



## The Magic Flute: How modern dances were introduced among Baga Sitem in Guinea in 1956

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**THE MAGIC FLUTE:**  
**HOW *MODERN* DANCES WERE INTRODUCED**  
**AMONG BAGA SITEM IN GUINEA IN 1956**

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## Abstract

*In 1956, le bal, i.e. new forms of French-inspired music and dance were introduced among the Baga Sitem of French Guinea at a time of global youth consciousness. At the time, the youths fell fascinated by the new instruments and bodily languages of le bal, but their elders, much more attached to local forms of music and ritual dance, did not want to accept the new one in the public sphere. Based on oral history, this article discusses the tension between youths and elders and proposes a generational and structural approach to the study of youth and modernity, suggesting that the tensions between youths and elders, and between new and old forms of popular culture may be much more ancient than normally assumed.*

**Keywords:** youth, popular culture, Guinea-Conacry, Baga, oral history

## Resumo

*Em 1956 novas formas de música e de dança de inspiração francesa, designadas le bal, foram introduzidas entre os Baga Sitem da Guiné Francesa, numa época de tomada de consciência global da juventude. Nessa altura, enquanto os jovens ficaram fascinados pelos novos instrumentos e linguagens corporais de le bal, os mais velhos, ligados a formas locais de música e dança ritual, não quiseram aceitar a nova expressão musical da esfera pública. Baseado na história oral, este artigo aborda a tensão entre os jovens e anciãos, e propõe uma abordagem geracional e estrutural para o estudo da juventude e modernidade, sugerindo que as tensões entre jovens e idosos, e entre as novas e velhas formas de cultura popular, podem ser muito mais antigas do que normalmente se supõe.*

**Palavras-chave:** juventude, cultura popular, Guiné-Conacry, Baga, história oral

*The ancients therefore were right in forbidding  
the flute to youths and freemen, although they had  
once allowed it*

Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 8

No matter how warmly I welcome the increasing body of literature on *modernity* that has revived African studies over the last twenty years and has brought youth to the centre of analysis, it also contains, I fear, a potentially negative effect.<sup>1</sup> Indeed it may give the wrong impression that only *today* has the opposition between *traditional* and *modern* things and forms of life become a social or cultural problem for Africans. In fact, however, the opposition between what is *new* and what is *old*, between what is learned from the elders and what is acquired from elsewhere, between what is appropriate and what is not appropriate for the education of the younger members of a community – all these oppositions are very old, probably as old as social systems themselves, in Africa and elsewhere. To give but one –very relevant– example, let me remind you of Book 8 of Aristotle's *Politics* (especially 1341a: 16-20), where our philosopher discusses which music instruments are to be accepted for the education of young people in the *polis* and which are not. He famously ends up with the total rejection of the flute (see epigraph), considered most inappropriate for the young people's edification and salutes its banning by the elders. It was not only in the 1960s that contestations on soundscapes and new forms of music became the bone of contention of the so called *generation game*!

In this short piece, however, I do not want to discuss either Ancient Greece or the hippy youth revolution of the 1960s. I want to offer for your consideration a brief account of some relatively short events that happened in the mid 1950s in the then colony of French Guinea in West Africa. It was short, but in many ways it was an overture to very huge changes that the Baga Sitem farming communities of coastal Guinea were to undergo in the following years, especially after 1957, when a rebellious young cohort initiated an iconoclastic movement that transformed the religious landscape and that has already been the subject of my major study on the region (Sarró, 2009). In writing this piece, I wanted to humbly follow the pioneering work of Phyllis Martin on the social reception of new forms of leisure among colonized youths in French-Speaking Africa (Martin, 1995), a topic that, despite her original effort, has remained largely neglected by Africanist scholars.

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough review of the literature on youth and modernity in Africa, see Bordonaro (2006) and Argenti (2007: 1-32).

Much as elsewhere in the world, the 1950s in French Guinea witnessed a rise in young people's awareness of their rights<sup>2</sup>. This awareness was linked first and foremost to the political movement *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA) and especially to its youth and female wings. The anti-colonial RDA had been created in Bamako in 1946, after the Brazzaville Conference of 1944, and was soon to spread a new social and political awareness among French West and Central Africans, now to be officially considered *citizens* and no longer just *subjects* of the French Empire. In West Africa, as has been discussed by some authors (Morgenthau, 1964; Schmidt, 2005), the RDA found an alliance with Islam, which became a medium through which RDA ideals and messages spread from village to village. However, it is interesting to note that some young people were in fact *empowered* by the Catholic youth movements. New forms of leisure introduced by Catholic missions gave them a space in which to express their dissatisfaction with a status quo that was simultaneously colonial and customary. Among the Baga of coastal Guinea, in particular, the alliance between *custom* and French-imposed traditional chieftaincy was so strong that young people could not fight one without fighting the other. They had to get rid of *custom*, and *custom* (*kutum*, in their language) was a hybrid construct of colonial and traditional agencies working together.

In 1956, at the invitation of the Catholic Church, the layman Maurice Humbert came to Guinea to organise a local branch of the international youth organisation *Jeunesse Agricole Catholique* (JAC), one of the wings of Catholic Action – an intervention which contributed to the rise of a whole new popular culture<sup>3</sup>. In some narratives I obtained in the Baga Sitem villages of Katako, Mare and Bukor, the young Christians of the time appeared as quasi-heroic nonconformists willing to undermine, through activities organised by the JAC, the very foundations of the age-based status quo. Their new forms of dance, music, instruments, dress and body language challenged the old people's rules and regulations. Although it became apparent that the JAC and the *Jeunesse du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (JRDA) were often at variance because of their different religious options (Christianity in the case of the JAC, Islam in the JRDA), it is also true that they sometimes worked together. They certainly shared an enthusiasm for the *soirées dansantes* (dance parties) based on new forms of dances Baga Sitem speakers re-

<sup>2</sup> For youth awareness in Guinea in the 1950s and its connections with global trends, see Goerg (1989). The rise of a global awareness of youth as an emerging social force in the 1950s is the topic of a very penetrating essay by the Galician psychoanalyst Juan Rof Carballo (Rof Carballo, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> My information on Maurice Humbert is based on oral history among Guinean Catholics. Father Vieira mentions him, as well as the JAC and other Catholic youth movements, in the second volume of his history of the Guinean Church (Vieira, 1999: 398, 489, 526). Literature on the JAC in Africa is, unfortunately, very scarce.

ferred to as *bal* (from French *le bal*, the ball) and saw as something completely different from the *kipise kabaka* (Baga dance). *Soirées* were organised by the JAC or the JRDA or as joint ventures.

These new dance forms contained elements that were very problematic from a male elder's point of view. Firstly, boys and girls danced in physical proximity and contact. This was a provocation to the male elders and, as some interviewees told me, aroused their jealousy. In such a gerontocratic society, elderly men considered that young women were for them, not for their juniors. In the past, young men had to wait many years before being able to marry and they needed their elders to help them arrange the marriage and collect all the marriage payments. In the 1950s there was already a tendency for bridewealth to be paid with money and male elders were more and more excluded when youths made their choices. This was part of the general *mediation crisis* that appears to have articulated Baga history over the last hundred years and of which I give other examples in my above-mentioned study.

Secondly, the new dances included new musical instruments and in particular the use of the flute, a sound that infuriated the elders. At the time, the youths did not know *why* the flute was so problematic. In my interviews with Baga elders in Guinea between 1993 and 2003, some of them told me that, to an elder's ear, the sound of the flute echoed far too closely the awful howling of *amanco ngopong*, the main spirit of Baga cosmology, in the elders' wood. According to this interpretation, by playing flutes in the village, the young men were recreating in a public acoustic environment a sound that had so far belonged to the wood and the elders. In West Africa, and not only among the Baga, there is a common association of flutes with initiation in the sacred wood. In some secret societies, initiates have to communicate with each other either with flutes or sometimes by whistling to one another, but in any case *not* through normal speech. Interestingly enough, in the above-mentioned Book Eight of his *Politics*, Aristotle makes the explicit structural opposition between flutes and speech and indicates that one of the problems of flutes is that you cannot use your voice *and* play at the same time. He seems inclined to claim that flutes must be banned from the *polis* because they do not help improve intelligence and virtue, which in my opinion may be linked to this deterring people from speaking. The reasons why flutes are so often banned from political and moral communities may indeed have to do with this opposition between the whistling sound of flutes and the articulate sound of human speech, since speech is foundational of any political order, be it in Greece, West Africa or elsewhere. Whatever the reason may be, the sound of flutes has very often been associated with magic and enchantment across cultures. One only needs to think

of Pan's flute in Greece, Mozart's opera based on Masonic initiations, the eerie child-luring technique of Hamelin's pied piper in Grimm's story, North African snake charmers, African initiations and surely many other avatars of the fascinating, universal and charming theme of the *magic flute*...

But I am digressing from my main narrative. In early 1956, a council of elders in Bukor decided to ban the *bal*, whether it was organised by the JAC, the JRDA or – as it frequently was – by both. They announced that whoever played a new instrument would invite deadly consequences. If it was a flute, the player would find his lips stuck to the flute forever. If it was an accordion, he would find his hands glued to the instrument forever. If it was a drum, he would find his fingers stuck to the drumsticks forever, and so on. More alarmingly, all boys and girls found dancing together would be stuck to each other forever.

According to the accounts I obtained in the Baga Sitem village of Bukor, the young people asked the elders to lift the ban and let them get on with their *bal*.<sup>4</sup> Elders said they would, provided the young people gave them enough palm wine. This was of course one way of restoring the waning status quo, young people making huge quantities of palm wine for their betters. However, instead of making the palm wine, the young people went to the trading centre of Bintimodia and bought a container of red wine. They took it to the elders waiting for them in a wood that young people were forbidden to enter. The elderly men took the wine into the wood. The young men waited outside. And they waited and waited...

Some hours later, a man who was acting as mediator between the two groups came out of the wood and told the young men that the elders inside were very angry. "They claim you have insulted the «old man» by saying he has red eyes." The *old man* (*wutem*) was a common euphemism for the high spirit *amanco ngopong*. It was a metaphor that encapsulated the seniority principle ruling Baga Sitem society. Men might be old and some older than others, but the spirit regulating this age system was older than any of them. The elders, I suppose, were offended that the youths had not made the wine themselves, but bought it in a shop instead – thus evading the painstaking labour the elders were seeking to exact.

For the youths, or at least for the elders who told me the story in 2001 and 2003, this was the very last straw. Obviously the elders had drunk the wine, found the excuse of it being *red* and not *white* and had not granted permission for the dance party. Fearing that the elders would try to steal their instruments, they took them to the Catholic mission, at the time the only religious space that

<sup>4</sup> This case study on the introduction of the *bal* in Bukor is a summary of several conversations I had with villagers in Bukor in 2001 and 2003. While it is not a verbatim reproduction, I have tried to present the material in an informal style rather closer to the narratives I gathered than to an academic analysis of them.

represented a clear-cut alternative to the elders' wood. The elders sent two men to steal the instruments from the youngsters, but they did not dare do so. Every time they tried to take the instruments, the young men would make a similar threat. "If you touch these instruments, your fingers will stick to them for ever" or "If you take these instruments away, you will know who we are". The two old men were afraid and went back to the wood. Why old men should fear the threats of young men will be revealed later. In the end, other elders came to help, and together they all managed to steal the instruments from the Catholic mission and take them to Dalence, an open bush that belonged to the elders, but was not as *secret* as others in the village. The elders placed the instruments there together with a *tumbu* mask that, so they thought, would keep an eye on them.

Our brave youngsters, however, did not consider the matter finished. At night, they prepared their own mask and, thus empowered, went to Dalence to get their instruments back. The next day, they organised a big party. The team of youths went from one ward to another announcing the event. They visited the whole village, containing six wards. In the ward of Mambre, young Emmanuel, who had braided his hair to challenge his elders, told his grandfather, Paka, "Granddad, it is me. Today we young people are going to dance the *bal*. If you want to hand me over to your friends, do it, but I am in the *bal* group." The elderly Paka granted his grandson due permission. Then they went to Morcok. A young man called Jean told his grandfather Sékou Moroma (today a well-remembered ritual specialist of the late colonial times), "Grandfather, it is me, Jean. This is a revolt. We are going to continue the *bal*. If you want to turn me in to your friends, do it, but the *bal* is going to continue." Sékou Moroma said that, as far as he was concerned, the young men could dance the *bal*. The young men then went to Motiya. Pierre Demba was from that ward. He talked to his grandfather Ali Nene, but before he could talk to him, the old man said, "No need for you to bother me with this. Come on, go on and dance your *bal*." In Sonta, the young Omar was getting ready to speak to one his elders, but before he could begin the old man came out of the house with a stick to beat him. He did not succeed. The young men headed him off and started to throw sand at him while shouting *aparen esere, aparen esere* ("the old man is a witch, the old man is a witch"), forcing him to retreat into his house. Then the young men went to Kapinta, and young Kande talked to his grandfather in much the same way as the others had done, with the same result. He obtained permission for the *bal*.

In general, as we can see, it was a *teaming up* strategy, as if they wanted to show the elders that *unity is strength*. In the exchange, there was direct emotional blackmail. Each young man talked to his own grandfather, convincing him that if



witchcraft reprisals were attempted against the youths, he, his dear grandchild, would die as well. In effect, they were emphasising their readiness to sacrifice themselves for the cause – and so consolidating the unity of youth while undermining the solidarity of the grandfathers.

They went back to Motiya, the most central ward in Bukor, where the dance party was to take place. This was in itself a violent affront to their elders' religious landscape, albeit a subtle one. Motiya, we read in Bangoura's dissertation (1972: 71–2), was not only the geographical centre of Bukor, but also its historical centre, the very spot where the first contract with the spirit *abong*, owner of the place, had been signed by Bukor's first human arrivals. As a memorial of this contract, right in the middle of the ward there used to be an African fan palm (*Borassus aethiopicus*) of special significance to the elders. By holding their party in that place, the young people were appropriating not only a *noise* (accentuated by the sound of the flute), but also a very significant *place* in the elders' *spiritscape*. The African fan palm, incidentally, was later to be cut down by the iconoclastic youths a bit later, in 1957.

It was late afternoon, and the young people were getting ready to start the *bal*. Because the *bal* was danced one couple at a time, it was a brother and sister who opened it. "Look, granddad", said the brave grandson, "I am dancing with my sister; if you want us to be glued to each other forever, do it now." Nothing happened. The young couple danced their *morceau* and after them other couples came out to the dance floor. In this way, today remembered in the form of a semi-incestuous mythic beginning, the youngsters made their elders understand that times were changing and that *bals* and *soirées* were being introduced among them. A short time after this revolt in Bukor, the young people of the neighbouring village of Kufen, in Canton Baga, did more or less the same thing and, encouraged by their age mates in Bukor, introduced the *bal* in their village too. These were big changes, yet no more than a prelude to even bigger ones.

In this narrative on the *bal*, no matter how much it may have been exaggerated in its transit to us, we find a series of elements that may help us to understand the changes taking place at the end of the colonial period. Older men appeared to be losing control of the *patriarchal* status quo. Young women did not belong to them any more; new musical instruments appeared that challenged notions of power, bringing to the village the sound of the wood; and, as if all this *modern* soundscape were not enough, men now danced with their own sisters! How on earth could all this happen?

My explanation is twofold. In the first place, challenging gerontocracy was not something necessarily new in the region. I do not know of any youth re-

volt among the Baga Sitem in earlier colonial times, and certainly not in the pre-French period. Yet there are sound reasons to suspect that, as with many other African societies, accumulation of power by male elders *could* be challenged by younger strata of the population from time to time, as Michael McGovern has demonstrated in his study on the political culture of the Upper Guinea forest societies (2004). Here I should answer the question asked earlier: why were some elders afraid of the young people's threats? The answer lies in the fact that, according to notions of personhood prevalent in the whole Guinean region and probably beyond, some young people have more mystical power than elders. Elders may acquire mystical powers with age – they may be initiated, they may even buy membership of some cults – but some people are simply *born* with powers, and these people become potentially dangerous, even to older men. This is what was going on in that group of youngsters. Some of the young men sitting next to the instruments at the Catholic mission of Bukor were regarded as innately powerful.

In the second place, the power of youth in the late 1950s came from certain organised sources and not only from inherited notions of power and personhood. Youths, whether Muslim or Christian, whether belonging to the JAC or to the JRDA, were actually encouraged to disobey, to antagonise their elders. Obviously, having conducted my fieldwork in the 1990s and 2000s, I could never interview anyone who had been an elder in the 1950s; but I could imagine that they found themselves living in a very strange world. “Bukor's *alipne* [initiated elders] were worn out”, old Charles told me in 2001. Indeed they were. Young men outnumbered them; they had the support of women; they could count on the support of new political institutions; new religions appeared that encouraged them to abrogate their ritual obligations; and in their fight against the power of ritual elders, they counted on the support of strangers, too. Elders tried to hang on to their power as much as they could, but to no avail. All the young people's religious and political agitation was creating ideal conditions in which a decisive agent of change might get a grip and cause an even bigger commotion. Early in 1956, this decisive element was embodied in a charismatic Malinké preacher just a few miles away across the mangroves from Bukor. His name was Asekou Sayon. He was an anti-witchcraft specialist and a Muslim converter who, with the support of the RDA, reached the village of Bukor in September 1957, starting an iconoclastic religious movement among dissatisfied Baga Sitem youths that was to change the history of the region and of the whole Guinean territory, which became an independent *modern* nation in 1957 – and a *highly modernist* one at that, if we are to follow James Scott characterisation of this kind of socialist state that

attempted to create a perfect society through modernizing schemes (Scott, 1998). Yet this state-making effort and the way Asekou Sayon's movement paved the way for it, is another story and has been fully recounted elsewhere (Sarró, 2009). My objective in this paper is another one. As a long tradition going back to Max Weber has taught us, social scientists should not study "why" events *happen*, but "how" they become *meaningful*. What are the conditions of possibility and plausibility for such a mysterious and inexplicable thing as *charisma* to become a social fact. What I set out to show in this paper is that for such a disruptive event as the unexpected arrival of Sayon among the Baga Sitem to become meaningful and for his charisma to be fully effective you needed an accumulation of dissatisfactions and frustrations such as the ones this narrative unearths, as well as young people that were already finding their own ways to contest the power of their tyrannical elders. There were some confrontations between Catholic and Muslim youths about the reception of Sayon and about the interpretation of his actions and words, but most of them followed him – even if they were Christian and not Muslim – because above the religious differences between them they all felt that Sayon was a holy man who came to put an end to old things and bring about a new order and a fascinating *modernity*. In this respect, I think, they were not that different from the young people of today.

## Coda

Pierre Demba, one of our main interlocutors in the gathering of these oral accounts in the village of Bukor, eventually became a very good musician. In independent Republic of Guinea, i.e. as from 1958, he even got to play saxophone in the famous group *Les Ballets Africains*, a national folkloric troupe sponsored by the Guinean Party-State. Yet, on one occasion, in 1966, when Pierre Demba was about to leave the country to travel to the USA to perform with *Les Ballets Africains* on one of their tours, he suddenly and quite mystically felt that the elders of the village were calling him and was afraid to travel. He cancelled his trip and in fact gave up music altogether and went back to the village, where he became a farmer and a Catholic catechist. He never played the flute, horn or saxophone again. When I met him in 2001 he was a rather sad old man, often getting infuriated with the very noisy amplifiers recently introduced by the young *animateurs* (a category of semi-nomad DJs. who go from village to village, especially during the school holiday months playing hip-hop music with electric amplifiers and huge speakers). Demba, who was instrumental in introducing modernity in his village fifty years ago, does not understand this new form of modernity and becomes as

angry at it as the old men in 1956 were at him. I do not blame him. Unlike *tradition*, which is immediately recognizable as being valuable, the condition of modernity is such that you have to let it rest for fifty years before assessing its values. But then again, do you accept it because it was *new* fifty years before, or because it has become *traditional* ever since? I suppose nothing would look more *traditional* to me today than the dances of the *bal* as they were performed by Baga Sitem youths in 1956... Such is the wonderful dialectic between tradition and modernity, between enchantment and disenchantment, between flute banning and flute playing. In his novel *The Fire of Origins*, Congolese writer Emanuel Dongala tells us that the charm of young people is that “they give new meanings even to old things”. He might as well have added that the charm of the elderly is that they, too, know how to give *old* meanings to *new* things. Maybe the problem with much of the current literature on youth is that its authors, unlike those who, almost a hundred years ago, wrote about “the problem of generations” (Mannheim, 1927) fail to acknowledge that no matter how we define the category of *youth*, young people never exist in a vacuum, but always in interaction with other, often *older*, people. There is no such thing as *modernity*, but an endless genealogy of modernities and traditions, negotiations, rejections and interactions of age groups. There has always been the charm of youth... and the charm of the elders too. If you do not believe me, ask Pierre Demba.

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