7.
- ¹⁰⁴ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 17-4-1911). AGA, box G-7.
- ¹⁰⁵ S. Eno Belinga, *L'épopée camerounaise, mvet: Moneblum, ou, L'homme bleu* (Yaounde, 1978).
- ¹⁰⁶ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 7.
- ¹⁰⁷ Balandier, *Sociology of Black Africa*, 198.
- ¹⁰⁸ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 8-8-1911). AGA, box G-168.

¹⁰⁹ *La Guinea Española* (10-11-1910), 9-11.

¹¹⁰ Idem (25-5-1909), 6-8; idem (25-9-1922), 5-6.

¹¹¹ A rough study conducted by a missionary in 23 Sanaga-Ogowe villages provides the following data: total population: 622; number of adult men (over 15 years old): 175; number of married men: 90; number of married women: 322; number of children: 125. Idem (10-6-1921), 4-6.

¹¹² Personal interview, Evinayong 11.

¹¹³ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 5.

¹¹⁴ Bisio men 'complained about women who, despite being married according to the Catholic rite, abandon their husbands whenever they get tired, and go to the military post where they "get unmarried".' Governor-General to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 2-7-1911). AGA, box G-168.

¹¹⁵ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 1.

¹¹⁶ F. Vázquez Zafra, *Mercantile and Agriculture Report* (Madrid, 12-12-1901). AGA, box G-166.

¹¹⁷ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 30-4-1912). AGA, box G-7. According to *La Guinea Española*, 'it was an unusual robbery, because they only took part of the goods'. *La Guinea Española* (10-6-1912), 5-6.

¹¹⁸ J. Fernández, 'Fang Representations under Acculturation', in P. Curtin (ed.), *Africa and the West: Intellectual Responses to European Culture* (London, 1972), 17.

¹¹⁹ Nicolás González to the Procurator of the Missions (Santa Isabel, 12-10-1919). Archivo General de los Misioneros Hijos del Inmaculado Corazón de María (hereafter Archivo General CMF): G-G-12/2.

¹²⁰ Personal interviews, Akurenam 3, 4, 5.

¹²¹ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 14-2-1923). AGA, box G-9.

¹²² General Secretary of the Governor-General to the Sub-Governor (Santa Isabel, 8-9-1925), AGA: G-198, exp. 12.

¹²³ J.J. Henn, 'Feeding the Cities and Feeding the Peasants: What Role for Africa's Women Farmers', *World Development*, v. 11, 12 (1983), 1044-45.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Gray, *Colonial Rule*, 202.

¹²⁶ General Secretary of the Governor-General to the Sub-Governor (Santa Isabel, 8-9-1925). AGA, box G-198, file 12.

¹²⁷ Balandier mentions that French officials in Gabon referred to Spanish Guinea 'not only as a place where higher wages were available, but also as a refuge'. Balandier, *Sociology of Black Africa*, 173. A Foreign Office report noticed a similar phenomenon, claiming that 'the population [of Río Muni] seems to have increased considerably of late years, owing to the influx of natives from the adjacent German territory, due to German methods of government'. *Spanish Guinea*, Peace Handbooks (Foreign Office), v. 20, 122-130 (1920), 7.

¹²⁸ Minutes of the Council of Authorities (8-8-1932). AGA, box G-1914, file 1.

¹²⁹ Governor-General Núñez de Prado to the DGMC Director General (Madrid, 15-3-1928). AGA, box G-195.

¹³⁰ Personal interviews, Evinayong 4, 15; Mikomeseng 1, 2, 11, 13.

¹³¹ Personal interview, Evinayong 14.

Chapter 3

Spain's Last Crusade

If the Spanish conquest of Río Muni was hampered by a lack of resources and support from the metropolis, the establishment of a colonial administration did not prove any easier. Madrid's lack of interest in and commitment to its Central African territory continued throughout most of the colonial period, and it was only in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), that Franco's regime became more actively involved in the development of Spanish Guinea. In this climate of metropolitan indifference, successive colonial governments had to create an administrative system which, very often, was the result of improvisation and the will of the current Governor-General. Broadly speaking, the colonial administration had two main objectives regarding Spanish Guinea: economic exploitation and the social transformation of Africans. Such general goals left plenty of room for the improvisation of policies. After the victory of Franco's troops in 1939, Spain was able to develop a more consistent ideology and policy with regards to its African territories. In the case of Spanish Guinea, the main lines of the colonial system were drafted and implemented between 1938 and 1959. By the end of 1936 Spanish Guinea was already under the control of Franco's faction, and two years later his administration introduced a series of key legal reforms that shaped the political, social and economic structure of the colony until 1959 when Río Muni and Fernando Po officially became Spanish provinces. During this period, Spanish Guinea was ruled under the umbrella of strong authoritarianism, Christian paternalism, and a close relationship between the Catholic Church and the colonial state. International pressure, as well as greater dissension within Francoist ranks, led to a gradual change

of policies in the late 1950s. As a result, between 1959 and 1968, Spanish Guinea moved from a provincial status, which was granted in 1959, to an autonomous one in 1964, and, finally, to independence in 1968.¹

This chapter shifts focus from the colonized to the colonizers, as it seeks to delineate some of the main features of the system that the Spanish put in place. Although the Spanish colonial system in the Gulf of Guinea deserves greater attention, here I shall concentrate on those aspects particularly relevant for the African population. In understanding the colonial system as the environment in which the Fang had to carry out their everyday life, we can contextualize their actions and the development of new social and cultural structures – the new tradition. We shall see how in developing a colonial system, the Spanish had to struggle between the desire for economic exploitation, which could attract much-needed metropolitan support, and the moral need for social transformation, which ultimately legitimized colonial domination. On the basis of misunderstood paternalism, the Spanish built up an antagonistic relationship between the ‘civilized’ European state and the ‘uncivilized’ African population. By looking at the colonial economy, we shall be able to understand why the so-called economic prosperity that the colony enjoyed in the 1960s did not quite translate itself into Africans’ self-reliance, since economic decisions always prioritized Europeans over Africans. Eventually, I shall examine the enormous role of the Catholic Church as a fundamental pillar of colonial domination, which, although not always cooperative, contributed to maintain the social order.

The quest for a colonial policy

Numerous factors explain the lack of interest in Spain in its equatorial African colony. Most of them were related to the serious political and economic crisis that

since the mid-nineteenth century affected Spain after the loss of most of its American empire. Reports from the tiny African colony were not very encouraging either. Long after occupying the colony, Spanish Guinea was still considered to be 'a cemetery greedy for colonizers.'² Although different colonial enthusiasts sought to dismiss this belief and change people's opinion at home, in reality such a perception greatly influenced the policies of Spanish officers, especially with regards to labour. Until 1968, the Spanish argued that Europeans were incapable of carrying out manual work in this region due to tropical diseases and the rigours of the climate.³ This key principle of the social and economic order in the colony laid the basis for racial segregation and African labour exploitation in plantations and through the *prestación personal*. It is somewhat paradoxical that the same individuals, who tried to change the image of the Central African colony amongst Spaniards and convince the metropolitan government to increase investments, spread negative views about Spanish Guinea and its peoples. From the colonial government's point of view, these opinions often served as an alibi to justify their failures, whereas for white settlers it appeared to serve as deterrence against potential competition from Spanish companies and settlers.

Spain's expectations with regards to Africa were not different from other European countries, all of which saw the continent as a potential source of wealth to strengthen their economies in the light of late-nineteenth century competition between industrialized nations. If anything, Spain had a greater need to draw on these prospects because of its acute economic crisis and the consequences of the '1898 disaster'. The outcome of the Treaty of Paris buried Spanish hopes to find a new eldorado. In the metropolis, many saw Río Muni as a burden, having very little hope that Spain could ever obtain any profit from it – a view that barely changed until

independence. Immediately after the final pacification of Río Muni in 1927, the senior officer of the *Dirección General de Marruecos y Colonias* (DGMC, Head Office for Morocco and the Colonies) wrote to the Governor-General: 'We are going to send you a mining engineer as part of a commission to study the colony's geology and its mining regulations. I wish we could find something worthy! Since this would finally create some affection for [the colony]'.⁴ Yet, Spain was never able to find any significant mining wealth in Río Muni, and hopes of the territory becoming a manpower source vanished by the late 1920s.

Although popularly known as Spanish Guinea, the official name of the colony was Spanish Territories of the Gulf of Guinea after a Royal Decree reorganized its administrative structure in 1904 – only one of many administrative reorganizations that followed.⁵ Indeed, the official terminology reflected more accurately the diverse nature of the colony. Spanish Guinea was not a single colony but two, made up of Fernando Po on the one hand and Río Muni and the small islands of Corisco, Elobey Chico, Elobey Grande and Annobon on the other. Despite its smaller size, Fernando Po was home for numerous European settlers – especially Spanish – who rapidly flourished thanks to the successful cocoa plantations scattered throughout the island, making Fernando Po a classic white settler colony.⁶ Río Muni, together with the smaller islands, had a minimum European presence and never attracted significant attention from the Spanish administration and businesses. Such disparities determined major differences in colonial policies with regards to the two administrative territories. Most economic resources were directed towards the development of infrastructure on the island, while the colonial government's efforts aimed at guaranteeing the steady supply of manpower for the plantations. The remaining territories saw very little development prior to 1959.

Since the beginning of the occupation of Río Muni, Spain did not have a clear view of what to do with the territory. Such doubts generated an intense debate regarding the future of the colony. Some argued in favour of encouraging European migration through a series of incentives, or for establishing a penal colony in which rehabilitated prisoners could farm and start families.⁷ Others in the metropolis suggested the leasing of the colony to private companies for its administration and exploitation. The leasing alternative gathered considerable support amongst certain senior officers and politicians, who backed this view during the course of the series of parliamentary debates about the colonization of the territory in 1904.⁸ Although no action was taken, the debate remained opened and seven years later Governor-General Barrera expressed his disagreement with the leasing of Río Muni to private companies:

[Companies] have become obsolete in other nations, which have got rid of chartered companies after falling into disuse, because, amongst many reasons, these companies cannot accomplish their mission without using force, which is one of the State's attributes that can never be delegated to anybody.⁹

One of Barrera's main concerns was to serve the interest of Fernando Po's plantation owners, hence it is not surprising that he was opposed to the leasing and exploitation of Río Muni by private companies. Clearly, this would not have allowed the recruitment of Río-Munian labourers for the island's plantations.¹⁰ In 1911, Barrera had already set the principal lines of Spanish policies regarding Río Muni:

Concerning native property... we must look after it, not thinking of the present day but of the future of that race, which is the one that had to exploit the land and exchange its products for our manufactures...¹¹

The leasing never took place, yet it is not clear what eventually determined Madrid's decision. Considering the crippled Spanish economy of the early twentieth century, it is difficult to see how private companies could have been interested in

assuming the challenging task of exploiting Río Muni. Furthermore, pressing problems in the metropolis took away any sort of interest in a colony where no foreseeable major benefits were expected. Between 1901 and 1938, Madrid took a passive stance with regards to Río Muni which inadvertently left the colony to the sole administration of colonial officers on the ground, under the distant supervision of public servants in Madrid. The fact that the colonial administration kept a military character throughout most part of the period of Spanish domination illustrates the provisional nature of metropolitan policies in the Gulf of Guinea. The republican government's attempt to move from a military administration to a civil one in 1934 was eventually reversed by the series of decrees which in 1938 established the character of the colonial administration for the first two decades of Franco's regime.¹²

Given the absence of a clear colonial project prior to 1938, colonial officers often opted for a pragmatic approach to resolve most matters related to colonization. Therefore, policies and legislation were often drawn a posteriori, in response to arising problems. Lack of connection and discontinuity characterized many of the policies of the different colonial administrators, as in the case of the *Patronato de Indígenas*.¹³ This institution, supposedly in charge of the administration and 'welfare' of those Africans considered as *no-emancipados* (non-emancipated or legally minors) from 1904, did not actually start functioning until 1928, when its statutes were finally approved.¹⁴

Until 1938, acute political rivalries in Spain that culminated in the civil war prevented the development of a clear colonial approach. Such inconsistency makes it difficult to provide a clear picture of what the Spanish colonial system was like, especially if we keep in mind the deep differences between the administration of Río Muni and Fernando Po. As Negrín points out, rather than talking of a colonial model

for the Territories of the Gulf of Guinea, it would be more accurate to talk of models; one for Fernando Po and another for Río Muni and the minor islands.¹⁵ This difficulty grows even bigger if we compare the policies followed in the Gulf of Guinea to those in the Spanish territories of Northwest Africa, the Moroccan Protectorate, Ifni and Sahara, where successive Spanish governments chose a less invasive approach towards native cultures.¹⁶ Indeed, this chaotic picture is not a unique case, and it is possible to trace numerous similarities with other colonial powers. Pragmatism and improvisation were the order of the day in most colonial administrations.

In spite of metropolitan rhetoric, European administrations in Africa had much more in common than it appears at first glance. District officers usually shared similar problems on the ground; hence their responses were likely to be similar. Often, variations in colonial policies were simply determined by physical conditions. The administration of a small territory with relatively homogeneous ethnic groups, such as Spanish Guinea, required less diverse policies than the administration of huge territories such as Nigeria or the Belgian Congo, for example. Similarities between different colonial administrations were not purely coincidental. In the case of Spanish Guinea, especially until the late 1930s, it was common that colonial officers looked at other colonies for effective solutions. As early as 1911, Barrera suggested that they 'should study the organization of the justice administration in the neighbouring colonies, especially that of Gabon or French Equatorial Africa, where racial similarities would make it more suitable to us'.¹⁷ This view was also shared by a top colonial officer during the republican period.¹⁸ The establishment of the Francoist administration did not stop this trend, for in 1940 the Sub-Governor of Bata sent a report, based on a Belgian Congo manual, suggesting a series of norms for district officers.¹⁹ Governor-General Juan Fontán rejected this idea because he considered

that Belgian colonization 'was far more advanced' and this model could not easily be applied to Río Muni.²⁰ Ideological reasons became increasingly dominant after 1938 and foreign colonial models were then used mainly to legitimize Spanish 'humanitarian' colonialism. In 1959, Diaz de Villegas, head of the DGMC for most of the Francoist period, compared the civilizing enterprise of Spain with the economic exploitation practiced by other European nations.²¹ A few years earlier, Governor-General Bonelli justified legal inequality in Spanish Guinea on the following grounds:

There are peoples forgotten by God... who, intoxicated by the corrosive venom of a-thousand-time-dammed ideas which are going to put an end to the unfortunate civilization in which we live nowadays, have fallen into stupidity and incoherence, giving natives in their colonies such a high degree of citizenship that they have the right to vote. That is, they have the right to exercise that stupid act that allows men to express an opinion about things they do not understand...²²

Internal contradictions within different colonial models were not only the result of lack of a clear colonial guiding principle and improvisation. As Murphy explains in his study of the colonial system in Kenya, contradictions often took place because the colonial state had to provide with the instruments for capitalist exploitation, while developing a tolerable level of legitimacy amongst Africans.²³ In order to achieve legitimacy, the colonial state often presented itself as an agent for the protection of Africans. Thus, according to European rhetoric, colonialism was not exclusively a system of exploitation but, above all, a tool for the much needed civilization and improvement of Africans. The balance between exploitation and legitimacy varied according to the government in power in the metropolis and the interests of the different European sectors of the colony.

In the Spanish colony there existed a fragile equilibrium between white settlers and Claretian missionaries until late 1930s. In Río Muni and, especially, on Fernando

Po, settlers were in favour of greater economic exploitation and were usually backed by the Governor-General. The Claretians, however, championed stronger protection of Africans and often found support from Madrid thanks to the Catholic Church's influence. The *Patronato de Indigenas* was founded as the institution embodying the paternalistic views of the Catholic missionaries and their followers. Yet the legal vacuum between 1904 and 1928 allowed successive Governor-Generals to conscript by force Africans from Río Muni and Fernando Po for the island's plantations, despite protests from the Claretians. As a result of this conflict between the two sectors, by 1924 the relationship between Barrera and the Vicar-General Nicolás González had deteriorated so much that González wrote:

His autocracy, to say the least, has reached the point that he is the law above all laws. Such is his malice, that he either secretly gives all those orders that might be compromising for him, or he despotically imposes them, even though they are contrary to all divine and human law.²⁴

Eventually, in 1925, Barrera was removed from office by the conservative government of Primo de Rivera, clearly more sympathetic to the Catholic Church's demands.²⁵

Between 1925 and the end of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship in 1930, there were no significant changes regarding Spain's colonial approach. Perhaps the Claretian missionaries saw an increase in their support from Madrid, but most colonial policies continued to be shaped by the personality of the colony's main authority. The metropolitan government continued to ignore the situation in Spanish Guinea, in spite of alarming signs of social, political and economic deterioration during the rule of Governor-General Núñez de Prado (1925-1930). In 1927, the Governor had to explain to the DGMC what happened in a corruption affair in the course of the 1926 labour recruitment campaign in Río Muni, in which he claimed not to be involved.²⁶ Neither

Spanish settlers nor Claretian missionaries were happy with Núñez de Prado's policies. In 1928, the Vicar-General González wrote a report criticizing the use of forced labour as well as the deteriorating conditions amongst plantation workers.²⁷ After the fall of Primo de Rivera's government in 1930, criticism against the Governor-General escalated and several newspaper articles portrayed Núñez de Prado as a tyrannical, corrupt and incompetent man.²⁸ Similar complaints appeared in a letter written by the *Comisión de Agricultores de Fernando Poo* (Commission of Fernando Po Farmers), which compared labour recruitment in Río Muni with past slave trade practices.²⁹

One of the first decisions of the new metropolitan government with regards to Spanish Guinea was to dismiss Núñez de Prado in 1930. One year later, this step was followed by a decree to revise the legislation approved during the dictatorial period.³⁰ However, these decisions lacked the necessary resolution to modernize the archaic colonial administration. The most serious attempt took place in 1934 with the creation of the *Cuerpo de Administradores Territoriales del Golfo de Guinea* – Territorial Administrator Corps of the Gulf of Guinea.³¹ This aimed to transform the military character of the colonial administration, which had hitherto been in the hands of military Governors and district officers, into a civil one. The republican government hoped that, by putting civil servants in charge of the colony, the administration would be more effective in looking after Spain's 'colonial interests' as well as 'organizing and protecting the native population against poverty and diseases'.³² Nonetheless, such a policy required funds, which the Spanish Public Treasury very much lacked, and will, which was seriously undermined by the political deterioration in Spain. Consequently, the formally civil administration remained in the hands of military officers until the end of Spanish domination.

The republican government was aware of its lack of support within the military ranks, and this reform attempted to reaffirm its control over the colony. The establishment of the Republic in 1931 met general opposition in the colony from colonial officials, settlers and missionaries, leading the President of the Republic to warn against anti-republican feelings.³³ Eventually, the acute antagonism between conservatives and the republican government spilled over to Spanish Guinea, where churches were ordered to close, like in the rest of Spain, by the Popular Front government. The electoral victory of the Popular Front in February 1936 was followed by the military uprising of General Franco five months later. During the last few months of the republican regime, the situation in the colony became confused, and even Governor-General Sánchez Guerra was accused of sympathising with the conservatives and was asked to resign. This development triggered the uprising of the conservative sector that with the aid of the Colonial Guard quickly took control of Fernando Po in September 1936.³⁴ The supporters of the Popular Front government initially took shelter in Río Muni, but by mid October, they were forced to leave the colony after a naval force sent by Franco easily overcame republican resistance.³⁵

Throughout the period of Spanish rule in Guinea, the difficult equilibrium between the discourses of economic exploitation on the one hand and Christian paternalism on the other was achieved through the use of African migrant workers from outside the colony. Migrant work did not only have an economic value, but it was also important from the political point of view. The use of workers from outside Spanish Guinea allowed intense economic exploitation without eroding the so-called moral principles of Spanish colonialism. That is, Spain's 'Christian' duty involved only those Africans legally under its 'protection', the native inhabitants of Spanish Guinea.

There existed a pattern of continuation with regards to the basic elements of Spanish colonialism. Certainly the Francoist regime reinforced the existing colonial policies by providing stronger political and economic support, as well as the ideological blanketing of the *nacional-catolicismo* ('national Catholicism'). The approval of the 1938 *Estatuto de Justicia Indígena* (Native Justice Statute) opened the way to a series of administrative reforms, which, along with the economic restructuring of the mid 1940s, shaped the social and economic bases of the colony for the next two decades.

Indeed, colonial rhetoric escalated under Franco's rule. The African colonies, especially those considered to be more backwards, such as Spanish Guinea, became part of the civilizing mission discourse, closely linked to the historic Spanish enterprise in the Americas. Such views became dominant amongst those in the metropolis who were in charge of the administration of the colony, as we can see in the words of Díaz de Villegas:

None of these lands were obtained by force! If we keep them today, it is due to the colonizing genius of the race – for Spain is the colonizing nation par excellence – and because our foreign activity has been done under the divine sign of the Cross. The crucifix has been, indeed, our constant guide in the Americas, in Asia, in the Pacific, and in Africa.³⁶

For the Francoist regime, Spanish Guinea was a continuation of Spain's historical mission to spread Christianity amongst 'infidels'. The 1938 justice reform, for example, was compared to the *Leyes de Indias* of Spanish America.³⁷ The combination of old-fashioned Catholic values and extreme nationalism provided Spanish colonialism with a degree of paternalistic rhetoric so far unheard of, and only comparable to that of Portuguese Africa during Salazar's dictatorship. More than ever during Franco's regime, the native came to be seen as the central focus of

colonization, whose inferiority justified Spain's rule. Thus, Governor-General Bonelli, during the course of a lecture at the Institute of International and Colonial Political Studies in 1946, asked his audience: 'if the native is exactly equal in his psychology and mentality to the inhabitant of a civilized country, will you please tell me where the colonizer fits in the colony?'³⁸ Bonelli's views certainly reflected the essence of Francoist ideology, in which the colonizer 'should feel, at the same time, partly as a master and partly as creator' and by doing so it should feel closer to God – the Master and Creator par excellence.³⁹ Francoist paternalism understood that natives' inferiority should be overcome by Spanish colonial agents, who in their civilizing mission would create a new people.⁴⁰ This paternalistic ideology was the cornerstone of the administrative and judicial structure of the colony between 1938 and 1959, in which Africans were legal minors under the protection of the colonial state and subject to *tribunales de raza* (native courts, literally 'race courts').

Contrary to Catholic rhetoric, which claimed that all men were children of God, paternalism was mixed with racist views. Governor-General Juan Fontán argued that Africans' intelligence decreased with age.⁴¹ This became a popular belief in the colony, and in the mid-1940s was 'scientifically' confirmed by two Spanish doctors, who maintained that this phenomenon was due to 'tropical diseases [which] totally exhaust the individual from birth, damaging his psyche as a result.'⁴² Negrín points out that racist and paternalistic views were especially dominant between 1939 and 1949, yet it appears that racism was mostly an outcome of life in the colony.⁴³ Whereas the less racist idea of assimilation dominated metropolitan discourse, in the colony itself, more racist ideas in favour of association prevailed and argued that Africans' intellectual inferiority would make assimilation of Africans to European culture impossible. Over time, as Negrín points out, Francoist colonizing doctrines

became more diverse.⁴⁴ This was possibly due to internal developments in the Franco regime, in which the younger generation, known as technocrats, started to occupy higher positions within the administration from 1957.

From 1958, a succession of political reforms rapidly altered the legal status of Spanish Guinea. That year, the colony was renamed Equatorial Province, though it was not until one year later that it formally stopped being a colony.⁴⁵ In July 1959, the Spanish Parliament passed the Bill of Organization and Judicial Structure of the African Provinces, by which the Spanish territory was divided in two provinces, Fernando Po and Río Muni, as part of a process known as *provincialización*. The new law also abolished the *Patronato de Indígenas* and the classification of Africans into *emancipados* and *no-emancipados*. From then on, all Africans were, in principle, granted equal rights with the rest of the Spanish population. In its preamble, the 1959 law said: 'The traditional Spanish policy overseas... has made it possible for them [the Territories of the Gulf of Guinea] to overcome the necessary stage of evolution and reach a degree of development to be considered legally fully integrated within the Spanish community.'⁴⁶

The Spanish government was not insensitive to current international processes, in which nationalist movements were increasingly gaining momentum and forcing European nations to grant independence to their colonies. These developments, plus pressure from the UN – which Spain had become a member of in December 1955 – convinced members of the Spanish establishment that it was about time to change Spain's policies regarding the Gulf of Guinea.⁴⁷ This view, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was part of an emerging trend within the Francoist ranks that felt it necessary to break with the autarchic system of the 1940s. This sector also thought that by granting equal rights to Africans and integrating the colonies into Spain, it

would be possible to silence international pressure and the colony's nationalist movement, while delaying Spanish Guinea's inevitable independence and satisfying the demands of hardliners at home.

The reforms of the late 1950s were barely felt by the population of Spanish Guinea. As we shall see, native justice was maintained until independence. From 1961 Africans were entitled to choose whether they wanted to be subject to native or European courts for civil matters, but, since not all natives were *evolucionados* ('fully-developed'), they had to have the opportunity to be judged according to 'native custom'.⁴⁸ Economic conditions were also poor, especially in Río Muni, forcing the Spanish Government to extend the 1963 Development Plan to its African territories. This scheme sought to prove to the international community that Spain was fully committed to bridging the social and economic gap between its African colonies and the rest of Spain. Nonetheless, voices from within Spanish Guinea and the international community still demanded that Spain should take the necessary steps towards granting total independence. By 1963, the situation was too difficult to maintain, hence, the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs became dominant. In November 1963 the Parliament passed the Bill of Statutes that granted an autonomous status to the provinces of Río Muni and Fernando Po. One month later, Equatorial Guineans approved the bill in a referendum. From 1964 to October 1968, Equatorial Guinea was run by an autonomous administration – the Spanish still refused to call it a government – under the supervision of the Governor-General, who was now renamed *comisario general* (high commissioner).⁴⁹ As Pélissier argues, the autonomous regime was designed to prepare Equatorial Guineans for independence, in spite of the official refusal to acknowledge this process.⁵⁰ Certainly there were Spaniards whose views on Africans remained the same and believed that 'the native

Guinean is a pacific man, a total mentally retarded person, whose intelligence age varies between 12 and 16 year old amongst adults – women do not go beyond 14 years of mental age'.⁵¹ Nonetheless, the new administration, together with the economic reforms, made possible the greatest social and economic development since the arrival of the Spanish.

Paternalism for social transformation

Until 1938, limited resources and a blurred colonial policy resulted in a weak administration with an unclear role. White settlers were in the colony to make money through cocoa growing, timber, or trade. The aim of the missionaries was to Christianize Africans and to get rid of their 'primitive' customs. The colonial state, however, had no clear function other than representing Spanish sovereignty in the colony. Not surprisingly, both Spanish settlers and missionaries appeared to think that the administration was there to assist them. Internal divisions within different European sectors made it more complicated to elucidate the role of the government. It is documented, for example, that there were different factions within the colonial administration. Internal divisions also affected the Claretians. According to Barrera, the Claretians were divided between those in favour of focusing on economic exploitation and a minority supporting greater emphasis on evangelization.⁵² Amongst settlers, well-established landowners were often wary of newcomers from the Peninsula, as Spain was often referred to. Different expectations from the government generated stiff competition between colonial factions, whose interests were often interwoven. In many respects, competition and conflict shaped Spain's colonial policy, especially between 1901 and 1938.

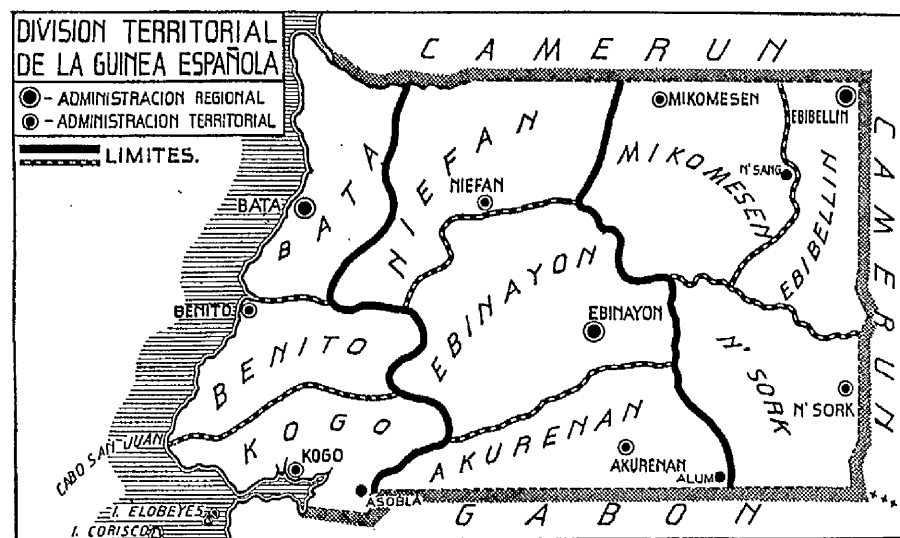
Being in such a precarious situation, the colonial government found it very difficult to assert its authority over the different colonial sectors. To Barrera, it was necessary to empower the role of the Governor-General. He complained that 'since 1902 there has been... 20 Governors-General in eight years, and the majority of them had an interim character. Can there be a colony like that? Can the position have any prestige? I understand not.'⁵³ Constant change of Governors put long-term residents, mostly Claretian missionaries, on a higher ground, making them believe that it was they who were the actual authority.⁵⁴ During Barrera's long term, the administration acquired a series of functions that it had hitherto lacked. Indeed, much of Barrera's success was due to his support from the officials in charge of the Ministry of State, the government branch that controlled colonial policies until 1925. From the reading of communications between Governors-General and senior officers in Madrid, one gathers that personal relationships very much determined the support given to the former as well as his policies. During Barrera's tenure, the administration was developed in order to represent the economic interests of the metropolis as well as the different Spanish sectors in the colony. When dealing with the natives, the colonial administration tried to unify the diversity of interests amongst Europeans, portraying the image that the Spanish, in particular, were one single body represented by the government. This, in essence, degenerated into an antagonistic relationship between Africans and the state throughout the Spanish domination.

The gradual development of an autonomous administration gave rise to confrontation with missionaries and settlers whenever they were unhappy with government policies. In principle, the colonial administration developed since the early twentieth century was conceived as a highly centralized and bureaucratic organization – the system that dominated in the metropolis except for the short

republican period. Nonetheless, centralization usually varied depending on the level of interest of the Spanish government, the character of the current Governor-General, and the available resources. On paper, the colonial government depended on each of the successive metropolitan branches in charge of administering the African possessions: the Ministry of State, the DGMC, and, after the provincialization in 1959, the *Dirección General de Plazas y Provincias Africanas* (DGPPA, Head Office for African Towns and Provinces).⁵⁵ These metropolitan bodies were supposed to dictate the main guidelines of colonial policy, yet, either Madrid's lack of interest or the confidence of senior metropolitan officers in the Governor-General often resulted in the almost total delegation of decision-making to the latter. This situation left enough room for Governors to impose greater centralization to ensure their authority in the colony, as well as the necessary bureaucracy to make centralization possible.

The Governor-General as head of the colony's administration was not only in charge of the different departments of the civil administration, but as a military officer – usually a general – was also responsible for the Colonial Guard, the colony's military force since its creation in 1908.⁵⁶ The Governor-General was based in Santa Isabel on Fernando Po, from where he controlled the different territorial administrations in which the colony was divided. Territorial divisions evolved over time according to Spain's growing control of Río Muni, as well as the varying needs of the colonial administration. At the suggestion of the Governor-General in 1907, the colony was divided into three administrative regions.⁵⁷ The first one comprised the island of Fernando Po, and it was under the direct administration of the Governor. The remaining two covered mainland Spanish Guinea and the minor islands, and they were under the supervision of two Sub-Governors, who were based in the regional capitals: Bata and Elobey.⁵⁸ Each region was further divided into districts,

corresponding with military posts, and were managed by colonial guard officers. They were known as *jefes de puesto*, whose functions amounted to government delegates. Like all Spanish public servants, they were appointed from Madrid.



1940s territorial division of Río Muni (on the eastern border it should read Gabon), J. Olmo, *Los territorios españoles del Golfo de Guinea* (Madrid, 1944), 85.
MAP 5

Although the number of districts increased over time, the basic administrative structure remained the same until the 1930s. As part of the modernization process of the republican government, one of the two sub-governships of Río Muni was eliminated, leaving only one in Bata. The Francoist administration preserved the essence of the previous territorial divisions; that is, the colony was divided in two administrative regions – Fernando Po and Continental Guinea –, which were further divided into districts.⁵⁹ After the 1938 reform, the *administrador territorial* (district officer) in Río Muni was accountable to the Sub-Governor of Bata, who was subsequently accountable to the Governor.⁶⁰ The structure of the territorial administration, except for the increase in the number of districts, was almost unchanged until the provincialization of 1959. The secretary general, the colony's

second in command, assisted the Governor-General in the supervision of the different administrative departments. He was also a substitute for the Governor in his absence, and was his advisor for administrative issues. The rest of the colonial administration was managed by *jefes de servicio* (chiefs of department) who directed the different administration departments. Although the chiefs of department were based in Santa Isabel, there were also representatives in Bata, as capital of the continental region.

Autocratic tendencies were salient during the Spanish domination. The faculties of the Governor-General, as a Spanish writer put it, 'were almost unlimited', for he acted as civil and military governor, having almost total control of the legislative and executive powers.⁶¹ Governors' abusive behaviour was only checked by Madrid when Spanish people were affected. Autocratic practices were not only limited to the colony's head. If anything, these tendencies were more acute amongst district officers, who, according to the Sub-Governor of Bata in 1939, could go as far as 'transforming his district into an independent feud, without admitting any relationship with other [districts], and even consciously doing different things and procedures from other districts.'⁶² Given that the European population on the mainland was scarce, district officers dealt with *no-emancipados* almost without any restraint. As the embodiment of government at local level, the district officer was in charge of all administrative departments and the Colonial Guard – which acted as a sort of police force – in addition to administering justice amongst Africans. In the absence of either a native legal code and or a set of rules for the district officer, he could give sentences and enforce the law according to his own criterion.⁶³ Wilson shows how this situation was widespread across colonial Africa, where the enormous 'discretionary power' of district officers 'defined much of the reality of the imperial situation as perceived by

his African subjects.’⁶⁴ As we shall see, in Spanish Guinea only the Claretians were interested in controlling the autocratic power of colonial officers.

In spite of its formal modernity, Fields rightly points out that the African colonial state was fundamentally an archaic structure, especially when compared to the metropolitan or European one.⁶⁵ The successive Spanish metropolitan administrations, however, were not particularly modern, and their shortcomings were multiplied in the colonies. In addition to autocracy, the close cooperation between Church and State and the heavy reliance on the Colonial Guard added to the archaic nature of the state in Spanish Guinea. Lack of means and legitimacy was very often replaced by coercion at the hands of the Colonial Guard. Whenever the administration could not afford to pay for public works or convince people about the benefits of government actions, the Colonial Guard would force people to work for free. In 1931, the government delegate in the Nsork district explained: ‘the recruitment of labourers for the works that have to be done on the track from Kogo to Río Benito is practically impossible... It is necessary to implement extreme and violent policies’.⁶⁶ The role of the Colonial Guard was especially notorious for the success of the *prestación personal*. Since the moment of its creation, Spanish officers were aware of the Colonial Guard’s abuses, and tried to devise different formulae to prevent violence from happening, which was believed to be due the lack of preparation of native guards and their idiosyncrasy.⁶⁷ Under the authority of Spanish officers, Africans constituted the core of the Colonial Guard.



Photograph 12: Colonial Guard

In 1932, after a few Spanish newspapers and a humanitarian society voiced the brutality suffered by the African population at the hands of settlers and missionaries in Spanish Guinea, the republican government sent an inspector to the colony to investigate and correct the situation.⁶⁸ These denunciations placed further pressure on the Spanish government, which in the late 1920s had been forced to put an end to the migrant labour agreements with Liberia after several international newspapers described work conditions on Fernando Po's plantation in terms of semi-slavery.⁶⁹ The victory of Franco's troops terminated with all dissenting voices inside the country at the same time that the regime isolated itself from external criticism – a situation that did not vary much until the late 1950s.

According to the 1950 census, the European population, made up mostly of Spaniards (91.3 per cent) was concentrated in the principal economic centres; 81 per cent of the island's total European population lived in Santa Isabel, whereas 68.4 per cent of the mainland's total population lived in Bata and Río Benito (present-day

Mbini).⁷⁰ In 1950, the European population in Río Muni only amounted to 0.95 per cent of the total population, while, on Fernando Po, the percentage was somewhat higher, 6 per cent.⁷¹ By 1966, the figures had risen slightly, since Europeans made up 1.6 and 8.4 per cent of the total population of Río Muni and Fernando Po respectively.⁷² Not surprisingly, Europeans living in overseas possessions formed a society of their own within a so-called hostile environment, surrounded by 'oppressive' nature and 'savage' people, in which they tried to prosper. Despite internal differences, bonds of solidarity were developed amongst whites both in opposition to Africans and to the metropolis; the latter was considered to ignore the reality on the ground as well as settlers' needs.⁷³ A letter sent to President Azaña quoted some of the words that the Governor-General addressed before the Agriculture Chamber: 'the greatest enemy that this colony has always had is the ignorance and lack of will to understand us that there exist in the Peninsula's offices.'⁷⁴ The metropolis could be a hindrance more than anything else.⁷⁵ Therefore, whatever happened in Spanish Guinea appeared to be kept away from Madrid's knowledge, except when conflicts became too serious to be resolved from within. After 1938, the DGMC became more interested in supervising the colonial administration. In 1949, the Governor-General attempted to go beyond his legislative attribution, yet he was stopped by the head of the DGMC, who had to remind him of his prerogatives under the 1938 Justice Decree.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, Governors continued to enjoy broad powers, because the bulk of legislation as well as the colony's budget were drafted by the colonial government, which only required the often formal approval of Madrid.

It was claimed that one of the government's most important responsibilities was the transformation of Africans in order for them to enjoy the level of cultural and material civilization of European societies. Thus, the administration, first, had to

protect Africans, and, then, provide them with the necessary means to allow social and economic transformation. The Spanish authorities created the *Patronato de Indígenas* for this mission. Its role evolved over time to the point of assuming increasing control of all those policies related to native affairs. Such a task was developed in close cooperation between the Catholic mission and three governmental departments: education, health, and agriculture. Along with 'humanitarian' reasons, the social transformation of Africans was considered to be a necessary step for the economic exploitation of the colony, because the existing family organization, linked to the local mode of production, undermined the spread of capitalism.

Social transformation was conceived as social engineering rather than as an internal process. In fact, as we shall see later, colonial authorities were very wary of any process of internal transformation that might escape their watch. Therefore, the first step to assert control over Africans was to deny their legal independence. Although it did not start functioning until the approval of its statutes in 1928, the creation of the *Patronato de Indígenas* in 1904 set the basic principle of what would become Spain's native policy until 1959; that is, the classification of Africans as either *emancipados* or *no-emancipados*. According to the Spanish, African cultures were extremely primitive, hence Africans lacked the maturity and knowledge of European adults. As a result, it was necessary to create a body that acted as tutor in the full sense of the word. The 1904 Royal Decree clearly illustrates the original spirit of the *Patronato de Indígenas*:

A *Patronato de Indígenas* will be formed with the assistance of the Spanish missions. It will be especially dedicated to the protection of children or natives... and workers, encouraging culture and moralization of the natives of the country, and their adhesion to Spain.⁷⁷

All Africans living in Spanish Guinea were automatically considered as *no-emancipados*. Until 1928 no legal distinction between *emancipados* and *no-emancipados* was laid out, being left to the arbitrary judgment of colonial authorities. During that period, only the small minority of Creole plantation owners of Fernando Po, known as *Fernandinos*, were granted full legal rights. The rest of the native population of Spanish Guinea, together with immigrant labourers, were deprived of legal personality, and, since the *Patronato de Indígenas* did not become effective until the late 1920s, they were left without any legal protection during this period.

After his arrival in the colony in the early 1890s, Father Nicolás González spent a long time in Río Muni, far from the European community and in close contact with Africans. During this period he developed an understanding of local cultures, as well as relative sympathy for Africans.⁷⁸ Thus, when he was elected Vicar-General in the late 1910s, one of his main preoccupations was to push for the regulation of the *Patronato* in order to guarantee the protection of Africans from European exploitation.⁷⁹ This probably contributed to the deterioration of relations between the head of the Catholic mission and Barrera, who repeatedly dismissed González's petitions. In fact, the statutes of the *Patronato* could only be approved once Barrera was no longer in office. As we saw above, this measure did not stop abuses.

Given that all Africans were automatically classified as *no-emancipados*, the 1928 statutes essentially explained which natives could be eligible as *emancipados*:

For the exercise of civil rights, with the prudent restrictions that are in practice advised by the security of the State and the actual interest of the population... those natives that clearly show, due to their state of intellectual and moral culture, to be in a position to rule their persons and properties by themselves.⁸⁰

Until then, the *Patronato* had proven to be totally inefficient because, as a dependent branch of the *Curaduría* (Labour Department) its objectives were too broad and its

functions too poorly delineated. The first steps towards the regulation of the *Patronato de Indigenas* were taken in 1926, when it was established that it could intervene in family affairs, and authorize all sorts of contracts involving Africans. Between 1927 and 1928 the *Patronato* became an independent body, thanks to the granting of more specific functions, the creation of a *Junta de Patronos* (executive board) presided over by the Vicar-General, and, finally, the approval of its statutes. The prominent role of missionaries reflected the paternalistic spirit of the *Patronato*. By representing Africans' legal personality, it would be possible to prevent them from dealing directly with European settlers, as well as the exploitation and loss of properties that arise from such deals. Amongst other things, *indigenas* could not sign any form of contract, borrow or lend money, or sell their properties without the authorization of the *Patronato*. Prior to 1928, there also existed other restrictions on Africans. These limitations were maintained until 1959 and included the application of customary law instead of the European legal system, the limit to four hectares of land plots, segregation of public transport (*indigenas* could not travel in a truck's cab), the requirement of a colonial officer's authorization for the purchase of alcoholic beverages, arms, gunpowder, and so forth.

In reality, neither the 1928 nor the following Francoist statutes of 1938 and 1952 guaranteed the protection of Africans. The 'most beautiful of our colonial institutions', far from being exclusively dedicated to 'defending, helping, educating, and protecting' natives, essentially regulated the exploitation of Africans by Europeans.⁸¹ Indeed, regulation avoided further potential abuses, but it also put limits on Africans' self-reliance and improvement.

Prior to the 1940s, the Sub-Governor admitted that on the mainland 'the works of the *Patronato* were nonexistent, and so were its results'.⁸² On Fernando Po, however,

the situation was different because the majority of the European population was concentrated there, making necessary the 'paternal protection' of Africans – excluding the plantation workers – from ambitious Europeans. It is also the belief, amongst Fang elders, that the Spanish, especially the missionaries, favoured the indigenous Bubi of Fernando Po over them.⁸³

The *Patronato* was mostly funded through natives' economic activities. Before the 1940s, the executive board preferred to concentrate investments on the island, where the *Patronato* dealt with labour contracts, the protection of native property, and the construction of schools and churches. The establishment of the republican regime in 1931 did not result in a more progressive approach towards native policies. The nature of the *Patronato* was maintained, and the most important change was the replacement of the vicar-general with the Governor-General as president of the *Patronato* in 1932.⁸⁴ It was necessary to wait until the Franco administration to see a greater impulse in the life of this institution. The approval of the new statutes in 1938 represented the cornerstone of Spain's social transformation policies, for it initiated a process of administrative modernization, which, along with a greater political and financial support, converted the *Patronato* in the institution directly in charge of all matters related to native affairs. Under the new statutes the Governor-General presided over the *Junta de Patronos* which was now formed by the Sub-Governor, the chiefs of the Education, Health, Labour, Agriculture, and Public Treasury Departments, the vicar-general, the heads of the two delegations of the *Patronato* – to the existing office of the *Patronato* in Santa Isabel a new one was recently added in Bata – and two *emancipados*. According to Altozano, the presence of two Africans on the executive board reflected Spain's 'intention to gradually incorporate the aborigines into the government process insofar as their degree of maturity allows it.'⁸⁵

The so-called humanitarian mission was key to the Franco administration, which, in the preamble of the 1938 statutes, stated that Spain's main goal in the Gulf of Guinea was the 'intellectual, material, and spiritual elevation' of Africans.⁸⁶ As part of the reform process, the colonial administration redefined emancipation as 'a status and a right that Spain acknowledges to those colonized insofar as they prove a sufficient degree of culture to make unnecessary the tutelage of the *Patronato*.'⁸⁷ In order to reach this status, Africans had to obtain two favourable reports from either the Education, Labour or Health Departments.⁸⁸ Unlike the 1928 statutes, under the Francoist administration the granting of emancipated status could not be removed.⁸⁹ The 1938 statutes suffered several reforms until new statutes finally replaced them in 1952. The Spanish authorities argued that acculturation was a gradual process, therefore it could not be expected that Africans became *emancipados* overnight. This belief led in 1952 to the creation of an intermediate status by which natives could then be classified as *no emancipado*, *emancipado parcial* ('partially emancipated') and *emancipado total* ('fully emancipated'). As the term implies, the *emancipado parcial* could partially control his property and have limited legal independence. Although not explicitly mentioned, women could not reach emancipation in accordance with the metropolitan legislation that denied full emancipation to women during the Francoist period. Governor-General Bonelli believed that these series of measures would encourage the formation of a 'native bourgeoisie' in order to fill the gap 'between the two societies' coexisting in the colony.⁹⁰



Photograph 13: Since 1936 fascist values became part of the transformation project



Photograph 14: Children also took part in patriotic indoctrination

In accordance with the paternalistic discourse that dominated the Francoist creed, the State was portrayed as a paternal figure, which restricted political and economic liberties in order to protect the weak from the strong. As a legitimizing rhetoric it certainly achieved economic growth while improving social conditions, especially from the late 1950s, yet it faced numerous contradictions both at home, where big corporations were the great beneficiary, and in Spanish Guinea, where Africans never

enjoyed the privileges of Europeans. Indeed, the situation of an *emancipado total* was far better than of the rest of Africans, who had very few chances of seeing their legal status being revised. Nonetheless, full citizen rights did not amount to being a 'black Spaniard', as Berman referred to *emancipados*.⁹¹ Heriberto Álvarez, who was in charge of the Education Department in the 1940s and early 1950s, admitted that, in practice, the *emancipado* rarely received the same treatment as Europeans did.⁹²

Together with the construction of roads, the improvement of sanitary conditions in Río Muni was one of the main priorities of the colonial administration from the early twentieth century. If Río Muni was to supply a labour force for Fernando Po, it was necessary to ensure population growth through better health conditions. Besides a few isolated vaccination campaigns, during the early colonial period, Spain did not do much to improve the situation, as Núñez de Prado admitted after a visit to Río Muni.⁹³ In fact, until the 1940s, the Spanish commonly believed that the native population was decreasing. Sanitary factors, the increasing abuse of alcohol resulting from contact with Europeans, and even polygamy were blamed for this phenomenon. Since we lack reliable census figures prior to 1932, it is difficult to know whether the African population was, indeed, decreasing in Spanish Guinea.⁹⁴ African informants refer to the rising mortality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This phenomenon was also registered in neighbouring Gabon, and it appears to have been common in many African colonies, as it was exposed at the Missionary Congress in Barcelona in 1929.⁹⁵ The first serious attempts to reverse the situation were made in the early 1940s. From then, the Health Department, with the support of the *Patronato*, initiated a series of campaigns to combat endemic diseases such as malaria, trypanosomiasis, yellow fever and leprosy. The latter became the symbol of Spanish humanitarian propaganda, following the construction of a leprosy hospital in

Mikomeseng and the almost total eradication of this disease from Río Muni by the mid 1940s. More importantly, health conditions were improved thanks to the construction of primary care centres in rural areas. Pélissier admits that, as a result of this policy funded by the *Patronato*, the quality of the health services in Spanish Guinea was amongst the best in the region.⁹⁶

From early on, education became a fundamental tool to assert Spain's sovereignty and transform Africans. Schools were established at military posts as part of the attraction policy, without pursuing any goal other than boosting loyalty to Spain. They taught Spanish patriotic values, in addition to encouraging certain sanitary and farming habits amongst African children. Although the 1918 education plan made education compulsory for children – between the age of four and twelve for boys, and four and eight for girls – it never had the resources to implement this policy.⁹⁷ In fact, it had to rely on the Claretians. In the 1920s and 1930s, missionary penetration into Río Muni was followed by the foundation of *reducciones* (missionary posts dependent on a central station) and schools in rural communities under the care of native catechists. The quality of these schools was certainly poor, given that catechists themselves had not received a good education, but it was enough for children to receive their first insights into Spanish and Christianity. Neither missionaries nor colonial authorities were satisfied with the results of rural schools during this early stage. In 1928, the colonial administration assumed full responsibility over the education system and took the first serious step to organize it, by classifying education into rural, urban, and superior schools.⁹⁸ The latter, however, did not become effective until 1935 with the creation of the *Escuela Superior Indígena*, in which Africans were trained to work in different fields of the colonial administration, such as nursing, clerkship and primary school teaching.

The republican regime tried to give a push to native education by opening numerous government schools yet its efforts did not suffice to change the poor state of education in Río Muni.⁹⁹ It failed in asserting a greater grip over the Claretian missionaries, for it could not replace missionaries' work, especially with respect to education, as the Governor-General admitted:

The meritorious task carried out by the Spanish missionaries in teaching the Spanish language in these possessions is unquestionable. It can be said that the knowledge of our language by the *Pamue* in the Continent is almost exclusively thanks to them...¹⁰⁰

A 1943 report of the Education Department indicated that the total number of official schools was 43 – 18 on Fernando Po and 25 in the rest of the colony.¹⁰¹ The author of the report was aware of the disproportion in the number of schools between the two regions, mentioning the lack of staff as a serious problem, as well as the 'extremely deficient' and 'almost nonexistent' quality of some native teachers.¹⁰² This situation was inconsistent with the Franco administration's so-called humanitarian mission. Therefore, in 1943 a new education statute was approved, which, according to Negrín, laid the basis for the improvement of native education from the late 1940s.¹⁰³ Between 1949 and 1959, the number of official schools rose from 70 to 106, resulting in an enrolment increase of 61 per cent.¹⁰⁴ The new statute classified education in several levels: elementary, primary, and superior schools. The former were taught by native auxiliary-teachers, usually students who had completed primary education, whereas primary schools were taught by either Spanish teachers or African teachers who were graduates of the *Escuela Superior*. Regarding the objectives of elementary and primary education the Education Department said:

Elementary schools have a specific mission to accomplish: to guide natives in the fundamental task of their future lives, such as farming and manual tasks. Primary [schools], where one reaches after a scrupulous selection, have as a mission to prepare

the best qualified students either for higher education [*Escuela Superior*], or for being employed in jobs of a bureaucratic, commercial, or industrial character.¹⁰⁵

Whereas the syllabus of primary education focused on academic subjects, the elementary syllabus put more emphasis on 'the teaching of Spanish, and the development of religious, moral, and civic and social sentiments'.¹⁰⁶ Up to the late 1950s, this was the type of education that the vast majority of Africans received in Spanish Guinea. In comparison to neighbouring colonies – French Equatorial Africa and Nigeria – the number of elementary schools was high.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, Equatorial Guineans were, overall, poorly prepared. After the colony became a province, it was necessary to apply the metropolitan education system and increase the education budget in order to improve the level of education, for independence no longer seemed distant.¹⁰⁸

Arrested economic transformation

The colonial administration had two main priorities with regards to Spanish Guinea's economy. First, it had to guarantee the supply of manpower for the plantations of Fernando Po. Secondly, it needed to convince the metropolis that Spanish Guinea could be a profitable enterprise with the necessary investments. Known as the 'manpower crisis', the former obsessively preoccupied colonial officers and settlers alike during most of the Spanish presence in the Gulf of Guinea.¹⁰⁹ In fact, one only needs to look at the colonial archives to realize that, in addition to government personnel, the bulk of the documentation deals with labour matters. From early on, the Spanish were aware that manpower shortages were not only a consequence of the low population density in the colony, but also of natives'

reluctance to work for wages. The problem was aggravated once the Fang started cultivating cash crops from the late 1930s:

No native... wishes to get hired as a farm labourer, or within the different manual trades and domestic service. We also notice the same trend amongst public servants and colonial guards, who often ask to get their contracts terminated because they prefer to go to their villages and open cultivation fields, from which they obtain greater profit.¹¹⁰

In fact, colonial authorities, in the 1940s, changed their focus regarding the *prestación personal* from being a form of public contribution for the construction of infrastructures to a mechanism to 'create a desire amongst natives for getting hired.'¹¹¹ Colonial measures kept failing in boosting the desire for wage employment amongst Guineans, thus white settlers always had to rely on foreign workers. This was indeed a heavy burden for the European producer, who gradually had to improve conditions in order to attract labourers and tackle the international pressure that, from the late 1920s, denounced semi-slave conditions on Fernando Po.



Photograph 15: Cocoa plantation in Fernando Po

Until the late 1930s, the colonial economy did not obtain great support from the metropolis, and on several occasions settlers raised their voices in demand of more favourable treatment, similar to that of the French and British colonies.¹¹² With the establishment of the Franco regime, protectionist policies started to be considered in order to boost Spanish Guinea's economy. The colony was not only important from the political and ideological point of view, but it could also play a role in the reconstruction of the metropolitan economy, whose recovery after the civil war was undermined by the Second World War. Further, Spanish colonies were finally given a purpose to contribute to the autarchic strategy that Francoist economic thinkers championed as a means to reconstructing and strengthening the weak Spanish economy. The role of Spanish Guinea's economy, however, was not widely acknowledged in the metropolis. In response to critics, Díaz de Villegas wrote an article in 1956 in which, after enumerating the volume of exports sent to Spain, he concluded that the colony produced around one and a half billion pesetas annually.¹¹³

The deep economic crisis that followed the Civil War seriously affected the colonial economy, especially traditional cash crops such as cocoa and coffee. In 1942, Spanish colonial officers recognized that as a result of the economic situation and the metropolitan tariff imposed on these goods, the demand and, subsequently, the prices had gone down.¹¹⁴ The priority of the colonial administration was to save these crops, which had hitherto been the basis of the colonial economy. Therefore they intervened by setting minimum prices in order to achieve 'the greatest stimulus for the native and a fair profit for the European trader.'¹¹⁵ Once Spain started recovering from the immediate effects of the war, coffee, and especially cocoa and timber consolidated their central role within the colonial economy. It was not until the second half of the 1940s that the Franco government imposed tariffs subsidizing

Spanish Guinea's coffee and cocoa production, which from that point bought at above world market prices.¹¹⁶ Indeed, favourable policies from the metropolis led to growth in the colonial economy, especially on Fernando Po, where plantation agriculture boomed in the 1950s and 1960s, but also in Río Muni, where Africans became increasingly involved in cash crop production from the 1940s. Although Pélissier argues that economic growth in Spanish Guinea was somewhat 'artificial' because it was achieved thanks to metropolitan subsidies, it is necessary to keep in mind that this was a common practice within an economy in which international goods paid high duties in order to favour Spanish production.¹¹⁷ Indeed, a few Spaniards benefited the most, having been able to create a 'complex development of monopolistic groups' that controlled large plantations, timber exploitation, imports, goods distribution, and even the small financial sector in Spanish Guinea.¹¹⁸

The economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s did not alter greatly the structure of an economy that, for the most part, suffered the typical problems related to underdevelopment. Thus, the economy revolved around the production and exportation to Spain of cocoa, coffee, and timber. Such exports were capable of enriching Spanish settlers and investors as well as raising the average living standard of Africans above that of Nigeria, Cameroon, and Gabon.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, the colonial economy could not generate enough wealth to bring running water beyond Santa Isabel and Bata, or to asphalt more than 160 kilometres of road across the whole colony, or to take the first steps towards the industrialization of Spanish Guinea.¹²⁰

For the early period of Spanish colonization, the economy of Río Muni was neglected, allowing some possible slow economic transformation without much interference from the state. From the trade in forest products of the 1900s and 1910s,

the African economy gradually moved to cash crops such as cocoa and coffee. This process was initiated by Río Muni migrant workers on their return from Fernando Po's plantations from the mid 1920s.¹²¹ Although there are no figures regarding the extent of labour recruitment in Río Muni, colonial sources suggest that the amount was small and certainly insufficient to cover the needs of the island's plantations. In spite of the lack of success of labour recruitment campaigns, Fang migrant workers played a significant role in the economic transformation of Río Muni. Once Fernando Po settlers realized the potential competition from Río Muni, they lobbied against the cultivation of competing cocoa on the mainland. The colonial government accepted this pressure and sought to encourage the substitution of cocoa farming, arguing that poor soils and economic cost made coffee cultivation more advisable.¹²² Nonetheless, colonial pressure had a very limited effect, and, as we shall see later, cocoa continued to be cultivated in Río Muni during the whole colonial period.

Given the difficulties to apply Fernando Po's plantation model in Río Muni, Núñez de Prado argued in favour of local production on the mainland, following the example of the Germans in Cameron and the British in the Gold Coast.¹²³ The absence of a large European settler population allowed, in the long run, the survival of a large African peasant class in Río Muni, which by the time of independence had almost disappeared from the island. Equally, Río Muni did not develop the monoculture model that made Fernando Po extremely vulnerable to world markets and which resulted in the almost disappearance of the agriculture sector on the island once cocoa production collapsed in the 1970s. Indeed, colonial authorities tried to intervene in the development that Río Muni's economy should follow, however its opposition to cocoa cultivation in Río Muni mainly affected European settlers, for African competition did not seriously undermine Fernando Po's planters and the state

could not control these activities. Whether the nature of the colonial administration was interventionist, it was not until the 1940s that the Spanish authorities were able to take a stronger grip on the African economy in the mainland.



Photograph 16: South of the Wele logging was the main source of income



Photograph 17: Logging was mostly manual and often relied on watercourses for transportation

Duffy suggests that Portuguese strong interventionism 'prevented what might have been the natural' economic 'development' in Angola and Mozambique.¹²⁴ Something similar happened in Río Muni from the 1940s, as Spanish authorities strengthened their commitment to closely guide the economic process. In mainland Spanish Guinea, the most important tool of state economic interventionism was the creation of native markets, designed for the exchange of goods between European traders and African producers with the veiled purpose of preventing rising prices, arising from competition between European traders, through the establishment of set prices for crops. Formerly, European traders moved freely, exchanging supplies for cocoa and coffee in rural areas. In 1932, the Spanish authorities argued that such practices encouraged the 'indolent nature of our natives', making necessary the creation of native markets in district capitals where colonial officers could supervise such exchanges.¹²⁵ It was not until the early 1940s, however, that monthly markets were consolidated as the main site for economic activities in Río Muni, as far as African production was concerned. Besides facilitating commercial exchanges and attracting goods from neighbouring colonies, it was claimed that markets would boost native production because they guaranteed minimum prices while preventing European traders from taking advantage.¹²⁶ In 1945, the *Administrador Territorial* of Niefang noted that the 'cultivated area' was much smaller in 'villages located far from markets'.¹²⁷

A few European traders, however, managed to trade with Africans outside official markets. In 1945, the head of the Agriculture Department argued that it was necessary to stop illegal commercial exchanges on the grounds that these traders often lacked enough economic resources and their lifestyle was far from what 'a white must present before the native'.¹²⁸ Despite generating certain advantages for

farmers, in some respects official markets undermined chances to further increase African incomes. The same colonial officer recognized that 'within a regime of complete market freedom, where demand is higher than supply... goods would get more expensive if insolvent buyers found a way to prosper'.¹²⁹ He suggested to the Governor-General to decrease the number of markets in Río Muni. In so doing, official markets would be more distant from each other, allowing the concurrence of a lesser number of European traders and, hence, keeping African prices low.¹³⁰ Although the number of markets grew over time as new roads and tracks were opened, rising from 23 in 1943 to some 35 in the mid 1950s, government supervision prevented free competition from rising cash crop prices.¹³¹ Traders were not allowed to offer better prices to attract more producers because the government established fixed prices and assigned African peasants to a fixed dealer.

Spanish policies with regards to cassava cultivation are the clearest example of how the colonial administration undermined the natural economic development of African agriculture in Río Muni. Cassava, as the staple food in the region, could have contributed to a more rational and sustainable development in which African peasants sold their production surplus instead of selling crops that were not consumed in Guinea. In the early 1940s, several circumstances favoured the increase in demand for cassava. Firstly, flour became scarce in Spain as a result of the war. Secondly, Fernando Po's labourers were mainly fed with metropolitan rice that now needed to be replaced with cassava. Although the Spanish authorities considered making the cultivation of cassava in villages compulsory in order to guarantee the production of this crop, eventually, such a measure was not necessary because, encouraged by rising prices, Río Muni's farmers concentrated on this crop.¹³² Such was the case that in February 1942, the Sub-Governor of Bata warned that should

cassava prices retain their current level coffee plantations and the timber industry would soon be left without labourers.¹³³ One month later, the Spanish passed an ordinance fixing cassava prices at 0.45 pesetas per kilo, down from 1.5 pesetas per kilo; unsurprisingly cassava production rapidly fell.¹³⁴ A similar action was taken with regards to palm oil, which, like cassava, is also consumed in the region. After peasant production of palm oil received support from the colonial administration, in 1942 a fixed price was set because of competition between European traders raised prices.¹³⁵

One of the myths maintained by the Spanish colonizers was that Africans were not subject to taxation in the colony. In 1911, Barrera demanded the imposition of a personal tax on natives similar to other African colonies, but such a petition was not approved.¹³⁶ The lack of economic development and the difficulties Spain went through in taking control of Río Muni probably dissuaded metropolitan officers. Two decades later, the Sub-Governor of Bata referred to the existence of a personal tax on Africans, although he complained that takings were low because of natives' reluctance as well as poor organization.¹³⁷ It is not clear how long the personal tax was effective for, but it seems likely to have fallen into disuse considering its meagre results. The paternalist approach of the Franco regime eventually removed any idea of direct taxation. As it was portrayed, Africans received several services from the colonial administration, such as health care and education, free of cost. From the colony, some Spaniards demanded that Africans should contribute to their own health care, for the sole support from the metropolis was insufficient.¹³⁸

Despite the lack of personal tax throughout most of the period of Spanish colonization, however, it is untrue that Africans were not subject to taxation or that they did not contribute to funding the services they received. Certainly, the

Prestación Personal was a clear form of taxation that affected both women and men. When it was officially introduced in 1906, the *Prestación Personal* was seen as a method by which all individuals should contribute to the construction of infrastructure of 'general interest', as was still the case in Spain.¹³⁹ Another important form of contribution was generated by native courts. Africans had to pay a fee, which varied according to the matter that they took to native courts. The Governor-General received 50 per cent of total intake, which he personally allotted according to the 'social needs', and the remaining 50 per cent was assigned for the functioning of native courts.¹⁴⁰ A less known form of taxation was *ewonga*, as it was known by the Fang. Women, who were virtually excluded from the colonial economy by the administration, periodically had to take foodstuff to the district capital, where African civil servants and colonial guards could purchase those goods below market prices.

Finally, it is worth considering the economic role of the *Patronato de Indígenas*. Its so-called humanitarian mission would not have been possible had it not been for the economic activities of Africans. Since the African population was considered legally minor, the *Patronato* was in charge of supervising all economic relations between Europeans and *no-emancipados*, and, in doing so, it retained part of the money involved in the transaction. Employers had to pay a fee for each of their African employees. The *Patronato* also held part of African workers' salary until their contracts expired, because they were considered to be unable to save – these sums clearly generated interest. In Río Muni, where very few Africans worked for European employers, the *Patronato* was mostly funded with the tax imposed on the purchase of native coffee.¹⁴¹ Although this amount was paid by the European trader, it is likely that the government deducted this from the fixed price set for coffee. Such

revenues were used to pay for the improvement and construction of health centres, school facilities, housing for native chiefs and 'many other works for the benefit of natives'.¹⁴²



Photograph 18: Road construction was the most common form of *prestación personal*

"Under the divine sign of the cross"

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Spain's colonial model was out-of-date and clearly unsuitable for the new trends of colonialism. Throughout the nineteenth century, progressive sectors in Spain were aware of the archaic nature of the country's social and economic structure, and believed the dominant role of the Church to be partly responsible for hampering development. In 1868, the Jesuit Order had been expelled from Fernando Po as part of the power struggle between liberals and conservatives, which brought the former to power during what came to be known as the *Sexenio Revolucionario*. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church recovered its central role, and in 1883 the Claretian order was entrusted with the

evangelization of the Spanish possessions in the Gulf of Guinea. Although this decision was probably determined as much by Spain's colonial tradition in the Americas as by the state's lack of resources, many actually believed that the missionaries were the best agents in dealing with the natives.

As in the New World, the Spanish stressed the so-called civilizing mission and the evangelization by Catholic missionaries. American peoples had been portrayed as barbaric and savage; a similar state, it was believed, to that of the inhabitants of the Gulf of Guinea. Such a situation justified the presence of Spain, whose new mission was to 'civilize' Africans. The creation of the model village of Banapá in 1894 was certainly inspired by the *reducciones indias* of South America. It was necessary to take the enlightenment of Africans beyond material progress, because Africans required a 'moral' transformation:

Neither the authorities, nor the civil servant, nor the settler, nor the schoolteacher will ever civilize or educate a single native; they will be able to teach him a trade, a skill... they will introduce him to scientific knowledge, but they will not make a man of him. The man is made by the sentiment; the sentiment is the effect of moral education, of religious education, and this can only be achieved by the missionary.¹⁴³

To Spanish conservatives, the Catholic missionary somehow embodied the essence of Spanish identity – '*Hispanidad*' – developed during the course of the *Reconquista* against the Muslim infidel, the conquest and evangelization of the Americas, the wars against Protestant nations in Europe, and ultimately the resistance against increasing secular trends in Spain. Nobody was better suited than the Catholic missionary to spread the fundamental values of Spanish culture amongst 'natives'. The missionary task was key, for it would make possible the necessary transformation of Africans, which would subsequently bring material benefits for both colonizer and colonized.

Both missionaries and colonial officers were aware of the difficulties that the 'moral' transformation of Africans entailed, thus the emphasis was put on children and education. The Spanish missionaries would not only eliminate 'savage customs' from the Sanaga-Ogowe, but would also overcome the influence of foreign Protestant missions, the American Presbyterian and the English Evangelical missions, which had been active in the area since the mid nineteenth century.¹⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Spanish missionary activities in Río Muni were marginal during the 1900s and 1910s, being limited to the southern coastal section. It was not until 1919, after the French Catholic missionaries left Bata, that the Claretians expanded their activities to the whole coastal area. The interior still remained unknown for the Catholic missionaries, but, in 1925 a series of missionary expeditions culminated in the foundation of the first Claretian missionary station in the heart of the Sanaga-Ogowe territory.¹⁴⁵ Education, it was believed, would lay the basis for the formation of 'Christian' families – the cornerstone of the new society. This view was not exclusive to Spain. Fabian points out that similar notions were also expressed in the Belgian Congo, where it was maintained that education 'had to form and transform the whole person in all aspects, religious as well as secular.'¹⁴⁶

In 1921, Father Ajuria asked the Government to force parents to send their children to school, and make an extra effort with regards to education of women, due to the 'despicable condition of the weak sex amongst the Pamue tribes'.¹⁴⁷ Emphasis on children and women was not only for moral reasons, it was also important insofar as it would allow the spread of capitalist structures across the colony. On the one hand, the Spanish believed that polygamy decreased the need of adult men to work for European employers, because they obtained enough incomes from women's work. On the other, patriarchal structures tied youngsters to their home commitments, making it

difficult for them to leave their villages to find wage labour. A 1936 article in the Claretian magazine showed that, in reality, the problem had more to do with the specific needs of the Spanish, claiming that 'the greatest enemies for the plantations, both in Fernando Po and Río Muni, were the civilized and rich natives' because their farms took away workers from European plantations.¹⁴⁸ The Claretians were aware of the importance of their work for the colonial enterprise, and time and again made clear their desire to cooperate in spreading the Spanish culture amongst Africans, even when relationships between Church and State were problematic during the republican period.¹⁴⁹

Between 1886 and 1927 the Claretian order was in charge of education, the main purpose of which was to inculcate patriotic values, change local customs, and evangelize. From the late nineteenth century, the teaching of Spanish was seen as a priority by colonial officials. Up until then, Fernando Po had been an anglophile enclave, dominated by the English-speaking Creole population. Colonial authorities believed that the spread of Spanish as a *lingua franca* would eliminate foreign influence from the colony. In order to avoid a similar situation in Río Muni, in 1907 the colonial government decided to make the teaching of Spanish compulsory in education, even for foreign Protestant missions.¹⁵⁰ Almost two decades later, a Claretian missionary explained that Spanish was a key subject in their schools, where they also tried to inculcate 'love' for Spain.¹⁵¹ This was not enough to consolidate Spanish as the dominant language in the colony, and the government had to approve additional measures in support of the Spanish language. In 1926, the colonial government established the compulsory command of Spanish for all natives working in the administration, whereas all residents who required the service of the administration and did not speak Spanish had to pay for an interpreter.¹⁵² Seven years

later, Governor Lluesma had to renew this measure in the light of the limited results.¹⁵³



Photograph 19: Female labour was strongly criticized by the Spanish



Photograph 20: Embroidery was believed to be more in accordance with women's roles

The prominent role of Claretian missionaries in the colony was often a matter of conflict with the colonial administration. In many respects, this difficult relationship was a reflection of the conflict in Spain, where secular and religious sectors battled for the space that the State and Church should occupy within society. Barrera, for example, considered that Catholic missionaries' privileges were disproportionate in relation to the results they obtained. He was especially unhappy with missionary schools, whose education he considered to be not solid enough, being soon forgotten by pupils.¹⁵⁴ Similar complaints were aired with regards to evangelization, the results of which were said to be inflated by the practice of baptism in '*articulo mortis*' (at the point of death).¹⁵⁵ Claretians' reluctance to spread their mission beyond Río Muni's coastal area during the 1900s and 1910s was also an issue of concern.¹⁵⁶ Missionaries rarely denied such accusations, for it was clear that their results were less than they had previously expected. Nonetheless, Claretians usually complained about the lack of support from the state. Although officially the Catholic mission was independent of the civil administration, its role within the colonial enterprise was acknowledged in the form of subsidies and privileges granted by the colonial state, which provided the bulk of the Claretian mission's budget.¹⁵⁷ In addition, missionaries were entitled to ten hectares of land free of charge in those areas where they established missionary stations or schools. To Barrera, missionaries tended to ignore their main goal in favour of more lucrative activities, claiming that they had no reason to complain about their lack of resources because they obtained incomes from their numerous businesses.¹⁵⁸ In 1925, he unsuccessfully asked the metropolitan government to modify the law regarding the concession of land for Catholic missions on the grounds that they took advantage of it, requesting always the best land whether or not it was needed to feed their pupils.¹⁵⁹ Missionary education was also funded through the

Patronato, which allocated money to pay for catechists, facilities and learning material.¹⁶⁰

Despite the close cooperation between Church and State in the colony, clashes were inevitable because both institutions had different priorities as far as colonization was concerned. The former believed that evangelization should take priority over any other action. Missionaries understood the necessity of economic growth, yet they saw economic exploitation simply as a means to fund colonization's most important objective: the evangelization of Africans.¹⁶¹ The colonial government, however, knew that little support would come from the metropolis unless they could prove that the colony was economically viable. Barrera tried to solve this discrepancy, explaining to the Claretians that:

Without stopping the spread of the Gospel, what Spain needs is to make men and women, but men and women with Spanish ideas... Later there will be time to make them Catholic, which is now impossible, because these rudimentary brains still cannot understand the mysteries of our Religion.¹⁶²

Before the Franco era, missionaries tended to depict any criticism as anti-Catholic, arguing that colonial authorities, especially Governor Barrera, favoured Protestant missions.¹⁶³ Such an accusation was far from being true, since the colonial government was wary of Protestant missions, which being administered by foreign pastors, were often seen as fifth columnists. Insofar as Protestant missions made clear their adherence to Spanish sovereignty, the colonial government had no complaints against them, because they rarely interfered with matters of the administration.¹⁶⁴

Once Spanish Guinea fell under Franco's control in 1936, missionaries received unconditional support from the administration. From then on, the conflict between Hispanization and Evangelization was meaningless, for both concepts were put on the same level; by making Catholics, the missionaries were also making Spaniards. This

support made possible an intensification of evangelization from the 1940s, which, at least numerically, was very impressive. According to Olangua, of a total population of 198,663 in 1959, there were 180,000 Catholics.¹⁶⁵ Protestant missions were not banned by the francoist administration, however. The 1938 General Ordinance of the colony established that, according to the *Fuero de los Españoles* (the Francoist fundamental laws), all Christian denominations should be tolerated. Nonetheless, their proselytizing duty was certainly undermined because the ordinance only allowed the Catholic Church to conduct public displays.¹⁶⁶ Religious tolerance was mostly effective on Fernando Po, where treaties required the respect of Nigerian workers' faith. In Río Muni, however, the Sub-Governor explained that 'the actions developed by these [Protestant] missions is hindered, in order to make their expansion and their activities in this district difficult.'¹⁶⁷ The control of Protestant missions was intensified in 1957 as a result of the proclamation of independence of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, which was feared to have implications in the development of political movements in Río Muni.¹⁶⁸ Although all these actions benefited the work of Claretian missionaries, outside the high number of conversions, their activities were not very successful in eradicating certain local beliefs such as witchcraft or eliminating polygamy, as we shall see in the following chapters.

The Claretians' relative success was partly due to their strategy with regards to natives. Besides targeting the most disaffected and vulnerable people in local society, they also sought to deepen their knowledge of their cultures. This effort was supported by the Spanish government, which financed the publication of the Claretians' dictionaries and grammars of local languages in the late 1920s. In the 1940s, Governors Fontán and Bonelli complained that Spain's neglect of ethnology was a serious mistake, because it was necessary to know natives' 'psyche' and

'ancient customs' in order to make colonization more effective.¹⁶⁹ Up until the 1940s, only Claretian missionaries amongst the Spanish population in the Gulf of Guinea had paid attention to the study of African cultures.¹⁷⁰

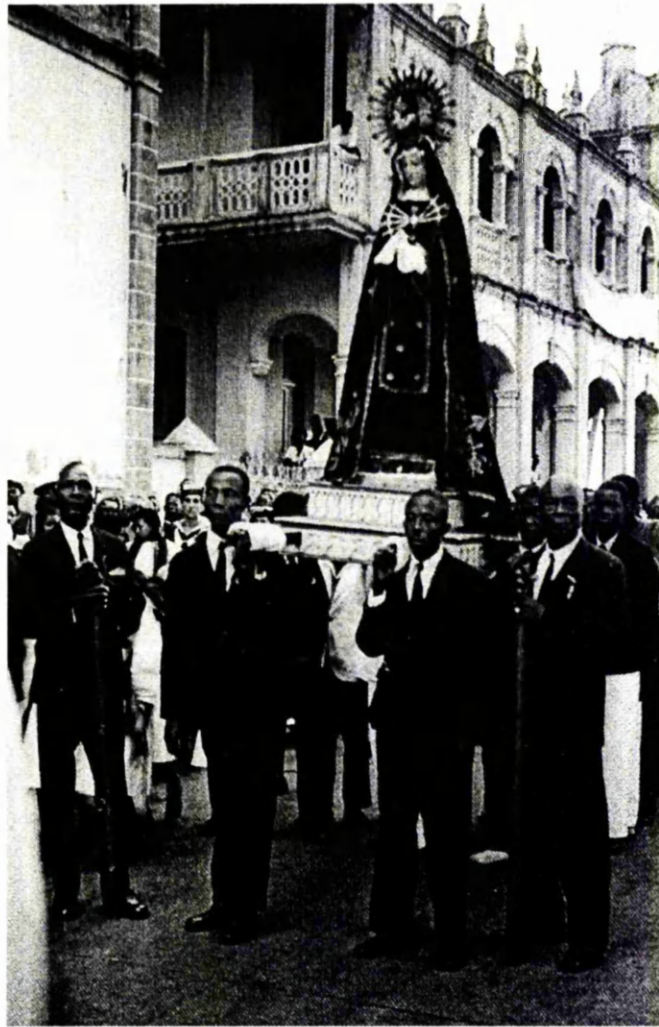
Indeed, a key element in explaining Africans' rapid acceptance of Christianity had to do with missionaries' strategy of presenting themselves as the gentle side of colonialism. In 1928, a Claretian compared the violent methods of the colonial guard during the penetration of Río Muni with those of the missionaries who 'do not enter their villages as a conquered land, and are only trying to make them see the truth'.¹⁷¹ Although civil authorities tried to avoid displays of European division in front of Africans, the Claretians frequently antagonized colonial officers in public. Missionaries used a different language depending on whether Africans were present or not. Thus, they unofficially became the native's advocate when it came to labour exploitation at the hands of the administration, or the protection of native property against settlers' ambitions, especially on Fernando Po.¹⁷² And yet, they could ask for the severest punishment should they feel confronted. In 1942, the Sub-Governor of Bata had to restrain a Catholic mother superior, who asked for further punishment against a group of colonial guards' wives after they had been physically punished and their farms destroyed for confronting and, allegedly, hitting a Catholic nun.¹⁷³

Despite the close relationship between the Church and Franco's regime, conflict between missionaries and the administration remained constant all through the colonial period. As with previous administrations, clashes were often motivated by missionaries' tendency to interfere in what the administration considered to be exclusively its jurisdiction. Undoubtedly family matters provoked most disagreements, for the Catholic order believed that family legislation should be the realm of the Church only. They were especially concerned with everything that had to

do with marriage, especially polygamy, which, to their mind, was somehow sanctioned by a government unable or unwilling to take a tougher position against it. To the missionaries, district officers' mediation in conflicts in which polygamy was involved was a way to consent to it.¹⁷⁴ A Francoist Governor-General expressed his frustration in trying to 'convince [missionaries]... that what we want is to go hand in hand with them... as this is the most convenient thing for the colony'.¹⁷⁵ He hoped that they could become 'great auxiliaries' due to their close contact with natives and their control over 'catechists to report to us' about local 'sects'.¹⁷⁶ In fact, missionaries' interference was likely to upset even the most recalcitrant of colonial authorities. In 1941, after the Claretians sheltered a runaway wife in Ebibeyin without the permission of the district officer and provoked a serious incident with villagers, the Governor-General wrote:

It is not only admissible that they [the Claretians] stand in front of us, but they are not even in a passive attitude. If they do not listen to reason, we shall apply the Law vigorously, and as soon as we expel a couple of missionaries to the Peninsula you will see how the rest will bow to reason.¹⁷⁷

Since the colonial administration was not willing to give up important aspects of its sovereignty, missionaries sought to take part in formulating colonial policies, especially with regards to marital issues. Polygamy, however, was never banned by any of the successive colonial governments, because such a measure was considered to be 'anti-political', due to the strong resistance that it would provoke amongst Africans. The Francoist administration sought to conciliate Claretians' demands by prohibiting polygamy amongst Africans civil servants. More importantly, the 1952 ordinance established that district officers had to be a 'tireless cooperator in the evangelizing task', avoiding any interference in the 'ecclesiastical jurisdiction', while respectfully preserving the government sphere from outside intrusion.¹⁷⁸



Photograph 21: Public displays of the faith served to show the success of the Spanish civilizing mission

Conclusion

The Spanish colonial state, like its counterparts across Africa, was an archaic underdeveloped institution. Being the spin-off of the Spanish state, the colonial administration did share some features with its precursor, yet it never reached the level of institutional development and power of the metropolitan state. In front of Africans, however, such limitations were covered up with a high level of authoritarianism, which contributed to the alienation between state and individual that has characterized the colonial and postcolonial Equatorial Guinea. Constrained by its own lack of development, the internal divisions amongst colonizers, and the

opposition of Africans, the colonial state only achieved limited results. The profits of economic exploitation mostly reached the European settler community and the small group of metropolitan investors. Although colonial policies favoured economic transformations amongst the African population, the system tended to undermine Africans' economic initiatives for self-reliance. Yet again, the authoritarian nature of the colonial state dictated the rules that framed Africans' economic behaviour and prevented the development of subsistence agriculture and its integration within the capitalist economy. With regards to social transformation, the results were even more discouraging. In spite of the rhetoric that surrounded the political reforms of the late 1950s and the 1960s, colonial officers and Claretian missionaries believed that the so-called hispanization of the African population was rather superficial. The ideological nature of the Spanish colonial state and its intense use of rhetoric contributed to the enlargement of the gap between form and substance, in which the former took prominence over the latter. Indeed, greater economic development of the Africans could have served better the efforts for social transformation, yet this would have ultimately clashed with the economic ambitions of the Spanish settlers and the very sense of Spanish domination, as the colonial establishment was aware. Eventually, the colonial state, unable to deal for much longer with the debilitating conflict between economic exploitation and legitimacy, was forced to initiate a process of self-destruction that culminated in the granting of independence.

NOTES

¹ Although officially the colony was renamed as province in 1958, it was not until 1959 that it was approved the law transforming its territorial administration was approved and Africans were granted Spanish citizenship.

² J.M. Banciella, *Rutas de imperio "Fernando Póo y Guinea": su significación actual y potencial ante las necesidades económicas de España* (Madrid, 1940), 39.

³ J. Molina, 'Principales circunstancias económico-jurídicas peculiares de la Guinea española', *Archivos del IDEA*, X, 41 (1957), 8.

⁴ DGMC Director General to the Governor-General (15-3-1927). AGA, box G-196, file 10.

⁵ A. de Unzueta, *Guinea Continental Española* (Madrid, 1944), 355.

⁶ It is interesting to note that the first cocoa plantations on Fernando Po were opened by the Creole minority in the 1880s. For more details see W. G. Clarence-Smith, 'African and European Cocoa Producers on Fernando Po, 1880s to 1910s', *Journal of African History*, 35 (1994); I.K. Sundiata, 'Prelude to Scandal: Liberia and Fernando Po, 1880-1930', *Journal of African History*, 15 (1974); idem, *From Slaving to Neoslavery: The Bight of Biafra and Fernando Po in the Era of Abolition, 1827-1930* (London, 1996).

⁷ Between 1866 and 1892 there were three expeditions to Fernando Po formed by both Spanish and Cuban prisoners, and Spanish migrants. M. de Castro & D. Ndongo, *España en Guinea: Construcción del desencuentro, 1778-1968* (Toledo, 1998), 70-72, 92-93; Inspector for Colonization, Annual Report about the Colonization of Spanish Continental Guinea (14-6-1904). AGA, box G-166.

⁸ Report of the Debate Sessions about the Colonization of the Spanish Territories of the Gulf of Guinea (1904). AGA, box G-166.

⁹ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 131-32. AGA, box G-167.

¹⁰ Ibid, 265.

¹¹ Ibid, 266.

¹² It was considered that natives should remain under military supervision for as long as 'civil life' had not been 'created and channelled'. Government-General, Draft Decree for the Provision and Functioning of Territorial Administrations (18-11-1938). AGA, box G-1746, file 2.

¹³ There is no exact equivalent in English for *patronato*, a Spanish term that refers to a type of council formed by several persons who exercise ruling, advisory, or vigilant functions in a foundation, a charitable or educational institution in order to guarantee that a series of goals are properly accomplished.

¹⁴ See H. Altozano, 'El Patronato de Indígenas de Guinea: Institución Ejemplar', *Archivos del IDEA*, X, 40 (1957), 56.

¹⁵ O. Negrín, *Historia de la educación en Guinea Ecuatorial: el modelo educativo colonial español* (Madrid, 1993), 41-42.

¹⁶ Ibid, 18.

¹⁷ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 23. AGA, box G-167.

¹⁸ Sub-Governor of Bata, Annual Report (16-6-1933). AGA, box G-1906, file 1.

¹⁹ Sub-Governor of Bata to the Governor-General (25-3-1940). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

²⁰ Governor-General Juan Fontán to the Sub-Governor of Bata (9-4-1940). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

²¹ J. Díaz de Villegas, 'Misioneros y Exploradores españoles en Guinea', *Archivos del IDEA*, XIII, 48 (1959), 16.

²² J.M. Bonelli, *Concepto del indigena en nuestra colonización de Guinea: conferencia pronunciada el 17 de diciembre por el Excmo. Sr. D. Juan M^a Bonelli Rubio* (Madrid, 1947), 10.

²³ J. Murphy, 'Legitimation and Paternalism: The Colonial State in Kenya', *African Studies Review*, 29, 3 (1986).

²⁴ General Vicar Nicolás González to the Curator of the Missions (Santa Isabel, 18-10-1924). Archivo General CMF, G-G-12/4.

²⁵ In 1925 the Papal Nuncio wrote a letter to the President of the Spanish Military Directory expressing his preoccupation about the favouritism shown by colonial authorities towards Protestant Missions, and the government's intrusion into moral issues. Papal Nuncio to the President of the Military Directory (11-5-1925). AGA, box G-195, file 7.

²⁶ Núñez de Prado argued that such accusations came from those sectors in the colony that still sympathized with the former Governor-General Barrera. Governor-General Núñez de Prado to the DGMC Director General (15-1-1927). AGA, box G-196, file 10.

²⁷ General Vicar González to the Governor-General (10-4-1928). AGA, box G-196, file 10.

²⁸ *Heraldo de Madrid* (14-2-1930), *Diluvio* (21-3-1930) and *El Progreso* (12-4-1930). AGA, G-197, file 7.

²⁹ Commission of Fernando Po Farmers to the Cabinet (23-6-1930). AGA, box G-197, file 2.

³⁰ Negrín, *Historia de la educación*, 87.

³¹ Inspección General de Colonias, *Carrera de Administradores Territoriales de las Posesiones Españolas del Golfo de Guinea* (1935). AGA, box G-2.

³² Ibid.

³³ Telegram of the Provisional President of the Spanish Republic to the Interim Governor-General (11-5-1931). AGA, box G-7

³⁴ Fragment of a newspaper without name or date that was kept as part of Father J.M. Soler's documentation. Archivo General CMF, G-B-6/21(9).

³⁵ It appears that a few Claretian missionaries were the only casualties of the civil struggle in Spanish Guinea. Their deaths were caused by Franco's troops in their attempt to take control of the ship where the followers of the Popular Front kept the Spanish missionaries. Ibid.

³⁶ Díaz de Villegas, 'Misioneros y Exploradores', 9.

³⁷ J. de la Peña, 'La administración colonial', *África*, 71-72 (1947), 397.

³⁸ Bonelli, *Concepto del indigena*, 8-9.

³⁹ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 6.

⁴¹ J. Fontán, *La etnología y la política indígena: conferencia pronunciada el día 26 de mayo de 1943 ante la Sociedad Española de Antropología, Etnografía y Prehistoria* (Madrid, 1943), 20-23.

⁴² V. Beato & R. Villarino, *Capacidad mental del negro* (Madrid, 1952), 16.

⁴³ Negrín, *Historia de la educación*, 111.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 110.

⁴⁵ de Castro & Ndongo, *España*, 192.

⁴⁶ Ley de bases sobre organización y régimen jurídico de las provincias africanas, 31-7-1959. AGA, box D-474.

⁴⁷ A. Campos, 'The Decolonization of Equatorial Guinea', *Journal of African History*, 44, (2003), 97-100.

⁴⁸ Draft Decree for the Reorganization of the Justice System in the Equatorial Region (16-8-1961). AGA, box D-479, file 1.

⁴⁹ Assistant High Commissioner to the Government Council (7-4-1965). AGA, box D-476.

⁵⁰ R. Pélissier, 'Spain's Discreet Decolonization', *Foreign Affairs*, 43 (1965), 527.

⁵¹ Assistant editor T. Gallego, Report (19-12-1963). AGA, box D-474.

⁵² Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 47. AGA, box G-167.

⁵³ Ibid, 4-5.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 44.

⁵⁵ These departments depended on the Presidencia del Gobierno (Presidential Office). Although the Republican regime temporarily abolished the DGMC, this was eventually reversed by the Francoist administration. De Unzueta, *Guinea Continental*, 357.

⁵⁶ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 128-29. AGA, box G-167.

⁵⁷ De Unzueta, *Guinea Continental*, 356.

⁵⁸ In 1926 the capital of the District of Elobey was moved from Elobey Chico to Kogo, which remained as the capital until the number of Sub-Governors in Río Muni was reduced to one in the early 1930s. Communication to the DGMC Director General (15-10-1926). AGA, box G-195, file 1.

⁵⁹ In the 1938 reform, Fernando Po was formed by two districts, whereas Continental Guinea was divided into ten districts. Draft Decree for the Provision and Functioning of Territorial Administrations (18-11-1938). AGA, box G-1746, file 2.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ de la Peña, 'La administración', 398.

⁶² Sub-Governor Cabrera, Report on the situation in mainland Spanish Guinea (25-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

⁶³ See notes 18 and 19.

⁶⁴ H.S. Wilson, *The Imperial Experience in Sub-Saharan Africa since 1870* (Mineapolis, 1977), 198.

⁶⁵ K. Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton, 1985), 41.

⁶⁶ Government Delegate of Nsork (25-4-1931). AGA, box G-1876, file 1.

⁶⁷ The Spanish believed that Africans were inclined to exercise violence whenever they were backed by some sense of authority. Governor-General Barrera to the First Officer of the Military Post in Ayamaken (11-1-1916). AGA, box G-4; Governor-General Núñez de Prado to the DGMC Director General (15-3-1928). AGA, box G-195; First Chief of the Colonial Guard to the Governor-General (10-1-1936). AGA, box G-1784.

⁶⁸ *Heraldo de Madrid* (14-2-1930). AGA, box G-196, file 7; *Diluvio* (31-3-1930). AGA, box G-196, file 7; *El Progreso* (12-4-1930). AGA, box G-196, file 7; Commission of Fernando Po Farmers to the Cabinet (23-6-1930). AGA, box G-197, file 2; DGMC Confidential Document (4-2-1932). AGA, box G-197, file 11; M. Pugnumboñg, letter to the Spanish President forwarded by the Biblioteca Cantón to the Liga Catalana Humanista (17-11-1931, 21-12-1931). AGA, box G-197, file 11;

Letter of the Liga Catalana Humanista to the Spanish President (28-12-1931). AGA, box G-197, file 11.

⁶⁹ Sundiata, 'Prelude to Scandal'; *From Slaving to Neoslavery*.

⁷⁰ Gobierno General de los Territorios Españoles del Golfo de Guinea, *Resúmenes estadísticos del censo general de población de los territorios españoles del Golfo de Guinea a 31 de diciembre de 1950* (Madrid, 1952), 12-17.

⁷¹ Ibid, 17.

⁷² Equatorial Guinea's 1966 Population Census. AGA, box D-479, file 1.

⁷³ General Vicar González explained to the Curator of the Missions that, 'it was difficult to have a more or less straight and correct criterion about matters over here, without having lived in these lands'. General Vicar González to the Curator of the Missions (25-3-1918). Archivo General CMF, G-G-12/1.

⁷⁴ Letter to the Spanish President Manuel Azaña (21-1-1932). AGA, box G-196, file 9.

⁷⁵ Banciella, *Rutas*, 12-15.

⁷⁶ DGMC Director General to the Governor-General (18-1-1949). AGA, box G-1915, file 1.

⁷⁷ Article 34, Royal Decree of 11 of July 1904. R. Morales, 'Patronato de Indígenas', *África*, 71-72 (1947), 402.

⁷⁸ A collection of his ethnographic essays about the Sanaga-Ogowe was published in *La Guinea Española*.

⁷⁹ General Vicar González to the Curator of the Missions (12-10-1919). Archivo General CMF, G-G-12/2.

⁸⁰ Quoted in H. Álvarez, 'El problema de nuestros indígenas evolucionados', *África*, 120 (1951), 597.

⁸¹ Bonelli, *Concepto del indígena*, 14.

⁸² Sub-Governor Cabrera, Report on the situation in mainland Spanish Guinea (25-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

⁸³ We saw in the previous chapter how the missionaries contributed to the portrayal of the 'Pamues' as an aggressive invading 'tribe'. The Spanish later applied this stereotype to Fang living on the island, despite the fact that they were initially brought as part of the missionary's model village experiment and to work on the cocoa plantations.

⁸⁴ Altozano, 'El Patronato', 56.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 57.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 56.

⁸⁷ Álvarez, 'El problema', 597.

⁸⁸ Álvarez, 'El problema', 597.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 597.

⁹⁰ Bonelli, *Concepto del indígena*, 19.

⁹¹ S. Berman 'People's Story: Footnote to Spanish Guinea', *Phylon*, 18 (1957), 308.

⁹² Álvarez, 'El problema', 598.

⁹³ Governor-General Núñez de Prado to the DGMC Director General (15-3-1928). AGA, box G-195.

⁹⁴ For the demographic evolution of Río Muni since 1932, see Gobierno Autónomo de la Guinea Ecuatorial, *Reseña demográfica de la Demarcación* (Santa Isabel, 1965).

⁹⁵ *La Guinea Española* (10-1-1932), 2.

- ⁹⁶ J. Chandler, 'The Birth of Equatorial Guinea', *Journal of African History*, 11 (1970) (Review of Pélissier's *Études Hispano-Guinéens*, 1969), 464.
- ⁹⁷ Negrín, *Historia de la educación*, 76.
- ⁹⁸ H. Álvarez, 'Enseñanza en la guinea Española', *Archivos del IDEA*, VI, 22 (1952), 31.
- ⁹⁹ Negrín, *Historia de la educación*, 35.
- ¹⁰⁰ Governor-General to the General Vicar (24-4-1934). AGA, G-76, file 8.
- ¹⁰¹ Summary of the current state of the Education Department and its work during the year 1942 (7-7-1943). AGA, box G-1914, file 1.
- ¹⁰² Ibid.
- ¹⁰³ Negrín, *Historia de la educación*, 35.
- ¹⁰⁴ These figures do not include the schools under the management of the Catholic and Protestant missions. Ibid, 36.
- ¹⁰⁵ Education Department, 1944 and 1945 Annual Report (7-8-1946). AGA, box G-1907, file 4.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁷ Instituto de Estudios Africanos, *La Guinea de Hoy* (Madrid, 1958), 37.
- ¹⁰⁸ See note 112 in chapter 5.
- ¹⁰⁹ Molina, 'Principales circunstancias', 8.
- ¹¹⁰ 1942 Annual Report of the Regional and Territorial Administration of Bata. AGA, box G-1907, file 4.
- ¹¹¹ Governor-General to the Sub-Governor (9-4-1940). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ¹¹² A 1932 article complained that Spain imported goods from French colonies that were also produced in the colony. *La Guinea Española* (14-8-1932), 4-5.
- ¹¹³ J. Díaz de Villegas, 'La Guinea de Iradier y la de hoy', *Archivos del IDEA*, IX, 36 (1956).
- ¹¹⁴ 1942 Annual Report of the Regional and Territorial Administration of Bata. AGA, box G-1907, file 4.
- ¹¹⁵ Prices of coffee in Río Muni varied from one district to another, depending on the distance from the coast – from 6 pesetas per kilo in Bata to 4.5 in Nsork, in the south-eastern corner. Sub-Governor of Bata, Orders concerning the markets of colonial goods (22-7-1942). AGA, box G-1944, file 5.
- ¹¹⁶ The cocoa subsidy was established in 1948. Chandler, 'The Birth of Equatorial Guinea', 464.
- ¹¹⁷ Pélissier, 'Spain's Discreet Decolonization', 525.
- ¹¹⁸ Liniger-Goumaz links these economic and financial groups in the colony to Carrero Blanco, close aide of General Franco and member of his government since 1951 when he was appointed Ministerial Under-Secretary. M. Liniger-Goumaz, *Small is not always Beautiful: The Story of Equatorial Guinea* (London, 1988), 31-33; Commission for the Economic Development of the Equatorial Region, Report on the Main Problems of the Río Muni and Fernando Po Provinces (6-11-1962). AGA, box D-479, file 1.
- ¹¹⁹ Ibid.
- ¹²⁰ Ibid.
- ¹²¹ *La Guinea Española* (25-11-1926), 7-9; idem (25-12-1928), 101-03.
- ¹²² Governor-General to the DGMC Director General (15-12-1926). AGA, box G-196, file 10; Governor-General Núñez de Prado (1928). AGA, box G-195, file 1.

- ¹²³ Governor-General Núñez de Prado to the DGMC Director General (15-6-1929). AGA, box G-197, file 2.
- ¹²⁴ J. Duffy, 'Portuguese Africa 1930-60', in L. Gann & P. Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960*, v.2 (Cambridge, 1970), 176.
- ¹²⁵ Sub-Governor of Bata, Annual Report (16-6-1933). AGA, box G-1906, file 1.
- ¹²⁶ Governor-General to the DGMC Director General (24-7-1942). AGA, G-1944, file 5.
- ¹²⁷ Niefang District Officer, Report (January 1945). AGA, box G-1748, file 1.
- ¹²⁸ Head of the Agriculture Department, Proposal concerning native markets in Río Muni (13-3-1945). AGA, box G-1944, file 5.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid.
- ¹³¹ Ibid. Molina, 'Principales circunstancias', 10.
- ¹³² Governor-General to the Sub-Governor (5-1-1942). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ¹³³ Sub-Governor to the Governor-General (23-2-1942). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ¹³⁴ 1942 Annual Report of the Regional and Territorial Administration (Bata, Nov. 1942). AGA, box G-1907, file 4.
- ¹³⁵ Ibid. Sub-Governor to the Governor-General (3-8-1945). AGA, box G-1926, file 1.
- ¹³⁶ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 284. AGA, box G-167.
- ¹³⁷ Sub-Governor of Bata, Annual Report (16-6-1933). AGA, box G-1906, file 1.
- ¹³⁸ De Unzueta argued that Britain and France had imposed an annual contribution to pay for health care expenses. In neighbouring Cameroon and Gabon, Africans had to pay 150 and 60 francs respectively. De Unzueta, *Guinea Continental*, 344-45.
- ¹³⁹ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel 13-10-1911). AGA, box G-2.
- ¹⁴⁰ Governor-General Bonelli's Bylaw (Santa Isabel, 31-3-1947). AGA, box G-1863, file 2.
- ¹⁴¹ Governor-General Bonelli to the interim Sub-Governor of Bata (12-9-1945). AGA, box G-1926, file 1.
- ¹⁴² Ibid.
- ¹⁴³ 1906-1907 Report of the Royal Commissariat in Spanish Possessions of the Gulf of Guinea. AGA, box G-166.
- ¹⁴⁴ Governor-General Barrera to the Minister of State (Santa Isabel, 29-2-1912). AGA, box G-7; de Unzueta, *Guinea Continental*, 351-52.
- ¹⁴⁵ Superior of the Claretian Mission Nicolás González to the Governor-General (Santa Isabel, 29-12-1924). Archivo General CMF, G-G-12/4.
- ¹⁴⁶ J. Fabian, 'Missions and the Colonization of African Languages: Development in the Former Belgian Congo', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 17, 2 (1983), 177.
- ¹⁴⁷ *La Guinea Española* (25-5-1921), 12-15.
- ¹⁴⁸ Idem (30-8-1936), 3-4.
- ¹⁴⁹ General Vicar to the Governor-General (25-4-1935). AGA, box G76, file 8.
- ¹⁵⁰ Report of the General Office for the Colonies (8-4-1935). AGA, box G-76, file 8.
- ¹⁵¹ Father M. Jauria, *La Guinea Española* (25-5-1924), 9-11.
- ¹⁵² Report of the General Office for the Colonies (8-4-1935). AGA, box G-76, file 8.
- ¹⁵³ Governor-General E. Lluesma's Decree, *Boletín Oficial de los Territorios Españoles del Golfo de Guinea* (28-11-1933). AGA, G-1944, file 9.
- ¹⁵⁴ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 38-40. AGA, box G-167.
- ¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 47.

- ¹⁵⁶ Governor-General Barrera to the Undersecretary of the Ministry of State (12-1-1925). AGA, box G-200.
- ¹⁵⁷ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 37-38. AGA, box G-167.
- ¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 43.
- ¹⁵⁹ Governor-General Barrera to the Undersecretary of the Ministry of State (12-1-1925). AGA, box G-200.
- ¹⁶⁰ General Vicar González to the Curator of the Missions (10-5-1926). Archivo General CMF, G-G-12/6.
- ¹⁶¹ General Vicar González to the Curator of the Missions (10-5-1920). Archivo General CMF, G-G-12/1.
- ¹⁶² Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 41. AGA, box G-167.
- ¹⁶³ General Vicar González to the Curator of the Missions (18-10-1924). Archivo General CMF, G-G-12/4.
- ¹⁶⁴ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 50. AGA, box G-167.
- ¹⁶⁵ A. Olangua, 'Cien años de Historia de las Misiones de la Guinea Española', *Archivos del IDEA*, XIII, 48 (1959), 63-64.
- ¹⁶⁶ Governor-General to the DGMC Director General (Santa Isabel, 23-10-1952). AGA, box G-1945, file 2.
- ¹⁶⁷ The Sub-Governor of Bata indicates that such actions responded to the instructions given by the Governor-General. Sub-Governor's Report about Protestant Missions to the Governor-General (21-10-1949). AGA, box G-1945, file 2.
- ¹⁶⁸ Sub-Governor Cervera to the Governor-General (23-12-1957). AGA, box G-1945, file 2. See also note 47 in chapter 5.
- ¹⁶⁹ Fontán claimed that ethnological knowledge was a prerequisite to the elaboration of manual for district officers. Governor-General Fontán to the Sub-Governor (9-4-1940). AGA, box G-1926, file 2. See also Bonelli, *Concepto del indígena*, 8. This new approach of Spanish colonialism culminated with the creation of the Museum of Africa in 1945, and, above all, the *Instituto de Estudios Africanos* in 1947, which during two decades was in charge of the scientific research and publication of subjects related to the African colonies.
- ¹⁷⁰ *La Guinea Española* (10-2-1918), 7-8.
- ¹⁷¹ Idem (25-12-1928), 7-8.
- ¹⁷² General Vicar González demanded the regulation of the *prestación personal* in order to avoid arbitrariness. Idem (14-12-1930), 2-3. Before, Father Jauria called for the legal protection of natives' properties, given that many Bubi people had lost their properties as a result of debts with European settlers. Idem (25-5-1924), 9-11.
- ¹⁷³ Sub-Governor of Bata to the Governor-General (29-1-1942). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ¹⁷⁴ *La Guinea Española* (10-9-1912), 7-8.
- ¹⁷⁵ Governor-General to the Sub-Governor (14-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ¹⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷⁷ Governor-General to the District Officer of Ebibeyin (8-2-1940). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ¹⁷⁸ Governor-General to the DGMC Director General (Santa Isabel, 23-10-1952). AGA, box G-1945, file 2.

Chapter 4

Searching for a New Tradition

For the Fang of Río Muni, the 1930s and 1940s was a transitional period in which, despite numerous important changes, their society continued to be dominated by individuals born long before the Spanish conquest. Fernández points out that, after losing their autonomy and becoming colonial subjects, the Fang became 'self-conscious about their own way of life.'¹ I shall argue that, rather than triggering the process of self-awareness, colonial conquest deepened it. Such a development laid the basis of the modern Fang tradition. This chapter will examine the transition between the established Sanaga-Ogowe tradition and the new socio-cultural organization, which culminated once the younger generation took over from their fathers in the late 1940s. Until a decade earlier, the impact of a capitalist-based economy in Río Muni had remained marginal, as cash crop cultivation had been only adopted by a few Fang individuals in northern and coastal Río Muni, favoured by the presence of colonial roads and white traders. South of the river Wele, however, commercial cultivation developed more slowly and access to cash was mostly limited to the timber industry. From the late 1930s, as a result of the post-war crisis in Spain, the demand for tropical goods such as cassava and palm oil grew significantly. Thanks to the push of the colonial authorities and the introduction of subsidized prices, coffee and cocoa spread throughout Río Muni during the 1940s. Many men, for whom agriculture production had been limited mostly to clearing farmland until then, now became fully engaged in commercial cultivation.

As a result of the social and economic transformations of the 1930s and 1940s, Fang society underwent a crisis of adaptation in which the rise in individualism and deepening social divisions clashed with strong egalitarian tendencies. We shall see how, at the same time, Christianity started taking root thanks to the intense campaign of evangelization which, consisting in the construction of numerous *reducciones* under the management of African catechists, targeted women and children in an effort to dismantle the Sanaga-Ogowe belief system. Christianity, however could not cope with the social crisis that affected Fang society and this was reflected in an escalation in the perception of witchcraft activities and the subsequent renewal of old anti-witchcraft cults, such as *Ngii*, and the emergence of new ones, such as the *Don Enrique* cult. Amidst this climate, local authority was also affected by the crisis, as Fang leaders were unable to restore the peace in their communities. The development of a dual authority structure to meet the internal demands of the *mvók* and the external ones of the government was not enough to prevent the weakening of local authority. In fact, Fang leadership actions, during this period, were a desperate attempt to preserve the political autonomy of their communities and, thus, their own legitimacy. The crisis also provoked an intellectual response. The Fang of Río Muni adopted the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement and the *Bwiti* cult, which spread from Cameroon and Gabon respectively. Despite being minority movements, they had a significant impact on the configuration of the new tradition. Under colonial domination, the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement succeeded in creating a sense of common identity amongst the numerous Fang clans. By 1948, the process of self-awareness matured to the point that a few Río Munian Fang began publicly to express their discontent with colonialism before an official delegation of the Spanish government to the Gulf of Guinea, in which many consider today as the first act of the incipient Equatorial Guinean nationalism.

When Mel̃n left: Christianity and witchcraft on the rise

The end of military campaigns did not bring to a halt Spain's offensive in Río Muni. From the early 1920s the Sanaga-Ogowe of the interior witnessed a different kind of assault in the form of Claretian missionary penetration, whose effects had been experienced by their coastal neighbours from the mid 1880s. In 1883, the Claretian order was asked to carry out the evangelization of the Spanish Territories of the Gulf of Guinea, and as early as 1885 they had already founded two missionary stations in Corisco and Cabo San Juan.² It would not be until the foundation in 1925 of the mission of San Francisco Javier de Nkue-Efulan – some 100 kilometres inland – that the rapid acculturation process began. The arrival of the Catholic missionaries into the Sanaga-Ogowe country in the 1920s could not have happened at a better time, because, after the series of military campaigns and the increasing labour conscription, the Christian message of hope found the perfect reception amongst the Sanaga-Ogowe. The Spanish missionaries' slow start was soon made up with a series of campaigns that were aimed at evangelizing the whole Sanaga-Ogowe people. Only four decades after the foundation of the first missionary station in the interior, most of Río Muni's population was Catholic.³

When talking to Fang elders, one immediately perceives an air of frustration about the state of Fang society today. Retrospectively, many elders point to the banning and subsequent disappearance of *Mel̃n* as the *coup de grâce* that sealed their complete defeat, bringing about the subjugation and decadence of their society. Balandier and Fernández argue that the ancestor cult was a key element of Sanaga-Ogowe society which reinforced elders' authority while strengthening community ties.⁴ Similarly, Fang informants maintain that their ancestors' power came from *Mel̃n*.⁵ It is therefore difficult to understand why documentary sources do not refer at

all to any strong backlash as a result of the banning of such an important cult. According to informants, Spain's repressive methods prevented their fathers from developing any sort of active resistance, leaving them with the sole option of simply handing over their relics and abandoning their rituals. Nonetheless, this explanation is not satisfactory, since we know that societies under coercion are often capable of developing passive strategies in order to preserve valuable institutions. Polygamy, for example, was extremely resilient throughout the entire period of colonial domination in spite of Spain's position against it.

Although repressive official measures and the aggressive campaign by missionaries did contribute to the end of the Fang ancestor cult, a careful analysis of sources indicates that the rapid disappearance of *Melăn* was also connected with internal dynamics. Scholars and Fang people in general traditionally assume that cults such as *Melăn* were long-lasting phenomena within precolonial societies. There is yet much that is not known about the nature and pace of social transformation in Central Africa before the advent of colonialism. De Craemer, Vansina and Fox argue that such religious movements are not a modern phenomenon, but were common in Central Africa prior to colonial domination.⁶ They claim that twentieth-century religious movements rarely last more than thirty years before being replaced by a newer and more vital movement.⁷ The comparison between past and modern religious manifestations is useful insofar as it suggests that similar processes of substitution were likely to have taken place in the past, although data indicate that the lifetime of precolonial cults was significantly longer.⁸ In the case of *Melăn*, it is difficult to establish how long this cult had been around before dying out in the first half of the twentieth century. Clearly, the mediating role of the ancestors, as the basic principle of Central African religions, predates rituals such as *Melăn*. This ancestor cult was

commonly practiced across the entire Sanaga-Ogowe territory, even by the Bisio or Osyeba, whose separation from the core group took place at a very early stage, corroborating that *Melān* was a rather old cult.⁹ It is reasonable to think that *Melān*, like modern religious movements, replaced a similar ancestor cult sometime before the series of migrations that gave birth to the different sections of the Sanaga-Ogowe.



Photograph 22: Claretian mission station in Cabo San Juan



Photograph 23: Claretian missionaries in Nkue

According to De Craemer, Vansina and Fox, the substitution of a given religious movement by another in Central Africa is inevitable, as people eventually lose faith in the cult's ability to 'prevent misfortune and maximize good fortune.'¹⁰ People's confidence in a particular ritual has much to do with the novelty associated with it, and its lifetime may be extended through constant innovation and reinterpretation.¹¹ While sharing the same basic principles, *Melăn* rituals contain numerous variations even within the same region. The large degree of autonomy and decentralization of Sanaga-Ogowe societies facilitated a process of constant renewal, since each *mvók-e'bot* could introduce modifications within *Melăn*. In spite of this, some sources suggest that, by the early twentieth century, *Melăn* had already entered a process of decline, which was accelerated, rather than initiated, by the European conquest of Río Muni and neighbouring territories.¹² Tessmann, for example, mentions that during the celebration of a *Melăn* ritual in the late 1900s, some men did not seem to take the ceremony very seriously and laughter and jeer could be heard.¹³ To Fernández, Tessmann probably witnessed 'rituals in decline', yet Fernández insists that *Melăn* was still very dynamic and so-called comic images only sought to offer 'a grace note and relaxation from the previous engagement with death' of the first two days of rituals.¹⁴ Although contemporary Fang descriptions of *Melăn* also portray a very different picture from that which Tessmann observed, an octogenarian informant admitted that faith in *Melăn* was not equally shared by everybody, and he was never initiated because of his father's disbelief.¹⁵ Even though *Melăn* still enjoyed a high degree of dynamism at the beginning of the twentieth century, it appeared to have been experiencing its first symptoms of decline as a result of the acute crisis and instability that affected the Sanaga-Ogowe from the late nineteenth century and that

culminated in their subjugation at the hands of the Europeans. Such a crisis, for which *Melăn* did not have an effective response, would explain its rapid decline.

At first sight, one gets the impression from Fang sources that *Melăn* was eliminated as a result of an organized campaign led by Claretian missionaries with the support of the Colonial Guard. This episode of Fang history is portrayed by present-day informants as a traumatic experience, yet when asked about details of how this campaign took place in their villages, facts are often scanty:

The power of the Fang came from *Melăn*, that is why they banned it... This banning came from the Church... catechists were told to observe who had *Melăn* ... with the support of the colonizers...¹⁶

Melăn was extremely powerful, so, when the missionaries came, their main target was to eliminate *Melăn*. I never saw it.¹⁷

Melăn disappeared because of the work of the missionaries... If anybody resisted, the priest left and reported them to the authorities, which, then, ordered the military to arrest people.¹⁸

When the missionaries found out about *Melăn* and the fact that the rite involved human skulls, they got furious... They said that this meant that we eat human flesh. That is how they decided that we should stop practicing *Melăn*.¹⁹

Surprisingly, neither the colonial nor Claretian archives shed any light on the process. Only in *La Guinea Española*, it is possible to find some obscure references to the ancestor cult. In a series of articles written in 1911, Father González described some Sanaga-Ogowe rituals that, despite being distorted, are easily recognizable as elements of *Melăn*.²⁰ At this time, however, Spanish missionaries were not fully aware of the importance of this ancestor cult, which was simply depicted as African 'superstitions'. The expansion of missionary schools from the 1910s allowed a dual learning process, in which both African children and Catholic missionaries learnt from each other's culture. By the early 1920s, the Claretians understood that cults

such as *Melán*, by then referred to as 'secret societies', played a vital role in Africans' lives, making it necessary to fight against them if evangelization was to succeed. Such a concern was expressed in numerous articles published in *La Guinea Española* in the 1920s. A typical contribution from 1922 argued that:

These secret societies have an enormous influence in the social and religious life of people... and their principal objective seems to be to keep the customs of the tribes, to set indisputable laws, and make women, slaves and children work and obey. The leaders of these societies are usually political and religious chiefs... [and] what gives power to these societies is the terrible sanctions that they impose.²¹

Since I was unable to examine missionary archives in Malabo, conclusions on this subject must be tentative. For the most part, *Melán* was eradicated through the active role of Fang individuals, mostly catechists but also missionary school pupils and women. Once missionaries realized the importance of religious cults within Fang society, they urged new converts to abandon their beliefs if they truly wanted to find God and avoid eternal damnation.²² The problem was that missionaries' influence mostly reached young men, women and children, neither of whom had any control over the ancestor cult. *Melán* relics, the ancestor skulls, were not simply a symbol but the instrument around which the village community came together to communicate with their forefathers, and the Claretians realized that if these symbols were eliminated, then the cult was doomed.²³

Although missionaries commanded all Africans to give up their 'fetishes', they were able to monitor the process only through their sporadic visits to Fang villages. The role of Fang converts was, then, to report on all those fellow villagers who kept relics. Even though Fang elders learnt to distrust catechists, in most cases they were reported by women and children in an attempt to prove their faith to the missionaries.²⁴ An informant, who attended missionary school in the mid 1930s,

described how he participated in the removal of *Melǎn* skulls. After receiving information on a village where *Melǎn* relics were kept, the Catholic missionary gathered all students to follow him. The mere petition of the missionary was enough for elders to hand over their relics, which were later taken to the mission to be blessed and buried.²⁵ In this account the students are described as having played a passive role, yet it is not that clear that this was always the case. A Fang elder explains that 'at the time, the priests were like the authorities because thanks to their escort of youngsters they could do whatever they wanted.'²⁶ Furthermore, the Fang were aware of the close relationship between the Claretians and colonial officers. To disobey the missionaries amounted to a challenge to the colonial government, which inevitably brought punitive measures. According to Fang informants, the removal of relics was mostly a missionary business in which colonial authorities did not intervene. However, when elders refused to give in to missionary pressure, the latter always found official support through the Colonial Guard.

There are indications that some villages abandoned *Melǎn* voluntarily, but only one informant openly admitted that this was the case in his village. According to him, this was an individual decision because each family head kept the relics of his ancestors. Thus, when missionaries asked his village to abandon *Melǎn*, many elders freely chose to hand over their relics, making unnecessary the direct intervention of Catholic missionaries or the Colonial Guard.²⁷ Fang reaction to the process of removal of *Melǎn* relics must be considered in the light of the egalitarian and decentralized nature of society, in which individual elders took different positions as to whether or not to give up their relics freely. It is likely that the voluntary handover of relics was more common than is usually acknowledged, explaining to some extent why many informants do not have clear recollections of this episode. Considering that

Melăn is seen by many Fang elders today as the source of power of their forefathers and that some of them are likely to have cooperated with missionaries in the early stages of evangelization, it makes sense that these memories were, somehow, 'forgotten'.

The offensive against *Melăn* did not begin with the expansion of Spanish missionaries in the 1920s, but earlier, in the 1890s, when the German influence started to be felt in large areas of central and northern Río Muni. There is little information about this, but in 1954 Larrea wrote that the Bisio reported to him that they had been forced to hide their ancestor skulls from the Germans who used them for decoration.²⁸ The Claretian fight against local beliefs may have been facilitated by German actions as well as early Presbyterian activities from their missionary station at Ebolowa, in southern Cameroon. The influence of German settlers and Presbyterian missionaries mostly affected the northern section of Río Muni, explaining to some extent why some Ntumu believe that *Melăn* disappeared earlier in their region while the Okak, south of the Wele, managed to preserve it for longer.²⁹ We know that Presbyterian missionaries were already present in the Muni and Gabon estuaries before 1842, but, in the long run, the impact of their mission was not as strong as in northern Río Muni and especially southern Cameroon.³⁰ From the Presbyterian mission in Ebolowa local converts took upon themselves the double mission of eradicating *Melăn* and spreading the Christian gospel. Presbyterian activities against the ancestor cult in Río Muni seemed to predate that of the Claretian missionaries by at least one decade. A Fang elder from Mikomeseng recounted how his family abandoned *Melăn* before he was born in the late 1910s due to the influence of the Bulu of southern Cameroon. According to him, Bulu converts told them that *Melăn* was not the original religion of the Ntumu and it should be abandoned if they wanted to be faithful to their tradition,

which was a main concern of the those who called themselves *Ntumu-Mebúm* or genuine Ntumu. Instead, 'the Bulu brought the religion called *Amerika*', which undoubtedly refers to the American origin of the Presbyterian missionaries.³¹ Others refer to this religion that came from Cameroon as *Jiso*, probably a deformation of the word Jesus.³² Clearly, the persuasive skills of the Bulu converts were helped by more mundane circumstances. As the informant went on to explain, at the time the region was badly affected by a contagious skin disease called *mebara* (yaws). The missionaries had a cure for it, but their Bulu followers only allowed non-Christians to be treated on condition that *Melăn* relics were first handed over.³³

By the 1920s, more than three decades of insecurity and violence had seriously disrupted Sanaga-Ogoe society. Elders had first been unable to put an end to the continuous skirmishes between local clans, and later they were driven to accept Spain's sovereignty as the only answer to the endemic violence. This solution soon took a sour turn when the Spanish authorities imposed forced labour for the road construction of the 1920s. To make matters worse, since at least the 1910s the northern region of Río Muni had been affected by contagious diseases such as yaws and leprosy, whereas the central and southern regions had been badly hit by famine. The main goal of *Melăn* was to ensure the welfare of the *mvók-e'bot*, but elders could not obtain any positive answer from the ancestors to counteract the chain of adversities that shook their tradition. Certainly, this crisis took a heavy toll on the dominant position of the elders, who in the eyes of the younger generation rapidly started to become replaced by the Europeans as figures of authority. As happened earlier with the first Bulu converts north of the Ntem – before Claretian missionaries even set foot in most Fang villages – Fang youngsters educated in Catholic missions returned home carrying news about the new and true God.³⁴ As a result of all these

circumstances, *Melăn* was in a very poor state to face the vigour and drive of Christianity that under the direction of the Claretians spread all over Río Muni in the 1930s. *Melăn* and the remaining Sanaga-Ogowe cults were forced to retreat due to missionary persecution. Its once public rituals now became clandestine, a situation in which it could not survive, because, unlike witchcraft, *Melăn* needed to be open and communal in order to benefit the whole village community. Gradually, the old ancestor cult of the Sanaga-Ogowe disappeared during the 1930s and 1940s as more and more villages fell under the influence of Claretian missionaries. By the 1950s, only a few Fang families still observed *Melăn* in remotes areas of Río Muni.³⁵

Although some scholars argue that Central African religious movements disappear only when they are successfully replaced by a new but yet similar cult, the end of *Melăn* did not quite follow this pattern.³⁶ *Melăn* was indeed replaced, not by another ancestor cult, but by Christianity. Indigenous cults found it extremely difficult to flourish under colonial rule, leaving the door open for Christianity, which was not only legal but also supported by the colonial establishment. However, the new order did not have the same impact on witchcraft beliefs. This was because the Spanish mostly ignored the significance of witchcraft, and repressive policies did not have the same effect on practices that are clandestine by definition. Paradoxically, the Spanish saw how witchcraft increased parallel to Fang evangelization during the 1930s and 1940s. Christianity expanded very rapidly across Río Muni, particularly among Fang youngsters and women. The skilful tactics of the 'merciful whites' paid off at a time when the Fang were still trying to recover from the trauma of the late 1920s road construction.

Although *Melăn* as a public cult was widely abandoned, we cannot say the same about its underlying beliefs. Sanaga-Ogowe religion was solidly established in their

tradition, but, as a pragmatic society, it was also strongly influenced by experience and observation. The notion of a close and protective God that interferes in human affairs was very difficult to accept for people who regularly had to deal with all sorts of adversities. Central African religions, like Christianity, considered Mebe'e as the Supreme Being, yet their conclusions could not be more different. While the Christian God Almighty cares and watches over men as the central piece of His creation, the African *Nkom-Bot* – 'men arranger' – is so great that He cannot be concerned about humanity's trivial problems. Not surprisingly, Fang elders could not come to terms with God's interest in a man's business, such as the number of his wives – the main obsession of Claretian missionaries with regards to African customs. A large majority of the people that I interviewed acknowledged that their fathers either were never baptized, or they did it right before dying. Informants are not very specific as to why so many Fang elders refused to be baptized, but Christianity's condemnation of polygamy appears to have been the main reason.³⁷ Baptism did not only imply renunciation of future wives, but also involved rejecting all of their current spouses except one.

In spite of the stance of Christian missionaries against African religious principles and social structures, there was not open opposition against Christianity on the side of Fang elders. Many of them seem to have attended church regularly, where they listened to the weekly sermons of the catechist and, sporadically, the missionary. More importantly, these men were often accompanied by their children at church.³⁸ Sunday services were seen as a sort of distraction from the monotonous life of the village, in which Protestant and Catholic competed for attracting the most followers.³⁹ Fernández correctly points out that the Fang were strongly attracted by numerous elements of the Old Testament, especially the 'ritual regulations' of the book of

Leviticus that could be identified with their 'system of ritual prohibitions' – *meki*.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the Old Testament came with a long array of attractive stories on subjects on which the Fang had elaborated little.

The main obstacle for Christianity, however, was Fang reluctance to subscribe to a moral doctrine emanating from a God that, in their views, had little or no business in human affairs. As Father González wrote in 1910, 'all savage peoples... admit a Supreme Being' yet 'they are mistaken about His providence, as they do not admit it in ordinary events, only in exceptional and very important cases.'⁴¹ Two decades later, the missionaries still struggled against the same obstacle, as the Fang continued to 'care very little about Him.'⁴² Despite Claretian success in evangelizing the Fang, the Christian God was unable to completely replace the ancestors as the source of morality. In 1942, the district officer of Kogo described this problem:

Despite the effort and continuous work of our missionaries, the native does not necessarily embrace Christianity. He apparently goes to church, gets baptized, and some even marry canonically, but without conviction or faith. The moment they are denied a second wife or they see how their desire of having descendents is not accomplished they move away from the Church.⁴³

In fact, as we shall see, the regulatory role of the ancestors was destroyed without being effectively replaced by either a religious or secular alternative. If anything, social regulations were mostly sustained by state violence, illegitimate, to many, due to the colonial and later dictatorial nature of the state.

To the Fang, the number of wives was one of the most evident signs of a man's success. Within an egalitarian society all these signs were especially significant and it was believed that successful men had been 'ritually arranged' – *akomng'a* - by elder relatives usually of the maternal line. Therefore, by renouncing polygamy, the Fang believed that they were rejecting all the good that their ancestors might have wanted

for them, condemning themselves to a simple life of no accomplishment and falling into oblivion, for only successful men are remembered. The strength of this belief prevented many from taking the necessary steps to be baptized, even if they found certain elements of Christianity attractive. Most elders seemed to be baptized 'at the point of death' when polygamy was no longer important and the hope of an eternal life was so.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, one should not interpret the numerous cases of baptism at the point of death exclusively as a genuine worry about the afterlife before imminent death. It appears that in some cases baptism was administered without the consent of men in the throes of death, often causing disputes between relatives in favour and against the sacrament. An informant recalls how her father was baptized at the point of death, in spite of his sister's strong opposition.⁴⁵ Similarly, Barrera, referring to the Claretians, reported:

They caused quite a few disruptions because of the baptism *in articulo mortis*, in which they change a person's name despite having been admitted in the hospital with a different one, and, being in the throes of death did not realize what had been done to them.⁴⁶

Most informants, particularly men, admit that, despite their fathers' position on baptism, they did not object to their sons being baptized. It is not known for certain why fathers did not resist a decision that clearly might undermine their sons' ability to marry many wives and have a large family. Their passivity is likely to have been due to the fact that, unlike them, their sons did not have to reject any wife in order to be baptized. As children, the process was much more straightforward, because in the eyes of the missionaries they were not yet corrupted by African customs and institutions. Adult men, on the other hand, not only had to renounce their wives but also to go through a long process so they could prove to be worthy of being Christians. The stance of most elders' on Christianity was characterized by a mixture

of rejection, passivity and attraction. The acute sense of impotence that overcame the Fang as a result of the establishment of the colonial system determined their attitudes towards the religion of the Europeans during the 1930s and 1940s. Fang men realized that Christianity was there to stay and, for their children, that it was crucial in gaining access to Western education.

Adult men's views on Christianity were much more hostile when it came to their daughters and wives, who, often, were only able to be baptized after their fathers had passed away or after divorcing their husbands. Men's authority over their daughters was likely to be more effective than over their wives, because the Spanish authorities made divorce more accessible for African women married according to local custom, which could always be used as a bargaining mechanism. The actions or inactions of these men were generally guided by the acceptance of Spanish domination and a sentiment of contempt towards the ruling Europeans. They accepted their sons being baptized, going to school, and working for the Europeans as a means to obtaining the maximum benefit from an undesirable situation, yet there was no reason why Fang women should be involved in the 'affairs of the colonizers'.⁴⁷ The new order that came with the Spanish clearly undermined the existing family structure by sowing 'dangerous' ideas in the minds of women about their new role within the nuclear Christian family. Those more hostile to the Spanish did not allow any of their dependents, including sons, to be baptized or to go to school.⁴⁸ In a situation like this, very few dared to challenge the authority of the family head while he was alive, otherwise they would run the risk of being repudiated or, as one informant recalls happened to his mother after she was secretly baptized, being neglected.⁴⁹



Photograph 24: A Claretian transported by two of his pupils



Photograph 25: Claretian baptizing Africans

Whatever the position of elders, there was little they could do against the Claretians' determination to evangelize the colony. The close relationship between the Catholic missionaries and the colonial government proved to be vital, for it did not only provide the economic and political support needed but also strengthened the case

that the missionaries were the doorway to the world of the Europeans. The Claretians wisely identified those sectors of society that were more receptive to the persuasive message of the 'merciful white': women, children and young men. Christianity offered Fang women a more central role within their communities as well as in villages' religious life. Above all, missionaries provided women in traditional marriages with stronger rights vis-à-vis their husbands. Paradoxically, women married according to local custom could have more rights than those married canonically, for whom divorce was more difficult to obtain. Claretian missionaries often refused to baptize women involved in polygamous marriages, unless their husbands accepted keeping a single wife or they obtained a divorce. The latter was not always motivated by women's desire for embracing Christianity, however women learnt to use the support of Claretian missionaries' to secure divorce from unwanted husbands.⁵⁰ Missionaries also saw girls' education as the cornerstone for their evangelization and acculturation. Despite the relative success of the girls school at the San José Mission in Evinayong, created in 1930 and directed by the Conceptionist Sisters, it was believed that many 'more girls would attend' if it were not 'for the obstacle of fathers and mothers' who 'wish their daughters to remain in the greatest ignorance so they can remain under man's slavery'.⁵¹ In order to reach more women, in the 1930s the missionary created the *Sigsa*, an institution designed to offer shelter mostly to young women in which they could learn the principles of Christian life and family before marrying canonically, usually to young men educated in Catholic missions. This institution was often a matter of conflict between Claretian missionaries and Spanish officers, as the former gave shelter to all women regardless of their reasons supporting their request for divorce. It was not uncommon that women under their protection were denied divorce by district officers. To the distress of the colonial

administrations, Claretian missionaries could take, at times, drastic measures, such as taking women away from their villages, creating subsequent turmoil.⁵²

As Fernández points out, evangelization was helped by the belief that Christianity would bring about material advancement.⁵³ European culture and material wealth was clearly attractive to most Fang youngsters, but, in order to gain access to it, it was necessary to learn the language and culture of the colonizer, all supposedly available in the schools that the Claretians, and to a lesser extent the Presbyterians, opened across Río Muni. So great was the desire of some children to go to school that, in some cases, informants reveal how they had to run away due to their fathers' resistance.⁵⁴ Once in school, children were unmonitored by their parents and, under the catechist's influence, were easily converted to Christianity. Schooling was key in interrupting the transmission of the established tradition from fathers to sons, since children now did not spend as much time with their fathers. In contrast, the catechist dealt with subjects apparently more relevant in the world they had to live. The ancestors had very little to offer in comparison to the numerous goods with which the white man had been blessed by God. Fernández correctly suggests that Christian missionaries, in an effort to gain followers, established a somewhat supernatural connection between Europeans and their material culture, a misconception the negative consequences of which are still felt in Equatorial Guinea today.⁵⁵

During this period, youngsters were not aware that Christianity also introduced social concepts that did not suit local social realities and which contributed to the adjustment crisis of the Fang. Missionaries encouraged the nuclear family model in opposition to the extended family. In doing so, Christianity eroded solidarity ties within villages, because Christian solidarity was based on elusive concepts – the universal Christian family – difficult to grasp for the average individual. The

ancestors, however, offered a more tangible solidarity, which, though not always effective, was based on a closer concept like blood ties. Looking back, it is clear that Christianity did not succeed in spreading the new family organization among the Fang, nonetheless its effects were felt in one way or another by local structures. The nuclear family model was seen by the Spanish as a key step for the economic transformation that, from the late 1930s, gathered momentum in Río Muni. The social effects of this process on the hitherto egalitarian social structures were evident by the 1940s. This was aggravated by the destruction of Fang cults designed to address all sorts of disruptions affecting the community. Whereas Christianity mostly focuses on the individual and his relationship with God, the ancestor cult, as Fernández argues, emphasizes the search for the common good.⁵⁶ In addition, Christianity firmly believes in an individual's responsibility, therefore local communities are not considered responsible and are excluded from the healing process.

The 1930s and 1940s appeared to have witnessed an unprecedented increase in witchcraft accusations in Río Muni, which was probably related to the generalized social disruption resulting from colonial conquest, the rise of economic inequalities, the destruction of checks on witchcraft and the loss of local autonomy, all of which can be described as part of the crisis of adjustment. Certainly, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to measure any increase in witchcraft activities due to the nature of this phenomenon. The roots of Fang witchcraft beliefs are indeed very old, probably dating back to the days before the development of the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition. This is shown by the fact that very similar principles can be found amongst other peoples across the entire western Equatorial African region. In understanding this phenomenon, we must be aware that witchcraft is not so much an activity as a belief. The ancestors of the Fang believed in the existence of a hidden world where

extraordinary things happened and supernatural forces could be manipulated so as to have an effect in the visible world. The manipulation of such forces is what is known in Fang as *mbwo*.

Anthropological literature has established a distinction between witchcraft and sorcery. The former would be an 'unconscious action' that relies 'purely on internal psychic power to harm', whereas the latter consciously makes 'use of objects to do so'.⁵⁷ As far as I know, there doesn't exist such a clear-cut distinction. Although *mbwo* is usually translated as witchcraft, highlighting its negative character, the primary use of this term refers to the manipulation of hidden forces without adding any moral connotation. In the course of this manipulation, individuals can resort to objects, *byang* (remedy or medicine), in order to manipulate hidden forces more effectively – ancestors' skulls were undoubtedly the most powerful *byang*. As I pointed out in chapter 1, *mbwo* can be either good or evil, depending on the use that one makes of it. All Sanaga-Ogowe cults and healing rituals involved the use of *mbwo* or the manipulation of hidden forces for the benefit of the community. As we also saw, in Sanaga-Ogowe ideology, the roots of success rest on *mbwo*, since it was the ability to manipulate hidden forces that made some individuals excel over the rest and become well-respected leaders in their communities. *Mbwo*, however, could also have evil intents when it was used for egoistic purposes. This case was strongly feared because it could bring about misfortune and, ultimately, the destruction of the community. As Fisisy and Geschiere point out, 'any distinction between good and evil, or between acceptable or unacceptable uses of the occult forces is relative and undermined by the extremely diffuse tenor of these discourses.'⁵⁸ *Mbwo* and those who are able to use it have a very ambivalent character, as they are both feared and admired simultaneously.

According to Bôt Ba Njok, the majority of people were unable to manipulate hidden forces and they were considered *bedzimi mam* (those who ignore things or ignorant people).⁵⁹ A few individuals, *beyem* (those who know or wise men), could manipulate hidden forces due to their ability to see beyond.⁶⁰ *Beyem* owe their ability to the possession of *evú*, a living being which is believed to live inside the body of these individuals. It is the *evú* that allows people to travel at night, usually in their sleep, into the hidden world, where they learn hidden secrets and manipulate forces. One's *evú* can be arranged (*akomng'a*) by another wise man, so the person can gain control over it and, thus, use his ability for the good. This is what Tessmann described as *evú-besi*.⁶¹ In the case that the *evú* has not been arranged, *evú-mbwo*, due to neglect or extreme ambition, the individual will use his ability for his own benefit and, in so doing, he will harm those closest to him. It is believed that, in such cases, the *evú* must be rewarded with the life of a fellow human, who will be eaten by the *nnem* (singular of *beyem*). This strong belief lies behind the principle of symbolic anthropophagy, which led the Fang to believe that wizards eat people, and the Spanish to assume that anthropophagy was rampant amongst the Fang in the 1930s and 1940s.

In understanding the rise in witchcraft in the 1930s and 1940s, it is necessary to look back at the principle of 'natural order' that we saw in chapter 1. The regular functioning of nature and society was considered to be the natural order established by *Mebe'e* at the time of the 'organization' or creation. The disruption of the natural order was considered to be the result of evil manipulation of hidden forces by members of the community. This was especially so, but not exclusively, when some seemed to benefit in the midst of a climate of misfortune and disruption. In such situations, witchcraft accusations would escalate, being people accused of doing witchcraft in their sleep or in the forest at night. Generally speaking alleged witchcraft

activities are intangible; that is, ceremonies in which groups of *beyem* secretly gather at night to plot against their neighbours do not take place – at least, not in the visible world. People are, therefore, accused in the belief that they are committing such actions. Furthermore, this was reinforced by colonial repression which drove legitimate religious practices into clandestinity. Thus, if an elder refused to give in the relics of his ancestors, he was forced to keep them in hiding, where the mediation of the ancestors is considered to be evil because it is neither open nor communal.

One must be very careful when analysing informants' statements on growing witchcraft activities, because it is a common reaction to believe that present circumstances are worse than those of the past. While admitting that the level of individualism within Fang society has expanded in the last century, colonial documents indicate that a rise in witchcraft accusations did take place during the 1930s and 1940s. Usually, the Spanish authorities did not refer openly to witchcraft as such, rather it was preferred to use the term 'anthropophagous sects'. From early on, the Spanish had been aware of Africans' belief in witchcraft, yet they were often dismissed as 'ridiculous superstitions' or 'repugnant rites'.⁶² Conditions appeared to have deteriorated considerably from the late 1930s, given that the Spanish authorities decided to take direct action in cases related with witchcraft. The situation was so alarming that in 1939 Sub-Governor Cabrera wrote to the Governor-General about the 'delicate' issue of '*N'buo*' [*mbwo*], which was 'very complicated due to the numerous cases of anthropophagy'.⁶³ In a following letter Cabrera asked the Governor to authorize execution by hanging in cases of witchcraft, clarifying that while this 'will be done without rushing... I consider it necessary.'⁶⁴ Governor Suances, though not very resolutely, replied by granting permission.⁶⁵

In the first half of the 1940s, sources refer to several instances of 'anthropophagous witchcraft' that ended up in court. One of the most notorious was the trial of nine people from Niefang accused of taking part in the alleged murder of three children who were later eaten.⁶⁶ From the copy of the sentence it is not clear whether these individuals, considered members of the 'evú sect', actually participated in witchcraft activities, or, as it seems more likely, simply exhumed the cadavers in order to carry out the traditional autopsy performed both in cases of suspected victims of witchcraft and on suspected sorcerers.⁶⁷ The individuals involved in this case received severe sentences varying from the death penalty to long-term imprisonment.⁶⁸ During the course of a lecture in 1944, Governor-General Bonelli referred to another important witchcraft case in which sixteen people were allegedly murdered and eaten. According to his analysis the main reason for these activities was that 'the native ignores what love is.'⁶⁹ The examination of different cases reveals that the colonial government, while trying to put an end to so-called witchcraft actions, never charged anybody directly for this activity, only for crimes related to it and contemplated in the colonial legislation, such as anthropophagy and cadaver exhumation. Unlike the French authorities in Cameroon, who created a special tribunal for witchcraft cases, the Spanish had no intention to give witchcraft official recognition in the eyes of the Africans.⁷⁰

It is clear from the reading of colonial sources that the Spanish had enormous difficulties in understanding African cultures. Such a situation motivated reactions like that of the distressed Sub-Governor Cabrera, who in 1939 wrote: 'there is a woman who in eating has eaten even her own mother.'⁷¹ Symbolic anthropophagy also became real in European minds, in which lack of knowledge combined with a long array of prejudices, added more credibility to the vivid descriptions reported by

Africans in court. In the defence of the Spanish officers, one has to admit that they were often misguided by the difficulty in translating these concepts and, above all, by African's total belief in witchcraft and the ability to cause somebody's death through magic. Such a deep conviction partly explains, as numerous students of this phenomenon have noticed, why many individuals are willing to admit responsibility for this kind of acts. According to Moreno, in 1946, 19 out of 73 inmates were imprisoned in Bata for the crime of anthropophagy.⁷²

Today, we know that witchcraft is mostly a discourse, which often expresses social tensions through metaphors. In this respect, anthropophagy is fundamentally a metaphoric expression of ritual assassination. Fernández, Fisiy and Geschiere's studies on witchcraft amongst the Fang and their Cameroonian neighbours the Maka are very useful in understanding this phenomenon.⁷³ Fernández and Geschiere's concept of witchcraft as a mechanism to express social inequalities seems to be corroborated by the fact that the increase in witchcraft activities amongst the Río Munian Fang in the 1930s and 1940s took place at a time of fundamental economic transformations.⁷⁴ The Fang reacted against the perceived rise in witchcraft through the use of old and new anti-witchcraft cults. Moreno mentions the resurgence of the *Ngii* cult in 1943 as an indicator of 'collective reaction' against witchcraft in the present-day district of Añisok.⁷⁵ He argues that traditional forms of *Ngii* gave birth to other anti-witchcraft versions like the so-called *Don Enrique* sect, that acted in the Mikomeseng and Ebibeyin area in 1943, and whose members were trailed by the Spanish authorities after several people allegedly died during the celebration of rituals.⁷⁶ Moreno, unfortunately, does not provide further information about this new cult, which is not mentioned in any of the examined colonial documentation. It is very

likely that colonial repression limited the geographical extension and lifetime span of the *Don Enrique* cult.

To the Spanish, there was no difference between witchcraft and anti-witchcraft activities, which were both equally pursued; if anything the more conspicuous character of anti-witchcraft movements made them more vulnerable.⁷⁷ By examining sources we realize that Spanish actions against so-called witchcraft activities, such as those mentioned above, were, in fact, directed against anti-witchcraft rituals. The repression on cults like *Ngii* left Fang elders, like in other Central African societies, powerless before the rise of individualistic tensions. Unable to deal with this phenomenon, witchcraft accusations no longer channelled community conflicts, but made them worse.

Keeping matters inside the village

The level of transformation within African societies as a result of colonial domination is a debatable and sometimes controversial subject. As we have seen, change was a two-way process, in which Africans actively participated, and was often the indirect result of European actions, since colonial administrators were not interested in governing all aspects of colonized societies. Local political structures undoubtedly became the most direct target of colonial policies. Spanish officials sought to exploit the colony through the transformation of the Fang and other local groups. Such an objective required tight political control. The Spanish authorities focused much of their efforts on transforming local authority structures, so they could become part of the wider network of colonial authority. This strategy was often hampered by Africans' determination to maintain their sovereignty at a local level. Fang elders, however, found it very difficult to match the will and power of the

colonial state, which by the late 1940s had established itself as the undisputed authority across the Spanish colony. The Spanish authorities had aimed to strengthen African leadership to assist *mikúkúma* (administrative chiefs) in their mediator role, but it is clear that this objective was never achieved.⁷⁸ The new functions of administrative chiefs ended up destroying what was left of the former Fang political structure. If, as Foucault argues, power is 'an action over actions', local Fang power rapidly disappeared during the 1930s and 1940s.⁷⁹ Fang leadership gradually lost the capacity to mobilize a population that over time became exclusively responsive to government orders, and mostly because of the state's coercive apparatus. The mediator role of the chief clearly contradicted the Fang concept of *mínnama*. The community leader's main responsibility was to look after the needs of his community, whereas the administrative chief acted as a representative of the government. Both functions were clearly at odds with one another, and most Fang elders struggled to reconcile the two institutions during this period as part of their effort to preserve Fang autonomy. Gradually, the figure of the *mínnama* as a symbol of Fang political autonomy retreated and by the late 1940s it had either disappeared in most villages or its functions were almost non-existent.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the imposition of chieftaincies by the Spanish resulted in the development of a dual authority structure in Río Muni. The Fang sought to integrate the newly created institution within their socio-political structure. However, this relationship was not always simple. By the early 1930s, Fang elders had understood the actual nature of Spanish domination as well as the importance of administrative chiefs in dealing with them. It was believed that the *mínnama* and the administrative chief could coexist as long as their functions were clearly delineated. Thus, the chief would be in charge of dealing with the colonial government and the

orders emanating from it, whereas the *minnama* would continue regulating the internal affairs of the village and representing his community before other villages. This trend was rather common to many decentralized societies across Central Africa. Balandier writes that French colonial authorities were aware of this phenomenon both in Gabon and Congo as a factor that undermined the authority of administrative chiefs.⁸⁰ The Spanish also observed this trend in Río Muni.⁸¹ As Balandier argues, the authority of administrative chiefs was often subordinated to the *minnama*, yet it is not so clear that this relationship was always characterized by mutual hostility.⁸² The relationship between chief and community leader was very much determined by the former's personality; that is to say, if the chief was particularly ambitious or had a strong character, relationships were likely to be more difficult. Informants tend to describe the relationship between the two village leaders as a cordial one, for the chief generally accepted the established authority in the village.⁸³ Although this situation did take place, we should not consider that this was always the case – especially as time went by and administrative chiefs perceived community leaders as an obstacle to their functions and aspirations. It is quite likely that tensions between village elders and administrative chiefs were more acute than it is often admitted, yet such memories have been re-elaborated in an effort to legitimize the growing importance of administrative chiefs. This is a well-known phenomenon, but it is not always easy to detect. At Beayop, Mikomeseng, two elders gave the same version as to how Okenve Mituy, the village's first chief was chosen by Ela Mituy, the *minnama*. However their version contradicted that of two informants whose fathers were directly involved in the process that resulted in the *minnama* being stripped of his official appointment in favour of his more dynamic brother around 1930.⁸⁴

The development of a dual authority structure among the Fang does not imply that leadership was necessarily shared between two individuals. At times, this duality was rather complex for the same person could exercise both functions. Undoubtedly, this required a large degree of discernment on the part of these individuals, above all, if they were seriously committed to differentiating between the two positions. Certainly, this was an extremely difficult situation to deal with, and inevitably one of the functions took priority over the other, avoiding what otherwise may have turned into a sort of schizophrenia.

Community leadership had been traditionally based on the village's recognition of an individual's extraordinary qualities and his commitment towards the interest of the whole community. However, it is unlikely that such extraordinary personal qualities were equally possessed by all community leaders. Therefore, for those whose leadership was barely acknowledged, the official backing of the Spanish authorities was a very attractive proposition.⁸⁵ It is difficult to tell the extent to which dual authority was in the hands of single individuals across Río Muni's villages, but it appears to have been at least as common as the division of village leadership between two individuals.⁸⁶ Those leaders who took advantage of the Spanish to consolidate their leadership were left in an awkward position because their legitimacy slipped away from the community to the colonial government on whose approval they ultimately depended. In 1933, the Sub-Governor of Bata wrote that those administrative chiefs who continued to solve palavers against the principles of the Spanish 'civilizing march' or repeatedly failed to attend monthly meetings with colonial administrators would be dismissed.⁸⁷

Sources do not refer to administrative chiefs openly challenging the status of the elders in their communities during the 1930s and 1940s. Many informants recount

how administrative chiefs used to consult with the elders and act according to their advice due to their recognition within the village as well as their experience.⁸⁸ For many of these early administrative chiefs, having been educated under the guidelines of the old Sanaga-Ogowe tradition, it must have been very difficult to break away from established structures and ignore the authority of the elders. Nonetheless, the process by which the administrative chief was appointed could also determine his relationship with the *mínnama*. In 1932-1933, Spain's commitment to redefine the state of native authority in Río Muni provoked the dismissal of part of the traditional leaders from their official post and the appointment of new administrative chiefs. All over Río Muni, district officers were ordered to assess existing chiefs, making sure that they had the required 'morality', 'spirit of justice', 'intelligence' and 'pedigree' among their personal qualities.⁸⁹ Spanish officers were also told to consider people's approval in appointing new chiefs or confirming old ones, provided they had these qualities.⁹⁰ New administrative chiefs, appointed after community leaders were removed from their administrative functions, were left in a strong position to challenge the influence of the established village authority that was discredited in public by the Spanish authorities.

Sources mention certain instances that indicated a rise in authoritarian tendencies among some administrative chiefs during this period. Existing check-and-balance mechanisms were unable to prevent the authoritarian actions of chiefs who enjoyed the coercive backing of the Spanish authorities. As a result, people often had no other option than asking the colonial government for help, as in this 1932 letter signed by members of the Amvom clan of Evinayong:

We have in this area a chief called Abesolo Ela who lives close to the Mission. This chief is causing us much damage because he takes other people's money so we report to

HE [His Excellency] that this chief does not observe the law of the Governor, since a chief is a Governor's representative to solve all existing palavers in villages... Therefore, we beg HE, given that we do not want him close to us, to send him far away...⁹¹

Informants describe other cases in which village chiefs were feared by their fellow villagers, as a simple disagreement or disobedience could easily trigger off an angry reaction on the part of the chiefs.⁹² Nonetheless, it does not appear that authoritarian tendencies were very common among administrative chiefs in this period, because the presence of charismatic elders was often enough to control such tendencies, especially if there existed a close family relationship.⁹³

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, colonial officers continued to complain about the weakness of most administrative chiefs, arguing for the need to further empower them. In 1939, Sub-Governor Cabrera saw the empowerment of chiefs as the only way to control the African population. A few years later, the colonial administration considered certain policies to strengthen administrative chiefs prestige such as the construction of concrete houses for them by the *Patronato de Indígenas*.⁹⁴ Authoritarian chiefs dealt with the conflict between their strong position and the traditional socio-political structure through the integration of the functions of *mínnama* and administrative chief. The Spanish authorities determined that chiefs should intervene in the resolution of conflicts within their villages, and, although many unofficially declined such responsibility in favour of the *mínnama*, charismatic chiefs assumed this role, as it was considered the greatest responsibility and virtue of prestigious community leaders. The combination of Spanish backing and a good economic situation offered charismatic chiefs the possibility to put into practice their skills as "community leaders". The adoption of cash-crop cultivation by some chiefs from the 1930s favoured the development of a clientelist relationship with the rest of

the community, which ultimately allowed people to tolerate those cases of accumulation of power and wealth by some chiefs.⁹⁵

Within resettled villages, Fang families, initially, intended to maintain their old organization by preserving the political autonomy of the different extended families. The division of village authority according to families was reflected by the construction of several *mabáá* (plural for *abáá*, 'palaver house') within the same village, in which each extended family would solve their conflicts and their male members would gather. However, the Spanish authorities did not accept this situation. According to the colonial guidelines, unified villages had to be organized under the authority of a single village chief. In the early 1930s, clan chiefs, like Motuu M'Abege, leader of the Nzomo clan in Mikomeseng, visited the villages of their respective clans and explained about the obligation to choose a single administrative chief per village.⁹⁶ In spite of this, villagers tried to maintain as much independence as possible within the new settlements, as in the case of Beayop, where the chief Okenve Mituy, according to his widow, built a fence around his compound to keep outsiders away.⁹⁷ Eventually, the imposition of single village authorities eventually forced reluctant settlements to join their neighbours.⁹⁸

The idea of a family head mediating or resolving the conflicts of a family group different from his was not new to the Fang. The situation created by colonial policies, however, was different, since a village chief now had to intervene in solving conflicts affecting the different families of his village as a result of outside imposition, and not the decision of the families involved. No doubt, this had a deep effect regarding the legitimacy of chiefs as arbitrators. If the chief chose to respect the traditional authority structure, he was less likely to attract antagonism from the village elders and families. Nevertheless, as the Spanish increased their intervention into Fang affairs from the

late 1930s, and youngsters and women sought matters to be resolved according to the new colonial native justice system, administrative chiefs gradually increased their intervention in conflict resolution. This trend slowly but surely eroded the authority of traditional leaders and the legitimacy of administrative chiefs. As a result, the latter resorted to the support of the colonial authorities in increasing their executive powers in order to overcome the steady loss of popular recognition. Only charismatic chiefs were in a good position to expand their functions without necessarily eroding their legitimacy.

Well aware that the excessive number of chiefs contributed to the inefficiency of native administration, the Spanish authorities tried to reduce the number of chiefs in the late 1920s, coinciding with the village resettlement. It was not until 1932 that a more serious attempt was designed to put in order the confusing situation regarding chiefs. Although Spain's reorganization of native administration shared, at least formally, some of the ideas of existing authority structures, it clearly differed from them with regards to contents. At the top of the native administrative organization was the *jefe de tribu* or clan chief in charge of looking after the affairs of his clan – *tribu* in the colonial argot – in each *demarcación* or district of Río Muni. Given that a clan could be divided into multiple villages within a district, villages were under the immediate supervision of a *jefe de poblado* or village chief. The colonial government exceptionally could admit the appointment of two clan chiefs within a given district, if a clan was too large.⁹⁹ In the past, the existence of so-called clan leaders was something exceptional, determined by the availability of men with the required qualities within a district at a given point in time. During the early stages of the colonial conquest, Spanish officials came across some of these characters and in the 1930s sought to institutionalize this figure. Top Spanish officials understood that it

was necessary to take into account 'the feeling of the majority of natives' in choosing clan chiefs if they were to be effective.¹⁰⁰ Whenever district officers found this type of chief, Fang clans did not have much trouble in accepting the authority of appointed clan chiefs. Nonetheless, as the Sub-Governor of Bata admitted in 1933, most chiefs were appointed in spite of not satisfying the conditions established by the colonial government.¹⁰¹ To a much greater extent than village chiefs, clan chiefs had to struggle to combine the qualities that bestowed prestige and recognition on them with the obligations that the colonial position entailed. Ultimately, Spanish officers favoured loyalty over popular recognition, like in the case of Motuu m'Abege, who, despite his great prestige amongst the Nzomo clan in Mikomeseng, was removed from office and banished to Fernando Po in 1938 due to his constant disdain for the Spanish authority. The anger provoked by Motuu's actions still could be perceived in the words of Sub-Governor Cabrera one year later:

If the chief who is asking you to come back is Matu Abegue [Motuu m'Abege], a "great" Chief of Mikomeseng, it is not advisable to bring him back... He is constantly working against us in Mikomeseng thanks to his prestige... Together with him, it was necessary to impose government punishment on a few more people, but it seems almost certain that he is the instigator of all these troubles.¹⁰²

Although the 1932 reorganization of the native administration sketched out some of the functions of clan chiefs, especially with regards to their involvement in 'all small matters' affecting Africans as well as the resolution of more complicated 'palavers' during the monthly meetings with district officers, it was not until the 1938 native justice reform that their functions were more clearly delineated.¹⁰³ The justice system reform, rather than introducing innovative elements, sought to formalize the existing legal structure, which had hitherto been developed in an ad-hoc manner. Given the anarchic functioning of native justice, the new ordinances stated in its

preamble: 'all authorities not mentioned here, as well as official institutions and private individuals must refrain from solving palavers of civil or criminal character'.¹⁰⁴ The biggest innovation of the new ordinance was the empowerment of administrative chiefs and the creation of the native tribunal, also known as *tribunal de raza*, which was divided into four tiers: the *Jefe de Poblado* – village court, headed by a village chief; the *Tribunal de Demarcación* (district court), formed by seven village chiefs under the supervision of the district officer; the *Tribunal de Distrito* (regional court), presided over by a judge along with two village chiefs; and, finally, the *Tribunal Superior Indígena*, presided over by an examining magistrate who was assisted by a public officer and an 'emancipated native'.¹⁰⁵

Like the bulk of colonial legislation, this ordinance was drafted in Santa Isabel, where most Spanish officials were not familiar with the social structure of the largest ethnic group in the colony, the Fang. Therefore, the original drafting is somewhat confusing because it mentions the *nkúkúma* or village chief, when in reality it was the clan chief who intervened in the different levels of native courts.¹⁰⁶ Since the figure of clan chief did not exist amongst the Bubi of Fernando Po, it was mistakenly assumed that village chiefs were the highest rank of Fang administrative organization. The clan chief, who, since the early 1940s was officially known as *primer jefe* (first chief), was in charge of visiting all the villages of his clan within his district and solving the cases presented by the village chief. In case he failed, he would refer the matter to the district court.

On paper the new native organization provided administrative chiefs with ample powers, for their role would be key in the resolution of judicial matters, especially on the first two levels of the new legal hierarchy. Nonetheless, colonial officers, including the Sub-Governor, shared numerous objections with regards to the original

draft of the native justice ordinance. Convinced of the 'evident ignorance' of native chiefs, the Sub-Governor considered that giving such ample powers to them was incompatible with a 'just, complete and impartial native justice'.¹⁰⁷ Further it was believed that chiefs' weakness would prevent them from carrying out their judicial responsibility at village level, since people would not respect their rulings.¹⁰⁸ Official reservations did not change significantly the final draft of the native justice ordinance, yet the reality on the ground was that district officers carried on solving most cases by themselves, using first chiefs simply as advisors.

The efforts of senior colonial officers to strengthen the position of administrative chiefs were undermined by district officers, who not only resolved 'palavers' during the monthly court sessions but also a whole series of minor complains and disputes on a daily basis.¹⁰⁹ Although the 1938 native justice ordinance established that all cases should be ruled according to native custom, this was not codified during the 1940s, despite several attempts.¹¹⁰ In the absence of a custom code, district officers ruled according to their 'common sense'.¹¹¹ District officers' role in native justice had two serious negative consequences with regards to the Fang socio-political structure. On the one hand, the authority of chiefs was undermined, reinforcing the notion that they were simple intermediaries between the Spanish officer and the African population. On the other, the Fang justice system was totally perverted by the adversarial approach of colonial officers, who, in accordance with Western justice, set one side against the other instead of restoring harmony within the community through compromise. At the same time, native courts, under the authority of district officers, also sought to boost women's legal rights, especially concerning family matters. As a result, the authority of elders could now be challenged by women who found it easier to divorce their husbands and reject arranged marriages.

Growing tensions resulting from the colonial justice system added to the increasing frictions of village life, in which relations were made more complex after the policy of resettlement brought different families together. Fang administrative chiefs were aware that they were losing control over a society where the district officer became the reference of authority and social tensions were on the increase. In response to this situation, charismatic chiefs tried to tighten the grip over their communities by minimizing colonial intervention in the affairs of their villages. This required the exercise of fair rulings in solving all village disputes so people did not feel the need to carry their cases to the colonial officer. In a desperate attempt to preserve the autonomy of his community from the colonial state, Okenve Mituy, the powerful chief of Beayop, soon before dying, instructed his successor not to let any 'trouble' in the village to come to the attention of Spanish officers.¹¹²

The children of Afri Kara begin their journey

The transformation of political and cultural identity across Río Muni is, no doubt, the clearest example of how this formerly decentralized society silently responded to the shock that followed the colonial conquest. As Fernández argues, colonial domination tends to raise the level of self-awareness in most colonized societies, including the Fang, while generating the need to find an explanation to the newly created situation.¹¹³ People's active participation in the transformation of their cultural and political identity throughout the 1930s and 1940s gave birth to the Fang identity that we know today. From a multiple, fragmented political identity, somehow cemented by a loose sense of cultural identity, the Fang came to be an ethnic group with a solid sense of their own unity. The integration of members of the Osumu clan into the Bopkweñ and Esakora clans to avoid the brutal reprisal of the Colonial

Guard, mentioned in Chapter 2, does not only show how flexible identity could be, but also how it was possible to manipulate it in response to critical situations.

Ranger rightly argues that ethnicity, as a solid sense of identity, in Africa is a colonial 'invention' or 'imagination', yet we should not interpret ethnicity as the result of colonial policies alone, but, rather, of the combined efforts of African and European agents.¹¹⁴ For the most part, the reconstruction of Fang identity was an internal response to the situation created by colonialism. Certainly, it was also encouraged by the Spanish authorities in order to simplify the complex socio-political composition in Río Muni. The colonial order put the numerous social units within a broader social context in which Sanaga-Ogowe speakers were identified as a sole entity in relation to the other communities coexisting in the colony. In colonial terminology, all Sanaga-Ogowe groups were classified as *Pamue*, in a similar fashion that coastal groups, today known as Ndowe, were classified as *Playeros* – literally beach people. This process was not unique to the Spanish colony, as the Sanaga-Ogowe went through a similar experience in neighbouring Gabon and Cameroon, where the French referred to them as Pahouin.¹¹⁵ Europeans' obsession with simplifying intricate structures, which colonial bureaucracy was unable to cope with, was especially evident regarding the complex African socio-political mosaic. In Río Muni, the Spanish aimed at ordering this complex reality by reallocating district population on the basis of clan identity.¹¹⁶ This proved to be an impossible task since clans were intermixed within the territory, and very often scattered throughout several districts. In addition, these colonial policies were often undermined by the decision to allow family groups from neighbouring colonies to settle in Río Muni, contributing to the complexity of the territory.¹¹⁷

Colonial policies during the 1930s and 1940s put special emphasis on clan structures. Settlements were reallocated according to clan composition, whereas the newly created figure of first chief united all clan members under the leadership of a single chief in each district. Perhaps the Spanish were aware of the difficulties of constructing new institutions on the basis of ethnicity, but it could have also well been that they were aware of the dangers that ethnicity entailed, as colonial authorities would learn from the late 1950s. Regardless of the reasons behind colonial policies, it is a remarkable achievement that the Fang, during this period, succeeded in overcoming past divisions as well as the ones encouraged, directly or indirectly, by colonial authorities. In fact, the Fang were able to construct a common identity on the basis of their diverse social composition, the *ayong*. The Fang clan was now used not as an element separating all those sharing the same language and culture, but as an instrument to unify all family groups under a common origin or ancestor. This achievement is all the most notable if we keep in mind that it was carried out across three colonial territories, Cameroon, Gabon and Río Muni. The reconstruction of Fang or Beti identity was a form of reaction to colonialism, even rejection of it, but, above all, it was a form of a reaffirmation for a people undergoing humiliating colonial domination. As Fernández points out, by means of protest movements the Fang sought to 'revitalize themselves' through the affirmation of their past, of a culture that appeared to have been belittled by the vigour and impressiveness of Western civilization.¹¹⁸

In creating a common identity, the Fang provided themselves with an alternative to the cohesiveness of the Spanish and French colonial masters. Historically, Sanaga-Ogowe culture was characterized by its dualism. In this respect, Fernández is right in suggesting that the Fang were impressed by European thought, which is why they

tried to recreate European forms of organization in their two main protest movements, *e'Lat-Ayong* and *Bwiti*. Fernández claims that 'it was not so much European's wealth, but his knowledge of how to do things... that impressed Fang.'¹¹⁹ *Bwiti* and *e'Lat-Ayong* were based on a hierarchical organization inspired by the Catholic Church hierarchy and military ranks respectively.¹²⁰ The consolidation of 'invented' or 'imagined' identities in Africa was possible thanks to its reliance on historical elements.¹²¹ As Ranger rightly acknowledges, all traditions and institutions are 'invented' at some point in time, yet his emphasis on the artificiality of this process downplays the social, political and cultural realities in which it was grounded.¹²² In the case of the Fang, we cannot know whether the construction of a pan-clan identity would have taken place without the establishment of colonial domination, but we know that, by and large, this process was successful due to the continuity between past and present. Fang identity was built on the basis of widely accepted old elements, such as blood ties, genealogy and clan identity.

The origins of the process that culminated in the development of a Fang identity is rooted in the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement, born in southern Cameroon, according to Fernández, in the mid or late 1930s.¹²³ This movement was based on the Sanaga-Ogowe concept of *e'lat-ayong*. Clan division was traditionally counteracted through the celebration of *bisulan*, clan gatherings that drew together members of brother clans in order to discuss common matters and strengthen family ties. The instability of the late nineteenth century, followed by colonial domination and the establishment of borders dividing the Sanaga-Ogowe territory, prevented these gatherings from being celebrated as frequently or from taking place at all. According to a Claretian missionary, by the early 1920s these gatherings had lost importance in western Río Muni, especially as elders' authority was challenged by youngsters who tried to

impose their own topics of discussion.¹²⁴ As Alexander and Balandier point out, clan gatherings continued to be celebrated in Cameroon, especially amongst Bulu and Yewondo sections where greater social stability maintained clans' cohesion, whereas south of the river Ntem, in Río Muni and Gabon, 'solemn gatherings' – *bisulan* – and even 'the feeling of tribal reality' were gradually disappearing due to clan dispersion.¹²⁵ It is not surprising, then, that the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement was born in Cameroon, where colonization was more advanced. It was founded precisely by those who were acculturated at an earlier stage, mostly pastors and catechists.¹²⁶ Faced with the constant reminder of their inferiority as well as the evils of their culture by colonial rulers, the leaders of this movement, who had been mainly trained in the Presbyterian mission of Ebolowa, felt compelled to assert their identity through the revival of their past tradition. Colonial domination was followed by a state of depression and, in trying to explain this situation, the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement also sought to revitalize Fang society. Fernández argues that genealogical history, legends and myths served as instruments for this movement. One should not think, however, that the Fang avoided any responsibility for this state of affairs. Quite the opposite: the leaders of the *e'Lat-Ayong*, like those of *Bwiti*, blamed the Fang themselves for this situation, as it was believed to have unfolded due to the abandonment of their ancestors' tradition.

In its origins the *e'Alat Ayong* did not aim at building an ethnic identity. Rather, its main purpose was to recover important elements of the past tradition through the strengthening of clan identities. The decline of clan obligations was seen to have debilitated Fang society, leading ultimately to the European conquest. Although people in present-day Equatorial Guinea are generally aware of the *e'lat-ayong* concept, during the course of this research it was obvious that not everybody knows

the complete list of their brother clans. Clan ties became blurred as a result of migration, thus most people could only recall family ties with one or two clans within their region, and very few could trace any ties with groups in more distant areas.

As Fernández points out, the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement was particularly interested in the past as a form of reaffirmation.¹²⁷ Africans had been dehumanized through the denial of their history, and this is precisely what the *e'Lat-Ayong* sought to recover by resorting to the *atam-ndá-e'bot*, the genealogy genre that Fang ancestors had used for centuries in order to be remembered and keep the past alive. Literacy now enabled the preservation of this knowledge while crisscrossing the multiple genealogies that the movement recovered across southern Cameroon, Río Muni and northern Gabon. In so doing, the leaders of the movement uncovered family ties between different clans beyond the obvious and limited list that most people were able to recall. Thus, a given clan in southern Cameroon could be related to other clans as far as southern Río Muni or central Gabon. It is no coincidence that most of my informants could immediately name one or two brother clans, while needing more time or the cooperation of fellow villagers to recall additional clans learnt thanks to the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement. From southern Cameroon, members of the movement spread the information concerning clan ties into Río Muni and Gabon, so the Nzomo clan could know that, besides the Amvom, they were also related to the Fong and Yendomo, or the Esamongon and Yenoo could learn of their relation with the Esamokuas, Esatuc and Esaman clans. The collection of genealogies brought to light the existence of common ancestors between clans that, having split up long ago, had forgotten their ties.

In Río Muni the actions of the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement were especially noticeable in the north, where the proximity of the Cameroonian border allowed regular contacts between people on both sides. Despite movement being restricted by colonial

authorities, the effects of the *e'Lat-Ayong* were also felt south of the Wele, albeit more feebly than in the north. In Nkum-Esong, Evinayong, an Oyek elder told me that they only learnt of their ties with the Yenkeng clan in the 1940s. A man who came from Cameroon asked them that 'why we kept marrying to the Yenkeng clan, since we are brothers'. As in many other villages, the member of the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement resorted to his broad genealogical knowledge to prove his point, asking them:

'How come Eva'a Nzam and Ndui Nzam are mentioned in both the Oyek and Yenkeng genealogies?' He told us that these two characters are mentioned because we are the same thing. It is then that we realized it and began to respect the rules that tie those of one family.¹²⁸

Although in the 1930s and 1940s most Fang elders knew, to different degrees, their clan genealogies, only a few were familiar with the genealogy of more than one clan. The *e'Lat-Ayong* movement was a significant development because it provided the Fang with a broader perspective surpassing the narrow borders of individual clans. In collecting a large array of genealogies, they could not only see ties between several clans, but more importantly could prove two or more clans shared a common origin. As part of their strategy, they revived traditional gatherings in which brother clans could come together in order to strengthen their ties. In northern Río Muni, these gatherings were relatively common during the second half of the 1940s when the movement was at its peak.¹²⁹ South of the Wele, although it was known that gatherings were celebrated among the Ntumu subgroup, they seem to have been uncommon due to the difficulties that *e'Lat-Ayong* members had in travelling unnoticed from Cameroon and northern Río Muni.¹³⁰ In Cameroon, colonial officers were less suspicious of these celebrations, but in Río Muni they had to be organized without the knowledge of colonial authorities and Spanish vigilance required that they were celebrated clandestinely in the forest.¹³¹ Clans usually took turns to organize

these meetings that used to gather elders of brother clans not only from Río Muni, but also from Cameroon and Gabon.¹³²



Photograph 26: The Fang from Río Muni have continued meeting their neighbours in Cameroon across the River Ntem



Photograph 27: From Ebibeyin one can easily cross the River Kie by canoe into Gabon

Despite its affirmative ‘traditional’ character, Fang appreciation for European culture was reflected in these gatherings, in which the European military and colonial

order was recreated. Thus, one informant witnessed how different groups arriving in her village were led by an individual who was referred to as 'president' and was carried on a chair, in the same fashion that Europeans were transported in their expeditions to the interior.¹³³ Like the colonial administration, fines were given to those who did not participate in the arrangements necessary to host the celebrations. Although many individuals were involved in the preparations, only male elders were allowed to attend the meetings and participate in the discussions. Access to the actual location of the meetings was controlled through a series of checkpoints, preventing women and children from attending. A mixture of the past and present, *e'Lat-Ayong* gatherings sought to maintain the old tradition through the celebration of *Melān* rituals, while creating a hierarchical order reminiscent of the European one in which individuals were given titles such as captain, colonel or major according to their responsibility.¹³⁴ More than ever, the symbolic value of the ancestors skulls was vital in reinforcing the link to the past, which was felt to have been betrayed, as well as family ties weakened after numerous migrations. Fang pragmatism could not help noticing that their lack of centralized organization put them at a disadvantage with the Europeans, making necessary to adopt their models.

It was precisely the recreation of an alternative hierarchical order that preoccupied the Spanish authorities, who, in addition to witnessing how administrative chiefs were usually challenged by the African population, now feared that they could be replaced by leaders outside the control of the colonial government. Marcelo Ndong Mba, a clerk of the colonial administration who throughout his work developed close ties with the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement and the incipient Equatorial Guinean nationalism during the mid 1940s and 1950s, recalled an incident in Ebibeyin on the occasion of an *e'Lat-Ayong* meeting:

There was a clan gathering when I was posted to Ebibeyin around 1945. The *e'Lat-Ayong* came from Cameroon with people like Afa'a Bibo'o. These people carried out some sort of politics, because these gatherings were clandestine here [Río Muni]. There were some who were colonels, others were captains... I remember how they said: 'fifty lashes for the colonel!'... They celebrated these meetings in the forest, but a chief... reported them to the authorities... and they went and caught them.¹³⁵

It is difficult to know what the Spanish authorities' exact position on the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement was. They broke up these gatherings whenever they learn about them, but it is not clear whether this was part of a direct plan against the *e'Lat-Ayong* or a general policy against all clandestine rallies. According to Fernández, the Spanish authorities were seriously concerned about the political implications of this movement. But colonial sources indicate that the Spanish were not very familiar with its actual nature.¹³⁶ In 1949, the Sub-Governor referred to the *e'Lat-Ayong* as a 'dance', which according to the district officer of Río Benito was unknown in the area.¹³⁷ This document suggests that *e'Lat-Ayong* was perceived as a sort of celebration pursued by the colonial authorities for its 'ambiguous' morality rather than its political implications.¹³⁸ This was not an isolated case, as the Spanish authorities generally ignored the details of most African expressions. In 1949, for example, Pinillos wrote an article in which he warned about the dangers of *Bwiti*, which should not be simply considered as 'one of many secret societies'. He argued that it was necessary to investigate the actual nature of this cult, for its 'hierarchical organization' as well as 'euro-phobic tendencies' could represent a serious 'political danger'.¹³⁹

Fernández's analysis of the *e'Lat-Ayong* does not quite do justice to the influence of the movement. Certainly, it never became a mass movement or developed into a direct political challenge to the colonial order, but its importance went beyond its

symbolic character.¹⁴⁰ In its search for forgotten clan ties and for social regeneration, the *e'Lat-Ayong* by the late 1940s had evolved into a movement working for a unified ethnic identity.¹⁴¹ Whatever its downfalls, this was no doubt the greatest legacy of the movement.

Following the tradition of old genealogies and migratory accounts, two Cameroonian Fang, Afa'a Bibo'o and Ondo Enguru, created the myth of Afri Kara, the common ancestor of the entire Fang or Beti people. In 1948, Ondo Enguru converted this legend into the book *Dulu Bon be Afri Kara – The Journey of the Children of Afri Kara* – which helped in spreading what, over the years, has become the best-known account across the modern borders that separate the descendents of Afri Kara. Written in Bulu dialect, despite the Ntumu origin of its two co-authors, the legend narrates the long migration of the descendents of Afri Kara from their original village by the salt sea (*mâng me nkũ*), to the piercing of the adzap tree that symbolizes the entrance into the rainforests, to the final separation of the descendents of Afri Kara in different directions until their arrival into the territories where they live today. This fascinating book, as Mbana suggests, is, above all, an expression of Fang self-realization within an environment characterized by the problems that colonial domination posed.¹⁴² Despite its numerous symbols and alterations to suit the needs of the colonized Fang, the account should not be dismissed simply as an ahistorical tradition, for it is based on numerous historical elements recorded in old accounts, such as the escape from militarily superior peoples (*Bivee be Bot* or Red People), the long settlement in *Odzambo'a* on the border between the savannah and the rainforest, the shock of entering into the unknown milieu, the crucial cultural contribution of the Bokuin or Pygmies, the gradual split of family groups after entering in the forest, and so forth.¹⁴³ Inspired by genealogical stories, the book very much follows the pattern of

Fang historical accounts in which the names of the ancestors, the villages in which they lived, their descendents, the separation of brothers who later become founders of new clans, and the origins of numerous traditions are all narrated.¹⁴⁴ Afa'a Bibo'o and Ondo Enguru basically translated the concept of the 'sewing of the clan' present in most genealogies into a broader concept embracing all Fang clans and even all African peoples. Thus Afri Kara, whose name's resemblance with Africa is not coincidental but full of symbolism, appears as the common ancestor of all Africans. The name *Afiri*, hope or future, and *Kara*, crab which refers to the etymological origin of the Portuguese term camarão, can be literally translated as the hope or future of the crab; that is, according to Alexandre, the Fang or Beti 'are the future of Cameroon and Africa.'¹⁴⁵ From the union between Afri Kara and one of his multiple wives, Nané Ngo'o Baá, seven children were born: Fang Afiri, Oka'a Afiri, Mevu m'Afiri, Nden Afiri, Bula Afiri, Nge Afiri – mother of Owono Nge – and Ntum Afiri. The seven, united by their symbolic uterine origin, are the ancestors of each of the main Fang subgroups: Fang, Okak, Mevu-mé-Nde, Bulu, Yewondo and Ntumu.¹⁴⁶

Afri Kara was not only an attempt to strengthen a common identity through blood ties, but also to provide the Fang with a historical consciousness in which they were incorporated within the much broader historical context of humankind. Against the Western worldview, the Fang had Afri Kara, the father of the Fang and all African peoples. Like most clan genealogies that usually started with Mebe'e (God) and Nzamá, his son and the first of a long series of human ancestors that eventually give origin to the founder of the clan, Afri Kara's lineage goes far beyond. If the book is a 'neo-tradition', as Mbana argues, it is mostly due to the presence of Western influences, especially Christian, mixed within a mostly traditional setting, and not so much to the fact that it is a modern creation.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, the structure of the book is

inspired by the Bible, whereas there is a constant preoccupation with stressing the monotheistic character of Fang ancestral religion and how they developed other cults to worship the Creator.¹⁴⁸ In the Afri Kara account, the Fang and by extension all Africans are linked to the rest of humanity by means of a common ancestor that originated the fathers of each of the inhabited continents.

Narrated from the Ntumu perspective, the historical account does not finish with the arrival in their present-day territory, but continues well into the colonial period. The contact with the Europeans is accurately described as a gradual process that culminated in the colonial conquest.¹⁴⁹ Equally, the book narrates the imposition of compulsory communal work, which is portrayed as the last straw in what became an intolerable situation.¹⁵⁰ *E'Lat'Ayong's* view on colonialism can be read in the conclusion of the book:

The cause of the decline of the Ntumu is their territorial dispersion... Some are located in Wele-Ntem (Gabon); the Governor there says that nobody can cross the river Ntem without authorization. Others live in the Spanish territories; the Governor there also prohibits crossing the river without documents. The same happens with those who live in Cameroon. Therefore if an intellectual or a good man lives in the Spanish territories or in Cameroon or in Wele-Ntem cannot have any contact with his brothers, nor try anything to help them... In conclusion, what has weakened the Ntumu is the compartmentalization of these countries.

I wish I had served under a single flag: Ah, Nané Ngo'oooo!¹⁵¹

In Río Muni, the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement found it difficult to extend beyond the Ntumu area. Nonetheless it succeeded in consolidating a Fang common identity across the Spanish colony, as colonialism inadvertently provided the tools for the spread of these ideas. Being a movement led by literate Fang, many of whom worked in different branches of the colonial structure, it was possible to transmit the main *e'Lat-Ayong* notions to Fang people as they were posted all over the colony.¹⁵² The

myth of Afri Kara was extremely attractive to all the Fang, because it provided them with a history as well as an interpretation as to their present situation. Initially transmitted as an oral account, *Dulu Bon be Afri Kara* was published by the American Presbyterian Mission of Ebolowa in 1954, allowing it to be read in many villages. This in turn allowed the Fang to develop a sense of themselves beyond the narrow borders of the districts and colonies in which they lived. Between 1947 and 1948, the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement reached its peak. In Mitzik, Gabon, the Pahouin Congress was celebrated in 1947 under the control of the French colonial government. Unfortunately there is not much information about this congress, but Balandier explains that there, numerous calls were made for the regeneration of a society in crisis and for Fang unity, yet the more dissenting voices of the 'group of progressives' asking for greater autonomy were eventually silenced by the majority of administrative chiefs.¹⁵³ A year later in Ebolowa, Cameroon, the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement took a step further with the creation of the *Union Tribale Ntem-Kribi*, which aimed not only at unifying all *e'Lat-Ayong* movements but also all Bantu peoples.¹⁵⁴ Not being able to develop any similar activity in Río Muni, the activists of the movement in the Spanish colony attended the rallies organized by the Ntem-Kribi Tribal Union which were called *efula-moyong*, the mixture of clans or nations.¹⁵⁵ 'It was then when we learnt that we were all brothers', commented Ndongo Mba.¹⁵⁶ Having developed the original movement into a pan-clan or even pan-ethnic political expression, these rallies became a space for the organization of opposition to European colonialism.¹⁵⁷ As we shall see in the next chapter, however, this movement never consolidated itself as political alternative to colonial domination.

Conclusion

The imposition of the colonial structure did not represent a sharp break in the history of the Fang, but it did unfold deep changes throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Fang society experienced serious instability, as it found it extremely difficult to deal with the pace and magnitude of such transformations. The erosion of key traditional institutions contrasted with the efforts of Fang elders to keep them alive. In trying to cope with the crisis, elders sought for reassurance in their old religious and political institutions. However, as these institutions weakened and proved unable to sort the crisis, the younger generation increasingly lost faith in the tradition of their ancestors, giving way to a new social and cultural organization by the end of the 1940s. Christianity also failed to solve the crisis, but it offered the key to a world of material prosperity free of the 'superstitions' that concerned their elders so much. The efforts of charismatic leaders to maintain local authority structures backfired, because, in their desperation, they increased the personal character of power excessively. In so doing, what was left of local authority came to rely mostly on charisma and not on the community, which had been traditionally the ultimate source of legitimacy. Undoubtedly, the most positive answer to the crisis was the development of a new political and cultural identity. The Fang identity, rather than being 'invented', was transformed on the basis of their historical heritage; hence its vigour. Thanks to their new identity, the Fang were better equipped to understand their position within the colonial environment and provide a more adequate response to the new challenges. Nonetheless, this process, as we shall see in the following chapters, was never smooth due to the lack of freedoms of the colonial and postcolonial regimes.

NOTES

¹ Fernández, 'Fang Representations', 43.

² Olangua, 'Cien años', 55.

³ A survey published by the Catholic Church in 1968 estimated that over a total population of 221,076 people, almost 75 per cent of the population was Catholic. These figures included some 8,000 Spaniards and the Nigerian migrant workers. T. Pujadas, *La Iglesia en la Guinea Ecuatorial*, v.2 (Barcelona, 1983), 19.

⁴ Balandier, *Sociology of Black Africa*, 140; Fernández, *Bwiti*, 253-56.

⁵ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 1, 2 5; Ebibeyin 1; Evinayong 14 and 27.

⁶ De Craemer, Vansina and Fox, 'Religious Movements', 465.

⁷ Ibid, 467.

⁸ The number of remains shows the long lifespan of ancestor cults. Tessmann, for example, describes a *Melán* ritual in which a family kept more than ten skulls and remains of their ancestors. Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 449.

⁹ Larrea refers to the Bisio ancestor cult, *Malande*, in which offerings were made before the ancestors' skulls. A. Larrea, 'Algunas costumbres y mitos de los Bujebas de nuestra Guinea continental', *Archivos del IDEA VII*, 28 (1954), 48.

¹⁰ De Craemer, Vansina and Fox, 'Religious Movements', 460, 467.

¹¹ Ibid, 467.

¹² Personal interview, Evinayong 4; Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 448; *La Guinea Española* (26-6-1911), 7-8.

¹³ Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 448.

¹⁴ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 265-66.

¹⁵ Personal interview, Evinayong 4.

¹⁶ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 2.

¹⁷ Personal interview, Ebibeyin 1.

¹⁸ Personal interview, Evinayong 4.

¹⁹ Personal interview, Akurenám 6.

²⁰ *La Guinea Española* (25-2-1911), 8-10; idem (26-6-1911), 7-8.

²¹ Idem (25-9-1922), 5-6.

²² Personal interview, Mikomeseng 5.

²³ In Central African religions, 'religious belief is not a primary element' whereas 'the ritual-symbol package usually comes together in the notion and form of a charm [i.e. the ancestor skull], which is an object made under inspiration, embodying the most powerful symbols of the movement.' De Craemer, Vansina and Fox, 'Religious Movements', 469.

²⁴ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 2, 28; Evinayong 4, 13, 14.

²⁵ Personal interviews, Evinayong 4, 27.

²⁶ Personal interview, Evinayong 6.

²⁷ Personal interview, Evinayong 15.

²⁸ Larrea, 'Algunas costumbres', 48.

²⁹ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 17, 28.

³⁰ This is partly explained by the fact that French and Spanish authorities favoured Catholic missions, whereas in German Cameroon Presbyterians could maintain a stronghold around the Ebolowa mission.

³¹ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 17.

³² Personal interview, Mikomeseng 27

- ³³ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 17.
- ³⁴ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 2; Father V. Aguado to F. J. Postiús (9-5-1930). Archivo General CMF, G-A-1/38.
- ³⁵ *Melán* was still practiced in Afak-Sok, Añisok, until the mid 1950s, when a Fang priest decided to build a chapel there. Personal interview, Ebibeyin 3.
- ³⁶ To De Craemer, Vansina and Fox, new cults are usually difficult to distinguish from the old ones, however, to its followers, they are totally new. De Craemer, Vansina and Fox, 'Religious Movements', 467.
- ³⁷ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 2.
- ³⁸ One informant recalls how his father, despite refusing to be baptized, used to take him to church and allowed him to be baptized. Personal interview, Ebibeyin 1.
- ³⁹ The informant's father advised him to attend the Protestant church over the Catholic mass because it was more 'amusing'. Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 0.
- ⁴⁰ Fernández, 'Fang Representations', 6.
- ⁴¹ Father N. González, *La Guinea Española* (10-10-1910), 8.
- ⁴² *Idem* (10-1-1929), 10-12.
- ⁴³ District of Kogo Annual Report (October 1942), AGA, box G-1907, file 4.
- ⁴⁴ Personal interviews, Akurenang 6; Evinayong 13, 15; Mikomeseng 6, 12, 13.
- ⁴⁵ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 9.
- ⁴⁶ Governor-General Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 47. AGA, box G-167.
- ⁴⁷ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 9.
- ⁴⁸ An elder remembers how he was secretly baptized by his mother, the daughter of a catechist, against the strong will of his polygamous father, who 'could not show his anger because at that time the priests were like the authorities'. Personal interviews, Evinayong 6.
- ⁴⁹ Personal interview, Evinayong 6.
- ⁵⁰ General Vicar Nicolás González to the Governor-General of the Missions (25-6-1930). Archivo General CMF, G-G-12/7. Grébert also observed a similar process among the Gabonese Fang in the early 1930s. F. Grébert, 'La Famille Pahouine en 1931', *Africa*, 5 (1932), 194.
- ⁵¹ *La Guinea Española* (22-11-1931), 7-8.
- ⁵² Sub-Governor Cabrera to the Governor General J. Fontán (5-7-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2; Sub-Governor Cabrera to the General Vicar (21-10-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ⁵³ Fernández, 'Fang Representations', 19.
- ⁵⁴ In cases of paternal opposition, only a few informants claim to have complied with their fathers' wishes, hiding from the authorities when they recruited children. Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 7, 17, 18, 28.
- ⁵⁵ Fernández, 'Fang Representations', 18-19.
- ⁵⁶ Fernández, 'Christian Acculturation', 249.
- ⁵⁷ De Craemer, Vansina and Fox, 'Religious Movements', 461.
- ⁵⁸ Fisiy & Geschiere, 'Sorcery, Witchcraft and Accumulation', 212.
- ⁵⁹ Bôt Ba Njok, 'Prééminences sociales', 153
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 154; Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 453-54.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid*, 454.
- ⁶² N. González, *La Guinea Española* (10-2-1911), 10-11; *idem* (25-2-1911), 8-10.
- ⁶³ Sub-Governor Cabrera to interim Governor-General Suances (11-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

⁶⁴ Sub-Governor Cabrera to interim Governor-General Suances (2-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

⁶⁵ Interim Governor-General Suances to Sub-Governor Cabrera (14-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

⁶⁶ Governor General to the DGMC Director General (29-12-1942). AGA, box G-1864, file 7; Sentence of the Bata District Court (9-4-1943). AGA, box G-1864, file 7.

⁶⁷ As far as I know there was no sect called 'evú'. Through the autopsy, one could confirm whether the individual was a wizard, or he had been the victim of a witchcraft attack. For more details see Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 454-61.

⁶⁸ General Franco later commuted this death sentence to a twenty-five year prison sentence. Sentence of the Bata District Court (9-4-1943). AGA, box G-1864, file 7; Radiogram to the Governor-General (9-7-1943). AGA, box G-1864, file 7.

⁶⁹ J.M. Bonelli, *Notas sobre la geografía humana de los territorios españoles del Golfo de Guinea: conferencias pronunciadas los días 13 y 28 de noviembre de 1944 en la Real Sociedad de Geografía* (Madrid, 1945), 27.

⁷⁰ *La Guinea Española* (25-1-1924), 9.

⁷¹ Sub-Governor Cabrera to interim Governor-General Suances (11-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

⁷² J.A. Moreno, 'Formas de antropofagia en los territorios del Golfo de Guinea', *Archivos del IDEA*, V, 17 (1951), 70.

⁷³ Fisiy & Geschiere, 'Sorcery, Witchcraft and Accumulation'; 'Witchcraft, violence and identity: different trajectories in postcolonial Cameroon', in R. Werbner & T. Ranger (eds.) *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London, 1996); Fernández, 'Christian Acculturation'.

⁷⁴ Fisiy & Geschiere, 'Sorcery, Witchcraft and Accumulation', 253-55; 'Witchcraft, Violence and Identity', 194; Fernández, 'Christian Acculturation', 248, 251-52.

⁷⁵ Moreno, 'Formas de antropofagia', 73

⁷⁶ Due to the lack of forensic facilities, the cause of the death of these individuals could not be proven. The leader of this cult escaped to Cameroon and those trailed were only charged with fraud and illegal exhumations, receiving 'benign' sentences. J.A. Moreno, *El "Ngui" o Contra-Brujo en la Guinea Continental Española* (Lisbon, 1952), 365-66.

⁷⁷ A 1929 article in *La Guinea Española* put Ngii on a level with other witchcraft practices. *La Guinea Española* (10-1-1929), 10-12.

⁷⁸ Urgent Provisional Ordinance on the Native Justice System (May, 1937). AGA, BOX G-1863, file 2.

⁷⁹ M. Foucault, cited in Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 267.

⁸⁰ Balandier, *Sociology of Black Africa*, 31.

⁸¹ See note 99 in chapter 2.

⁸² Balandier, *Sociology of Black Africa*, 31.

⁸³ Personal interviews, Evinayong 4; Ebibeyin 3; Mikomeseng 5, 7, 13, 28.

⁸⁴ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 0, 1, 2, 6.

⁸⁵ Spanish documents indicate that throughout the 1930s colonial officials considered it necessary to reduce the number of appointed chiefs in charge of small communities. Sub-Governor, Annual Report (16-6-1933). AGA, box G-1906, file 1; Sub-Governor Cabrera, Report on the Situation in the Mainland (25-12-1939). PRP, box G-1926, file 2.

⁸⁶ Personal interviews, Evinayong 15; Mikomeseng 7, 20, 28.

- ⁸⁷ Sub-Governor, Annual Report (16-6-1933). AGA, box G-1906, file 1.
- ⁸⁸ Personal interviews, Akurenam 6; Mikomeseng 2, 5, 13, 28.
- ⁸⁹ Sub-Governor, Annual Report (16-6-1933), AGA, box G-1906, file 1.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid.
- ⁹¹ Letter to the Governor-General (June, 1932). AGA, box G-1926, file 1.
- ⁹² Personal interviews, Evinayong 4; Mikomeseng 7.
- ⁹³ Regarding the case of two authoritarian village chiefs, informants claim that the *minnama*, who happened to be the eldest brother in each case, could keep the chief in line. Personal interviews, Evinayong 4; Mikomeseng 7, 9.
- ⁹⁴ Sub-Governor Cabrera, Report on the Situation in the Mainland (25-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2; Governor-General Bonelli to the temporary Sub-Governor (12-9-1945). AGA, box G-1926, file 1.
- ⁹⁵ Informants refer to a village chief who used to take in most of the boys and girls in his compound, where he provided them with food and clothing as well as protection. Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 7, 9.
- ⁹⁶ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 2.
- ⁹⁷ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 1, 2, 7.
- ⁹⁸ Personal interview, Evinayong 13.
- ⁹⁹ Sub-Governor's instructions to district officers (10-8-1932), in Sub-Governor, Annual Report (16-6-1933). AGA, box G-1906, file 1.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid.
- ¹⁰¹ Sub-Governor, Annual Report (16-6-1933). AGA, box G-1906, file 1.
- ¹⁰² Cabrera wrote this letter in response to the petition of his substitute to pardon Motuu's sentence. Unfortunately there is no other document referring to the incidents that motivated the banishment of this chief. Suances to Sub-Governor Cabrera (1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2; Sub-Governor Cabrera to Suances (21-10-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ¹⁰³ Sub-Governor, Annual Report (16-6-1933). AGA, box G-1906, file 1.
- ¹⁰⁴ Urgent Provisional Ordinance on Native Justice (1937). AGA, box G-1863, file 2.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁶ The list of candidates for the Niefang district court was formed by first and second chiefs. President of the *Tribunal Superior Indígena* to the Governor-General (13-2-1947). AGA, box G-1863, file 5.
- ¹⁰⁷ Sub-Governor to the Governor-General (23-9-1937). AGA, box G-1863, file 2.
- ¹⁰⁸ District Officer of Eastern Basakato to the Governor-General (17-5-1937). AGA, box G-1862, file 2.
- ¹⁰⁹ District Officer of Bata, Annual Report (November, 1942). AGA, box G-1907, file 4.
- ¹¹⁰ Sub-Governor to the Governor-General (11-1-1943). AGA, box G-1864, file 2; Governor-General to the Sub-Governor (6-4-1945). AGA, box G-1864, file 2.
- ¹¹¹ Sub-Governor to the Governor-General (23-9-1937). AGA, box G-1863, file 2.
- ¹¹² Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 0, 1.
- ¹¹³ Fernández, 'Fang Representations', 43.
- ¹¹⁴ Ranger, 'Colonial and postcolonial identities', 274.
- ¹¹⁵ Gray, *Colonial Rule*, 14; Weinstein, *Gabon*, 102-03.
- ¹¹⁶ General Vicar Nicolás González, Notes for the DGMC regarding the organization of those departments subscribed to the apostolic vicar of the missions (1927). AGA,

box G-197, file 14; Governor-General to the DGMC Director General (14-7-1930). AGA, box G-200.

¹¹⁷ According to colonial sources, it was common, especially in the Muni estuary, that families from Gabon were granted authorization to settle in Río Muni. Sub-governorship of Continental Guinea to the Governor-General (16-8-1931). AGA, box G-1876, file 1.

¹¹⁸ J. Fernández, 'The Affirmation of Things Past: Alar Ayong and Bwiti as Movements of Protest in Central and Northern Gabon', in R. Rotberg & A. Mazrui (eds.), *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York, 1970), 428-29.

¹¹⁹ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 70.

¹²⁰ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 70; A. de Veciana, *La secta del Bwiti en la Guinea Española* (Madrid, 1958), 55-56; Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 2; Mikomeseng 20.

¹²¹ T. Ranger, 'The invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa', in T. Ranger & O. Vaughan (ed.), *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-century Africa: Essays in honour of A.H.M. Kirk-Greene* (Basingstoke, 1993), 78-82; 'Colonial and Postcolonial Identities', 274.

¹²² Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition Revisited', 63.

¹²³ Fernández, 'The Affirmation', 428.

¹²⁴ L. Fernández, *La Guinea Española* (25-4-1921), 15-16.

¹²⁵ Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 520; Balandier, *Sociology of Black Africa*, 105.

¹²⁶ Fernández, 'The Affirmation', 431.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 430.

¹²⁸ Personal interview, Evinayong 13.

¹²⁹ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1, 2; Mikomeseng 6, 10, 13, 15, 20.

¹³⁰ In Evinayong, only one informant remembers the presence of a Cameroonian who travelled to organize a clan gathering. Personal interview, Evinayong 13.

¹³¹ Fernández maintains that the Spanish authorities and colonial administrators in Gabon were much more alarmist regarding these clan gatherings than the French administrators in Cameroon, who saw them very much like a '*festivité*'. Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 2; Fernández, 'The Affirmation', 431, 438-39.

¹³² Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1; Mikomeseng 10.

¹³³ Although it could not be confirmed, it appears that positions of responsibility within the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement were not in the hands of administrative chiefs. Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 2; Mikomeseng 13.

¹³⁴ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 2; Mikomeseng 20.

¹³⁵ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 20.

¹³⁶ Fernández, 'The Affirmation', 431, 437-38.

¹³⁷ Sub-Governor of Bata to the Governor-General (4-11-1949). AGA, box G-1899.

¹³⁸ The Sub-Governor reports that in the Río Benito only the '*eligiligiti*' dance was banned in 1948 because of its 'symbolic scenes of ambiguous meaning' and subsequently was not practiced as a result of the 'exemplary punishments' that were imposed. Sub-Governor of Bata to the Governor-General (4-11-1949). AGA, box G-1899.

¹³⁹ M. Pinillos, 'La secta del Mhueti', *África*, 86 (1949), 53-54.

¹⁴⁰ Fernández suggests that in the areas where the movement took hold no more than 20 per cent of the population took part in it. To him the movement essentially created 'a microcosm in which all is perfectly organized, with the Fang themselves occupying all the important posts.' Fernández, 'The Affirmation', 430, 439.

¹⁴¹ According to Balandier, colonial authorities in Gabon initially had a positive opinion of the movement because they thought it could provide greater cohesion to the complex structure of Fang society. However, in the late 1940s they 'became hostile, because the initiative for the movement, being strictly Fang, could be interpreted as the first indication of a developing national consciousness.' Balandier, *Sociology of Black Africa*, 188.

¹⁴² Mbana, 'La emigración', 22.

¹⁴³ For a more detailed description and analysis, see Fernández, *Bwiti*, 64-69.

¹⁴⁴ The account of the origin of the Esamongon clan very much resembles the structure of the Afri Kara Legend. Thus, Mba Mongono Ebee, had four sons: Monoo Mba, Emong Mba, Moko Mba and Mogono Mba, who gave origin to the Yenoo, Yemong, Esamokuas and Esamongon clans respectively, which are scattered between Cameroon, Gabon and Río Muni. Personal interview, Mikomeseng 19.

¹⁴⁵ Alexandre, 'Proto-histoire', 551.

¹⁴⁶ After Afri Kara prepared a talisman to protect his children from the forthcoming war, the book explains: 'For everybody the language of his brother became unintelligible... for each of his children only the language of their mother's house, their mother tongue, was left intelligible... Thus, when the Children of Afri Kara could not understand each other, they begun to call each other *bilobolobo*.' Bibang Oye, *La migración Fang*, 42.

¹⁴⁷ Mbana, 'La emigración', 22.

¹⁴⁸ Bibang Oye, *La migración Fang*, 37, 38, 63.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 131-40.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 145-47.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 153.

¹⁵² In Evinayong, a villager was able to recall numerous accounts that he learnt from an elder who served as colonial guard. Mikomeseng 19 and 20, who were deeply involved in the movement, served in the Colonial Guard and colonial administration respectively. Personal interviews, Evinayong 15; Mikomeseng 19, 20.

¹⁵³ Balandier, *Sociology of Black Africa*, 102-103, 200-204.

¹⁵⁴ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 19; Fernández, 'The Affirmation', 438.

¹⁵⁵ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 19.

¹⁵⁶ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 20.

¹⁵⁷ Initially reluctant to answer, Mikomeseng 19 eventually admits that the main topic of these meetings was how to face the Europeans. Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 19.

Chapter 5

The Fang Find “Modernity”

The 1950s and 1960s saw how the socio-cultural organization that emerged from colonial rule consolidated its position in Spanish Guinea. More and more individuals aspired to adopt ‘modernity’ in an effort to improve their social and economic status. Nonetheless, in Equatorial Guinea, like in the rest of colonial Africa, modernity was never synonymous with the socio-cultural model that dominated European societies in the mid-twentieth century; not even that of backward Spain. The only modernity Equatorial Guineans knew was that imposed by colonial authorities; that is, a series of social, cultural, administrative and economic structures, which, though based on the metropolitan ones, were substantially modified in order to fit the needs imposed by colonial domination. Although traditional structures still dominated a fundamentally rural Fang society, colonial modernity achieved a paradigmatic character in the 1950s and 1960s, as it became the referential model that many aspired to reach through Western education, Christianity and capitalist economic activities. This chapter will analyse the relationship between traditional and modern structures within Fang society during a period in which modernity gained ground at the expense of tradition, becoming the dominant social and cultural reference.

The success of Catholic evangelization during this period was undoubtedly the main manifestation of the modernity embraced by the Fang. Colonial modernity was characterized by the coexistence between archaic and modern European institutions. In looking at this aspect of Fang society, we shall see how the massive acceptance of Christianity was greatly determined by the belief that Christianity was the doorway to

modernity; in other words, to the world of the whites. Within this context, traditional institutions, especially political ones, were abandoned since they no longer served a purpose in the rapidly changing Fang society. The rise in authoritarianism amongst administrative chiefs exacerbated their loss of legitimacy, especially after society understood that it was the government and not the chief in which actual authority lay. 'Acculturated' Fang soon realized that, despite embracing modernity, the colonial system curtailed their own ability to achieve the social and economic improvement that the very system claimed to offer. Although Fang self-assertion never evolved into a nationalist movement, it did contribute to the development of Equatorial Guinean nationalism. To become modern amounted to live like Europeans, which is precisely what nationalism sought. However, this goal was undermined by the lack of integration of a colonial society in which neither modernity nor tradition were complete socio-cultural models. This realization led to the development of the 'double realm' or compartmentalization of social and cultural structures, which resulted in the coexistence between Fang or traditional institutions and Spanish or modern ones. The development of the latter was partly undermined by racial segregation, which allowed minimum contact between European and African societies, and the fact that it was Africans themselves – catechists, chiefs and teachers – who transmitted modernity to the rest of the African population.

Christianity holds sway

The combined effects of missionary evangelization and repressive colonial policies on Fang society were apparent by the late 1940s. By then, old Sanaga-Ogowe religious cults had nearly disappeared from most of Río Muni, remaining only in isolated areas. The generational change of the late 1940s and early 1950s proved that

the Claretians' relentless focus on the evangelization and education of children had been an effective strategy. The instruction level of most people educated in missionary schools and *reducciones* was certainly poor, yet it was enough to question basic Fang principles, which had been formerly maintained through the use of *meki* or ritual prohibitions. Social movement within the Fang hierarchical structure was regulated by elders and symbolized by rituals of passage. The missionaries did not ignore the social functions of such rituals, but, since their goal was to undermine the existing social order, they clearly targeted ritual prohibitions. Christianity was portrayed as the key to social equality, and women and children were promised immunity from Fang prohibitions by means of a new passage rite, baptism. Today, some elders explain that 'gluttony' spelt the end of Fang cults, because Christian women and children could eat any meat, including those animals that were exclusively reserved to initiated individuals; that is, the ambition for enjoying the privileges of adult males precipitated the decadence of local cults.¹ Whether we call it gluttony or ambition for a more promising society, it is clear that by the 1950s the religious role of the previous generation was almost non-existent. Younger Fang embraced Christianity as their religion, and, according to the Catholic faith, their children were usually baptized soon after being born; no longer were questions raised as to what the ancestors had to say.

Although the post-war economic development in Río Muni was modest in comparison to the plantation-based economy of Fernando Po, it made possible a clear improvement in the living standard of the African population. Undoubtedly this had a positive effect on the expansion of Christian beliefs, since people could experience firsthand the benefits of European culture of which Christianity was a fundamental part. The rise in witchcraft accusations that since the late 1930s affected Fang society

appeared to have been successfully contained one decade later, as explained by a colonial report in 1950:

It has been observed during the last year that, in comparison with previous years, there has been a very significant decrease, almost total disappearance, of all those cases that showed native's backwardness, especially of those of the mainland's interior. We are speaking, in particular, about those cases related to criminal manifestations of their secret sects, whether they are autochthonous like Evu or imported like Mbueti [*Bwiti*], in connection with ritual anthropophagy. This is a clear result of the vigilant and educative work of the administration, on the one hand, and the spiritual one of the Religious Missionaries, on the other.²

From this point, there is no record in colonial documentation of major incidents associated with witchcraft and similar practices. The social tensions linked to the initial stages of the introduction of cocoa and coffee crops diminished as more people benefited from these cultivations and other economic activities related to the colonial system. By the late 1940s, the Fang were becoming to terms with the effects of such transformations, which were no longer attributed to witchcraft practices. Success was now explained in different terms, because, as an informant explained, once *Melän* was gone, 'the Fang man was left only with three things to face his problems: many children to farm and reap abundant harvest, physical strength to work hard in case one did not have many children, and discernment to chose the right business strategy.'³ The belief in witchcraft did not disappear completely, yet its scope was diminished to extreme cases, as people could see a cause and effect relationship between economic prosperity and cash crop cultivation and education. The latter replaced ritual preparation – *akomng'a* – as the tool to guarantee children's success in life.

In addition to the improvement in living conditions, so-called witchcraft practices were also affected by the harsh measures adopted by the Spanish authorities during the 1940s. Now, when people were suspected of witchcraft activities or rituals against

such practices were carried out, this was kept in secret in order to avoid the intervention of the district officer. Something similar happened with the expansion of religious movements like *Bwiti*, which, after becoming a great concern for the Spanish authorities, came to a halt by the late 1940s.⁴

Contrary to colonial rhetoric, which linked *Bwiti* to witchcraft and anthropophagous sects, *Bwiti* was a communal religious movement, in the fashion of past ancestor cults, that sought to maximize the fortune of the members of the cult. This decentralized movement seemed to be born in the late nineteenth century around the Gabon Estuary, probably amongst the Mitsogo people. Fernandez in numerous articles and, especially, in his influential ethnological work, *Bwiti*, describes this religious movement as an adaptation of previous Central African ancestors cults, such as *Melán*. Despite its syncretic nature, in which elements of Christianity were integrated especially from the 1940s, *Bwiti*, somehow, sought to re-establish links between worshipers, the ancestors and God. *Bwiti* was born out of the sense of crisis that followed colonial conquest, and which was believed to be the result of the abandonment of the ancestors.⁵ Unlike *Melán*, *Bwiti* transcended family, gender and age boundaries, since both men and women from different clans and ethnic groups took part in ceremonies, and young men, especially since the 1940s, could play a leading role. This was, indeed, one of the worrying factors of this religious movement, in which blacks – Africans – were given a sense of communality in opposition to whites. Pinillos, for instance, refers to a *Bwiti* legend that claimed that Jesus was murdered to prevent blacks from knowing the ‘truths of the world.’⁶

The dynamism of all kind of African religious manifestations, such as *Bwiti* and *Ngii* was seriously undermined by repressive colonial measures, which included the use of the death penalty. Moreno and Novoa argue that after the execution of seven

bandji (*Bwiti* members) in 1948, the cult became much less visible, abandoning its former proselytizing approach.⁷ Unlike *Bwiti* in Gabon, no religious movement was created or widely spread across Río Muni during the colonial period. *Bwiti*, which spread into the Muni Estuary at the turn of the twentieth century, was mostly limited to the south-western and south-central part of the territory. This is not surprising considering the repressive climate created by the Spanish authorities, especially effective within Río Muni's narrow borders. The existence of a religious movement does not only require that a community 'accepts a new religious form but also transmits it to other individuals and groups', and this was certainly difficult in a territory like Río Muni, under the close scrutiny of colonial officers, missionaries and elements of the African population.⁸ Inadvertently, some of the Spanish strategies to combat *Bwiti* backfired, favouring, at least initially, the expansion of this cult. Members of *Bwiti* arrested in coastal areas were confined to regions of the colony where *Bwiti* was unknown. Given the proselytizing nature of *Bwiti*, in which non-initiated people were allowed to attend ceremonies, local individuals could be co-opted to becoming active members of the cult.⁹

Sources indicate that Spanish propaganda with regards to African religious manifestations was quite effective. When asked about *Bwiti*, informants' views are very different from academic interpretations like that of Fernández who sees in *Bwiti* a reformatory and affirmative cult. Initially there were numerous misconceptions about *Bwiti*, which was purposely portrayed as an anthropophagous sect by the colonial government and the Catholic missionaries. This, along with most of the Fang population's ignorance of the cult, contributed to the development of exceptionally negative views on *Bwiti*, particularly in regions like present-day Kie-Ntem where the cult never took root. Nobody can explain exactly why *Bwiti* was so unpopular in

northern Río Muni, but it appears that it was seen as a form of witchcraft, feared by many.¹⁰ In becoming increasingly clandestine to protect itself from Spanish persecution, the mystery around *Bwiti* grew, raising all kind of rumours about the evil nature of its rituals. The ingestion of *iboga*, a hallucinogenic substance, for example, was frequently argued in many informal conversations as the main reason to reject *Bwiti*. This is certainly surprising, considering that *Melán* also involved the intake of a hallucinogen, *alan*.¹¹ Whatever the reason, *Bwiti* members found it very difficult to explain that this cult was merely a religious movement and should not be feared.¹² The profound effects of this campaign are still visible today. In districts like Evinayong, where *Bwiti* flourished in the 1930s and 1940s and continuing to be celebrated long after, people are very reluctant to talk about the cult. Spanish propaganda did not only affect new cults like *Bwiti* but also old ones like *Ngii*, which, according to one informant, was believed to be 'foolishness' by many of his peers in the 1950s, despite the fact that their fathers still took it very seriously.¹³ African religious beliefs were either demonized or ridiculed to such an extent that most Fang people embraced in varying degrees some of these misconceptions.

Despite retreating in the face of Christian culture and colonial repression, local religious beliefs did not disappear completely. In fact, the existence of cults like *Bwiti* and later *Mibili* indicate that the Fang managed to enrich their religious repertoire through the influence of neighbouring peoples both from inside and outside the Spanish colony. Nonetheless, it is clear that this period was dominated by Christian culture. When asked whether any other cult replaced the functions that *Melán* used to serve in the village, most people initially give a negative answer. If anything, many replied that they were left only with Christianity.¹⁴ It is only after some discussion that informants admit that, in certain occasions, some rituals were celebrated in the

village. Clearly, their answers denote that these rituals had a marginal character, for they did not have the same consideration as *Melăn* nor were celebrated often. Referring to one of these rituals, a relatively young woman explained that during the 1960s 'life was pretty ordinary' and people 'only looked after their farms, which did well', thus 'those rituals were not celebrated in the village.'¹⁵ Christianity did not make modern Fang less pragmatic than their ancestors, therefore religious celebrations remained rather scarce due to the relative material prosperity of this period. In contributing to this climate of perceived spiritual calm, the reduction of mortality resulting from economic prosperity and colonial health policies also made local rituals somewhat unnecessary.

Despite informants' descriptions of rising prosperity, we should not paint too rosy a picture of the late colonial period. Many people's memories are tainted by the repression and hardships that followed the country's independence, but living conditions were not ideal within a colonial system perceived as unjust due to the numerous obstacles for the improvement of the African population. In dealing with unjust interventions by the colonial state and other problems, the Fang resorted to *Bowuu* and *Abira*. These rituals are comparable to what the Fang generically call *abán metêñ* or blessing of the village, whose main purpose is to expel whatever evil there is within the community and restore the natural order. Perhaps because *Bwiti* never spread to northern Río Muni, these rituals appeared to have been more common in this region than south of the river Wele. In accordance with the previous tradition, *Bowuu* and *Abira* involved the role of the ancestors who were asked by the elders for assistance to rid the village of existing difficulties. Skulls relics, however, were not present. There are conflicting views as to whether or not these rituals were banned by the authorities, yet it does not seem that the Spanish took a tough stance on them.¹⁶

Fang religious beliefs remained alive especially in the minds of those elders most sceptical about the religion and culture of the Europeans. Many of them rejected Christianity and even refused to allow their children to be baptized and to go to school. *Melăn* relics were gone, yet, during the 1930s and 1940s, they reinvented new cults in which the ancestors maintained their intermediary and protective role. *Bowuu* seems to have followed an initiation pattern similar to that of *Melăn*, which was narrowly linked with the Sanaga-Ogowe *Só* ritual. The latter took its name from the red antelope, *só*, whose meat was exclusively reserved to those men initiated in this ritual, and which also allowed them to participate in *Melăn* ceremonies.¹⁷ Informants do not refer to the existence of *Só* during their lifetime, yet a few of them claim that *Bowuu* was an initiation rite that allowed men to eat red antelope.¹⁸ This information complements those views that describe *Bowuu* fundamentally as a purification ritual. It is difficult to know the origin of this rite but Ndongo Mba and Tessmann provide some clues which may shed some light on this process. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tessmann explained that after being initiated a neophyte received several tattoos or scars in the back of his neck; this mark was called *wu*.¹⁹ Ndongo Mba confirms that these scars are called 'bogu' [*bowuu*], which is plural for *wu*.²⁰ It is probable that due to the decline of some Sanaga-Ogowe cults, such as *Só* and *Melăn*, and the later confiscation of *Melăn* relics, Fang elders recombined elements of the two cults into a new one, which included an initiation rite as well as the mediator role of the ancestors. Informants recount that during the ritual the name *bowuu* is called, which, according to them has no meaning, but whose root seems quite close to the verb *a wu* (to die) and the noun *nwu* (dead person).²¹ Due to the absence of 'gruesome' elements, such as human bones, that could attract the condemnatory

vigilance of the Europeans, *Bowuu* could be practiced with relative freedom. Nonetheless data do not suggest that this cult spread beyond present-day Kie-Ntem.

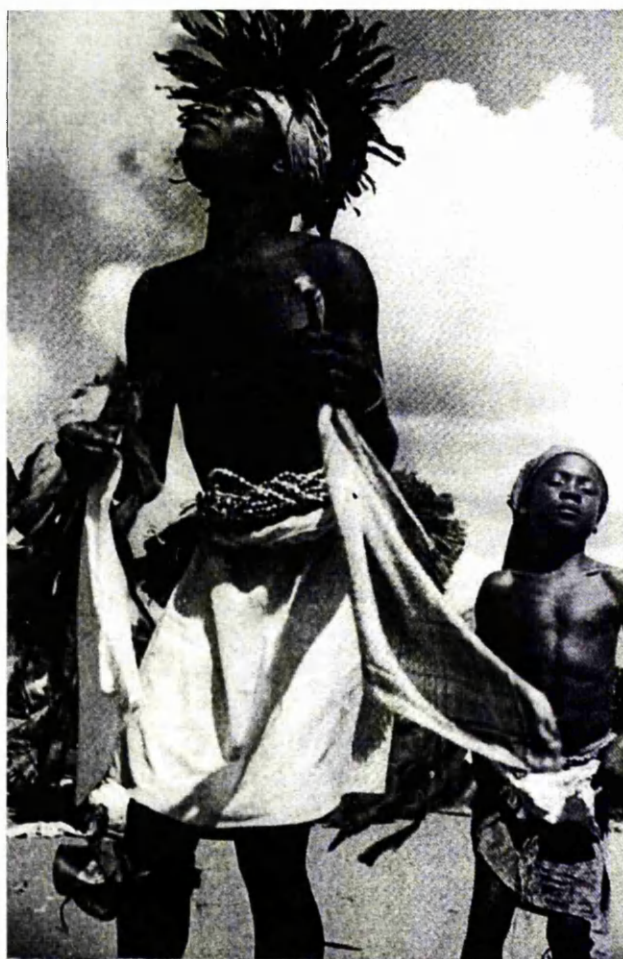
It is not very clear, as De Craemer, Vansina and Fox suggest for Central Africa generally, that the exchange of ideas was expanded and intensified in Río Muni; at least not during the first half of the twentieth century.²² Despite the fact that colonial domination facilitated contacts within Río Muni, religious practices did not benefit greatly from this situation because they had to be hidden from the colonial establishment and its closest African allies.²³ In his study of southern Gabon, Gray argues that Europeans' disregard of the 'supernatural' allowed elders to remain in control of this part of the 'precolonial cognitive map', placing the 'invisible' realm 'beyond the influence of the colonial administration'.²⁴ In Río Muni, however, Fang religious manifestations seemed to have lost their previous dynamism. This is partly explained by the hostile colonial environment but also by what appears to have been a reduction in the celebration of local rituals. As Fernández argues, 'systematization was buried in action and image' in Central African societies; that is, the strength of the belief system is mostly kept through regular religious practice.²⁵ Action, however, was quite scarce during this period. Despite the lack of evidence, Fernández was inclined to think that soon after the contact with the Europeans 'a decrease in the complexity of Fang cognitions of their own culture' took place, which, to my mind, might have been caused by the reduction of religious activity just mentioned.²⁶ This conclusion is inevitable if one compares modern Fang religious thought with the one reflected in Tessmann's monograph of less than a century ago. Fang elders of the 1930s and 1940s sought to transmit their knowledge to those younger men who were considered to have special aptitudes and who remained in the village away from strong European influence, yet this process was undermined by the repressive colonial

climate. In the 1950s and 1960s, this generation started to take over, but given that they did not experience religious life previous to the arrival of the Europeans and their formation had been incomplete, they had to reinterpret new ways on the basis of less complex religious beliefs within an adverse climate dominated by Christianity.

The lack of vigour of African religious manifestations in the late colonial period contrasts with that of Christianity, whose popularity grew as the younger generation started gaining control over their society. Christianity was the religion of the European colonizer, but it was also the religion of a more modern and vibrant society in which many Africans in the Spanish colony wanted to be integrated. Within colonial society, one of Africans' maximum aspirations was to reach the status of *emancipado*, which, on paper, put them on the same cultural level with Europeans. To be Christian was obviously a *sine qua non* to reach the point of so-called cultural evolution required to enjoy the benefits of full citizenship. Very few became *emancipados*, for the law required a level of economic independence difficult to obtain for the vast majority of the African population. Nonetheless, Christianity allowed many to pursue and advance their careers within education and the colonial administration. Polygamy was strongly discouraged by the Spanish administration, which saw such behaviour as contrary to Christian civilization and morality. Having observed that many Christian Africans were still reluctant to marry canonically, the Spanish administration decided to pay a salary bonus to those functionaries who did so.²⁷ Living in accordance with Christian principles could put one in a position to be promoted by the Europeans, which subsequently resulted in many economic and social rewards. Such a lifestyle, somehow, brought Africans closer to the way of life of the European, and, as one informant acknowledges, 'at that time, people who were married canonically had plenty of prestige'.²⁸



Photograph 28: Under the term “baleles”, the Spanish allowed dances that were previously part of religious rituals



Photograph 29: “Baleles” were often encouraged as folkloric manifestations

Key to the success of Christianity was the speed with which it was internalized by the Fang, passing from being considered the religion of the colonizers to be accepted as a local institution. Indeed, this process was facilitated by the important role of Africans in the evangelization of Río Muni. Scholars such as Fernández often highlight the importance of the missionaries by placing their influence above that of colonial officers, yet this was very much possible thanks to the assistance of African catechists and pastors.²⁹ In commemorating the centenary of the Catholic missions in the Gulf of Guinea in 1959, Father Olangua acknowledged that the function of the African catechist was 'invaluable' when it came to 'forming a new Christendom'.³⁰ The average Fang did not learn the Christian gospel through the mouth of the European missionary, but through their African assistants. Despite Río Muni's limited size, the Claretians never had enough human resources to cover the territory. In 1959 there were 53 priests, including 12 Africans, in the colony in addition to a larger number of brothers and sisters from several religious orders and some 325 catechists.³¹ From central missionary stations in Nkue, Evinayong or Bata, a given missionary periodically visited the *reducciones* in villages under his supervision.³² The frequency of missionaries' visits was not only limited by the lack of resources but also by climate, since their touring was interrupted by the two annual rainy seasons that could make travel almost impossible in certain areas. Most informants admit that, although their contact with Europeans was mostly with the missionaries, they rarely saw them more than twice a year. Claretians' visit to their *reducciones* usually coincided with the commemoration of the village's patron or other similar important occasions. These visits could be more frequent in the case of *reducciones* in big villages where the large number of followers required the special attention of the missionary.³³



Photograph 30: Guinean priest celebrating mass

In many respects, Fang catechists had to play the role of priests, administering some sacraments such as baptism or the last rights, and celebrating religious services. As mentioned above, they were also responsible for initiating children into Christianity as well as providing spiritual guidance for the rest of their community. Not surprisingly, some people believe that the catechist's role was more important than that of the missionary.³⁴ When analysing the peculiarities of Catholicism in present-day Equatorial Guinea, one not only has to keep in mind the African cultural background in which Christianity developed, but also that Christianity was mostly interpreted and transmitted by Africans. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the absence of trained catechists forced the Claretians to resort to good students from their missionary schools. Initially most of these students came from coastal areas but as the Spanish penetration into Río Muni progressed in the 1910s they also recruited pupils from the interior, especially the children of prominent leaders. The opening of two schools to train catechists in 1928 and 1931 did not succeed, as they had to close down in 1935 due to the lack of resources and support from the Republican

government.³⁵ These schools were never opened again and, during the remaining colonial period, most catechists continued to come from Claretian boarding schools.³⁶ Clearly, their religious training was never comparable to the one received in Catholic seminaries. With a rudimentary understanding of the intricate Catholic theology, Fang catechists became the new 'peasant intellectuals' having to interpret and explain the message to their followers. As one informant recalls, in the early stages of evangelization, people could refer to these catechists as a sort of prophet, for in religious discussions an opinion was usually preceded by the words '*José Meñana a dzó na*' – 'José Meñana says that'.³⁷ In a process similar to other African peoples, the Fang Africanized Christianity by adding their own interpretations and rites to the Catholic liturgy. Fang Christianity became essentially ritualistic, with a lesser emphasis on Catholic moral principles.³⁸ The Fang were equally influenced by Christianity, which made them more concerned with the hereafter at the same time as providing them with a more universal worldview.³⁹

Many informants explain that they were mostly taught about the Christian gospel, without much emphasis given to 'correcting' Fang customs. This is somewhat surprising considering that missionaries were aware that so-called pagan practices and beliefs remained alive in Fang villages. Only a few informants had memories about missionaries censuring certain customs such as the use of protective amulets, which were dismissed as foolishness before the impotent eyes of Fang parents who had to see their children dispossessed of ritual protection against misfortune.⁴⁰ The issue that by and large continued to aggravate missionaries during the 1950s and 1960s was polygamy, because most Fang men, like their fathers before them, did not want to renounce polygamy on principle, and continued to reject canonical marriages even if they were monogamous.⁴¹ Since missionaries sought to maintain the picture of the

'merciful White' in the eyes of Africans, they avoided being seen as ruthless and condemnatory in their sporadic visits to Fang villages. With regards to Fang catechists, the situation was a bit more complicated. Firstly, they came from the same cultural background as their fellow villagers, and their Christian faith had not succeeded in eliminating certain enduring beliefs such as the power of *evú* and *byang*. In 1966, Perramón estimated that, despite ninety per cent of Fang were baptized, they still believed in '*medicina*' (*byang*).⁴² Secondly, having to share the same village space with other Fang Christians, it was not in their best interest to exacerbate tensions within the community and, thus, make their life harder. In addition, Fang catechists found it very difficult to reach the right equilibrium between the culture they came from and the religion they followed. Bonifacio Ondo Edu, one of the most prominent catechists and who would later serve as the President of the Autonomous Government between 1964 and 1968, had many difficulties in explaining to his fellow men certain aspects of Christianity:

Amulets were removed but, in exchange, they were given crosses, medals and scapularies.

Totemic figures were despised, but yet they were made to worship images of saints.

The marvellous doings of their wizards and warriors were mocked, but, on the other hand, they were told about the miracles and marvels of saints and the extraordinarily supernatural tales of the Bible.

They were censured for offering food and hens to the dead, while Christians honour them with candles and flowers... Their wizards were discredited as frauds, despite being considered as their legitimate intermediaries between people and spirits, having extraordinary powers. However, they were taught to believe in the supernatural powers of the Catholic priest; powers as potent as the Eucharistic consecration, the forgiveness of sin, salvation through baptism, protection or liberation from evil through exorcisms and blessings.⁴³

Despite Christianity's inability to eliminate completely local beliefs, by the late 1950s it was clear that, as far as numbers were concerned, the Claretians had won

their battle against local cults and other Christian denominations in Río Muni – 180,000 Catholics and 8,000 Protestants out of a total population of 198,663 people.⁴⁴ The competition between Catholics and Protestants added further conflicts to village life, with their communities divided between Protestant and Catholic followers as leaders of both denominations sought to attract the largest number of converts as possible.⁴⁵ In spite of Claretian complaints, this competition was clearly imbalanced since they had much more human and economic resources as well as enjoying official support. The colonial government's concern with Protestantism was based more on political than on religious grounds. By the late 1940s the Spanish authorities were aware of growing nationalist demands in neighbouring colonies, which were usually voiced by educated Africans. In this respect, Protestantism was considered as a threat in Spanish Guinea, not only because its alliance to the colonial government was not clear but also because the majority of pastors were African. In response to this situation, in 1949 the Spanish decided to carry out an intensive survey on the situation of all Protestant chapels in the colony. The 1949 report included the number of chapels in each district, their ascription, the central mission on which they depended, number of followers, and so forth. The same report acknowledged that Protestant missions activities were undermined by district officers.⁴⁶ Almost a decade later, Protestant activities in Río Muni became much more worrying as the African population started to make more evident their dissatisfaction with a system that limited their social and economic improvement. Following the announcement of the independence of the Cameroonian Presbyterian Church in 1957, the Spanish authorities decided to impose censorship on all mail involving Protestant African pastors.⁴⁷ This measure, however, did not stop the rise of nationalist demands in the late 1950s and 1960s. From then, social dissatisfaction was not expressed in terms of

witchcraft accusations, nor took the form of religious movements; rather, the Western educated elite opted for 'modern' ways of political struggle.

It is the state that matters: the decline of village autonomy

In so-called traditional societies, customs and institutions mostly survive as constituent elements of the broader tradition or culture in so far as they serve a purpose. Pre-industrialized societies can rarely afford to preserve outdated customs that are otherwise stored as folkloric elements in the industrialized world. By the late 1940s, as the passage of time took its inevitable toll on charismatic elders, most Fang were aware that *minnama* leadership was meaningless. The death of Fang elders came along with the decline of the values that they struggled to preserve for several decades, only eventually to become part of people's memories. The establishment of the native justice system in 1938 increased the colonial government's interference in village affairs, putting a serious strain in the relationship between the community leader and the administrative chief. One decade later, it was very difficult to distinguish one from the other. A Fang elder explained that *minnama* never disappeared, it was simply transformed into what was nowadays called *nkukuma*, whose leadership is as essential for the village as 'the soil is for men'.⁴⁸

By the late 1940s, Fang society was left without the mechanisms to counteract the individualistic trends encouraged by all sectors of the colonial establishment. The younger generation of Fang chiefs did not share the same values of their predecessors. To them, personal ambitions came before their responsibility to their communities, a tendency that was accentuated during this period. The erosion of check-and-balance mechanisms did not necessarily mean that Fang administrative chiefs became ruling despots within their villages, because colonial authorities continued to be extremely

wary of empowering local authorities to the extent that they could no longer be controlled. The Spanish approach towards administrative chiefs was always influenced by a mixture of racism and suspicion. In 1939, the chief José Meñana of Mbe, Mikomeseng, reported the intention of a group of Fang civil servants and chiefs to hire a lawyer to defend African interests in Spain to the colonial authorities.⁴⁹ Although the Sub-Governor suggested rewarding him, the Governor-general, advised by the Mikomeseng district officer, refused to do so:

Baena [the district officer], who knows him well, believes that it is not appropriate to give him a reward, because he considers that he reported the case not out of good will, but out of outrage for being deceived... What Baena says completely agrees with the Bishop's opinion, who claims that it is very dangerous to reward natives because, vanity being an innate quality in them, rewards are usually counterproductive.⁵⁰

Chiefs' authoritarian tendencies were as much limited by colonial officials as by the African population. In neglecting their duties as community leaders, administrative chiefs were seen by the Fang population as simple agents of the colonial government. Chiefs who referred conflicts to district officers were likely to be seen as 'traitors' to the village community.⁵¹ Accordingly, people understood that chiefs' ability to impose their authority was mostly limited to those cases that directly concerned the colonial state, such as labour and marriage. All those spheres of village life in which the state did not intervene gradually escaped the control of village chiefs during the 1950s and 1960s. This contributed to the political compartmentalization of Fang communities, whose integration was never completely consolidated after the policy of resettlements of the 1920s and 1930s. Administrative chiefs of the 1950s and 1960s lacked the necessary skills to be acknowledged by all extended families at village level. In the 1930s, Fang families tended to acknowledge the leadership of chiefs from different families, but by the 1950s and 1960s people found it more

difficult to recognize village leaders outside their families. Informants explain that in some cases this situation led to the appointment of more than one village chief in order to satisfy all families involved.⁵² Although such measures went against colonial authorities' efforts to unify native authority, it is likely that individual district officers approved this kind of measure so as to avoid disruptive conflicts.⁵³

Although divisions and tensions between extended families did not become evident until the late 1950s, this was an outcome of the series of accumulated actions of administrative chiefs from the late 1940s. The newer generation of administrative chiefs was chosen on different grounds than the first generation. Spanish officials were no longer as interested in their local legitimacy. Now, their aptitude was measured according to their level of acculturation and loyalty to the colonial state, which included some command of Spanish and literacy as well as their Christian commitment. An informant from the Añisok district clearly remembers how amongst a neighbouring clan, the succession for chieftainship opposed the clan elders against a younger candidate, who was finally appointed by officials thanks to his command of Spanish, his canonical marriage, and his leadership qualities learnt during service in the Colonial Guard. Clan elders chose a candidate amongst themselves, arguing that he knew Fang customs as well as the villages and people of the district, unlike his younger opponent who, after working outside the district for so long, was not familiar with village life.⁵⁴

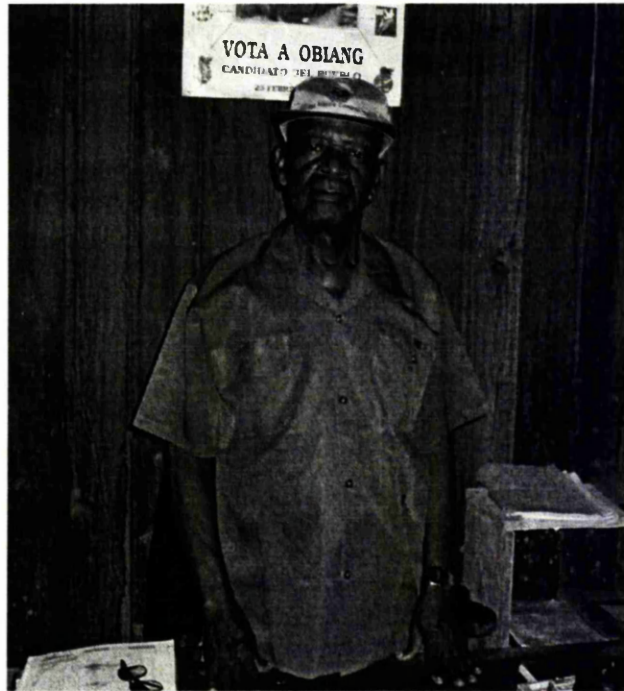
In the past, succession was usually decided after reaching some form of consensus amongst village elders as to whom was best qualified to protect the interest of the whole community. Behind administrative chiefs' attempt to point out their successor was the secret desire to retain the chieftainship within their family, institutionalizing the hereditary character of this post. Accordingly, the election of the

successor was usually an individual decision that ignored the will of the rest of villagers. Chieftainship turned into a self-promoting institution, while village families generally opposed chieftainships becoming the patrimony of a sole extended family. Referring to the dispute over succession in Beayop, where the young Nzang Okenve was appointed by his father – Okenve Mituy –, an informant claimed that the two other families refused the election of the chief's son because his 'family have held the post for too long, so they cannot continue any longer.'⁵⁵ The district officer had to intervene to ease the tension which threatened to destabilize part of the district. The district officer arrested numerous people, after a crowd marched for some thirty kilometres to the district capital to protest against the appointment of a young candidate. The arrested individuals were released on condition that they all returned to their village, where they should follow a regulated process to elect a new village chief.⁵⁶ Finally a member of a different family was elected as chief. Although informants do not usually refer to this type of incidents – disputes over leadership are frowned upon – it appears that they were more common than are often accepted. These cases are often hidden by village official versions, which tell of succeeding chiefs being pointed out by their predecessors or elected by village men. Authority legitimacy continues to rest on the village community, thus, in order to legitimize the final outcome, the official version in Beayop claims that the succeeding chief was pointed out by Okenve Mituy from the beginning.

Administrative chiefs' lack of prestige was influenced by district officers' low concept of them, as it was evident in the leadership dispute in Beayop. Nzang Okenve was advised by the district officer to withdraw from the race over the chieftainship because the chieftainship was 'worthless' and, given his education, he could have a more prosperous future within the colonial administration.⁵⁷ This advice eventually

proved to be right, according to one informant.⁵⁸ In spite of this, it is clear that many individuals actively sought chieftainships. The efforts of administrative chiefs to consolidate their position became clear during the visit of members of the metropolitan government to the colony in 1948. Although the main item in the agenda of the official delegation was the construction of the new airport at Bata, it was decided to carry out a mini tour across Río Muni in order to see the progress of the colonial enterprise. The tour, which was initially considered as a simple formality, took a different tone when the delegation arrived in Mikomeseng. The district officer, knowing that the delegation had scheduled to meet a group of prominent chiefs and hear their views, asked this group of chiefs to write a letter where they expressed their petitions and concerns. Most Fang chiefs saw this as an opportunity to advance their position and request a series of improvements in the conditions of chieftainship from the metropolitan government. According to Marcelo Ndongo Mba, one of the Fang civil servants in charge of typing the letter, the chiefs of the Mikomeseng district asked for a salary, for the transformation of the position into one for life and for the position to be hereditary.⁵⁹ In view of the fact that most chiefs were only concerned with their own benefit, a group of educated men and chiefs led by Enrique Nvo and Carmelo Nguema Ndongo – teacher and first-chief respectively – decided to write a letter denouncing the abuses of the colonial system and asking for an improvement in the treatment of Africans, and, more significantly, for the possibility of sending a few acculturated Africans to Spain in order to expose the conditions and needs of the African population.⁶⁰ Although a few chiefs reported this move to the district officer, the defiant group managed to hand in their letter to the metropolitan delegation, including the Minister of Aviation, González Gallarza, Franco's Undersecretary, Carrero Blanco, and the Director-General for Morocco and the Colonies, Díaz de

Villegas. The colonial authorities, embarrassed by an incident that exposed Africans' dissatisfaction with the colonial administration, reacted by punishing those involved in the plot. Those arrested were tortured and banished to Annobon, from where a few of them, including Marcelo Ndongo Mba, managed to escape.⁶¹



Photograph 31: Marcelo Ndongo Mba in his office of Nkue

The 1948 incident announced the emergence of open dissatisfaction amongst certain sectors of the African population, which would develop into a nationalist movement by the mid-1950s. The incident also revealed that administrative chiefs would be an obstacle for the aspirations of the nationalist movement. Village leadership had clearly moved away from the principles of precolonial ideology and no longer aimed at representing the interest of the community. Furthermore, administrative chiefs, despite barely obtaining anything from the colonial administration, were very attached to their chieftainship and feared district officers. Being afraid of losing their posts, they were unable to represent the grievances of their

fellow villagers. Instead, they mostly limited their functions to referring judicial matters to the district officer, witness his resolutions and receive his orders. As a result, families were increasingly reluctant to refer their cases to the village chief or even to be represented by him. In the absence of the regulatory role of elders' councils, village life became susceptible to administrative chiefs' arbitrariness and partiality, which eventually exacerbated divisions and tensions within communities.

Although colonial chiefs enjoyed a specially privileged position, in many cases they were no different from the rest of the population. They also had to take part in the much-hated compulsory communal work, given that only *emancipados*, Africans working directly for the administration, migrant labourers and foreign Africans were exempt from it.⁶² In fact, the colonial government was aware of the precarious situation of most chiefs, whose situation deteriorated when they lost control over the hiring of villagers by European companies in the late 1930s. A colonial report pointed out that it was advisable to pay a salary to administrative chiefs, in order to avoid their interest in fomenting 'palavers' within their communities, since this was their only source of income. In spite of this, chiefs continued not receiving a salary during the colonial period.⁶³ Only a small number of administrative chiefs could act as members of the district tribunal, so most chiefs lived thanks to their farming activities. Given that administrative chiefs did not obtain much from the colonial administration, some used their authority to take advantage of their fellow villagers, especially in relation to two types of issues, women and personal disputes. According to colonial authorities, women filing for divorce should remain under the custody of the chief until the case was finally heard by the district officer. Nonetheless, chiefs could delay unnecessarily the referral of the case before the colonial authorities, so as to use women's labour in

their farms as well as other personal favours. With regards to administrative chiefs conduct in divorce cases, an elder explained people's stance:

Those cases took place, yet, at that time, this was not considered to be an abuse but something normal that we had to respect. It was assumed that during the process of divorce a woman had to stay in the *nkúkúma*'s compound. It is only later that people realized this was abusive.⁶⁴

Other sources refer to cases in which clan chiefs used their position to undermine fellow clan members in case of personal clashes. Thus, there were cases in which people could be accused before the colonial authorities or they could be denied a positive report necessary to hire farm workers.⁶⁵ An informant described how he was arrested and brutalized by the Colonial Guard after being accused by the chief of his clan in 1951. When asked about the type of accusations launched against him, he answered that he was simply arrested without being told why or without being able to defend himself; on top of that, he had to pay the colonial guards to compensate them for the 'trip', as was customary.⁶⁶ Although abuses at the hands of chiefs appear to have been relatively limited during the 1950s and 1960s, it is difficult to measure the actual extent of the problem because even now people are reluctant to speak out.⁶⁷

As in most African colonies, the nationalist movement in Equatorial Guinea developed an antagonistic relationship with local chiefs, who were seen, from the nationalist ranks, as agents of the colonial administration. This is not to say that the nationalist movement completely bypassed rural communities. Urban development was practically non-existent in Río Muni, being limited to Bata and, to a lesser extent, Río Benito, Ebibeyin and Mikomeseng, where commercial activities had a more solid basis. Educated elites, therefore, kept very strong links with the rural communities where they came from. Enrique Nvo, who along another *emancipado*, Acacio Meñe, was the most prominent nationalist leader in Río Muni during the 1950s, developed

most of his activities from his home-village of Mbe, Mikomeseng. As we shall later, the two leaders died in strange circumstances at the end of the decade, but, before their deaths, they tried to gather support from respected elders. The clash between nationalists and administrative chiefs was a logical consequence. The latter owned their privileged position, however limited it was, to the fact that they acted as government representatives. They claimed to be the legitimate heirs of precolonial Sanaga-Ogowe community leaders, thus their authority was based on tradition and age. The younger and educated generation, however, had problems in coming to terms with administrative chiefs authority, as they despised their lack of education and considered themselves to be better qualified to lead. If there was any hope as to the future of so-called traditional authority, this was sealed after the legalization of political parties by the Spanish government in 1963. From then on, African leadership came into play within the broader national arena, and so-called traditional authorities were ruled out as an alternative in taking meaningful decisions. Informants usually agree that village authority is no longer respected, and a few point out the arrival of politics as the moment in which this took place.⁶⁸ At the same time, politics exacerbated divisions within communities, putting village and clan chiefs in a more precarious situation. In realizing that their role would be even smaller within an administration controlled by African politicians, many administrative chiefs chose to oppose the idea of independence.

The Fang complete their journey

The development of a common Fang identity did not result in the formation of a nationalist movement capable of claiming a nation state for the Fang people across the three colonial borders that separated them, as the leaders of the *e'Lat-Ayong* would

have desired. Following the foundation of the Kribi-Ntem Tribal Union in Cameroon in 1948, its activities gradually diminished during the 1950s and by the end of the decade the movement had virtually ceased to exist. In Río Muni, the movement always remained dependent on Cameroonian leadership, hence its actions were seriously affected by the political developments north of the border as well as Spain's suspicion towards what was increasingly seen as foreign interference. Undoubtedly, the development of formal political parties in Cameroon had a negative effect on the fate of the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement. Mbana recounts how a former member of the movement in Cameroon told him that 'the political parties that fought for independence in Fang countries were utilized by colonial governments against Fang nationalism, since their goals were set within the border limits of the new states created by colonial powers.'⁶⁹ The 1948 incident in Mikomeseng showed the existence of an incipient cooperation between early nationalist leaders, such as Enrique Nvo, and charismatic elders. To the educated elite, elders' influence in their communities was key, for it went beyond that of administrative chiefs, who, as we have seen, were constantly caught between government and village loyalty. However, the younger generation of nationalist leaders, who started to emerge from 1959, developed a more antagonistic relationship with rural leadership. For as long as political activism was banned in Spanish Guinea, politicians, acting from exile mostly in Cameroon and Gabon, maintained closer contacts with charismatic elders in order to spread their messages. Once political activities were legalized at the end of 1963, political leaders gradually distanced themselves from their traditional counterparts. The latter were seen as competitors by a political class that enjoyed little or no influence within rural areas. Amongst the different political parties that saw the light in Río Muni since 1959, only *Idea Popular de Guinea Ecuatorial* (IPGE, Popular Idea

of Equatorial Guinea) embraced Fang nationalism while pushing for a future union with Cameroon. As we shall see later, this option lost momentum throughout the 1960s due to Spain's opposition as well as regional divisions amongst Fang political leaders.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the investigation of this period of Equatorial Guinea's history is constrained by the limited access to relevant documents in Spain and in Guinea. Amongst the available documentation, for example, there is no explicit mention to *e'Lat-Ayong* as a protest movement. Nonetheless, informants acknowledge that in the 1950s, hardly any clan rallies were celebrated in northern Río Muni.⁷⁰ Given that the movement continued to be active in southern Cameroon, at the same time that the number of refugees from Río Muni grew throughout the 1950s, it is clear that the Spanish authorities increased the level of repression against protest activities. One year after the 1948 nationalist manifestation in Mikomeseng, the colonial government made enquiries on the spread of *e'Lat-Ayong* across Río Muni, in spite of not knowing its actual details, being simply defined as a 'dance'.⁷¹ Less than a month earlier, in October 1949, the Sub-Governor had sent the newly appointed Governor, Faustino Ruiz González, a complete report on the situation of Protestant missions in the colony.⁷² This should not be interpreted as an attempt to limit the religious influence of Protestantism, which was minimal according to the report, but as part of a strategy to stop the political threat of the so-called 'Protestant plot' which according to the authorities was behind the growing unrest.⁷³ Not surprisingly, the Spanish authorities were more concerned than ever about 'hindering' the 'activities and influence' of Protestant missions in the region.⁷⁴ The fact that most of these missions in Río Muni were controlled by African pastors, especially those in Kie-Ntem where opposition activities were more conspicuous, added to Spanish concerns.⁷⁵

According to Donato Ndongo, the 1948 incident in Mikomeseng triggered the dismissal of Governor-General Bonelli and the subsequent appointment of Ruiz González, whose long term in office coincided with growing nationalist activities in the colony. The activities were confronted by growing repression on the part of Ruiz González's administration.⁷⁶ While the increase in repressive measures undermined the activities of the e'Lat-Ayong movement in Río Muni, it also encouraged growing nationalist sentiments amongst educated Africans. Such is the case of Ndongo Miyone, a Fang and future nationalist leader from Mbini, who was brutalized by the police and expelled from the Banapá Seminary on Fernando Po in 1951 after a strike that simply demanded an improvement of the seminary's education and living conditions.⁷⁷

E'Lat-Ayong's decreasing influence in northern Río Muni during the 1950s was not only the result of repressive Spanish measures. The movement was born in response to the crisis of adaptation that followed colonial conquest. By the 1950s, Fang society had come to terms with certain elements of the colonial order as the Fang readjusted their socio-economic structures, at the same time that younger individuals, who did not know any other reality outside colonialism, started taking up positions of influence in society. The old values around which *e'Lat-Ayong* sought to revitalize and unify Fang society, such as clan solidarity and elder authority, were less appealing for the younger generation. Given the colonial '*pax*' imposed since the 1920s and relative economic prosperity of the 1950s, the clan no longer served as the protective mechanism of the past. In addition, increasing individualism resulting from the economic growth of the 1950s did not favour the strong communitarian principles behind the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement, now that individuals' fate had become less dependent on their communities.

The emergence of political parties from the late 1950s, which contributed to the break of solidarity links and growing polarization within Fang society, did not originate from so-called tribal divisions, but from the administrative partitions established by colonialism.⁷⁸ This became clear during the autonomy period (1964-1968), when Macías Nguema turned into the candidate for the Fang of the interior (present-day Kie-Ntem and Wele-Nzas), Ondo Edu the candidate of the central region (present-day Centro-Sur), and Ndongo Miyone that of the coastal area (present-day Litoral). The origin of these divisions is unclear but it appears that, along with the usual distrust derived from geographic separation, it was also related to Spanish racial stereotypes that confronted the 'savages' from the interior versus the 'civilized' from the coast.⁷⁹ Referring to the Kombe group, de Veciana wrote in 1956:

They were, along with the Benga, the first in having contact with the European culture. They have a clear intellectual superiority in relation to other natives of our colony, and it is no coincidence that the posts in the administration, education or trade, which have been assigned to natives, are mostly in their hands.⁸⁰

The formation of unified ethnic identities in colonial Africa did not require, in each case, the emergence of regeneration movements such as *e'Lat-Ayong*. While fomenting internal divisions, colonial domination also contributed to the development of self-awareness by opposing a given people, now conscious of their similarities, against the remaining groups coexisting in the colony. A 1919 article in *La Guinea Española* illustrates how the Bubi, amongst whom there historically existed a clear division between those of the north and south of Fernando Po, started to refer themselves as Bubi because everybody else did, and in order to distinguish themselves from the outsiders.⁸¹ This common phenomenon was also observed amongst the Fang, who, according to Panyela, 'felt Fang' within the heterogeneous social context of Fernando Po, whereas in Río Muni their identity was still dominated

by the clan.⁸² In this respect, the uniqueness of the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement's contribution was not the formation of a common identity, but the active participation of the Fang in the development of their own identity. It provided the Fang with the necessary agency to elaborate an ethnic consciousness mostly determined by their historical dynamics and not only by foreign intervention. In so doing, the Fang surpassed the boundaries established by colonial powers, as their identity encompasses three different countries.

The name in itself is a symbol of self-determination, for the Fang refused to accept the foreign name, *Pamue*, forcing all sectors in the Spanish colony to eventually accept the local name, *Fang*. Nowadays, most Fang believe that this is the name that their forefathers always used to refer to themselves. In the process of developing an ethnic identity, the Fang adopted a common name in order to distinguish themselves from other social groups. The hitherto loose sense of identity was now made relevant, because colonialism created a multicultural reality that required greater interaction between the peoples living within colonial boundaries. Thus, in Río Muni and Gabon they called themselves *Be'fang*, whereas in Cameroon they named themselves *Beti*. *E'Lat-Ayong* and its influential spin-off, *Dulu Bon be Afri Kara*, despite being an affirmation movement, never promoted the use of a single term. In fact, the title, *The Journey of the Children of Afri Kara*, is very significant, since in Fang one's identity is expressed as "son of". For example, a Fang man will be referred as *mon fang* (son of the Fang). Ondo Enguru and Afa'a Bibo'o consciously or unconsciously overlooked this difficult matter and only referred to the numerous clans sharing a common language and culture across Cameroon, Gabon and Río Muni as *bon be Afri Kara*, the children of Afri Kara.

The question which is yet to be answered is how the term Fang came to be generally accepted by all sections of the Sanaga-Ogowe in Río Muni and Gabon, whereas in Cameroon it never took root. North of the river Ntem the presence of the Fang-Fang was unknown, therefore it is not surprising that people could not identify themselves with the term Fang. In Río Muni, on the other hand, this was a familiar term since the Fang-Fang inhabit sections of the east and centre of the territory. During the course of my fieldwork the complexity of this matter became clear, as it was very difficult to explain the actual nature of those questions that enquired of the origin of the term Fang. The sense of identity based on common language and culture, though loose, did predate the arrival of the Europeans, therefore, most people assume that Fang has been their name since time immemorial, being impossible to pinpoint a moment in time in which this name started to be used. Modern Fang identity was built upon the basis of continuity between past and present, hence, from the inside, there is no difference between their identity and that of their forefathers.⁸³ Only after some discussion, a few elders from northern Río Muni admitted that Fang was not always the name that they applied to themselves or their language, but *Ntumu*.⁸⁴ In fact, one of the informants kept constantly referring to the Ntumu instead of the Fang during the interview, and, when questioned about it, he replied that the term Fang 'was promoted by the Spanish' in order to 'identify' all those who say '*ma dzó na*' or speak the Fang language.⁸⁵

Father Soler refers to several legends that in the mid 1940s circulated across Río Muni explaining how the name Fang was adopted to identify the entire ethnic group because such was the name of Afri Kara and Nané Ngo'o Baá's first-born.⁸⁶ A decade later, the name seemed to have been widely accepted and it was regularly used by Fang intellectuals when writing about their culture in *La Guinea Española*.⁸⁷ This

magazine, in which individuals linked to the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement – like Marcelo Ndongo Mba – collaborated, played an influential role because, although the circulation of the Claretian magazine was rather limited amongst rural Africans, it was easily accessible to African civil servants and students based in Bata and Santa Isabel. For these individuals, displaced from their family environment, such readings gave them the opportunity to learn about themselves and develop a sense of identity beyond their family or clan boundaries. An elder in Ebibeyin explained that it was not until he moved to Bata to study that he was referred to as Fang for the first time.⁸⁸ Given that many of these educated Fang continued to keep close links with their home villages and were posted in different destinations as civil servants, the term Fang rapidly spread throughout Río Muni. Furthermore, Mbana sees the appeal of the term Fang in its double etymological origin: *fâm*, man or male, on the one hand, and *mfang*, genuine or authentic person, on the other.⁸⁹

The construction of Fang identity affected all elements related to their past, including subgroup ascription. Having an extremely fluid character, subgroup identity never had much importance other than indicating the regional and dialect characteristics of those clans living within the same geographical space. As a result of the process of simplification that affected colonized society, the various Fang dialectal sections of Río Muni were reduced to only two. The Spanish were aware of the regional and dialect differences amongst the Fang and, as early as 1919, they already mentioned the existence of two main Fang branches, although it would not be until 1927 that this classification became more influential following the publication of the Fang-Okak catechism in 1927.⁹⁰ By the 1940s, the colonial government's acknowledgement gave official character to the emerging classification of the Fang. Thus, subgroup identity was transformed, as it was fixed by means of clear-cut

definitions such as that of Governor Bonelli in 1944: 'In Guinea the Pamue are divided in two large groups: the Ntumu and the Okak, practically separated by the river Benito [Wele], being the Ntumu to the north and the Okak to the south of the river.'⁹¹ In reality, the Fang were neither divided into these two groups alone, nor was the border between them clearly delineated by the river Wele. Ntumu clans could be found south of the Wele in so-called Okak territory and vice versa.



Photograph 32: River Wele

In addition, some educated Fang were also interested in simplifying their social reality as part of their effort to construct a comprehensible and explanatory past. Thus, *Dulu Bon be Afri Kara*, which in the 1950s and 1960s gained the status of a semi-official account of Fang history, reduces to seven the number of Fang subgroups for the entire Fang-Beti territory, the descendents of the seven children of Afri Kara.⁹² According to this account, the children of Ntumu Afiri marched their way to the sea along the left bank of the river Ntem, whereas the children of Okak Afiri followed the left bank of the Wele. Except for the Bisio, who were considered altogether a different ethnic group by the Spanish, the remaining Fang dialectal sections in Río Muni

followed a process of integration within the Okak and Ntumu ranks depending on their geographic location. Due to the historical fluidity of subgroup identity, the process of integration ran rather smooth. Nowadays, Equatorial Guinean Fangs have no memories whatsoever of a Fang subgroup – Fang-Fang in modern anthropology – ever existing. Not even amongst those clans from central and eastern Río Muni considered historically Fang-Fang, such as Bekpweñ, Esangi, Osumu, Okas, or Esawong, does there exist any such memory of their Fang-Fang origin. Indeed, many informants in this area held some doubts as to their subgroup identity, but, in trying to resolve certain contradictions, the majority went as far as to say that perhaps they were originally Ntumu, without even contemplating the possibility of a Fang-Fang origin.⁹³ Only a Bekpweñ elder from Nfulu-Ayong, Evinayong, surprisingly admitted that: 'I am Fang, I'm neither Ntumu nor Okak.'⁹⁴

Selective memories have always characterized traditional societies, before and after the arrival of the Europeans, because the fluidity and character of these societies require the continuous legitimization of the present through the past. In the case of the Fang-Fang subgroup, their elimination from historical memory in Río Muni appears to have been a necessary step to solve the conflict that the adoption of the name of their subgroup by the entire ethnic group posed, and also the outcome of educated Fang's desire to simplify their social reality. So-called historical truths are rarely questioned, but if they are, a Fang elder may answer that all Fang subgroups received the name of one of the children of Afri Kara, Fang Afiri, because he was the eldest and more important due to his great offspring, or because he never had any children and so his name would not be lost.⁹⁵ The Fang managed to create a unified identity in times of adversity, within a colonial setting where the rules were not theirs. In so doing, they regained a sense of dignity lost after the colonial conquest. Unfortunately,

they also lost part of their historical heritage. The Ntumu in northern Río Muni, under the influence of the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement, led the construction of Fang identity in Equatorial Guinea while losing their genealogical knowledge. Having focused their attention on the spread of a new historical past characterized by its literate character, Afri Kara, they neglected oral tradition and the transmission of their genealogies. South of the Wele, the majority of Okak informants can at least name ten ancestors, whereas, in the north, most people cannot go beyond their great-grandfathers.

The double realm: between tradition and modernity

The heterogeneous nature of colonial society was rationalized through the development of the 'double realm', a concept by which the Fang of Río Muni classified each element of their reality according to what was perceived as either *Fang* – traditional – or *Mitángán* – modern – cultural origin. Both realms maintained a parallel yet complementary relationship, for, although mutual influence was denied on principle, individuals were able to resort to either realm according to the conditions and needs. Fernández, who defines this situation in terms of cultural dualism, believes that this was the result of a process of 'acculturation' that gave rise to 'cultural dilemmas' and made 'choice' more difficult.⁹⁶ The development of a double realm concept was, above all, a reflection of the poor level of integration within colonized society. Thus, depending on the situation, Fang culture was more relevant than the European one and vice versa, giving individuals a grater scope to resolve situations that could be contemplated by one realm but not the other. The effects of witchcraft, for example, were resolved according to Fang tradition, whereas, in choosing a career, individuals resorted to the modern realm. To the Fang, the coexistence of both cultural realms was, therefore, necessary.

Syncretism in colonial Africa was the result of a double process of acculturation by which both African and European cultures influenced one another. Although the concept of a double realm or dualism suggests the idea that both cultures maintained an independent existence, in reality there was a mutual interaction between the African and European realms. In theory, this phenomenon is denied, as a clear-cut division between both cultures was established in most people's minds. It is only after some reflection that people tend to admit such a possibility. The new tradition that the Fang developed since colonial conquest was clearly affected by the culture of the colonizers, in the same way that European culture was reinterpreted by Africans before being adopted. Two representative developments of the new tradition, such as the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement and *Bwiti*, show distinctive European influences, especially with regards to their hierarchical organization. Customary law, which is believed to be a continuation from the precolonial society, was also transformed, becoming more rigid and losing part of its compromising character as a result of the legal interpretations of Spanish officers. Christianity, as we saw, turned into a more ritualistic religion in which its moral code became less relevant. Given that individuals maintained a permanent dialogue between both cultures, moving back and forth, the two realms influenced one another and continue to be reinterpreted constantly.

Modernity is usually distinguished from tradition on the basis of rationality; that is, the organization of modern societies mostly responds to a rational logic, whereas in traditional societies it generally responds to the logic of a semi-sacred past.⁹⁷ In fact, rationality plays an important role in all types of cultures, but, while in modern societies rationality is observed as the main source of legitimacy, in traditional societies the past is considered to be the key legitimizing principle.⁹⁸ All societies are

heterogeneous, as they develop multiple answers to a given situation. In modern societies, traditional elements do not disappear completely, yet their presence gradually shrinks as modernity gains ground and leaves an increasingly marginal space to tradition. In colonial Africa, the transition to modernity did not quite follow the same path. Indeed, the Fang of Río Muni increasingly adopted modern institutions and, by the 1950s and 1960s, colonial modernity had become the referential culture pushing tradition into a secondary position. However, since tradition and modernity were perceived as different social realities, traditional institutions could find shelter within the traditional realm without necessarily disappearing. The survival of a traditional realm made it possible that, whenever European culture was unsatisfactory, the Fang could recreate old traditions as well as import new ones, which, despite not being Fang, could easily fit into Fang culture due to their traditional character. *Bwiti*, for example, was originally a religious cult of the Mitsogo of central Gabon, but is considered as local amongst those Fang who practice it.

In his study of the Gabonese Fang, Balandier was aware of the existence of the double realm. To him, this was due to a strategy of hiding the 'authentic social reality behind official appearances'.⁹⁹ Although this could have been the case initially, the persistence of two cultural realities had more to do with the nature of colonialism and its lack of legitimacy. In Río Muni, the Fang tried to conceal their community leaders from the Spanish authorities, but, as we saw, legitimate traditional institutions found it very difficult to survive within a climate of clandestinity. As Balandier argues, 'semi-secrecy' led to a decrease in the necessary 'dynamism' of society.¹⁰⁰ The consolidation of two different realms was mostly the result of Spanish policies, which, from the onset sought to divide colonial society in two. On the one hand, the modern sector was the space for the European and the tiny minority of African *emancipados*.

The traditional sector, on the other, took in the remaining African population. This social organization was consolidated through the establishment of two separate legal systems, one for Europeans and *emancipados* and another for Africans. In spite of the rhetoric, the Spanish government was never fully committed to transforming Fang society, and chose not to make use of the law as a means to accelerate social transformation. The lack of legitimacy as well as the fear of resistance drove the Spanish authorities to acknowledge local institutions, such as customary marriage and polygamy, while Catholic missionaries encouraged canonical marriage and monogamy.¹⁰¹ Undoubtedly, the lack of consensus amongst European colonizers did not contribute to the development of a more homogeneous society. After the 1959 change in status from colony to Spanish province put an end to the legal distinction between *emancipados* and *no-emancipados*, yet the majority of the African population continued to be subject to customary law. The new justice system of 1961 left the door open for Africans to decide whether they wanted to be subject to the native court or the ordinary court for civil matters.¹⁰² It was argued that this temporary measure was necessary, especially in Río Muni, due to the large number of 'non-fully-developed individuals of inferior culture.'¹⁰³

The existence of two distinctive social sectors and its manifestation through two cultural realms drove the Fang to assume that people's actions could respond to either realm. Thus, it was believed that there was a 'Fang way' and a 'European way' of doing things. Although this conception mostly responded to a racial division, it was not so much based on race as on culture. Africans could sporadically act as Europeans or, like in the case of *emancipados* and other acculturated individuals, do so regularly. In theory, this conception also admits the possibility of Europeans acting as Africans, but, in reality, colonial authorities made sure that Europeans always presented

themselves in front of Africans according to a certain standard.¹⁰⁴ Unlike Portugal, Spain kept a strict control on European settler migration into its Central African colony, so as to prevent the inflow of a large number of poor and uneducated settlers from undermining the white race stereotype built up by colonial authorities. Spanish legitimacy, claimed to be based on its so-called cultural superiority, meant that all efforts had to be made to maintain the status quo. To the Fang, superstitions or poor housing were considered to be part of the Fang realm; little did they know about the figures of saints being carried in procession through Spanish villages when hit by a severe drought, or about the slums growing around Spain's main urban areas in the 1950s and 1960s. A Fang informant still remembered the shock when, for the first time, he saw white men 'working with their hands' during a visit to Spain in 1963.¹⁰⁵

In many respects, the clear-cut division between Fang and European ways was based on misconceptions originating from an artificial colonial reality, that portrayed fake stereotypes on both cultures. Racial segregation was a key instrument in guaranteeing this order, as it prevented the interaction between African and European cultures while regulating contact between them. For the average Fang, contact with European culture took place within a controlled, limited and partial environment. Not surprisingly, European civilization tended to be mystified by many Fang in the 1950s and 1960s. After the legal end of racial segregation, Africans tried to gain access to formerly segregated spaces – despite Europeans' resistance – not so much as a desire to interact with Europeans, but mostly as a sign of rebellion and as an opportunity to live like Europeans or actual people. A Fang elder, for example, explained that *emancipados*, having the same rights as Europeans, could 'live like human beings'.¹⁰⁶



Photograph 33: Colonial life offered Europeans a completely different lifestyle from that of the metropolis

In understanding the influence of European culture on the Fang, we must keep in mind that, for the most part, direct contact between the Fang and the European was rather sporadic. As a result of the limitations of the Spanish administration, the number of colonial officers and missionaries was relatively low. In addition, the small number of European settlers in Río Muni was mostly concentrated in the coastal area. Most informants point out that district officers rarely visited their villages, and it was only during the course of an official tour or a game expedition that they could be seen in villages. Only administrative chiefs had more frequent contact with district officers during the course of the monthly sessions of the native tribunal, especially in the case of clan chiefs whose attendance was compulsory so as to allow district officers transmitting the series of government orders. Within rural communities, most adult men's communication with Europeans was limited to their trade partners, as cash crop producers sold their crops to an assigned European trader, from whom they also purchased different goods. This could sometimes evolve into a friendly relationship, but it was mostly characterized by mistrust between the African farmer and the European trader, each of them trying to obtain the maximum profit.¹⁰⁷ The low level of urbanization in Spanish Guinea did not allow a larger development of the modern

economic sector nor greater interaction between the African and the European cultural realms. In the early 1960s, Bata, the largest town in Río Muni, had a population of some 9,000 people out of a total population of some 183,000.¹⁰⁸

No doubt, for the vast majority of the Fang population, the Catholic missionary was the most familiar face of European culture, as they visited Fang villages for one week once or twice a year. Nonetheless, these sporadic visits do not change the fact that contact between the Fang and the Spanish was infrequent. This raises serious doubts as to the level and quality of Fang acculturation or what the Spanish called the 'civilizing mission'. Understandably, this situation contributed to the cultural misunderstanding and mystification that was referred to above. As we saw with the evangelization of Río Muni, African catechists were in charge of spreading the Christian gospel amongst the rest of the population. It was also the African chief who transmitted the government's orders, the African teacher who taught the colonial curriculum, and the African soldiers of the Colonial Guard who physically punished. Cultural contact suffered from the problems related to the cultural gap between communicators and transmitters, as well as from the fact that the Spanish were only interested in transmitting a partial message that excluded basic information. Gradually some Fang became aware of this situation, which would influence their actions throughout the 1950s and 1960s. This problem was not exclusive of Spanish Guinea, as Fernández heard from a Gabonese Fang elder:

When have we not been disappointed in the European? We have always had the highest hopes in him but he has not taught us to make the simplest thing he knows-a match! He always comes among us full of promises but in the end he turns away from us and deceives us!¹⁰⁹

As in most colonial societies, the culture of the colonizers in Río Muni became paradigmatic. European culture amounted to political and economic power, and, more

importantly, quality of life. By the 1950s and 1960s, large sectors of Fang society embraced different aspects of European culture, aspiring to live like Europeans. Amongst the least acculturated Fang, Western education and the capitalist economy were seen as an opportunity to improve their living conditions. To the most acculturated Fang, political struggle became, from the late 1950s, an instrument for socio-economic improvement. During this period, the modern realm, by and large, grew at the expense of the traditional one. Most parents were now willing to send their children, including daughters, to school. The expansion of Western education came hand in hand with the decline of traditional education, which was no longer relevant.¹¹⁰ In spite of the increase in the education budget during the 1950s, this did not solve all needs, especially with regards to the quality of teaching.¹¹¹ After all the efforts of the 1950s, the 1962 report of the Commission for the Economic Development of the Equatorial Region acknowledged that 'female education leaves much to be desired' and 'there exists an imbalance regarding secondary education' in Río Muni.¹¹² Mainstream education was not enough, by itself, to bridge the cultural gap between the African on the one hand and the European and acculturated population on the other. The opening of a boarding school by the La Salle Brothers allowed a small group of students from the mainland to receive an instruction similar to the average metropolitan school. From this select group of students came the intellectual elite of Río Muni that in the late 1960s and 1970s had the opportunity to study in Spanish universities. However, it was too little for the vast majority of the population who had to make do with poor teaching, facilities and resources, and too late for the poorly trained political leaders who led the independence process in the 1960s.

So we can live like whites: the end of colonial rule

In the minds of Spanish officials, there always existed the fear that socio-economic development could pose a serious challenge to their authority. Since the late 1940s, these fears started to become more real due an emergent protest movement in Spanish Guinea and, above all, to the dynamics spreading throughout the entire continent. By the mid 1950s, Spain's concerns were confirmed, as nationalism grew stronger in Africa and started to take shape in Río Muni and Fernando Po. As Alicia Campos argues, the transformations in the status of Equatorial Guinea between 1958 and 1968 responded very much to international pressure as well as internal circumstances in Spain, yet these steps would not have taken place had it not been for the development of a nationalist movement in Equatorial Guinea from the early 1950s.¹¹³ In 1957, an article written for the Spanish weekly magazine *Blanco y Negro* was stopped from being published by the Spanish censors due to several remarks that indicated the emergence of a nationalist sentiment in Río Muni, especially amongst the Fang. With regards to the situation in the colony, the author claimed: 'Río Muni... is slipping through our fingers. It is a matter of time. We can no longer do anything! I wish we could retreat to Fernando Po wisely!'¹¹⁴ The incipient nationalist movement in Río Muni was particularly intense in the north, where there was a stronger tradition of protest since the late 1930s and where the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement had been especially active. Not surprisingly, the article pointed out that the union of Río Muni's Fang with 'their brothers' of Cameroon was unavoidable.¹¹⁵

Although the authorities publicly denied the existence of an emerging nationalist movement in Spanish Guinea, all indications seemed to point in the different direction. The provincialization of the Spanish colony in July 1959 did not stop nationalists' discontent. In October 1959 the Sub-Governor asked for reinforcements

in order to prevent 'the activity of the anti-Spanish movement', which was 'notoriously and gradually on the rise'.¹¹⁶ A few months earlier, a force of the *Guardia Civil* had been sent to Río Muni and Fernando Po to support the *Guardia Territorial* (the former Colonial Guard) in the policing of the increasingly difficult political situation. From the Government General, it was believed that this should suffice to contain the nationalist movement in Río Muni, and they refused to attend the Sub-Governor's request.¹¹⁷ Sources seem to suggest that Spanish officers were resigned to losing Río Muni and focused all their efforts on Fernando Po, where its economic interests were much greater. On the island, for example, Spain was seriously concerned about the possibility of a Nigerian invasion.¹¹⁸ There are no details about the nature of this threat, other than 'credible sources', but this fear was grounded in the large number of Nigerian workers on the island as well as the numerous complains about labour conditions appeared in Nigerian newspapers.¹¹⁹ So great were Spanish concerns that, in 1962, a military base was built on Fernando Po in order to host a quick intervention military unit. Troops, however, were never deployed due to the political situation in Spanish Guinea and its possible impact on international opinion.¹²⁰

Little is known about the actual development of nationalism in Equatorial Guinea, and, indeed, much more research needs to be done. From the existing literature one gets a rather blurred picture of Equatorial Guinean nationalism that does not go beyond a few names of political leaders, acronyms and their main political guidelines. If anything, one comes across contrasting information as to the chain of events that resulted in the formation of each of the main nationalist parties. As we saw, neither *e'Lat-Ayong* nor *Bwiti* directly challenged the colonial order. By the late 1940s, *e'Lat-Ayong* seemed to be moving towards a more confrontational approach, yet this

development was hampered by the internal limitations of the movement as well as the emergence of a more conventional political line of action.

In Río Muni, the origins of the future nationalist movement can be traced back to the late 1930s. Behind the incident that triggered the banishment of the chief of the Nzomo clan, Motuu m'Abege, to Fernando Po in 1938, laid the growing dissatisfaction of sectors of the African population, especially traditional leaders and colonial civil servants, with the failed promises of the Spanish regarding African's socio-economic improvement. According to colonial sources, in 1938, a group of colonial civil servants, led by the *emancipado* teacher Enrique Nvo and inspired by Motuu m'Abege and other traditional leaders, tried to raise funds to hire a Spanish attorney, who could defend their interest in the metropolis, in the belief that the Spanish settlers and officers planned to take their land plots.¹²¹ Colonial sources do not explain the origin of what they refer to as simple 'nonsense', but it appears that such rumours were based on the ambiguous character of native property and the fact that the 1938 Native Justice Statute neither clarified nor guaranteed Africans' property rights. Generally, Africans' property over land was not seriously threatened in most of Río Muni, but, on Fernando Po and Río Muni's coastal region, where the presence of European settlers was more noticeable, this was a genuine concern.¹²² In this respect, it is worth noting that, amongst the African civil servants involved in the raising of funds in Mikomeseng, there was a Bubi civil servant, Matías Remi Hoko.¹²³ In response to these activities, the Spanish authorities not only banished Motuu m'Abege but also expelled the implicated Africans from the colonial service, including Enrique Nvo, who happened to be Motuu's nephew.¹²⁴ Sources do not refer to similar activities until the famous incident of 1948 in Mikomeseng, in which Enrique Nvo also took part.

From the early 1950s, protest activities took a turn towards a nationalist approach that started to challenge the colonial order. In Río Muni, Enrique Nvo and Acacio Meñe, became the main leaders of the incipient nationalist movement. The latter was a Fang *emancipado* farmer from Kogo, who somehow symbolized the success of Spain's 'civilizing' mission, since, in addition to his economic success, he was known for his deep Catholic beliefs. Acacio Meñe, however, was not all that sympathetic towards Spain and, according to Donato Ndong, from 1950 he became the leader of the Movimiento Nacional de Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial (MONALIGE, Equatorial Guinea National Liberation Movement), a party that was founded with the purpose of 'raising awareness about the abuses of the [colonial] system.'¹²⁵ Thanks to his *emancipado* status, he was able to move freely across the colony with the excuse of recruiting labourers for his plantation, establishing contact with other African figures, such as Enrique Nvo, as early as 1951.¹²⁶ These links were soon spread to Fernando Po, where both Enrique Nvo and Acacio Meñe were able to secretly meet other nationalist leaders, such as Luis Maho Sicachá (a Bubi attorney) and Gustavo Watson Bueco (a *Fernandino* doctor). The first significant outcome of Equatorial Guinean nationalism was the sending of a report to the U.N., refuting Spain's claims about the provincial status of its African territories, denouncing the series of abuses that took place in the colony, and demanding the colony's independence.

Between 1958 and 1959, a series of repressive measures against nationalist activists convinced Spain that order had been restored. Although *Fernandino* and Bubi nationalists were also involved in the nationalist movement, repressive measures were mostly directed against activists from Río Muni. The assassination of the two main Fang nationalist leaders, Enrique Nvo and Acacio Meñe, was followed by the arrest of other nationalist activists, who, according to testimonies received by Donato

Ndongo, were brutally tortured by the Spanish authorities.¹²⁷ As a result of this, most nationalist activists went into exile, including Ndong Miyone, who acted as representative of MONALIGE in Gabon. The majority of the population, who had hitherto been unaware of the development of a clandestine nationalist movement in the country, was then alerted about its existence by the series of repressive measures. From exile in the now independent Cameroon and Gabon, the nationalist movement became more active in the early 1960s, as different activists moved clandestinely into Río Muni where they kept secret reunions with community leaders. Ndongo explains that, as a result of its clandestinity, the nationalist movement adopted a mythical character in rural areas.¹²⁸ Some report that they heard about nationalist claims through 'letters that fell from the sky'; political pamphlets were planted in villages at night without people's knowledge.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, the majority of the population, especially women, had little or no information about the nationalist movement and its claims for independence.¹³⁰

The two oldest parties, MONALIGE and IPGE appeared to be founded in the 1950s under the influence of Acacio Meñe and Enrique Nvo respectively. The two parties had a multiethnic composition as they were made up by Fang, Ndongwe, Bubi and *Fernandino* or Creole members. IPGE and MONALIGE were somehow depicted as leftist parties by the colonial authorities, although they appeared to have had a poorly defined ideology beyond the demand for independence. As in the case of many liberation movements in Africa, Equatorial Guinea's nationalism was seriously hampered by factionalism which prevented the development of a unified movement.¹³¹ Most of the parties born in the 1960s were splinters of the two original political formations. This should not be a surprise, as the small nationalist movement was in the hands of a limited group of individuals who had either a privileged

economic position or a formal education. As time went by and the prospect of actual political power became more evident, divisions arise amongst nationalist leaders.¹³²

When asked about the impact of the 1959 provincialization on daily life, people's answers tend to be contradictory. Some claim that there was improvement because compulsory communal work disappeared; others argue that little changed since the Spanish were still in power; most are unable to elaborate on their answers and provide examples as to how things changed.¹³³ For the most part, it appears that very few things changed, since racial discrimination, abuse of power and repression continued during this period. For the majority of the population, there was barely any improvement in their living conditions. The relatively high living standard in Fernando Po and Río Muni did not hide the fact that there existed, especially on the mainland, a sharp imbalance in the income levels between the European and the African population, and that infrastructure and economic investments needed to be increased if the provinces were to be competitive against their neighbouring countries that were then undergoing 'ambitious economic development plans'.¹³⁴ In fact, nationalist leaders were aware that the provincialization was used as decoy by the Spanish authorities, and were convinced that political struggle should continue until the country's independence was won. Although Africans had been given the same rights as the rest of the Spanish population, most people kept seeing the Spanish as oppressors and, hence, sympathized with the demands of the nationalist leaders. This was, according to some informants, a general sentiment shared by most villagers except administrative chiefs.¹³⁵ It was believed that Africans' advancement could only be achieved once Africans themselves took control of political power.

By 1963, it was impossible to maintain the farce created by the provincialization of Río Muni and Fernando Po. Spain drafted a bill to grant an autonomous

administration to Equatorial Guinea that would serve as a transitional arrangement during which African leaders would be able, for the first time, to play a direct role in government. Most informants do not have detailed recollections about the Autonomy Bill referendum. In fact, many were not aware what the Autonomy amounted for. Nevertheless, the Bill of Statutes was passed by referendum on 15 December 1963 within a confusing climate in which many people were not even sure what 'yes' or 'no' meant.¹³⁶ Spanish officers were seriously concerned that the bill would not be passed in Río Muni, where pro-independence sentiments were stronger, leaving them with no room to manoeuvre and with the only option of having to grant immediate independence to a population with no government experience whatsoever. The referendum was finally approved thanks to the affirmative vote of the majority of the population in Río Muni. But the outcome of the referendum showed the first signs of what would become some of the main political problems for the future independent country: poor information, men casting their wives' votes, and a clear political split between Río Muni and Fernando Po, where the majority wanted to maintain the existing status quo and voted against the Autonomy Bill.¹³⁷

During the autonomous period (1964-1968), Equatorial Guinea was at its most prosperous moment due to the Economic Development Plan, which led to the improvement in economic and social conditions. Ondo Edu, the former catechist and founder, while in exile in Gabon, of the moderate and short-lived Unión Popular de Liberación de la Guinea Ecuatorial (Popular Union for the Liberation of Equatorial Guinea), and Macías Nguema, the former colonial civil servant, emerged as the two strongest political leaders of Río Muni, and by extension, of Equatorial Guinea.

The two leaders competed for the leadership of the Autonomous Government. Due to Spanish support, Ondo Edu was chosen as President of the Autonomous

Government Council and leader of the recently created pro-Spanish party *Movimiento de Unión Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial* (MUNGE, Equatorial Guinea National Unity Movement), whereas Macías Nguema was left with the public works portfolio. A metropolitan officer sent to Equatorial Guinea wrote to the DGPPA Director General, advising him to appoint Bonifacio Ondo Edu as president, 'who, at the moment and except surprise, seems to be a serious, formal and very religious person and who has a great influence in Río Muni'.¹³⁸ Indeed, Ondo Edu was very respected south of the Wele due to his personality and the fact that he was born in Evinayong, but, in addition to his deep Catholic beliefs and sympathy for Spain, one could not see any other merits to support him as leader of the Government Council. Members of the different existing political parties and ethnic groups were represented in the Government and the Assembly. It is a general belief in Equatorial Guinea that tensions between Fernando Po and Río Muni were fuelled by the Spanish colonial administration, which promoted the fear that the Fang majority would eventually take control over the island. Although the Spanish government, led by the Foreign Affairs Ministry, wanted a future unified country, Spanish colonial interests hoped that the rift between the island and the mainland population would degenerate in the split of the two regions, leaving the island under the strong influence of Spain. Spanish interests on Fernando Po were disrupted by the quick intervention of the more radical nationalist sector. In January 1966, the MONALIGE members represented in the Autonomous Government – Macías Nguema, Rafael Nsue Nchama and Antonio Nang Ondo – submitted a motion to start negotiations towards the independence of Equatorial Guinea.¹³⁹ Less than three years later, on 12 October 1968, independence was proclaimed.

Conclusion

The Fang interpreted that Spanish political and economic power was based on their cultural superiority or, rather, the inferiority of the Fang culture. Amongst the Fang, as in most colonized societies, community leaders stopped being the most influential members of their society in favour of teachers, clerks, colonial guards, catechists, priests and other acculturated individuals. Understandably, modernity became paradigmatic as the social and cultural model that guaranteed social advancement, while tradition was relegated to a marginal position, in the belief that traditional institutions had to be abandoned if social and economic improvement was to be achieved. Nonetheless, the Fang, who only had a limited understanding of a system they were never fully exposed to, were not aware that colonial modernity was not a completed socio-cultural system. Under colonial domination, the African population came to know a distorted version of European modernity that did require the existence of traditional institutions. Christianity, though massively embraced, could not address all spiritual needs, especially Fang concern with the relationship between man and evil. The district officer, despite being an element of the colonial administration, tended to resolve judicial conflicts in a personal manner, as a sort of 'big man'. Fang social structures were simplified, facilitating the development of a Fang common identity. However, this never transformed into Fang nationalism, because, to the acculturated Fang, colonial modernity required a 'modern' response. Fang desire to enjoy the benefits of modernity were channelled through their contribution to the Equatorial-Guinean nationalist movement. In accordance with colonial modernity, nationalism also suffered from the series of dysfunctions that emerged especially after 1968.

NOTES

¹ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 17, 19, 20.

² Report of the Department of Justice, 1946-1949 (2-3-1950). AGA, box G-1914, file 1.

³ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 5.

⁴ Moreno, 'Formas de antropofagia', 84-85.

⁵ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 5-6, 8-9.

⁶ Pinillos, 'La secta del Mhueti', 53.

⁷ Ibid. J.M. Novoa, *Guinea Ecuatorial: Historia, costumbres y tradiciones* (Madrid, 1984), 133, 167.

⁸ De Craemer, Vansina, and Fox, 'Religious Movements', 460.

⁹ A former Colonial Guard recalls how one of his comrades in Mikomeseng became a *Bwiti* member after getting in touch with *Bwiti* deportees from Mbini. He was eventually arrested after the district officer found out about this. Personal interview, Mikomeseng 19; de Veciana, *La secta del Bwiti*, 33.

¹⁰ Ndongo Mba compares *Bwiti* leaders with sorcerers who can 'control by means of magic an entire village and even a district'. Ndongo Mba, 'El "Totem" Pamue', 125.

¹¹ Today, very few know or admit that this hallucinogen formed part of the *Melán* ritual. In fact, only two informants mentioned the ingestion of *alan* during the celebration of this ritual. Personal interviews, Evinayong 14, Mikomeseng 2.

¹² Personal interview, Mikomeseng 19.

¹³ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 20.

¹⁴ Personal interviews, Evinayong 27, Mikomeseng 15, 28.

¹⁵ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 11.

¹⁶ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 1, 5, 10, 19.

¹⁷ For more details, see Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 375-94.

¹⁸ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 17, 20.

¹⁹ These marks might receive different names depending on the region. Tessmann, *Los Pamues*, 372, 375.

²⁰ Ndongo Mba, 'El "Totem" Pamue', 123-24.

²¹ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 19, 25.

²² De Craemer, Vansina, and Fox, 'Religious Movements', 465.

²³ *Abira*, for instance, involved men and sometimes women dancing – *abók miseng* or dance of sins – to expel all sins of the village. This clearly had to be kept away from colonial authorities. Referring to the Bisio, Larrea points out that they hid their birth and death rites from Europeans. Personal interview, Mikomeseng 10; Larrea, 'Algunas costumbres', 38.

²⁴ Like Gray, De Craemer, Vansina and Fox believe the invisible realm or the core elements of Central African culture have enjoyed a large degree of continuity from the precolonial period. Gray, *Colonial Rule*, 202-03, 217; De Craemer, Vansina, and Fox, 'Religious Movements', 465.

²⁵ Fernández, 'Fang Representations', 44.

²⁶ Ibid, 29.

²⁷ A Fang teacher admits that he married his wife canonically in 1966 to receive a salary bonus of 150 pesetas. Personal interview, Ebibeyin 3.

²⁸ Personal interview, Evinayong 8.

²⁹ Fernández, 'Fang Representations', 18.

- ³⁰ Olangua, 'Cien años', 53.
- ³¹ Ibid, 63-64.
- ³² A sole missionary could supervise between forty and seventy *reducciones*. Pujadas, *La Iglesia*, 57.
- ³³ Olangua, 'Cien años', 53.
- ³⁴ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1, Mikomeseng 2, 15.
- ³⁵ Pujadas, *La Iglesia*, 58-61.
- ³⁶ Ibid, 61.
- ³⁷ José Meñana, after working on Fernando Po, became one of the firsts catechists in the Mikomeseng district. Personal interview, Mikomeseng 27
- ³⁸ Fernández, 'Fang Representations', 23.
- ³⁹ R. Gray, 'Christianity and Religious Change in Africa', *African Affairs*, 77 (1978), 95-96.
- ⁴⁰ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 17.
- ⁴¹ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 3, 10, 12.
- ⁴² R. Perramón, 'Culturas primitivas de Guinea Ecuatorial', *Archivos del IDEA*, XX, 81 (1966), 18.
- ⁴³ B. Ondo Edu, quoted in Pujadas, *La Iglesia*, 50-51.
- ⁴⁴ Olangua, 'Cien años', 63-64.
- ⁴⁵ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 3, Mikomeseng 2, 6.
- ⁴⁶ Sub-Governor of Bata, Report on the Situation of Protestant Missions (Bata, 21-10-1949). AGA, box, G-1945, file 2.
- ⁴⁷ Sub-Governor Cervera to the Governor-General (23-12-1957). AGA, box G-1945, file 2; Governor-General to the Sub-Governor (7-2-1958). AGA, box G-1945, file 2.
- ⁴⁸ Personal interview, Akurenám 6.
- ⁴⁹ Sub-Governor Cabrera to Governor General Juan Fontán (5-7-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ⁵⁰ Governor General Juan Fontán to Sub-Governor Cabrera (12-7-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ⁵¹ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 5.
- ⁵² Personal interview, Mikomeseng 2.
- ⁵³ A 1947 report suggests that, in some districts, there existed more first and second chiefs than the authorities had originally established, which was very likely the result of district officers' own discretion. Sub-Governor to Governor-General Bonelli (29-4-1947). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ⁵⁴ Personal interview, Ebibeyin 3.
- ⁵⁵ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 6.
- ⁵⁶ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 9.
- ⁵⁷ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 0.
- ⁵⁸ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 9.
- ⁵⁹ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 20.
- ⁶⁰ de Castro & Ndongo, *España*, 187-188; Personal interview, Mikomeseng 20.
- ⁶¹ de Castro & Ndongo, *España*, 188; Personal interview, Mikomeseng 20.
- ⁶² Junta de Gobierno (5-8-1932). AGA, box G-192.
- ⁶³ Sub-Governor Cabrera, Report on the Situation in the Mainland (25-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.
- ⁶⁴ Personal interview, Ebibeyin 1.
- ⁶⁵ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 13, 20, 28.

- ⁶⁶ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 13.
- ⁶⁷ People from Beayop, Mikomeseng, pointedly avoided speaking about the authoritarian nature of their former chief, despite the fact he had died long ago. It was only when I had the opportunity to interview people outside this village that informants talked openly about the issue. Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 5, 13.
- ⁶⁸ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 2, 11.
- ⁶⁹ Mbana, 'La emigración', 171.
- ⁷⁰ Informants do not refer to any *e'Lat-Ayong* rally after 1949. Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1, 2; Mikomeseng 13, 15, 20.
- ⁷¹ Sub-Governor to Governor-General (4-11-1949). AGA, box G-1899.
- ⁷² Sub-Governor to Governor-General, Report on the Protestant Missions (21-10-1949). AGA, box G-1945, file 2.
- ⁷³ Mbana, 'La emigración', 169.
- ⁷⁴ Sub-Governor to Governor-General, Report on the Protestant Missions (21-10-1949). AGA, box G-1945, file 2; Governor-General to the DGMC Director General (23-10-1952). AGA, box G-1945, file 2; Interim Governor-General to the DGMC Director General (3-4-1954). AGA, box G-1945, file 2.
- ⁷⁵ Sub-Governor to Governor-General, Report on the Protestant Missions (21-10-1949). AGA, box G-1945, file 2.
- ⁷⁶ de Castro & Ndongo, España, 188.
- ⁷⁷ de Castro & Ndongo, España, 189. Colonial documents concerning this case are restricted until 2014. AGA, box G-1945.
- ⁷⁸ Personal interviews, Evinayong 6; Mikomeseng 10, 12, 15, 17.
- ⁷⁹ Governor-General to the Minister of State (17-4-1911). AGA, box G-7; Governor-General A. Barrera, Annual Report (14-5-1911), 196-97. AGA: G-167.
- ⁸⁰ de Veciana, 'La organización familiar'.
- ⁸¹ *La Guinea Española* (25-1-1919), 7.
- ⁸² A. Panyela, *Esquema de Etnología*, 46.
- ⁸³ Misled by the *e'Lat-Ayong* ideology, Panyela assumed that, what he perceived as 'pride of being Fang' was a remainder of the past. Panyela, 'El Individuo y la sociedad', 63.
- ⁸⁴ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1; Mikomeseng 17, 28.
- ⁸⁵ '*Ma dzó na*' ('I say that') is a common formula at the start of a discourse in Fang. Personal interview, Mikomeseng 17.
- ⁸⁶ Father Soler explains that he obtained this version from an *e'Lat-Ayong* meeting that took place in the interior of Río Muni in 1945. J.M. Soler, *La Guinea Española* (25-5-1948), 7-10.
- ⁸⁷ A.M. Ndongo, '¿Quiénes son los fang?', idem (10-7-1957), 12; E. Elo, 'La extraña palabra "pamue"', idem (15-4-1962), 21.
- ⁸⁸ Personal interview, Ebibeyin 1.
- ⁸⁹ Mbana argues that the meaning of Fang is similar to that of Beti, whose root means 'noble', 'civilized' or 'male'. Mbana, 'La emigración', 23-25.
- ⁹⁰ General Vicar N. González to the Curator of the Missions (15-11-1927). Archivo General CMF, G-G-12/6.
- ⁹¹ Bonelli, *Notas sobre la geografía*, 22-23.
- ⁹² Íñigo de Aranzadi, for example, gathered the Afri Kara legend from Fang elders in 1957 and treats it very much like historical fact. de Aranzadi, 'Tradiciones orales'.

⁹³ A few informants could even remember how their fathers spoke a different dialect from them that they defined as Ntumu. In contrast, amongst the northern Ntumu, people never had any doubts about their subgroup identity. Personal interviews, Akurenang 6; Evinayong 4, 6, 13, 14, 15.

⁹⁴ According to him, this is how he always heard his fathers referring to themselves and their language while showing certain disdain for the Ntumu and Okak way of speaking. Personal interview, Evinayong 27.

⁹⁵ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 2; Akurenang 6.

⁹⁶ Fernández, 'Fang Representations', 37.

⁹⁷ Booth, 'Time and Change'; P. Boyer, *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse* (Cambridge, 1990); Comaroff & Comaroff, *Modernity and its Malcontents*; R. Horton, 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', in B. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford, 1974).

⁹⁸ Horton suggests that the differences between traditional and modern thought are not as wide, as both tend to resort to common sense to solve ordinary situations, only employing theoretical thinking in more complicated circumstances. To him, the main difference between traditional and modern thought is that 'in traditional cultures there is no developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of theoretical tenets... traditional cultures are "closed" and scientifically oriented cultures are "open"... the absence of awareness of alternatives makes for an absolute acceptance of the established theoretical tenets, and removes any possibility of questioning them... such tenets as sacred.', Horton, 'African Traditional Thought', 136, 142-43, 153-54.

⁹⁹ Balandier, *Sociology of Black Africa*, 76.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ This situation was not unique of Spanish colonialism. Portugal, for example, approved a new native statute in 1954 that recognized polygamy as a native institution except in the cases of those married canonically. 'Nuevo Estatuto del Indígena Portugués', *África*, 151 (1954), 353.

¹⁰² Bill for the Reorganization of Justice in the Equatorial Region (16-8-1960). AGA, box D-479, file 1.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ In 1945, a Spanish officer argued in favour of regulating native markets as a measure to prevent European traders without the adequate image from being in contact with Africans. Head of the Agriculture Department, Proposal concerning native markets in Río Muni (13-3-1945). AGA, box G-1944, file 5.

¹⁰⁵ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 0.

¹⁰⁶ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 28.

¹⁰⁷ Some people were aware that some traders used to manipulate scales so as to cheat African farmers. On some occasions, European traders could offer financial support to farmers to enlarge their production. Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 2, 12, 28.

¹⁰⁸ Translation of the report written by the US ambassador to Gabon after his private visit to Río Muni (15-8-1962). AGA, box D-479, file 1; Gobierno Autónomo de la Guinea Ecuatorial, *Reseña demográfica de la Demarcación* (Santa Isabel, 1965), 11.

¹⁰⁹ Fernández, *Bwiti*, 28.

¹¹⁰ Both children, being in school, and fathers, working in their cash crops farms, had less time for teachings of little relevance in the 1950s and 1960s. Personal interviews, Evinayong 6, 15; Mikomeseng 2, 3, 9, 14, 17, 18, 28.

¹¹¹ Negrín, *Historia de la educación*, 36.

¹¹² Commission for the Economic Development of the Equatorial Region, Report on the Main Problems of the Río Muni and Fernando Po Provinces (6-11-1962). AGA, box D-479, file 1.

¹¹³ Campos, 'The Decolonization'.

¹¹⁴ The article never saw the light and its author was banned from entering 'our Guinea' and publishing anything related to the colony. DGPPA Director reports to the Governor-General on the Father Rey Stolle's article (7-12-1957). AGA, box G-1952, file 1.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Sub-Governor to the Governor General (10-10-1959). AGA, box G-1964, file 1.

¹¹⁷ Secretary General to the Sub-Governor (16-10-1959). AGA, box G-1964, file 1.

¹¹⁸ Encoded telegram of the DGPPA to the Government General (10-3-1962). AGA, box D-794; Undersecretary of the Army Ministry to Presidential Office (19-5-1962). AGA, box D794.

¹¹⁹ Encoded telegram of the DGPPA to the Government General (10-3-1962). AGA, box D-794. Bernan mentions an article published in a Nigerian paper in 1957 under the title 'Free Ticket to Hell' and which denounced the semi-slave conditions of Nigerian labourers on Fernando Po. Berman, 'People's Story', 307-08.

¹²⁰ DGPPA Director General Díaz de Villegas to the Military Governor of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, General Alfonso Pérez Viñete (9-5-1963). AGA, box D-794.

¹²¹ Sub-Governor Cabrera Governor General Fontán (5-7-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2; Sub-Governor Cabrera to Suances (21-10-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

¹²² Sub-Governor Cabrera acknowledged that Africans' main fear was that 'the white man take their farms away', and he went on to say that 'it would be advisable to guarantee their properties'. Sub-Governor Cabrera, Report on the Situation in the Mainland (25-12-1939). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

¹²³ Governor-General Office to the Sub-Governor (10-5-1940). AGA, box G-1926, file 1.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ de Castro & Ndong, *España*, 188.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 194-95.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 192.

¹²⁹ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 1, 10.

¹³⁰ Personal interviews, Evinayong 14, 17; Mikomeseng 1, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 28.

¹³¹ S. Decalo, *Psychoses of Power: African Personal Dictatorships* (London, 1989), 44.

¹³² A report following the Autonomy Bill Referendum pointed out how the 'actual struggle for independence will start once the Autonomy Bill come into effect, since the [Equatorial] Guinean leaders have become aware of their influence.' Report on the Referendum (19-12-1963). AGA, box D-474.

¹³³ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 1, 2, 4, 10, 12, 15, 28.

¹³⁴ Commission for the Economic Development of the Equatorial Region, Report on the Main Problems of the Río Muni and Fernando Po Provinces (6-11-1962). AGA, box D-479, file 1.

¹³⁵ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 1, 2, 8, 10, 17, 28.

¹³⁶ Carrero Blanco had to clarify in the Spanish Parliament that a negative answer would mean that the provincial status would be maintained. Informative Note (6-11-

1963). AGA, box D-472, file 1; Report on the Referendum (19-12-1963). AGA, box D-474.

¹³⁷ Subeditor T. Gallego, Report (19-12-1963). AGA, box D-474; Report on the Referendum (19-12-1963). AGA, box D-474.

¹³⁸ Pedro de la Torre to the DGPPA Director General, José Díaz de Villegas (20-5-1964). AGA, box D-476.

¹³⁹ Copy of the thirteenth point of the Autonomous Government Council Minutes (13-1-1966). AGA, box D-476.

Chapter 6

The New Tradition Takes over, 1968-1979

In 1968, Equatorial Guinea's independence from Spain was received by many of its people with great optimism. Although European observers, including Spanish officials, were less optimistic about the prospects of the new Central African country, very few could foresee the series of events that soon after independence triggered off a process which, by 1979, had virtually wiped out any trace of a 'modern' social, political and economic system. At the end of colonial domination, modernization had not been consolidated in Equatorial Guinea, but Spanish rule had succeeded in spreading a series of modern structures throughout the country and, more importantly, in making colonial modernity the referential socio-cultural model. At the height of the African decolonisation process, however, Fernández warned:

No one has ever supposed that political independence in Africa has meant independence from European culture. Much less has it meant independence for the Africans themselves from the 'dysfunctional' and 'primitive' elements that linger on their age old civilizations.¹

In Equatorial Guinea, such warning soon proved to be correct. The collapse of the existing political and economic structures indicated the relevance of the 'double realm'; that is, the compartmentalization of reality into the Fang or 'traditional' realm and the Spanish or 'modern' one. President Nguema, an acculturated Fang, was not unaware of this conception and, from 1969, he became convinced that Africans' distinctive culture responded to rather different principles from the European one. His regime portrayed the idea that European culture was inappropriate for the now sovereign nation. *La tradición*, as the culture of the ancestors, became the alternative

to modernity, which, since this period, was rapidly relegated to the increasingly formal role that it plays in Equatorial Guinean society today. This process, by which colonial modernity gave way to the new Fang tradition as the socio-cultural paradigm between 1968 and 1979, will be examined in this chapter.

The new tradition, like modernity before, did not gain ground as a result of a natural social process; rather, it was encouraged by the Macías Nguema's regime in an effort to preserve power. As we shall see, Equatorial Guineans' actual independence lasted less than five months, before they lost the autonomy that they needed to face the challenges that independence was to bring. In the immediate aftermath of independence, very few in Equatorial Guinea believed in the tradition as the socio-cultural reference for the independent country. In fact, the ruling elite aspired to preserve the political and economic structures left by the Spanish. In understanding the so-called process of Africanization or retraditionalization that Equatorial Guinea underwent in the 1970s, I shall pay special attention to the 1969 political and economic crisis that triggered off the collapse of the country's modern structures and its subsequent replacement by traditional ones. As a result, the Fang tradition was gradually applied to the political and social organization of the whole country, within a climate of extreme coercion that undermined the process. Finally, we shall see how the failure of Christianity, now besieged by the Macías Nguema's regime, in offering an effective response to the generalized deterioration of living conditions led to the rampant expansion of witchcraft beliefs within Equatorial Guinean society.

The short-lived independence

The Autonomy period was dominated by growing internal divisions that highlighted the lack of social and economic integration in Equatorial Guinea. Such tensions were aggravated by the absence of a civil society and a mature political class. During the two rounds of the constitutional conference between October 1967 and June 1968, it became clear that the differences and tensions between Fernando Po and Río Muni would be the main obstacle to national integration. The Bubi and Creole leaders from the island were especially wary of the Fang majority on the mainland, with whom they competed for political power. Encouraged by the imminent withdrawal of Spain, an emergent Bubi nationalism demanded a separate state for Fernando Po while maintaining close ties with Spain. This demand, however, could not overcome the strong opposition against partition from the United Nations, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Río Muni's nationalist leadership. In exchange for giving up its separatist claims, the island was given a 'disproportionate political weight and representation' in the constitution.² The opposition of the Bubi and Creole minorities did not prevent the approval of the constitution in a referendum in August 1968. The new constitution did not bring an end to internal conflicts; rather they were exacerbated as presidential elections approached. Thanks to the demographic weight of the Fang population, more than 85 per cent of the Equatorial Guinean total, three Fang leaders, Ondo Edu, Macías Nguema and Ndongo Miyone, emerged as the main contenders for political power.³ The electoral dispute revolved around the level of association that Equatorial Guinea should keep with Spain. The results of the first electoral round, in which no candidate obtained the necessary majority support, polarized the dispute even more, as Ondo Edu, in favour of a close

association between the two countries, and Macías Nguema, in favour of cutting ties with the metropolis, emerged as the two strongest contenders.



Photograph 34: Front page of the Spanish newspaper *ABC* with the photos of the three main candidates

The build-up to the final round of the presidential elections distorted the actual purpose of the voting, which was transformed into a contest between the so-called 'total independence' coalition, led by Macías Nguema, and the 'associated independence' faction, headed by Ondo Edu.⁴ In fact, the constitution only contemplated one formula for the country's independence, granting complete

sovereignty to the Equatorial Guineans regardless of the cooperation agreements signed by the two countries. Given the moderate position of Ondo Edu, who was supported by the Spanish, the group led by Macías Nguema chose to radicalise its discourse in order to gain popular support. Macías Nguema capitalized on the abuses of the colonial period and portrayed Ondo Edu as a pro-Spanish candidate who would allow Spain to maintain a dominant position in Equatorial Guinea. Ondo Edu argued that Equatorial Guinea should keep a close relationship with Spain, since the country was not ready to rule its destiny without the input of the expatriate community. To many of the voters in the 1968 elections, the debate was reduced to the simple question of whether or not the 'whites' should leave the country. In the end, the more radical option won the elections, thanks partly to Macías Nguema's charisma, his capacity to connect with the ordinary Fang voter, and his ability to gain the support from those candidates who lost the first electoral round, including Bosio Dioco, leader of the Bubi political party on Fernando Po, Unión Bubi. Today, very few Guineans are willing to admit their support for Macías Nguema in 1968.

Born in the Mongomo district in the early 1920s, Macías Nguema's instruction was limited to elementary and primary education, being unable to pass the exam that gave access to the Escuela Superior, the highest education level for non-emancipated Africans at the time.⁵ He spent most of his career as clerk within different departments of the colonial administration and later as translator in Mongomo. He became prominent after being elected mayor of Mongomo in 1962, and, later, member of the Autonomous Government Council, where he served as Infrastructure Minister between 1964 and 1968. His short political experience eventually proved to be insufficient to deal with the enormous difficulties of ruling a country, where most of the political class aspired to obtain his post and where the national economy was

closely dependent on the very same people he antagonized in order to win the elections.

Many present-day informants describe the time immediately after independence as a period of great improvement in their living conditions. However, this is seen to have lasted only around two years, before things changed for the worse.⁶ The extent to which the economic situation actually did improve is unclear, but it appears that optimistic expectations at the time affected people's perceptions. The atmosphere of generalized optimism that characterized the months leading to and following independence was, indeed, very brief. As early as 5 March 1969, less than five months after the proclamation of independence, things started to change dramatically in Equatorial Guinea. 'The true independence', as Mitogo argues, 'only lasted 145 days', before Equatorial Guineans lost their recently gained sovereignty at the hands of an autocratic regime.⁷ The drastic turn of events was triggered off by a failed coup d'état on 5 March 1969, led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ndongo Miyone, and allegedly sponsored by Spain. As a result, Macías Nguema, now obsessed with losing power and Spanish interference, transformed his government into a ruthlessly repressive regime and made anti-Spanish sentiment his ideological cornerstone.

Repression and harassment affected all sectors of Equatorial Guinean society, including most members of the original cabinet and Parliament and the expatriate community, whose role was key in the running of the economy. According to Decalo, by the end of his brutal regime, Macías Nguema had eliminated 32 ministers – 10 of which formed part of his original 12-member cabinet – two thirds of the original National Assembly and some 37 senior officers of the security and civil services.⁸ Alarmed by the deterioration of the situation, in March 1969 the Spanish authorities advised its population to leave the country.⁹ Decalo claims that, in the month after the

failed coup, 92 per cent of the Spanish community left Equatorial Guinea.¹⁰ Deprived of Spanish capital and commercial organization, the country's economy rapidly collapsed. During the next decade, economic development effectively came to a halt, contributing to the deterioration of social and political conditions in a country where violence and coercion became the order of the day. Independence did not only reveal the country's over-dependency, but also the absence of a fully committed political class. Despite nationalist promises of social and economic equality, post-independence developments indicate that political leaders wanted, above all, simply to take over the position left by the Spanish. On the one hand, Ondo Edu and Ndongo Miyone did not accept the electoral results, undermining the country's fragile stability. On the other, Macías Nguema drove the country into total chaos in his effort to keep political power by any means.

The Political Crisis

Amongst those individuals who lived during the period of Spanish domination, there exists a general sentiment of disappointment with independence. Much was expected from it, and nobody could imagine the sufferings that this period would bring about. Optimism soon gave way to the pessimism that still today affects a society with little or no hope for the future. When asked about Macías Nguema's rule, except for the short initial period, it is almost impossible to obtain any positive recollection. By and large, most informants cannot hide their disappointment and distress regarding this episode.¹¹ Some people go as far as to say that 'total independence has killed us', or to argue that if they were asked again today, 'most people would choose the whites to come back'.¹² The series of elections that took place throughout the 1960s – the autonomy and constitution referenda and the

presidential elections – leave little doubt as to Equatorial Guineans' mind regarding Spanish colonialism. Thus one can get an idea about what this people went through between 1968 and 1979 in order to change their mind so drastically. Many desired independence as an opportunity to get rid of the Spanish masters, who were thought to curtail the chances of the improvement of African society. Today, many of the 1968 voters cannot help but wondering what would have happened had Ondo Edu won the elections. To some extent, people's disappointment appears to be mixed with some degree of sadness, for in reality many voted for Macías Nguema, the first and only time Equatorial Guineans had the chance to choose their ruler freely.

Perhaps the Equatorial Guinean were caught off guard by the developments that followed the granting of independence, yet a careful look at the social and economic conditions in Equatorial Guinea at that time reveals that the aftermath of independence was somewhat predictable. Bayart points out that 'authoritarianism' and 'extreme centralization' were predictable in Africa due to the weaknesses that the postcolonial state had inherited from its colonial predecessor.¹³ Equatorial Guineans themselves admit what today seems as an overstatement; that is, the country was simply not ready for the challenge of independence. The Spanish Territories of the Gulf of Guinea were rushed towards self-determination as a result of a combination of factors such as the UN pressure to put an end to colonial domination, certain Spanish political and economic sectors' will to withdraw from Equatorial Guinea, and the ambition of a small number of Equatorial Guinean politicians to take over the economic and political control of the country.¹⁴ Between 1945 and 1960, Britain and France paved the way to independence through the creation of political institutions in which Africans could increasingly take part in and gain political experience. In the case of Equatorial Guinea, this experience was limited to the four years of the

autonomy period. Certainly, the former Spanish colony is not the only case where the postcolony failed. However, except for the former Portuguese and Belgian colonies, Angola, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo, other African countries took longer before experiencing serious crisis that undermined the survival of the 'modern' state. Along with the absence of sustained social and economic development, a problem that affected many African countries, Equatorial Guinea had to deal with the shortage of experience and qualification of its political leaders. During the election of the eight members that would form the Autonomous Government Council in 1964, a Spanish official wrote that 'they [Guinean politicians] are now becoming aware that they do not have much to choose and even those picked are far from being well-qualified'.¹⁵

Whereas in most African countries independence leaders moved from democratic convictions to dictatorial practices once they felt their position threatened, in Equatorial Guinea politicians did not quite follow this journey. What is often underestimated is the influence that metropolitan regimes had in the formation of the political class and their different ideologies across Africa. In the French and British colonies, for example, nationalist leaders often studied in the metropolis where they could get political inspiration from the democratic principles and institutions that they were denied back home. At least initially, African nationalists rarely devised alternative political models; rather they were mostly inspired by their respective metropolitan systems. In Equatorial Guinea, however, the government model was not a democratic one but that of General Franco, and there is no doubt about its influence over Ondo Edu first and Macías Nguema later. In the final round of the 1968 elections, the choice was limited between two candidates with little or no democratic convictions and with very poor intellectual instruction. Previously, the best-qualified

candidate, Ndongo Miyone, who had a seminary education and had been in contact with different African nationalist movements during his time in exile, failed to gain enough support, partly because he was unknown to the majority of the electorate. Ondo Edu's anti-democratic principles were clearly expressed during the course of a speech in 1964:

There existed an unknown country whose inhabitants lived within an upset and despaired atmosphere, deprive of their complete freedom of action... You must know that political parties are dangerous. I believe that each country's custom must be its actual political party. Why should we look for or imitate those countries that have parties for destruction when we are all united?... As long as I am the President, I will ask you to be patient... Be quiet because your moment will come... You look crazy, you look like a rabble who want to take over the Autonomous Government... We are now going to organize the Government and you must listen to the Government Council because the people no longer has a voice.¹⁶

Previous to his election as president of Equatorial Guinea, one cannot find such explicit anti-democratic statements in Macías Nguema's discourse. Nonetheless his proclaimed admiration for General Franco, expressed during the declaration of independence, was undoubtedly a bad omen.¹⁷ In a later speech, on 3 November 1968, President Nguema stated that he and his government 'having been educated by Spain will follow the policy of thirty years of peace of *Generalísimo* Franco.'¹⁸ In fact, this was a rather conciliatory discourse for somebody who had been characterized previously by his vitriolic declarations against both Spain and other nationalist leaders. In addition to maintaining the economic partnership with the Spanish and proclaiming the national and non-partisan character of his government, Equatorial Guinea's new President reasserted his lack of concern about any coup d'état against his administration.¹⁹ The latter is a clear example of Macías Nguema's contradictory personality, which characterized his rule until he was ousted in August 1979. At the

same time that President Nguema was giving his speech, the Spanish ambassador reported to his superiors about the detention of Ondo Edu's followers due to an 'unsubstantiated' fear of activities against the government.²⁰ A few days later the Spanish ambassador described the situation in the following terms: 'the kind and harmless personality of Bonifacio Ondo [Edu] has become a nightmare for the inexperienced and fearful rulers of this country.'²¹

In the light of these events, Ondo Edu escaped to Gabon, where he believed he would be safe. The Equatorial Guinean government convinced the Gabonese authorities to hand him over, however, and a few weeks later, in January 1969, the former President of the autonomous government died in prison as a result of torture – in spite of an agreement with the Gabonese government to treat him 'humanely'.²² The detention and murder of Ondo Edu only a month after independence clearly showed the character of those in charge of ruling the country. The problem was not limited to Macías Nguema only, but, as indicated in the correspondence of the Spanish ambassador, several members of the administration were involved in the repression against Ondo Edu and his followers, especially the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ndongo Miyone. Although not visible to the majority of Equatorial Guineans, in Evinayong and Akurenam, Ondo Edu's stronghold, some sectors of the population were already suffering the Government's repression.²³ It is the belief of the people of this region that Macías Nguema never forgave the '*nkoo*' (gazelle), as Ondo Edu's supporters were known, and his repressive policies were especially hard in these districts.²⁴ Other than Spain's traditional support for Ondo Edu, it is not clear where the fear of potential activities against the Equatorial Guinean government came from. Some internal sources suggests that President Nguema was not fully involved in the repression against Ondo Edu, and his murder in prison was received with surprise and

concern by the President.²⁵ Spanish documents indicate that Ndongu Miyone was, at least, the visible head and one of the main instigators behind the repression against Ondo Edu. Whatever the case, Macías Nguema was clearly unqualified to run the country and, overcome by circumstances, his policies became very much a desperate attempt to control a situation that was going out of hands as early as 1969.

As soon as Macías Nguema became president, he sought to reconcile with the Spanish and held out his hand to the expatriate business community. Nonetheless, the damage had been done and the Spanish settlers, somewhat misled by their diplomats, were wary of the Equatorial Guinean President. Restricted access to the Spanish documentation for this period does not allow the confirmation of information from Equatorial Guinea suggesting that the Spanish, led by the ambassador, sought to undermine the Macías Nguema government. According to Equatorial Guinean sources, civil servants stopped being paid from October 1968 and when the government took direct action to find out the reasons for the delay in the payments, they realized that there was no money in the government's accounts of the Banco Exterior de España (BEE), the only operative bank in the country.²⁶ Furthermore, Bolekia claims that all BEE accounts were empty after all Spanish businessmen withdrew their funds. According to him, by December 1968 there were no more than 2,000 pesetas in all the BEE branches in the country.²⁷

The murder and repression of Ondo Edu and his followers as well as the complicated economic situation created a climate of growing tension and instability in the country. The government banned political meetings and increasingly directed its attacks against the Spanish and everything that was identified with them, including the Catholic Church.²⁸ The early months of 1969 were characterized by the escalation of tensions between the Equatorial Guinean government and the group of Spanish

diplomats, top officials and military personnel that remained in the country as part of the transition agreements signed before independence in order to guarantee the functioning of the administration and security of the country. Such hostility culminated in the so-called 'incident of the flags' on 25 February 1969. This originally minor incident blew up out of proportion as a result of the accumulated tensions and, above all, the lack of ability of Macías Nguema and the Spanish Ambassador Durán-Loriga to address the conflict. Frustrated by his inability to deal with the country's difficulties, President Nguema organized a public rally during which he demanded that all Spanish flags be lowered from Spanish buildings in Bata. The refusal of the Spanish Consul, backed by the Ambassador, to comply was perceived as affront to Equatorial Guinea's independence. This gave way to a series of street protests by uncontrolled groups of youngsters against Spain and the Spanish presence, which culminated in the death of a Spanish citizen.²⁹ In order to sort out the conflict between the two countries, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ndongo Miyone and the Ambassador to the UN Saturnino Ibongo travelled to Madrid. Two days after their return, on 5 March 1969, they led a failed coup d'état against President Nguema in Bata. The Spanish have always denied their involvement in the coup, but in Equatorial Guinea it is a common belief that the Spanish were behind the plot.

Most Equatorial Guineans consider the 1969 coup attempt as a turning point in the history of the country and the beginning of what Decalo calls 'Nguema's reign of terror'.³⁰ The events that followed have made people forget that the first signs of Macías Nguema's repressive tactics appeared less than a month after gaining independence. Today, many blame Ndongo Miyone and Franco's government for Equatorial Guinea's decade of terror, in the belief that perhaps Macías would never have become so brutal had it not been for the failed coup. Initially, Macías Nguema's

reaction was directed against those related with the supposed instigators of the rebellion, that is, the members of Ndongo Miyone and Ibongo's parties, MONALIGE and Unión Bubi respectively. Many of those arrested died in prison as a result of torture, and those who survived imprisonment and harsh punishments were later expelled from their jobs.³¹ Although the President's counter-attack was initially localized with regards to the Equatorial Guinean population, the entire Spanish community became the target of the government. Ndongo Miyone's public confession, before dying in prison, about Spanish participation in the plot became the official version in Equatorial Guinea, despite the fact that he had clearly been tortured.³² Sources do not indicate that the Spanish were physically attacked in the aftermath of the failed coup, yet the Spanish ambassador asked the Spanish community to evacuate the country, fearing that rhetoric might give way to action. The latter never happened and although some of the nine hundred Spaniards that remained in the country by 1971 complained about government harassment, they never suffered the harsh repression that was inflicted on many Equatorial Guineans.³³ No doubt, Macías Nguema contributed to the mass departure of the expatriate community, for he clumsily victimized all the Spanish for the faults of a small and localized group of people. The so-called Spanish neo-colonialism became the obsession and alibi of the regime. Cornered by the subsequent stagnation of the economy, Macías Nguema started a series of measures that paved the way for the highly autocratic regime that dominated the country during the 1970s. In November 1969, one could read in the newspaper *Potopoto* the first manifestations praising the ruler in the totalitarian fashion that characterized the following decade:

The truth is making its way; the system has triumphed.

MACÍAS, MACÍAS, MACÍAS, PRESIDENT.

Oh, venerated loved son of Equatorial Guinea.

Oh, great saviour of Equatorial Guinea, your wisdom has transformed many things miraculously.

You seem to have been sent by God for our salvation.

We were still in darkness, but your rays gave us the light...

Oh, great thinker, great contemporary wise man, oh humble man destined to come to us from the bottom of the darkness to redeem us, poor oppressed people that suffered in sadness and misery, we show you our great gratitude.³⁴

Macías Nguema, like many of the first generation of African leaders in the postcolonial period, did not possess a coherent plan for government. The rhetoric and actions of the nationalists were dominated by the blinding goal of independence. Once in power, the Equatorial Guinean president simply aspired to take over political control of the former colonial administration. The basic structure of the country should remain the same but without the abuses and injustices of the previous period. This was seen to be easily accomplished, since Africans themselves would now be in charge of the administration. The reality was, however, that since the late 1960s most African countries entered a process of disintegration, which scholars have described as the Africanization of the state.³⁵ This concept appears to imply that African countries inherited a totally modern state, which increasingly lost its modern characteristics in favour of so-called traditional or African elements. In this respect, Macías Nguema was not a traditionalist; if anything, he became one. As we saw in his first speeches, he had a 'modern' conception of the state as an instrument that should serve the interests of the whole of Equatorial Guinean society. African rulers, however, were unaware that the system they inherited was not a modern one, but an old-fashioned organization that worked thanks to the existence of a coercive apparatus, the colonial state, and an unequal economic structure, the colonial economy. Both the colonial state and colonial economy were interdependent and

required the support of the metropolitan bureaucratic machinery as well as the financial assistance of European private investors.



Photograph 35: President Nguema at the steps of the Presidential Palace

The initial conciliatory tone of Macías Nguema suggests that he realized the extent to which the country depended on the human and financial resources of Spain. Certain Spanish political and economic sectors, however, sought to take advantage of this circumstance in order to maintain de facto control over the young country. The inevitable clash between President Nguema and the Spanish left Equatorial Guinea without the necessary resources, as Spanish businessmen and officials abandoned the country. Under these circumstances, Macías Nguema began to take resolute steps towards instituting a dictatorial regime. Authoritarianism should not be typified exclusively as characteristic of the process of Africanization of the state, since its presence dates back to the early days of colonial domination. The Spanish, once the colonial state was consolidated, were able to reduce the level of authoritarianism and autocracy. Nonetheless, they never disappeared completely as the colony continued to

be run under the almost absolutist power of the Governor-General and his district officers and the permanent threat and use of the Colonial Guard. Deprived of 'sophisticated' mechanisms to make the administration work, it should not come as a surprise that African leaders resorted to increasingly brutal means which turned the existing totalitarian-styled administrations into weak but yet omnipresent organizations from which they could benefit while hampering the development of internal dynamics in African societies that might jeopardize their position.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the deterioration of the social, political and economic conditions in Africa led to the adoption of autocratic systems, which, in varying degrees, were heavily dependent on the use of violence for their survival. In Equatorial Guinea, the dictatorial system that developed throughout the 1970s and which laid the bases for the successive authoritarian regime was first defined as 'nguemism' by Ela Nchama.³⁶ Scholars and observers agree that nepotism was the main characteristic of this system.³⁷ With regards to this subject, Bolekia explains that Nguemism is a 'pseudo-philosophy that consists in considering Equatorial Guinea as a private matter of Macías Nguema and his family.'³⁸ According to this analysis, the state was appropriated by Macías and his family, who then had to develop a system of arbitrary terror in which human rights and freedoms were completely denied in order to guarantee their power. In this respect, the infamous Juventud en Marcha con Macías (Macías' Youth Movement) became a key tool, since they terrorized entire communities, exercising a greater power than many government officials.³⁹ The patrimonialization of the state by a family is, in essence, what we can understand as the Africanization of the state, because, although the personalization of the state institutions is not exclusive to Africa, in Equatorial Guinea and other African countries this process took place on the basis of kinship ideology. The use of kinship

ideology in postcolonial Africa is, according to Ekeh, a corruption of the ideology developed in the past, because, applied in a modern context of intense multi-ethnic interaction, it becomes socially unacceptable.⁴⁰ Such use is derogatorily defined as 'tribalism'.⁴¹ To Ekeh, the lack of development of the state inherited by African rulers has been a major factor in the strengthening of kinship ideology or tribalism, as individuals from all social categories could not rely on state institutions for their security and welfare.⁴² In Equatorial Guinea, tribalism was encouraged from the top, since Macías Nguema, not trusting state institutions, increasingly resorted to kinship alliances to maintain his power. Thus the formation of what Liniger-Goumaz calls a 'nepo-republic'.⁴³

After the 1969 coup attempt, Macías Nguema got rid of his multiparty cabinet and surrounded himself with members of his Esangi clan, including Obiang Nguema, the current ruler of Equatorial Guinea, who helped him to eliminate numerous politicians and cadres considered as a potential threat.⁴⁴ The departure of Spanish officials and businessmen along with the murder, imprisonment and exile of the local cadres brought the economy and government to a halt by 1971.⁴⁵ Civil servants could spend up to five months without pay, hospitals and health centres lacked essential medicines, and teachers had to do without textbooks.⁴⁶ People from all over the country were mobilized to keep commercial crops afloat without economic compensation. As the situation in the country deteriorated, the lack of legitimacy and fear of the Macías Nguema's regime rose. As a result, in 1971 he abolished numerous articles of the 1968 constitution. A year later he proclaimed himself president for life, and in 1973 he passed a new constitution that gave him full control over the executive, legislative and judicial powers. The entire life of the country became politicized around the single party, Partido Único Nacional de Trabajadores (PUNT,

Workers' Single National Party), which based its ideology on the adoration of the egomaniac and histrionic personality of its leader as well as a vague mixture of socialism and nationalism.⁴⁷

The so-called authenticity was used, above all, as a weak excuse to hide the failures and abuses of Macías Nguema and his relatives. Thus, the political system imposed by the Equatorial Guinean ruler was justified as an attempt to follow African traditional ways. People were told, for example, that genuine Africans eat cassava rather than bread in order to cover the lack of flour in the country. However, the development of this Mobutu-styled rhetoric, which was often mixed with Communist discourse, did not seem to have been directly influenced by the Congolese dictator. Macías Nguema was not an African nationalist, but an Equatorial Guinean one, and resented foreign African influences. After establishing cooperation agreements with the communist bloc, for example, his government allowed people to wear Maoist suits, whereas African garments from neighbouring countries were banned. Children, civil servants and the whole society in general were mobilized to undergoing militia-styled instruction and attend rallies of support for Macías Nguema, in which people had to chant slogans such as '*Todo con Macías y Nada sin Macías*' ('Everything with Macías and Nothing without Macías'). The fragility of the system could not stand criticism; hence any complaint was interpreted as treason and was harshly punished. It is estimated that, by the end of Macías Nguema's regime, one third of the population had been driven into exile.⁴⁸

The economic breakdown

It is often argued that at the time of independence Equatorial Guinea was in a better economic position than neighbouring countries. This statement tends to stress

President Nguema's disastrous management that led the country from a relatively prosperous economy to be considered amongst the poorest nations in Africa only a decade after gaining independence. In explaining developments in Equatorial Guinea between 1968 and 1979, scholars such as Liniger-Goumaz, Decalo and Mitogo tend to focus their attention on Macías Nguema's complicated personality, questioning his mental state by using terms such as psychosis and inferiority complex when describing his chaotic and brutal policies.⁴⁹ Indeed, many in Equatorial Guinea consider today that Macías Nguema was mentally unfit to serve as president. Nonetheless, these observations often neglect economic conditions as a major factor in the deterioration of the country. Whether the economy suffered as a result of President Nguema's mistakes, the President's policies were also affected by pressing economic circumstances beyond his control. In fact, it is somewhat misleading to affirm that Equatorial Guinea was in a better economic position than its neighbours in 1968.

In 1962, a Spanish official report revealed that 'the average living standard' in Equatorial Guinea was 'higher' than in 'Nigeria, Cameroon and Gabon', yet warned that the development plans these countries were carrying out 'would dangerously bring their living standards closer', affecting 'the economic and political mechanism' in Equatorial Guinea.⁵⁰ Having an economic system that relied on cheap migrant labour for the production and export of cocoa, coffee and timber, the rise in the living standard in the neighbouring countries would deprive Equatorial Guinea of its cheap labour supply. Further, an increase in production in these countries would also bring world-market prices down, making Equatorial Guinean subsidized goods uneconomic in the Spanish market. The report went on to say that 'Fernando Po and Río Muni' were 'poor provinces', and, therefore, they could not develop 'without representing a

burden to the Treasury' like the rest of the poor Spanish provinces did.⁵¹ Indeed, the Spanish colony, as Pélissier points out, had the highest export earnings per capita in Africa in 1960, but this was mostly due to the Fernando Po plantations and Río Muni's timber exploitation controlled by Spanish settlers and companies.⁵² The production of the myriad of small African farms dedicated to the growing of coffee and cocoa was very limited due to their lack of capital and rudimentary techniques.⁵³ The farming companies, despite their high capitalization, were over-dependent on cheap migrant labour, since they had barely invested in the mechanization of production.⁵⁴ To de Cossio, 'the coexistence' of the African and European farming production made 'returns to be minimum' as the productivity of the best farms could not compensate for that of the poorest ones.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the apparent success of the colonial economy was very much based on the system of subsidies, which allowed farms to 'withstand the cost pressure' – 30 pesetas per kilogram for coffee and 10 pesetas for cocoa.⁵⁶

The Spanish authorities were not unaware of these problems. They knew about the fragility of an economy highly dependent on monoculture, at a time when cocoa and coffee prices were falling in world markets, and with almost non-existent industrial activity.⁵⁷ Although the 1963 development plan sought to readdress these problems, including the poor infrastructure and education levels, so as to prepare Equatorial Guinea for independence, it achieved limited results due to the short time span as well as the obstacles posed by Spanish interests in the region. As the 1962 report and de Cossio point out, Equatorial Guinea's economy was based on large monopolistic Spanish companies that controlled all financial and commercial activities. This oligopoly, along with the Presidential Office and colonial officials, opposed the granting of independence and, once they realized there was no way back,

they pushed for the separation of Fernando Po, where they aimed at maintaining the same economic relation with Spain. In short, this alliance tended to boycott the efforts that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which through the development plan tried to transform Equatorial Guinea's dependent economy.

In 1966, in an article that defended the economic relationship between Equatorial Guinea and Spain, a Spanish author argued that 'Equatorial Guinea's economy will not be able to survive without being integrated in the broader economy of Spain.'⁵⁸ Considering that Spain guaranteed a market and higher prices, this statement was not far from being true. Nonetheless, there were economic and political sectors that were willing to disengage from what was considered to be a burdensome relationship for the Spanish economy. To them, the well-being of a marginal group could no longer dictate Spain's policies at the expense of the country's broader economic interests and its international relations. A 1967 official report argued about the convenience of breaking the existing economic relationship, because Spain not only paid prices above the international market for Equatorial Guinean goods, but this relationship also cost the Spanish Treasury some 16 million US dollars to compensate for the colony's foreign trade deficit and the purchase of pound sterling to pay for the migrant workers' salaries.⁵⁹ In spite of the differences between the two groups, represented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidential Office, they both agreed on the need to provide financial and technical support to the new country.

The study of Equatorial Guinea's economy after 1968 is a challenging task due to the absence of reliable statistics.⁶⁰ When analysing previous information, however, one needs to be careful to avoid being misled by data that the Spanish often utilized in a propagandistic fashion. Decalo, for instance, relies on this information to say that Equatorial Guinea's per capita income and gross national product was similar to that

of Ivory Coast in 1968.⁶¹ Unlike the case of Ivory Coast whose agriculture sector relied on local producers, one of the most serious problems of the Equatorial Guinean economy, according to the 1962 report, was the extremely unequal income distribution between the African producers and European settlers as well as the internal tensions resulting from it.⁶² The developments that followed the aftermath of independence were to a large extent determined by the accumulated tensions between the Equatorial Guinean politicians and civil servants and the affluent European population. As we saw above, President Nguema, immediately after securing power, sought to appease the expatriate community and restore their confidence, in an effort to undo the damage caused by his radical anti-Spanish campaign. In his speech before a majority Fang audience on Fernando Po, Macías Nguema asked Equatorial Guineans to forget about past colonial errors, at the same time that he demanded Europeans to leave aside former discriminatory behaviours.⁶³ Conscious of the economic importance of the European community, he asked not to 'offend the white man, who is here to help us.'⁶⁴

The Spanish community was not willing to forget the 'arrogance' of a former African clerk who, taking advantage of the changing political situation, dared to speak of the white man as an equal. From the beginning, the Spanish business community, in alliance with the Presidential Office in Madrid, tried to boycott the policies of a government whose fragility and dependence was obvious to everybody. Despite the fact that Spanish government undertook to pay for the salaries of the Equatorial Guinea's administration until the end of 1969, all wages stopped being paid as early as October 1968. It is clear that, by not paying civil servants' salaries, they expected that Macías Nguemas' weak government would fall as a result of mounting dissatisfaction. The fact that European businessmen also withdrew their funds from

local accounts shows that both businessmen and members of Franco's government took part in the design of this strategy.

On 12 October 1968, during the ceremony of independence, a message from General Franco to President Macías Nguema was read:

I am very pleased to express to you my warmest congratulations and assure you that the Spanish Government will provide firm support to the new and dear nation, which Your Excellency is going to lead, with the intention of cooperating in its development and growing prosperity.⁶⁵

Far from getting Spain's support, the Equatorial Guinean Government suffered a series of destabilizing policies that targeted the country's weakest point, its economy. Yet the Spanish underestimated Macías Nguema's charisma and Equatorial Guineans' antagonistic feelings towards the former colonial master. People's dissatisfaction instead turned against the Spanish who were perceived to be interfering in the matters of Equatorial Guinea as if they were still in charge. The Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs sought to sooth the tense relations between the two countries through the signature of a comprehensive cooperation agreement in May 1969, which covered commercial, financial, education and transport areas. The agreement did not seem to be fully implemented due to the inability of Macías Nguema's administration to meet the obligations and the lack of cooperation of the Presidential Office, whose support was key for the implementation of the agreement after having been in charge of the colonial administration for the last few decades.⁶⁶ In 1971, after the signature of another cooperation agreement to 'normalize relations with Equatorial Guinea', the Foreign Affairs Minister had to remind Vice-president Carrero Blanco, in charge of Presidential Office, about 'the importance of this matter, given that, if our economic cooperation is delayed or defectively implemented, we shall enter... a new period of crisis with Equatorial Guinea'.⁶⁷

The sudden departure of the Spanish community had catastrophic effects for the Equatorial Guinean economy. It is very likely that the country's economy would have fallen apart as a result of the ending of colonial commercial privileges, the fall in cash crops prices and the 1973 oil crisis, as happened all over Africa, yet the collapse would not have been as sudden had it not been for Spanish flight. Spanish settlers and companies who owned large cocoa plantations on Fernando Po and timber exploitations in Río Muni, which produced the bulk of the country's GDP, left without making any arrangements to guarantee the continuation of production.⁶⁸ As early as 1969, cocoa production suffered a major setback as a result of the instability related to the attempted coup, moving from 37,000 tons of cocoa the previous year to 28,000 tons.⁶⁹ Although the conditions of the 1969 cooperation agreement guaranteed the purchase of some 20,000 tons of cocoa by Spain, they could not compete with those of the colonial period.⁷⁰ The new agreement, in addition to not absorbing the total production, paid for cocoa in accordance with international market prices.⁷¹ The profits of the plantation based economy of Fernando Po decreased significantly in spite of previous reports warning about the inability of this sector to survive without the subsidies that since the mid 1940s had contributed to economic growth. Without this extra profit, the necessary commercial infrastructure and the backing of the Spanish business' capital, production fell dramatically in the subsequent years. Timber exploitation, which required a substantial capital base, could not continue once the Spanish left, as the government did not have enough financial resources.⁷² Only coffee, mostly grown by small local farmers in Río Muni, did not suffer such a drastic collapse. In the end, however, it followed the same pattern as the other production sectors, partly, because farmers, being formerly accustomed to heavily

subsidized prices, no longer found the necessary economic incentive in the market after 1969.⁷³

Beyond the impact on cocoa plantations and timber exploitation, the Spanish departure had a significant effect on the entire commercial system. The Equatorial Guinean economy was articulated through a widespread network that connected producers, distributors and a small group of monopolistic companies in charge of exporting Equatorial Guinea's production and importing the bulk of the goods consumed in the region. Despite the economic preponderance of the large commercial companies, the commercial network depended on the numerous small Spanish traders scattered throughout the country, who linked African farmers to the large commercial companies. The flight of the Spanish deprived Equatorial Guinea of three important pillars: the farming and timber companies, the small trader network, and the monopolistic companies that connected the country's economy to the international market. The production of African farmers was severely damaged by the breakdown of the commercial network for, in the absence of their commercial partners, they now found it almost impossible to sell their harvest.⁷⁴

Trusting government promises and not having other economic option to obtain cash, most farmers continued growing commercial crops. By 1971, only those in border regions still grew these crops since they had the option to smuggle their harvest into Cameroon or Gabon to be sold.⁷⁵ Those far from the border chose not to waste their time and effort in return for nothing. Macías Nguema's administration tried to ameliorate the situation through the creation of a government office, INFOGE, which bought farmers' production. This solution soon failed because INFOGE did not have the necessary funds to pay farmers for their harvests. People were promised to be paid as soon as the coffee and cocoa was sold to Spain. However, due to a

combination of the government's inability and corruption generated by the deep economic crisis, farmers were rarely paid.⁷⁶ Farmers stopped growing cash crops, income sources disappeared, unsupplied shops closed down, and money flow was almost non-existent; the country, for the most part, moved towards a subsistence economy.

In response to the economic crisis, most rural communities resorted to subsistence agriculture. Despite being marginalized by the administration and capitalist sectors, subsistence farming had played a key role in the colonial economy. Now, due to the collapse of the modern economic system, it regained its central role in ensuring the survival of the Equatorial Guinean population. Subsistence agriculture, however, did not meet the needs of an administration that relied on exports to generate the funds that kept the state machinery running as well as the elite's living standard. For the government, the only viable alternative was to take control of Fernando Po's abandoned plantations. The situation did not improve as the government expected, and under its management cocoa plantations were unable to regain previous production levels. In addition to the lack of expertise and old age of the trees, the prices obtained for the cocoa harvest were not enough to cover productions costs. The decrease in profits made it increasingly difficult to pay for the Nigerian labour force. The latter's dissatisfaction was addressed by the Equatorial Guinean government through the use of violence and coercion, which, far from improving the situation, made matters worse. In November 1972, the use of repressive measures against a group of migrant workers protesting against their labour conditions caused the death of some fifty Nigerians at the hands of the Equatorial Guinean police during a demonstration.⁷⁷ Coercion as a means to address the economic difficulties created a vicious circle in which Nigerians' productivity diminished, profits and salaries

became increasingly meagre, and the government made greater use of violence to deal with the situation. Given the series of abuses committed against the Nigerian labourers, their government decided to evacuate its citizens in 1975. Such a measure left the island's plantations without its labour force, and Macías Nguema reacted by signing a Presidential Decree that 'established that all citizens over fifteen years of age had to provide manual work in the government's plantations and mines.'⁷⁸ According to Buale, the following year some 25,000 people were recruited to work on the island's plantations without pay, in exchange for a small food ration that barely covered the needs of the worker but not his family.⁷⁹ In addition to the forced recruitment of workers for Fernando Po's plantations, known as *bolsa* (literally, bag), abandoned private coffee and cocoa farms in Río Muni had been nationalized. There the government forced the population to carry out free communal work, like in the old *prestación* days, in an effort to reactivate production which stopped due to the lack of economic incentives.⁸⁰

Equatorial Guinea's underdeveloped civil society was unable by itself to replace the vacuum left by the Spanish in 1969. The government, which totally depended on the modern economic sector, tried to play the role the Spanish had done before in order to keep the system alive. Nonetheless, changing economic conditions and insufficient cadres made it an impossible task. Being completely overcome by the circumstances, it resorted to violence in the belief that it would work as it did during the early days of the colonial domination. Although coercion was a key instrument of the colonial system, the Spanish did not rely on it exclusively but also on bureaucratic, financial and human resources.



Photograph 36: Since the collapse of commercial agriculture women have become the pillar of rural economies.

The collapse of the colonial economic system affected the entire Equatorial Guinean population, whose living standard fell dramatically. People could not buy basic goods such as salt, soap, kerosene, clothes or medicines.⁸¹ Many were forced to make trousers out of sacks and use almost forgotten methods to make their own salt and soap.⁸² The signature of cooperation agreements with China and other countries of the communist bloc by 1972 improved the situation initially, as the country received basic goods that were sold in state shops known as *estatales*. The government, in accordance with the communist principles of its new allies, banned all private economic activities after declaring all capitalists to be subversive.⁸³ Beyond the communist rhetoric, the ban on private economic activities hid the government's wish to profit from all economic activities in the country. By banning most private initiatives, it undermined the regular functioning of the economy and people's ability to deal with the precarious situation. Thus, for example, an informant explains how he was arrested, along with his brothers, for buying coffee and cocoa from local

producers that was later sold in Cameroon.⁸⁴ Freedom of movement was virtually non-existent, as people required government credentials to move from one district to another, and numerous checkpoints were established along the roads.⁸⁵ According to an informant, the climate of terror and distrust prevented many individuals from sneaking through forest paths for fear of being reported by someone else.⁸⁶ People often resorted to the sale of game meat, staple food, *malamba* (fermented sugarcane juice) or handmade soap to get some money.⁸⁷ The government, however, eventually banned the production of *malamba* and soap and established a myriad of checkpoints that control all kind of activities throughout the country.⁸⁸ By the late 1970s, the economy was almost paralysed as a result of the firm control on private economic activities and the failure of most government initiatives due to corruption and mismanagement.

Bi ne bon be'fang: we are Fang

By 1968, Equatorial Guinean society appeared to have come to terms with colonial modernity, and people were, to varying degrees, familiar with some of its elements. Very few questioned modernity as the system that should organize the country's social and economic structures. Some nationalists argued about the need to include some local elements within the so-called modern system, but, no doubt, the great challenge to the new government was how to consolidate the process of modernization. In a speech in November 1968, President Macías Nguema talked about his commitment to act as the leader of all Equatorial Guineans regardless of their ethnic origin and to maintaining the basic economic structure in good partnership with the Spanish community in order to develop the country.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, the fragility of modern political and economic institutions became evident as soon as

Equatorial Guinea suffered its first serious crisis in March 1969. From then on, the regime turned its back on modernity, as Macías Nguema, like many contemporary African leaders, moved somewhat inadvertently towards tradition in his 'search for authority.'⁹⁰ Modernity stopped being sponsored from the government ranks; instead, tradition gained strength and, slowly but surely, replaced modernity as the referential social model. The adoption of 'tradition', as the African alternative, did not mean an explicit rejection of the administrative and economic structures brought by colonialism, because nobody could envision an autochthonous alternative to run the country. Fang compartmentalization of reality, the double realm, led the regime to believe that the tradition could rule Equatorial Guineans' social behaviour, especially family life and religious beliefs, whereas modernity would regulate the country's administration and economy. Nobody seemed to be aware that, once the tradition was accepted as the social and cultural paradigm by the ruling elite, its influence would transcend social life, giving way to the so-called process of Africanization or retraditionalization of social, political and economic structures in Equatorial Guinea.

Similar social and political developments, taking place throughout most of Africa since the 1970s, have been often interpreted as an indicator that European culture was not deeply rooted amongst the African population. According to European observers, by the 1960s Spanish culture had a strong hold amongst young individuals while the so-called traditional system was still strong amongst older generations.⁹¹ Indeed, it is difficult to assess the level of acculturation within a given society, as one can be misled by external factors. At the time of independence, acculturation was especially strong amongst two groups of Equatorial Guineans, the generation born after 1945 and especially those adults in the administration and business sectors in close contact with the Europeans. Often these individuals had to leave their rural communities in

order to pursue their careers or continue their education. In the process, however, they felt out of touch with village traditional social organization and adopted Spanish culture as their social reference. Acculturation is rarely a straightforward process as it usually results in the formation of contradictory mentalities. In Equatorial Guinea, such contradictions started to emerge as soon as the country's independence was imminent. It was precisely within the acculturated sectors, which, by and large, benefited the most from the colonial system and accepted European culture, where nationalism took a stronger hold and more intense anti-Spanish sentiments developed. Spain had expected that acculturation would strengthen the identification between Africans and Spaniards but it had the opposite effect, as a Spanish official reported in 1963:

We must assess the position of the [Equatorial] Guinean youth, especially, those who have reached a higher level of education or an independent economic position. They are not only in favour of independence, but they are also anti-white racists.⁹²

In Equatorial Guinea, the process of retraditionalization did not take place as a result of a well-designed strategy. As Vansina argues, 'the transition to independence' in Africa took place 'without the guidance of a basic new common tradition'.⁹³ In many respects, this process was very much the undesired effect of Macías Nguema's failed attempt to consolidate the modern system in the country. As shown above, a combination of personal inability and systemic fragility led the country to the collapse of colonial administrative and economic structures. The moment Equatorial Guinea suffered its first serious crisis, the country was unable to recover. From then on, each desperate attempt on President Nguema's side to address the political and economic crisis resulted in a greater erosion of modernity. The individuals who led the top-down traditionalization process in Equatorial Guinea did not have a close relationship

with the new tradition. For the most part, they had neither the intellectual capacity nor the traditional knowledge necessary to direct a viable process of traditionalization, in which the country's organization and institutions responded to the existing traditional socio-cultural structures. In theory, the traditionalization of society would pose an immediate problem, such as what tradition is to be followed within the multi-ethnic context of most African countries. In Equatorial Guinea, where more than 80 per cent of the country's population was Fang, including Macías Nguema, the regime mechanically imposed the 'Fangization' of Equatorial Guinean society; that is, the application of their own interpretation of the Fang tradition on a multi-ethnic social reality. Fang language, for instance, was declared the national language and compulsory to all Equatorial Guinean nationals.⁹⁴ Although there was no premeditated campaign to develop Fang nationalism, not surprisingly, a loose sense of hegemony developed amongst the Fang since the early 1970s, which led to mistake Fang culture for Equatorial-Guinean culture. The national model that President Nguema defended during a speech in 1968 was abandoned, because, within a climate of growing political fragility and loss of legitimacy, multi-ethnicity came to be considered as divisive and dangerous.

Many scholars now emphasize the numerous similarities between the colonial and postcolonial periods, given that colonial 'dynamics have continued to shape postcolonial society.'⁹⁵ Thus, the process of traditionalization was also overshadowed by authoritarianism and the divide between rulers and subjects that characterized the colonial period. Given that the main goal of Nguema's regime was to maintain the power structure inherited from the Spanish, it is not surprising that this process was dominated by the denial of plurality and the extreme use of coercion. Unlike the Sanaga-Ogowe tradition, during the post-independence period political leaders chose

to ignore pluralism in order to create what Houtondji defines as the 'unanimist illusion'.⁹⁶ Within a climate of political fragility and growing illegitimacy, the only valid view in Equatorial Guinea became that of the government, which could only count on violence to guarantee this state of affairs. Alternative opinions were depicted as subversive or simply as contrary to African culture. Nowadays, under the successor regime of Obiang Nguema, criticism continues to be rejected and unconventional views are usually labelled as *ntángán*, a term that can have derogative connotations especially if its directed against a black individual.

As hard as it is to define Macías Nguema's political thought, many in Equatorial Guinea consider that, if anything, this was characterized by a fierce nationalism.⁹⁷ Macías Nguema's nationalist feelings, like the rest of Equatorial Guinean nationalists, mostly consisted in a radical rejection of the Spanish legacy. As a result, all those Equatorial Guineans who were identified with the former metropolis or its culture were repressed by the regime, especially Western-educated individuals. Seeking to eradicate potential competition, President Nguema chose to vilify this sector, by confronting them with the non-educated majority. According to President Nguema 'education and intellectuals' were the 'greatest problem facing Africa today' because 'they are polluting our climate with foreign culture'.⁹⁸ Decalo claims that Macías Nguema went as far as banning the use of the word 'intellectual' and, by 1979, 'not a single university graduate remained in the country'.⁹⁹ In rejecting Spanish culture, the regime also attacked monogamy, which was considered as a foreign institution, and encouraged polygamy, that seemed to rise since this period.¹⁰⁰ As Lonsdale points out, 'the social impudence of women in the colonial era roused many men to redefine "tribal" norms to secure a degree of female subordination for which there was often little precedent'.¹⁰¹ As early as 1969, district tribunals, now controlled by African

men, chose to ignore Spanish and Catholic laws when resolving both canonical and non-canonical marriages.¹⁰²

Like colonial modernization, postcolonial traditionalization was hampered by the oppressive climate imposed by the government of Macías Nguema, which denied people's autonomy. However, unlike the colonial project, Macías Nguema's regime did not allow any safety valve. Ranger rightly points out that the colonial state was less omnipresent than its successor.¹⁰³ Having a more efficient organization, the colonial administration did not require to depredate all economic activities or to control all social actions.

Macías Nguema gained power through an alliance with other political factions, which were later integrated within his cabinet and the country's administration. The 1969 coup attempt exposed the fragility of this alliance and of Nguema's position. State institutions did not only fail to provide the necessary support for political power, but more distressingly the uprising originated from within these institutions. Fearful of losing power and incapable of devising a better solution, Macías Nguema chose to appoint personal allies to the state apparatus. In a society like Equatorial Guinea, characterized by the lack of qualified cadres, President Nguema did not have much to choose amongst his personal allies, and, rapidly, state institutions lost their institutional character as they moved from a people-in-institution model to an institution-in-people one.¹⁰⁴ Those in charge of the state apparatus were aware that they owed their position to the President's trust and not their qualification, exacerbating the personal character of the administration. A measure, which initially had intended to preserve the existing political order, ended up destroying it, because the administration became an inefficient machine with a totally distorted purpose. Macías Nguema laid the basis of a personal system, but he lacked the material and

ideological resources to reward his allies.¹⁰⁵ The underlying principles of state institutions stopped being served in order to serve the interests of those in charge of the administration. As early as 1971, Macías Nguema was aware of his failure in reasserting political control. The state, in the hands of dubious personal allies, became, then, a threatening organization that had to be dismantled. The series of constitutional reforms transformed the state into Macías Nguema's 'personal fiefdom', and, thus, became a void reality.¹⁰⁶

The political crisis originating from the 1969 coup exposed the lack of national integration in the country, as social, regional and ethnic tensions came to the surface. Macías Nguema was clearly influenced by such tensions and interpreted the coup mostly on regional and ethnic grounds. Therefore, the coup was not simply the result of the political ambition of MONALIGE, Unión Bubi and certain sectors of the Spanish community; rather, to Macías Nguema, the coup revealed the disloyalty of certain sections of Equatorial Guinean society. Río Muni's coastal areas, where MONALIGE had its stronghold, Fernando Po, where Unión Bubi originated from, and the European community in general were victimized for the actions of a small group of individuals. In turn, the President looked for alliances from within those Fang regions that supported him during the 1968 elections, present-day Wele-Nzas and Kie-Ntem. For that purpose, he recovered the previous radical language that he successfully used during the presidential campaign, but now, in addition to targeting the former colonial master, he picked on minority groups – Bubi and Ndowe – and coastal Fangs. These social sectors were replaced in state institutions with individuals from the president's traditional strongholds. Such measures opened the way to tribalism, which, in the 1970s, became a growing trend affecting the entire Equatorial Guinean society. Tribalism, being such a deeply pervasive pseudo-ideology,

eventually tainted both oppressors and victims. The latter reacted by blaming the 'Ntumu tribe', as all the Fang of the interior of Río Muni were wrongly referred, for the chaos and suffering affecting the country, in spite of the fact that all social sectors were victim of the abuses and brutality of the regime. The so-called Ntumu were not only accused for the country's problems but also described as a 'primitive race that has barely coexisted for fifty years with the whites'.¹⁰⁷

By sponsoring the traditionalization of Equatorial Guinean society, Nguemism has been able to direct this process in the most convenient way to the interest of the ruling elite. During the 1970s, village and clan based political institutions were clearly undermined by the government's policies, as they were seen to pose a threat to its authority. More than ever, administrative chiefs acted as government agents for the control of rural communities across the country. In the 1960s an administrative reform created the village council, an institution that joined several neighbouring villages, regardless of their clan identity, under the same administration. The villagers chose the council members as well as its president. Macías Nguema replaced the village council for the *comité de bases*, which represented the ruling party, PUNT, in the village, instead of the village population. On principle, people had the right to choose the members and president of the committee, all of which had to be sympathizers of the PUNT, but, in reality, they were handpicked by government delegates or the party itself. Under Nguemism the only legitimacy originated from the President, thus no other loyalties were tolerated. Fear and terror as a tool for social control affected chiefs and villagers alike, contributing to the spreading of a climate of mutual accusations and distrust that eroded local political institutions. Hardcore supporters of the regime were rewarded in exchange for reporting on their fellow villagers and, in

doing so, they could be appointed as presidents of village committees and enjoy certain privileges, such as access to scarce goods.¹⁰⁸



Photograph 37: Although the abáá is no longer a political forum, it is still the main space for socialization for men

Whatever legitimacy was left after colonial rule, it completely disappeared during the 1970s, destroying any sense of local authority. In the end, loyalty to the regime was not expressed to obtain any reward but, above all, to avoid being punished by the government. As in the worst days of the colonial conquest, villages could be indiscriminately burnt down in retaliation for challenging the government's authority. In Evinayong, for instance, following the murder of a soldier in 1975, Macías Nguema arbitrarily ordered the torching of several villages on the Evinayong-Kogo road to prevent so-called rebel elements from finding shelter in the future and, thus, setting an example to dissuade potential rebellions.¹⁰⁹ Despite the level of coercion diminished after the ousting of Macías Nguema, local authority has been unable to

recover any sort of legitimacy as it still acts as the government's primary instrument for social control.¹¹⁰ Rural communities continued to be alienated and, thus, they remain 'uncaptured' by the state and on the margins of the official system.¹¹¹

The development of a clientelist system within the higher ranks of the administration during the 1970s spread all over the Equatorial Guinean society, yet it was somewhat limited by a political regime that did not favour the development of a closer clientelist relationship. The climate of physical and legal insecurity made possible the emergence of 'big men'; that is, politically well-connected individuals who could offer some level of protection to ordinary citizens against generalized abuses. Rural communities witnessed how government delegates, whose functions were officially similar to those of former district officers, acted as powerful individuals. Unlike colonial officers, government delegates knew the local language and culture, which allowed them to exercise greater control while establishing an incipient clientelist network in their districts. In addition, government delegates visited villages much more often than their colonial predecessors.¹¹² Considering the total abuse of human rights that dominated the country during this period, for villagers it was important to offer their loyalty and adulation as a means to gain the sympathy of government delegates and other government top officials, and, thus, avoid severe punishment or the looting of their scarce resources. Since this period, power relations were characterized by an extreme display of submission in order to disguise the lack of legitimacy of the powerful.

Black man only does witchcraft

Given that Macías Nguema's regime destroyed anything that got in its way or was likely to be threatening, Christianity was soon targeted by the government. From the

mid 1960s, the most radical elements of Equatorial Guinean nationalism had singled out the Catholic Church as the main symbol of the much-hated 'imported' culture, despite Catholicism appearing to be strongly consolidated within Equatorial Guinean society.¹¹³ Local religious beliefs were not directly sponsored by the regime, yet they benefited from the government's rhetoric in favour of local culture. The Claretians, despite being regularly harassed from the early 1970s, managed, for some time, to persuade the government that they posed no threat to the regime.¹¹⁴ Indeed the Catholic Church had to pay a high price to subsist within an increasingly hostile environment. Decalo points out how priests were forced to spread government slogans such as 'there is no other God than Macías' or 'God created Equatorial Guinea thanks to Papá Macías'.¹¹⁵ Between November 1974 and April 1975, all sorts of religious meetings and the use of Christian names were banned at the same time that Christianity was declared to have an alien nature.¹¹⁶ Eventually, in May 1978, Equatorial Guinea was officially declared an atheistic state.¹¹⁷ For the most part, religious manifestations survived within an intimate family realm, but, in some cases, larger communities could continue to practice regular masses thanks to the support of government officials with a greater faith than fear.¹¹⁸

In 1967, Bishop Nze Abuy had expressed his concern about a situation that led nationalist parties to deny the Church's representation in the future legislative assembly.¹¹⁹ The loss of a privilege, which the Church enjoyed in Spain, came along with messages that served to 'encourage and spread the hate for religion, as well as lies, smears, criticisms and disdain against God's ministers.'¹²⁰ By singling out the Catholic Church, nationalists were implicitly expressing acceptance for the existing administrative and economic structure, while explicitly rejecting the Church's influence within a society that never came to terms with its ruling on moral and

family affairs. In this respect, Nze Abuy was right in arguing that Christianity did not have deep roots in Equatorial Guinea.¹²¹ Nonetheless, this had much to do with the own nature of the Catholic Church, which never paid much attention to the pressing problems of Africans, such as witchcraft. As a Guinean priest explained to me, the greatest difficulty that the Church faces in Africa today is to deal with the problem of 'evil', for which Catholicism does not offer an adequate response other than in the afterlife. In 1980, the Archbishop of Bamenda (Cameroon) drew attention to what he called Africans' 'double-life'.¹²² By compartmentalizing reality, to Africans, Christianity became perfectly compatible with local beliefs. The latter became especially relevant after independence, as the decline of social and economic conditions increased Equatorial Guineans concern with evil or witchcraft.

The deterioration of living conditions in Equatorial Guinea rapidly found its social expression in the revival of witchcraft beliefs. During the 1950s and 1960s, such beliefs appeared to be dying out, yet they only became less conspicuous within a context of economic prosperity that did not favour the development of those internal tensions usually expressed through witchcraft beliefs. Equally important, government repression contributed to maintaining the low profile of witchcraft during this stage. The reduction of Spanish repression during the autonomy period resulted in the gradual growth of witchcraft expressions. In 1967, Bishop Nze Abuy warned about the 'reappearance of certain pagan practices', such as sorcery, witchcraft or magical remedies, in Equatorial Guinea.¹²³ Unlike the Spanish administration, most African political and religious leaders did not bear, and still do not, the same reservations regarding the existence of witchcraft. In fact, it would not be too adventurous to claim that many of them believed, to a varying extent, in it.

It is difficult to decipher the role that witchcraft beliefs actually play in African societies, but there is no question that, in Equatorial Guinea, these beliefs resurfaced at a time of a great social and economic turmoil. Scholars have often interpreted witchcraft as an expression of social dissatisfaction as well as a mechanism to channel internal tensions resulting from inequality. In looking at witchcraft in postcolonial Cameroon, Rowlands and Warnier emphasize the political character of a phenomenon that seeks to express popular dissent with the autocratic state.¹²⁴ Although referring to religious movements, Rangers sheds some doubts about this approach with regards to these sorts of phenomena, which, to him, must be interpreted as 'responses to cultural and psychological tensions and not as expressions of political antagonisms.'¹²⁵ The case of Equatorial Guinea during the 1970s shows that, witchcraft is, above all, a cultural and psychological response to social tensions, which are ultimately originated from a political situation. Macías Nguema's policies, like that of his successor, were clearly related to the problems that Equatorial Guinean society experienced since independence and which, for lack of a more appropriate mechanism, were articulated through a witchcraft discourse. Referring to the repression of Macías Nguema's government, an informant explained how, after the 1969 coup attempt, 'Macías started doing witchcraft and eating people'.¹²⁶

As Fernandez rightly points out, in modern African societies, witchcraft accusations, rather than channelling internal tensions, have exacerbated them.¹²⁷ The reason for this has to do with changes in African societies and, in particular, in witchcraft beliefs since colonial conquest. In the past, magic in Equatorial African had an ambivalent nature, as it could be used by charismatic leaders for the benefit of the whole community as well as by 'selfish' individuals for their own benefit. In this context, social inequalities behind internal tensions could be addressed through

witchcraft accusations against those who did not redistribute their gains in their communities. In postcolonial Guinea, like Fisiy and Geschiere have noticed in Cameroon, witchcraft is used both by the weak and the powerful, which has limited the levelling role of witchcraft accusations. In the 1970s, ordinary Fang individuals resorted to witchcraft accusations to express their frustration with the dreadful social and economic conditions, hoping, perhaps, that such accusation could have an impact on those responsible for the situation. The powerful, especially President Macías Nguema, manipulated witchcraft beliefs in order to convince Equatorial Guineans of his supernatural power and, hence, discourage potential threats. During the 1970s, many in Equatorial Guinea were convinced about President Nguema's use of witchcraft as well as his cannibalistic habits. As Decalo suggests, Macías Nguema, being feared for his magic, turned witchcraft into a pillar of his eleven-year-long 'rule of terror'.¹²⁸

No doubt, the absence of past anti-witchcraft institutions undermined the capacity of witchcraft accusations to serve as tool to channel social tensions, which, now, could not be dealt accordingly. After the destruction of these institutions in the mid 1940s, people were often left with the only option of resorting to district officers in the hope of obtaining some protection. Although the Spanish did not believe in witchcraft, they did take a tough stance whenever these accusations were launched, especially in the 1940s. After independence, however, government officials lacked any sort of legitimacy to deal with this situation, since they were often suspected of witchcraft themselves. Given that the sympathizers of the regime were often behind much of the indiscriminate violence and abuses of this period, accusations were rarely launched. Therefore, during the 1970s, witchcraft did not appear to serve so much as a levelling instrument, but rather as an expression of social dissatisfaction and

frustration. In fact, despite Bishop Nze Abuy warning about the revival of movements such as Bwiti in 1967, religious movements were generally held back during the 1970s. Informants from Evinayong, one of the areas where Bwiti had been traditionally more active, confirm that, during Macías Nguema's rule, this cult suffered greater repression than ever. It appears that President Nguema, somehow wanted to repress all those supernatural activities which might threaten him. Decalo claims that Macías Nguema did not only accumulate a large array of skulls, but also 'tapped all other clan sorcerers of their powers, "concentrating" their magic in his own hands.¹²⁹ In this respect, the end of his extremely coercive regime had two immediate consequences. On the one hand, there has been a significant increase in religious movements in the last twenty-five years. On the other, witchcraft accusations have skyrocketed, partly, as a result of the absence of legitimate anti-witchcraft institutions that seek to restore social harmony instead of making economic profit.

One of the factors that contributed to the revival of witchcraft beliefs during Macías Nguema's rule was the significant increase in mortality as a result of repression and the decline in living conditions. The limited number of qualified doctors and nurses were unable to deal with the deteriorating health situation because they did not have basic medicines or the necessary equipment, as an informant working at the Mikomeseng health centre at the time explained.¹³⁰ Not finding an appropriate response in modern medicine, people increasingly looked at the Fang tradition for answers. An informant explains how in the last four decades there has been a proliferation of illnesses of unknown origin, a factor that is clearly related with the collapse of health services and the contempt for scientific knowledge that followed independence.¹³¹ In the past, witchcraft was the explanation for inexplicable

tragedies, especially premature death. The new Fang tradition, however, has neither the complexity nor the expertise of the Sanaga-Ogowe, which was much more efficient in dealing with social and natural adversities. As a result, witchcraft has become since the 1970s the common explanation to any tragedy or incident, however minor this might be, as Fang elder explains:

Nowadays people talk about witchcraft much more. To the Fang of the past, witchcraft was a hidden secret that was not publicly discussed... You could not call anybody a wizard. Today, for instance, if you have a minor argument with somebody, he will call you wizard as if it were an insult. Any incident is said to be caused by witchcraft.¹³²

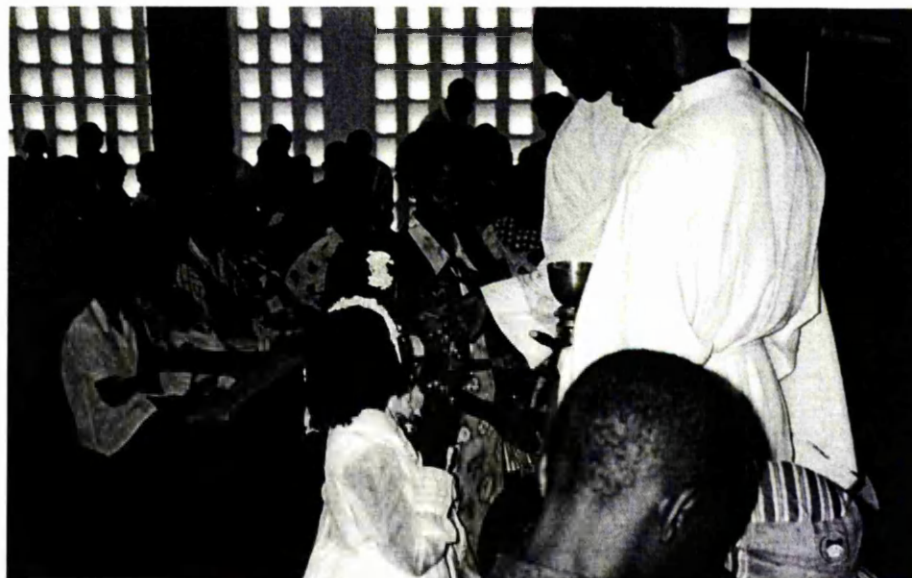
The loss of Sanaga-Ogowe knowledge has been especially relevant with regards to traditional medicine. The Fang *ngengán* or healer, who traditionally relied on his knowledge of medicinal plants, has assumed in the last few decades the functions of the *ndende'e* or diviner.¹³³ This seems to have its origin in a modern anti-witchcraft movement, which, according to Fernández, originated in Gabon in the late 1950s, only to die out a few years later.¹³⁴ Although the *ndende'e* movement disappeared, it had a significant impact on Fang society, as so-called diviners of all kinds have mushroomed since independence. Divination became identified with healing, thus providing with a livelihood to numerous individuals who, despite their ignorance of traditional medicine, were more than willing to see witchcraft actions behind any kind of affliction. Modern *mingengán* (plural for *ngengán*) have not been aware of their social responsibility in restoring family or social harmony. In making witchcraft a trivial phenomenon, witchcraft has contributed to the 'instrumentalization of disorder', since it exacerbates distrust and prevents the development of social institutions outside the margins of the state.

Conclusion

Equatorial Guinea became a paradigmatic case in Africa, where the transition from colony to postcolony turned out to be an enormous challenge for most countries, showing that modern democratic states can rarely succeed within an environment characterized by poor socio-economic development. During great part of the colonial period, the Spanish authorities sought to consolidate certain social, political and economic structures in Equatorial Guinea, but independence revealed the fragile foundations of colonial modernity. The new tradition, despite its secondary role during the colonial period, proved to be much more deeply rooted in Equatorial Guinean society. The absence of a mature nationalist movement prevented a more accurate analysis of the country's social, political and economic conditions, as well as the articulation of an ideology that could realistically serve as framework for the organization of the new country. In view of the collapse of modern structures, Macías Nguema resorted to tradition, which was now sequestered, and sponsored a restricted version of tradition so as to serve the needs of the regime. In so doing, he developed a totalitarian-styled regime that sought to control every aspect of Equatorial Guinean society. Paranoid about losing power, Macías Nguema was increasingly forced to reduce his circle of allies. Initially, he looked for shelter amongst the Fang, soon later his Esangi clan, and, after 1975, he retreated to his home village from where he ruled over a country that in effect no longer existed.

Within a system dominated by chaos and repression, the state was left in the hands of individuals, who, in their search for resources, end up appropriating each and every one of the state institutions. Through the use of extreme coercion, Macías Nguema and his cronies developed a completely arbitrary system that allowed them to exploit the scanty resources left in the country. By 1979, the regime was completely

exhausted and, once the inner circle had used up all the resources and could no longer benefit from the system, the decision to remove Macías Nguema was taken. He was replaced by his nephew and close collaborator, Obiang Nguema, one of the instigators behind the August 1979 coup. Once in power, Obiang Nguema was able to correct the errors of his uncle in order to transform Nguemism into a more efficient authoritarian and patrimonial system, at the same time that he consolidated the process of retraditionalization of Equatorial Guinean society.



Photograph 38: The Catholic faith has recovered part of its former dynamism



Photograph 39: Family blessings are a key element of funeral celebrations



Photograph 40: The Sanaga-Ogowe Ndongo Mba ritual is today a form of entertainment



Photograph 41: The Mvét continues to entertain Fang villagers across Río Muni

NOTES

¹ Fernández, 'Christian Acculturation', 244.

² Decalo, *Psychoses*, 45-46.

³ Excluding the European and Nigerian population, the total population of Equatorial Guinea was 226,784 people, 86.7 per cent of whom were Fang according to the 1966 census. 1966 Equatorial Guinea Population Census. AGA, box D-499, file 1.

⁴ Many informants describe the 1968 elections as a choice between 'independencia total' and 'independencia asociada'.

⁵ In 1943 the Sub-Governor asked the Governor General to pass the exam of several candidates from Río Muni who complained about the favourable treatment received by the students of Fernando Po. Macías Nguema was amongst the candidates recommended by the Sub-Governor, yet, after assessing their exams, the Governor refused to pass any of the candidates due to the poor level of their papers. Sub-Governor Pérez Barrueco to the Governor Alonso (27-1-1943). AGA, box G-1926, file 2; Governor Alonso to the Sub-Governor Pérez Barrueco (8-2-1943). AGA, box G-1926, file 2.

⁶ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 6, 7, 11, 15.

⁷ L. Mitogo, *Guinea: De colonia a dictadura* (Madrid, 1977), 44.

⁸ Decalo, *Psychoses*, 58.

⁹ On March 1969, a letter signed by a group of Spanish businessmen stated: 'The commercial Spanish businessmen established in [Equatorial] Guinea... have been forced to abandoned their companies due to pressure of the developments and the strong recommendation of our diplomats.' Petition of financial support of a group of Spanish businessmen (26-3-1969). AGA, box D-472, file 1.

¹⁰ Decalo, *Psychoses*, 48.

¹¹ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 3; Mikomeseng 2, 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 28.

¹² Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 28, 14.

¹³ Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 261-62, 265.

¹⁴ Alicia Campos' study highlights the lack of a grassroots movement behind the independence process. Campos, 'The Decolonization'.

¹⁵ The Spanish official warned that the situation would worsen once the Government Council had to appoint the remaining top officials. To him, they would be forced to choose people within the General Assembly or even the Government Council itself. Pedro de la Torre to the DGPPA Director General (20-5-1964). AGA, box D-476.

¹⁶ Speech of the President of the Autonomous Government Council, transcribed from Río Muni's weekly newspaper *Potopoto* (24-8-1964). AGA, box D-476.

¹⁷ Macías Nguema's admiration for Franco had already been stated a year earlier to a Spanish newspaper, and it was later repeated in his first official speech as President on October 12, 1968. Macías Nguema's statement to *La Vanguardia Española* (16-5-1967). AGA, box D-472, file 1; 'Independencia de Guinea Ecuatorial', *África*, 323 (1968), 540.

¹⁸ Highlights of the President Macías Nguema's speech during his visit to the Sacriba-Fang village (Fernando Po), transcribed by the Spanish Embassy for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (3-11-1968). AGA, box D-472, file 1.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Encoded Telegram of the Spanish Ambassador Juan Durán-Loriga (3-11-1968). AGA, box D-472, file 1.

²¹ Spanish Ambassador to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (12-11-1968). AGA, box D-472, file 1.

²² Decalo, *Psychoses*, 47; Spanish Ambassador to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (12-11-1968). AGA, box D-472, file 1.

²³ The Spanish Ambassador claims that 'the government delegates appointed by Macías have imposed some sort of terrorism' in Akurenam and Evinayong. Ibid.

²⁴ Personal interview, Evinayong 27. During the 1968 elections each candidate was identified with a symbol to facilitate the vote for illiterate people. Thus Macías Nguema was represented by the cockerel and Ondo Edu by the gazelle. Some argue that, during Macías Nguema's rule, the cockerel became a semi-sacred animal and nobody was allowed to hurt them.

²⁵ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 0.

²⁶ Ibid. In a 1969 document the DGPPA maintained that its only compromise regarding Equatorial Guinea was to keep 'the Aid and Cooperation Budget until December 31, 1969.' This budget should have served, amongst other things, to pay the salaries of the civil officers. One gets the impression from this document that there existed a tense relation between the DGPPA, which had traditionally defended the Spanish interests in Equatorial Guinea, and the Foreign Affairs Ministry that pushed for the process of independence. Director General of the Presidential Office to the Undersecretary of Foreign Policy (4-12-1969). AGA, box D-470.

²⁷ J. Bolekia, *Aproximación a la historia de Guinea Ecuatorial* (Salamanca, 2003), 117.

²⁸ R. Nze Abuy, *Exhortación Cuaresmal: Carta Pastoral* (Bata, 4 February 1969).

²⁹ According to Decalo, a Spanish foreman was murdered in present-day Mbini, provoking the panicked reaction of Durán-Loriga who ordered the Spanish troops to take control of the airports in case it was necessary to evacuate the Spanish community. Decalo, *Psychoses*, 48.

³⁰ Ibid, 49.

³¹ Jesús Bimbile [Jorge Doria, José Maria Vila], *La Vanguardia* (19-9-1970). AGA, box D-863, file 1.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid; José Gómez Figueroa, *ABC* (1971). AGA, box D-863, file 1.

³⁴ R. Asumu Nsue, 'Gratitud al primer Piloto de la Guinea Ecuatorial y padre de la Nación Su Excelencia Macías Nguema', *Potopoto* (3-11-1969), 6. AGA, box D-472, file 1. Decalo points out that Macías Nguema adopted some '45-odd honorific titles'. Decalo, *Psychoses*, 51.

³⁵ Regarding this subject, Fisiy and Geschiere argue that the state 'has been invaded by African conceptions and forms of organization.' Fisiy & Geschiere, 'Witchcraft, violence and identity', 193.

³⁶ The term *nguemismo* or Nguemism refers to the family relation between the two authoritarian leaders who have ruled the country since its independence in 1968, Macías Nguema and Obiang Nguema. Ela Nchama, cited in Bolekia, *Aproximación a la historia*, 124.

³⁷ Bolekia, Decalo, Liniger-Goumaz and Nze Abuy.

³⁸ Bolekia, *Aproximación a la historia*, 124.

³⁹ Referring to this movement, an informant explains that they had more power than a captain. Another informant described how one of these groups arrived in his village

and destroyed the chapel, despite it had been previously closed down by the government. Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1; Evinayong 8.

⁴⁰ P. Ekeh, 'Social Anthropology and Two Contrasting Uses of Tribalism in Africa', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32 (1991), 672-73, 688-89.

⁴¹ Ibid, 688-89.

⁴² Ibid, 693.

⁴³ M. Liniger-Goumaz, *Guinea Ecuatorial: La democracia nguemista sin cambios* (Alcobendas, 2000), 47.

⁴⁴ Memorandum of the Bubi and Ndowe groups on the situation in Equatorial Guinea to Generalísimo Franco (May 1972). AGA, box D-472, file 1. Liniger-Goumaz, *Guinea Ecuatorial*, 21.

⁴⁵ According to Decalo, by 1979 there was not 'a single university graduate' left in the country. Decalo, *Psychoses*, 59.

⁴⁶ Personal interviews, Mikomseng 12, Ebibeyin 3.

⁴⁷ The ideology of this communist bloc styled party was everything but convincing. As a sign of his rejection of Spain and his search for external allies, Macías Nguema moved towards communism, the greatest enemy of Franco's government.

⁴⁸ Decalo, *Psychoses*, 54.

⁴⁹ Liniger-Goumaz, for example, claims that Macías Nguema's psychosis was confirmed by Spanish doctors before being elected. Liniger-Goumaz, *Guinea Ecuatorial*, 21; Decalo, *Psychoses*, 49, 51; Mitogo, *Guinea*, 42.

⁵⁰ Commission for the Economic Development of the Equatorial Region, Report on the Main Problems of the Río Muni and Fernando Po Provinces (6-11-1962). AGA, box D-479, file 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Pélissier, 'Spain's Discreet Decolonization', 525.

⁵³ R. de Cosío, 'Problemas que afectan a la estructura económica de la Guinea Ecuatorial', *África*, 271 (1964), 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 10.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 10; 'Spanish Equatorial Guinea', in *West Africa Annual* (London, 1966), 337.

⁵⁷ de Cosío, 'Problemas', 11.

⁵⁸ J. Gómez, 'Las ayudas a la Guinea Ecuatorial', *África*, 291 (1966), 144.

⁵⁹ Note attached to a report on the development plan (18-10-1967). AGA, box D-479, file 1. The commission of economic investors with interests in Equatorial Guinea, however, wrote a different report, claiming that it was in the interest of everybody to keep the current economic relations along with the duty protection between the two countries. Report on the Spain-Equatorial Guinea Economic Relationship (8-5-1968). AGA, box D-479, file 1.

⁶⁰ Decalo points out that the 1970 budget was the last one issued by Macías Nguema's government. Decalo, *Psychoses*, 55.

⁶¹ Ibid, 31.

⁶² Commission for the Economic Development of the Equatorial Region, Report on the Main Problems of the Río Muni and Fernando Po Provinces (6-11-1962). AGA, box D-479, file 1.

⁶³ Highlights of the President Macías Nguema's speech during his visit to the Sacriba-Fang village (Fernando Po), transcribed by the Spanish Embassy for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (3-11-1968). AGA, box D-472, file 1.

- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ 'Independencia de Guinea Ecuatorial', *África*, 323 (1968), 535.
- ⁶⁶ See note 26 above.
- ⁶⁷ Minister of Foreign Affairs to Vice-president Carrero Blanco (29-7-1971). AGA, box D-472, file 1.
- ⁶⁸ By the late 1950s, before the economic boom of the 1960s, Equatorial Guinea produced more than 200,000 tons of timber, more than 20,000 tons of cocoa, and more than 6,000 tons of coffee. Data on the economic production of Spanish Guinea (2-2-1959). AGA, box D-474.
- ⁶⁹ 'Equatorial Guinea', in *Africa Contemporary Record: Annual Survey and Documents, 1970-71*, B317.
- ⁷⁰ The rest of the agreement also guaranteed the annual purchase of 6,000 tons of coffee, 300,000 tons of timber, 4,000 tons of cassava, 2,000 tons of palm oil, etc. E. Buale, *El laberinto Guineano* (Madrid, 1989), 124-25.
- ⁷¹ Ibid.
- ⁷² According to Mitogo, the timber Spanish companies were later replaced by French companies. Mitogo, *Guinea*, 43.
- ⁷³ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 1, 2, 28.
- ⁷⁴ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1; Evinayong 4; Mikomeseng 1, 2, 6, 13, 28.
- ⁷⁵ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 2; Mikomeseng 7, 10, 14, 15.
- ⁷⁶ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 28.
- ⁷⁷ Report on the situation in Equatorial Guinea, summary of two articles from the *The Times* and *L'Unità* (13-11-1972). AGA, box D-472, file 1.
- ⁷⁸ Buale, *El laberinto*, 162.
- ⁷⁹ The average working day was twelve hours, and numerous civil servants and soldiers had to work on these plantations during half of their working day. Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1; Mikomeseng 11, 15.
- ⁸¹ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1; Mikomeseng 2, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14.
- ⁸² Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 1; Mikomeseng 8, 11.
- ⁸³ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 14; Decalo, *Psychoses*, 55.
- ⁸⁴ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 15.
- ⁸⁵ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 3; Mikomeseng 8; Decalo, *Psychoses*, 63.
- ⁸⁶ Personal interview, Ebibeyin 3.
- ⁸⁷ Personal interviews, Evinayong 4, 15; Mikomeseng 12, 13.
- ⁸⁸ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 3; Mikomeseng 14; Decalo, *Psychoses*, 63.
- ⁸⁹ Highlights of the President Macías Nguema's speech during his visit to the Sacriba-Fang village (Fernando Po), transcribed by the Spanish Embassy for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (3-11-1968). AGA, box D-472, file 1.
- ⁹⁰ Lonsdale, 'African Past', 133.
- ⁹¹ C. Esteva, 'Algunos caracteres del sistema de propiedad fang', *Étnica*, I (1971), 58; Pélissier, 'Spain's Discreet Decolonization', 524.
- ⁹² Report on the Autonomy Referendum (19-12-1963). AGA, box D-474.
- ⁹³ Vansina, *Paths*, 48.
- ⁹⁴ Report on the situation in Equatorial Guinea (1972). AGA, box, D-472, file 1.
- ⁹⁵ See for example, T. Ranger, 'Colonial and postcolonial identities', 280.
- ⁹⁶ Paul Houtondji quoted in Lonsdale, 'African Past', 133.
- ⁹⁷ Mitogo claims that Macías Nguema, 'outside his nationalist feelings' he 'never had any political belief'. Mitogo, *Guinea*, 42.

- ⁹⁸ Decalo, *Psychoses*, 51.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid, 51, 59.
- ¹⁰⁰ Novoa, *Guinea Ecuatorial*, 119; R. Nze Abuy, *Los cristianos ante la evolución política de la Guinea Ecuatorial: Carta Pastoral* (Bata, 1967), 17; *Independencia y Libertad: Carta Pastoral* (Bata, 1969), 8; *Familia y Matrimonio Fan* (Madrid, 1985), 75-76.
- ¹⁰¹ Lonsdale, 'African Past', 136.
- ¹⁰² Nze Abuy, *Exhortación Cuaresmal*, 4.
- ¹⁰³ T. Ranger, 'Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa', *African Studies Review* 29, 2 (1986), 12.
- ¹⁰⁴ Obiang Nguema, the President's nephew, was one of the few semi-qualified allies as he was a sergeant trained in a Spanish military academy.
- ¹⁰⁵ Lonsdale points how this strategy has ruined African economies given that 'scarce resources' were distributed 'according to a political rather than productive logic.'
- Lonsdale, 'African Past', 133.
- ¹⁰⁶ Decalo, *Psychoses*, 60.
- ¹⁰⁷ Memorandum of the Bubi and Ndowe groups on the situation in Equatorial Guinea to Generalísimo Franco (May 1972). AGA, box D-472, file 1.
- ¹⁰⁸ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 14.
- ¹⁰⁹ Personal interviews, Mikomeseng 14, 15, 17.
- ¹¹⁰ Informants believe that local authority disappeared for good during the 1970s. Personal interviews, Evinayong 8; Mikomeseng 1, 14.
- ¹¹¹ Rowlands & Warnier, 'Sorcery, Power and the Modern State', 118.
- ¹¹² Personal interviews, Evinayong 4; Mikomeseng 2, 6, 11.
- ¹¹³ According to *Jeune Afrique*, some 84 per cent of the population was Catholic in 1968. Translation of an article in *Jeune Afrique* (1-12-1968). AGA, box D-472, file 1.
- ¹¹⁴ A 1971 document shows that Equatorial Guinean officials clearly intended to make Claretians understand who the actual authority was, while reminding them that their influential days and past practices were long gone. Missionaries could now be expelled of the country if government officials desired so, as the case of Father Soler, who had to leave Equatorial Guinea after more than 45 years. Government Delegate to J.M. Soler (30-10-1971). Archivo General CMF, G-S-15/16; J.M. Soler to the Government Delegate, Miguel Eyegue Ntutumu (5-11-1971). Archivo General CMF, G-S-15/16
- ¹¹⁵ Decalo, *Psychoses*, 53.
- ¹¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁸ Personal interviews, Ebibeyin 23; Evinayong 8.
- ¹¹⁹ Nze Abuy, *Los cristianos*, 11.
- ¹²⁰ Ibid, 21.
- ¹²¹ Ibid, 10.
- ¹²² Archbishop of Bamenda, P. Verdzekov, quoted in Mbuy, *Understanding Witchcraft*, 14.
- ¹²³ Nze Abuy, *Los cristianos*, 10.
- ¹²⁴ Rowlands & Warnier, 'Sorcery, Power and the Modern State', 129-30.
- ¹²⁵ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 28.
- ¹²⁵ Ranger, 'Religious Movements', 2.
- ¹²⁶ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 28.

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- ¹²⁷ Fernández, 'Christian Acculturation', 252.
¹²⁸ Decalo, *Psychoses*, 52-53.
¹²⁹ Ibid, 53.
¹³⁰ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 12.
¹³¹ Personal interview, Mikomeseng 10.
¹³² Personal interview, Mikomeseng 17.
¹³³ Mve Bengomesama, *Tradiciones*, 184.
¹³⁴ Fernández, 'Christian Acculturation', 251-52.

Conclusion

Deep changes have taken place in Equatorial Guinea but few are aware, for that is indeed the nature of tradition. If one inquires, elders will admit that matters were not always run the way they are in the village, that the *ngengán* never used to be a simple diviner, or that, in fact, Fang was not always our identity. The younger generation ignores these things. They do not even question such matters, since they rightly believe that their tradition has always been the Fang tradition. Thus, Fang identity, the clan chief, the diviner healer, the monetary bridewealth, witchcraft as cause of any incident, government officials 'arbitrating' justice, economic power equally proportional to political power, the non-questioning of authority: they are all the Fang tradition. The new tradition, which resulted from the establishment of the series of political, administrative and economic structures that followed the Spanish conquest of Río Muni in the first quarter of the twentieth century, is a clear example of continuity in African history, as it was developed on the basis of the old Sanaga-Ogowe tradition. The strength of the tradition rests, though not exclusively, on the belief that Fang traditional structures have been handed over generation after generation since time immemorial, since the times of Afri Kara, the ancestor of those who say *ma dzó na* – the Fang people.

The loss of autonomy by the Sanaga-Ogowe was the highest price of colonial conquest. Until the 1920s, political communities lay within the narrow borders of the *mvók-e'bot*, which provided its members with protection without limiting their independence. The strength of egalitarian tendencies had allowed village communities to keep personal ambitions in check. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the expansion of European trade throughout the region brought about a series of social

and economic changes that resulted in growing instability. These transformations, however, took place within a context in which Sanaga-Ogowe communities were still in command, being able to carry out the necessary adjustments. The gradual accumulation of economic and political power in the hands of a few individuals was somehow counteracted by the combination of egalitarian tendencies and geographic mobility. Emergent leaders faced numerous difficulties due to the constant flow of village communities towards the coast, whose competition tended to reduce their power, at the same time as making it extremely hard to maintain large family groups under the control of a single leader. Certainly we should not overestimate the scale of European trade in the area, which, for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, did not cause major changes with regards to social and political structures. Gradual concentration of political and economic power during this period was far from being institutionalized.

European contact per se did not mean a sharp break in the history of the Sanaga-Ogowe, in spite of the transformations and instability resulting from it since the mid nineteenth century. Colonial conquest, however, had much more dramatic consequences in the history of the Sanaga-Ogowe as it removed communities' sovereignty and subsequently damaged their ability to deal with the series of transformations and instability that characterized the immediate precolonial period. In this respect, there is little doubt that the Spanish conquest of Río Muni interrupted the internal transformation process that was begun in the second half of the nineteenth century. From then on communities' responses would be curbed by the limits imposed by the state, a completely new institution in the history of the region and whose power found no match in local institutions. Ever since, people's actions and decisions have been, in many respects, a reaction to the series of policies imposed from the

government ranks. With the establishment of the state, Sanaga-Ogowe communities lost one of its most cherished values, the autonomy that had shaped its social features for some five centuries and had allowed the expansion of their tradition across a large area of western Equatorial Africa. Deprived of their autonomy, village communities were unable to face the challenges posed by the colonial state, which now targeted key principles of their social, political and cultural organization.

Autonomy, nonetheless, was such a strong value within Sanaga-Ogowe society that its influence has somehow survived until today. In fact, the development of the new tradition is a reflection of people's efforts to maintain or regain their autonomy. Both in the colony and in the postcolony, the state has remained as an illegitimate entity from which Equatorial Guinean society sees no representation. It is difficult to determine to what extent the state's illegitimacy is related to bad government – meaning that working for the benefit of a small social minority – or the pervasiveness of autonomy as a cultural and political principle. Throughout the twentieth century and up until today, Equatorial Guineans have waged a silent battle against the state, which sought to remove people's agency while imposing its unilateral policies. Thus, the colonial state tried to transform Africans in order to create a 'Hispanized' social model. Africans, on the other hand, tried to retain their agency by creating their own answers to the conditions imposed by colonial modernity. Whatever the final objective of the Spanish and the Fang was, the reality is that neither of them quite succeeded due to the clash of wills. The new tradition and the colonial modernity are in fact the outcome of such clash, as both were motivated and limited by each other's actions.

The existence of two socio-cultural models is perhaps the greatest failure of the colonial modernizing project. The nature of colonial domination lies behind the lack

of integration that characterizes Equatorial Guinean society today. The colonial state was above all the political tool for the economic benefit of a small sector of society. In maintaining such an illegitimate situation, it was required to impose a particular set of social, political and economic structures – the colonial model – while seeking to transform – modernize – African society in an effort to legitimize foreign domination. Modernization, however, was in conflict with economic exploitation, as it would ultimately bring Africans to the level of ‘civilization’ that justified European rule over the African population. For this purpose, the Spanish authorities, like the rest of their counterparts across the continent, devised an incomplete form of modernization – colonial modernity – that would allow the controlled transformation of Africans. This peculiar model of social organization, however, required the existence of ‘traditional’ structures so as to fill the gaps left by colonial modernity. Despite Equatorial Guineans having learnt to coexist with both social models, it seems evident that the effects of such coexistence are more negative than positive, as tradition and modernity keep hampering one another.

The development of new traditional socio-cultural structures did not result in the formation of a functional society in the fashion of its predecessor. The Sanaga-Ogoe organization, despite not being ideal, could at least respond effectively to most of the challenges that village communities faced on a day to day level. Fang society, however, found numerous limits to the development of adequate responses, as they had to fit within the limits imposed by the state. The clearest consequence of this has been the poor development of authority structures within modern Fang society. Most rural communities lack the necessary leadership to address all sorts of ordinary problems that the state chooses to ignore and which would be easily solved at local level had the necessary political structures be in place. The mere construction of a

rudimentary bridge to cross a stream separating a village from farmland may pose a serious difficulty in many villages across Equatorial Guinea. Under these circumstances, Fang society has increasingly relied on state institutions to mediate in all kind of matters, from witchcraft, to marital conflicts, to debt disputes, and so forth.



Photograph 42: One of the multiple watercourses that crisscross Río Muni

As pervasive as the colonial state was, it left some room for manoeuvre. This allowed some forms of political organization outside the official sphere, such as those behind the *e'Lat-Ayong* movement in the 1930s and 1940s and the incipient nationalist movement of the 1950s. Certainly, the development of party-styled politics in the 1960s and especially the arrival of independence had a much more negative effect on Fang political structures than many might have anticipated. As Macías Nguema's government lost its legitimacy, and helped by its intimate knowledge of traditional political organizations in rural areas, pressure was increased on all sorts of social associations. Although, under Obiang Nguema's regime, religious manifestations have been allowed to flourish, the pattern remains very much the same for other forms of association, which tend to be considered highly suspicious. A

traditional reluctance to develop organizations outside family limits combined with a climate of fear and repression has clearly undermined the ability of the Equatorial Guinean society to create the necessary level of association that modernity requires. One should not underestimate the role of fear alone as a political instrument in countries with underdeveloped civil societies like Equatorial Guinea.

Independence did not only show how superficial the Spanish modernizing project was, but more importantly that modernity, the colonial modernity that Africans came to know, was in no way viable within an independent nation. At the time of independence, Equatorial Guineans were not aware of this, and sought to perpetuate most of the basic structures left by the Spanish. Very soon, they realized that modernity was falling to pieces in the absence of the colonial masters. Macías Nguema had neither the human nor material resources to keep the system alive, but also he was an African himself trying to govern a system designed for foreign domination and exploitation on the basis of European cultural superiority. Under these circumstances and in the light of growing illegitimacy, it was necessary to find an alternative social and cultural model. Macías Nguema's regime resorted to the new tradition which was now sequestered to serve the interest of an autocratic regime. In doing so, traditional structures have been deeply undermined, as they have been manipulated from the state in order to legitimize and strengthen its position.

Today, the loss of Fang autonomy is more obvious than ever, as the ruling elite dictate the direction of traditional structures. Nonetheless, no one should suppose that the process of retraditionalization that Equatorial Guinea has experienced since 1968 has meant the total eradication of modernity. At an ideological level, colonial modernity legitimizes the existence of modern structures such as the state or even the national boundaries, and, at a material level, it provides the instruments to perpetuate

another form of 'colonial' government, that of a ruling elite over the majority of Equatorial Guineans. Very few seem to accept traditional structures as a viable alternative; rather, the new tradition is a contingency solution in times of crisis. For traditional structures to actually become effective and come to terms with the needs of a modern nation state, Equatorial Guinean society requires a much greater level of representation than it enjoys today. Historically speaking, the new tradition is a rather recent phenomenon with a very long way to go before evolving into the sort of socio-cultural model that is needed. As long as the state keeps acting as an illegitimate coercive apparatus, we cannot claim that the process of retraditionalization that we witness today is Africans' genuine response to the crisis of modernity.

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