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Jeremy Rich

Cruel Guards and Anxious Chiefs

Fang Masculinities and State Power
in the Gabon Estuary, 1920-1945*

During a research visit to the Gabon Estuary in the spring of 2000, I heard a harrowing story first told to me by an elderly man named Nzong Mba [no relation to Léon]¹. He lived in the small village of Nzamaligue, a community of several dozen Fang-speaking people located perhaps 50 miles from the Gabonese capital of Libreville. Before Mba would tell the tale, he emphatically demanded that I recorded it. After the microphone was turned on, he spoke of the insults that elders in his family had endured at the hands of colonial guards. According to Mba, two brothers of his grandfather were chosen by the local village chief to go fulfill the annual two weeks of forced labor that the French government required of most rural Gabonese men before 1945. The older of the two men had no interest in putting forth any effort. Annoyed, some African guards commanded the younger brother to hit his elder. The younger man made a glancing blow out of respect for his sibling's age, but the other brother struck back more forcefully. At this point, the guards reportedly said, "You should hit him harder! Don't show any mercy, [because] you have the muscles to hit [the older brother] hard". The younger brother had no choice but to follow orders. Nzong Mba then lamented how cruel colonial rule had been to Fang people.

It would be easy to view this story as yet another example of the endless litany of indignities that rural Africans faced under colonial rule. However,

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1. Interview, Nzong Mba and Enengba Enengbe Julienne, Nzamaligue-Donguila road, March 22, 2000.

it also is a story that reflects past and present concerns of rural men in the aftermath of European conquest. Scholars have begun to consider how masculinities underwent extraordinary shifts in the wake of colonial invasions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the Sokoto Caliphate to the Chikunda slave soldiers of Mozambique, men who had prided themselves on their ability to make war and defend their family honor faced serious difficulties (Gewald 1999: 192-230; Isaacman 2004: 281-321; Kreike 2004: 35-80; Giblin 2005: 23-74; Iliffe 2005: 183-226). Fang men in the coastal Estuary province had once considered skill in hunting and battle as ways of performing ideals of adult manhood. How these men envisioned masculinity and honor in the new era of colonial state authority that came between 1920 and 1945 will be a central theme of this essay. Following recent work on African masculinities, I follow Lisa Lindsay and Stephan Miescher (2003: 4) in highlighting varied notions of manhood and honor in colonial Africa that uneasily coexisted with one another, rather than contending one particular form of honor or manhood dominated in Fang communities. Fang men had a wide variety of influences and career paths to choose from missionary education to support for syncretic bwiti religious movements to the growing timber industry. They also had to cope with new efforts to remake Gabonese families through the institution of customary courts.

This study offers insights for the wider literature on African masculinities as well by contrasting examples of successful and unsuccessful efforts by men to build prestige and influence over women. In much of the recent work on masculinity in colonial Africa, authors have examined men who had entered occupations and developed skills that allowed them to negotiate effectively with colonial authorities. Soldiers, men educated by missionaries, wage laborers, and chiefs all developed notions of manhood that drew from their elevated position (Sunseri 1997: 235-259; Allman & Tashjian 2000: 169-183; Miescher & Lindsay 2003; Peterson 2004; Miescher 2005). The concerns of rural men disenfranchised by colonial policies and new economic changes rarely appear in the new literature on African masculinity, especially in the immediate wake of conquest. Dorothy Hodgson and Sheryl McCurdy's collection of essays on "wayward women" noted a widespread sense among men in colonial Africa that their controls over marriages were imperiled, but only Margot Lovett's selection (2001: 47-66) indicates how rural men outside the privileged class of chiefs felt threatened by changing state and private intrusions on marriage practices. Only a few historians have sought to examine those who felt disenfranchised in rural areas during the initial period of conquest and its aftermath. In all the celebration of male and female agency in colonial Africa, one ought not to forget the humiliations that rural men struggled with.

The varied reactions of Fang men to the new colonial order are still only barely understood. In the end of colonial rule, Georges Balandier (1957) and James Fernandez (1982) discussed how the rise of bwiti religious

movements expressed concerns among Fang people to the disorienting effects of colonization and hinted at its relation to gender tensions. Rachel Jean-Baptiste's recently completed thesis (2005), offers insights on urban Fang masculinities in the colonial era. She explores how some Fang women took advantage of courts to gain autonomy from husbands, and notes how government concerns about "traditional" family structure created both opportunities and challenges for Fang men. This essay will supplement her discussion through looking at varied constructions of Fang masculinity in ways outside of marriage and customary law. In particular, how different Fang men envisioned themselves and the perceived threats to their manhood will be under review here. Florence Bernault (2003: 187) has recently pointed out, "Tout au long de la période coloniale et post-coloniale, les Fang sont donc restés les grands perdants de l'État moderne au Gabon, un État qui n'a eut cesse de brider leur influence". Elsewhere, she has argued that Europeans and Gabonese anxieties over occult forces derived their force from the sense of dispossession and unbridled violence that came as part of the new colonial order (*ibid.* 2006: 238-239). These fears also entered into gendered discussions of the impact of state power on rural Fang men. However, not all made out as poorly as Nzong Mba's unfortunate kin, even as they drew from stories that highlighted male powerlessness. Office work, mission education and employment, the timber industry, and especially political offices serving the colonial state offered opportunities for a minority of Fang men.

This essay will examine different ways that Fang men commented on the impact of the colonial government upon indigenous notions of masculinity, as well as several cases where privileged Fang men harnessed the state bureaucracy to construct new notions of male leadership. I first review the many economic and political changes that swept through the Estuary region during and after World War I. The onslaught of the war and the famines that came in its wake destabilized local understandings of masculinity, as did the increased ability of French administrators to reorder political hierarchies by instituting state-appointed chiefs who governed over territorial districts rather than over clans. The sudden growth of timber concessions in the early 1920s also led to new challenges and options for Fang men. How Estuary Fang men envisioned these changes and their effect on masculinities are then reviewed through material drawn from oral testimony, missionary writings, and government correspondence. I finally discuss how state-appointed chiefs Félicien Endame Ndong and Léon Mba (later the first president of independent Gabon) negotiated with the colonial government and rural Fang male anxieties in the political careers. Both men challenged in different ways earlier understandings of seniority and success among Fang men, yet both appealed to a common set of ideas about prestige in the interwar era. These certainly do not exhaust the ways one can examine changing Fang masculinities in Gabon, but they do provide opportunities for starting points to exploration innovations and continuities.

Fang Masculinities and Colonial Changes in the Gabon Estuary, ca. 1870-1945

French dominance over the Gabon Estuary did not come until after the end of the First World War, even if the *tricolore* had flown at Libreville since the early 1840s (Sautter 1967; Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972; Austen & Headrick 1983: 27-94; Cinnamon 1998; Gray 2002; Metegue N'nah 2006). Prior to 1914, the Gabon Estuary region was a chaotic place where no centralized authority held sway. Mpongwe traders living on the shore of the Estuary and its tributary rivers purchased ivory from Fang men migrating into the region from northern Gabon and captives from southern Gabon (Patterson 1975; Bucher 1977; M'Bokolo 1981; Ratanga-Atoz 2000: 43-91). Fang-speaking clans entered the Gabon Estuary and supplanted Séké and Mpongwe communities who had long lived in the region. Clan leaders fought against other villages to obtain access to commercial links and to obtain dependents. French authorities often faced armed resistance to their attempts to collect taxes.

The ability of a man to make war was a key component to adult Estuary Fang masculinities until 1914. Protestant missionaries were appalled by the culture of violence that they encountered in the Estuary at the turn of the twentieth century. Clan battles revolved around conflicts over women who had been abducted by members of opposing clans, or by married women who fled one clan for another². As one elderly man in Kango said in 2004, "Clan wars were ways a man could prove himself"³. However, war was only one means that men employed to build prestige. Producing wealth for marriage also was a crucial way for individuals to receive respect as adult men.

Obtaining merchandise through trade that could be exchanged for wives was another important element of Fang masculinity. Capturing and killing animals was another practice where men could show off their ability and acquire access to trade goods (Ratanga-Atoz 2000: 253; Aubame 2002: 229-233)⁴. The search for game involved supernatural knowledge and command of a wide range of trapping and hunting techniques. Goods exchanged for ivory in Libreville then could be exchanged as bridewealth. The ability to kill animals was not only a matter a profit. Elephants and other wild game scoured Estuary Fang villages by trampling and consuming banana trees and manioc fields. Finally, meat could be distributed for marriage, funeral, and other ceremonies as a sign of wealth. Another way to obtain goods for bridewealth was to collect wild rubber for exchange (Fernandez 1982: 418-419).

2. Interviews, Ndong Nguema Antoine, Nzeng Ayong, Libreville, September 6, 2000; Abone Ndong Pierre-Marie, Ntoun, September 20, 2000; Aboghe Obiang Seraphine, Akok, October 28, 2000.

3. Interview, Ndoutoume Nkobe Justin, Kango, August 13, 2004.

4. Interviews, Evoung Ndong Pierre Celestin, Plaine Niger, Libreville, September 3, 2000; Ntoutoume Medoua Joseph, Ntoun, September 23, 2000; Mba Beyeghe Charles, Akok, October 28, 2000.

Available sources from male informants and colonial correspondence on Fang men tend to downplay female agency in Fang communities. Women often were presented as submissive victims of male oppression. Catholic and Protestant missionaries described how Fang men chained their wives and regularly assaulted female family members. Even though these accounts express the gender conventions of their authors, there can be little doubt attacks on women were commonplace. Wives accused of witchcraft and adultery were beaten and tied to logs by husbands and angry kin (Milligan 1908: 228-229, 296-299). Fang male informants in the 1950s lamented to anthropologist James Fernandez (1982: 152-158) how women before the colonial period had obeyed their husbands without question. However, women did challenge husbands and older male relatives, especially by fleeing spouses and seeking other male partners (Jean-Baptiste 2005: 70-77). One could well argue the use of brute force by men to intimidate Fang women only highlighted the precariousness of male authority.

Decisions within villages were settled by meetings of men and male power associations. Each Fang village had an *abeng*, a large building designed as the meeting space for men alone, and they usually served as the place for discussion regarding quarrels. Clan wars and other troubles often were settled by agreements to exchange goods, but descriptions of how these negotiations operated are few and far between. Injured parties often could demand trade goods for infractions such as adultery. A father in the Estuary village of Ebèl in 1915 lamented to a priest that his son was wasting his trade goods to pay fines handed out for his adulterous affairs⁵. Other collective groups might uphold an individual's honor. The all-male *ngil* male masked power association was an institution common in Fang villages. They ferreted out suspects believed to have used supernatural forces to harm others, and held public dance ceremonies to expose and punish wrongdoers. One such group held a dance to discover who had supposedly used mystical forces to kill one man's daughter in the Estuary village of Alum in 1919⁶. Adult men also kept *bieri*, reliquaries made of the skulls of deceased relatives that allowed individuals to communicate with the dead and turn to them for assistance in times of war and discord (Fernandez 1982: 253-266).

The relative independence of Estuary Fang people collapsed in World War I, when French forces launched an invasion of the German colony of Kamerun⁷. Forcible recruitment of soldiers and porters dragged men out

5. Donguila Parish Archives, Donguila, Gabon [DPA], Carnet de voyages, "Voyage Bilagone, Lezé, Igume, Ava", Ebèl village entry, October 4-16, 1915.

6. DPA, Carnet de voyages, "Asango", Alum village entry, April 3, 1919.

7. On World War I in Gabon, see Archives nationales du Gabon [ANG] 2Dj(IV)5 Fonds de Medouneu, Rapports politiques 1915-1919, Chief sub. Médégue Charbonnier to Chief. circ. Estuaire, April 30, 1918 (MOUÉLÉ 1984: 273-274, 299-303, 320; DUBOIS 1985).

of their villages. Fang people fled in the bush or across the colonial border into Spanish Guinea. Skirmishes broke out among different Fang clans in the confusion, as did scattered attacks against colonial troops. Bishop of Libreville Louis Martrou fulminated against the catastrophic results of state policies by noting, "It is slavery on behalf of the government. By hook or by crook, one must collect 10 francs per person from natives who have nothing to portage at any moment, arbitrary forced labor, months of collecting rubber [...]"⁸. John Cinnamon (1998: 348-358) has argued that the decline of trade goods during the war interrupted bridewealth practices and undermined the power of Fang big men to support dependents. Scattered by fighting and unable to pay for expensive gunpowder and ammunition, Fang villagers were helpless to stop elephant herds from tearing apart their fields⁹. Famine and the influenza epidemic took hold throughout much of Gabon, including the Estuary area, by late 1918 (Rich 2007a).

The end of the war had even more dire consequences for Fang villagers. The French government helped European entrepreneurs establish timber firms that exported *okoumé* wood to Europe. Estuary Fang preferred to work on their own, as they already had sold timber independently until the French made those wishing to sell *okoumé* pay exorbitant fees for permits in the early 1920s (de Dravo 1979; Rich 2007b). To offset the thin population of the region, the colonial administration forced thousands of men from southern and northern Gabon to work in the Estuary camps. The flood of labor into the region led to severe hardship. Rural households already shaken by famine, war, and disease could not cope with the voracious appetite of camps for food. Starvation haunted Estuary villages for much of the 1920s.

The French colonial state expanded its ability to control Fang communities. With a stronger government, extracting taxes and labor proved to be a much easier task. The government appointed chiefs (*chefs de canton*) to control groups of villages. Since villagers were usually governed by a council of men and members of one clan would not obey another, this system required the government to use force to make Fang villagers obey their new leaders, much as among the Beti of Cameroon (Guyer 1978: 577-597). This system was a radical innovation among clans divided into small and widely dispersed settlements. The French state in Gabon reordered ethnic identities and promoted a new class of middlemen to collect information on the size and nature of African collectivities. Guards gave administrators the muscle required to enforce their attempts to remake local society.

8. Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, Chevilly Larue, France [ACHS] Boîte 4J1.4b, Correspondance Gabon 1891-1920, Lettres 1910-1920, Bishop Martrou to Très Révérend Père, July 11, 1916.

9. ANG Carton 29, Cultures, Guibet to Chefs des subdivisions de la circonscription de l'Estuaire-Como, January 10, 1919; ANG 29 Cultures, Guibet to Thomann, April 12, 1919.

Chiefs, guards, and the new economy altered the options and expectations of men and women. Bridewealth payments rose in the 1920s¹⁰. Fang big men, especially chiefs supplying timber camps with food and the colonial government with revenue, manipulated their position to obtain wives and male clients. Fang husbands regularly accused chiefs of demanding bribes and favoring women in disputes over bridewealth¹¹. Women fled marriages to seek out new opportunities in Libreville or at the Catholic mission of Donguila. The end of clan warfare also altered relations between men and women. Unhappy wives no longer could take advantage of fighting to flee husbands, while younger men could no longer avoid paying bridewealth by abducting women from enemy settlements.

In this new climate, colonial authorities and their African auxiliaries could impose their will on Fang villagers in ways unimaginable before 1914. Older forms of male social advancement through obtaining dependents by raids vanished, and the fluid spatial organization of communities became more fixed. Government employees became the sole group of Africans able to overtly use force against others without fear of punishment. Chiefs allowed for more concerted surveillance by the state in scattered villages that had been only nominally under European rule before 1914. Ordinary farmers had little ability to resist the call to work in *corvées*. Within this new order, guards acted as an influential set of intermediaries who enforced state decrees and pocketed benefits in the process, much to the dismay of villagers. Such maneuvers posed challenges to hierarchies of order and masculinity.

“But where were you going to talk about it?”:

Fang Narratives of Powerlessness, Masculinity, and the Colonial State

One point is quite clear from oral interviews, missionary letters, and administrative correspondence: Estuary Fang people despised guards. Fang informants told Catholic missionaries that guards were raiding villages and molesting female prisoners in 1911¹². Several years later, farmers refused to supply the remote administrative post of Médégué in retaliation for the

10. Société de Missions évangéliques Archives (SMEA), SME, Correspondance Gabon Fiche 2642, Edouard Panchaud to Directeur SME, November 4, 1928; ACHS Boîte 4J1.6b Divers Gabon 1920-1949, Visites, Father Joseph Soul, “Compte Rendu St. Paul de Donguila”, December 17-23, 1928.

11. ANSOM 5D61, Dossier Abogho Nze, “Jugement du tribunal indigène de la circonscription de l’Estuaire”, September 6 and October 2, 1926; ANSOM 4(1)D44, “La population indigène” to Governor General of French Equatorial Africa [GGAEF], August 8, 1936; “Note pour M. le chef de la subdivision à propos du tribunal indigène”, December 1936.

12. ACHS, Microfilm T2 B11 Gabon, Journal of the Parish of Saint-Paul of Donguila 1887-1919, November 25, 1911.

pillage of their homes by guards¹³. Militia members extorted money, stole food, and assaulted porters assigned by the government to sell food in Libreville¹⁴. A Libreville Fang man claimed a canton chief with guards and his extensive private entourage stole from one his employees¹⁵. Practitioners of bwiti congregations, religious groups combined varied strands of beliefs and practices from all over Gabon and from Catholicism, combined the cruel images of guards with a general sense of social breakdown. Anthropologist Stanislaw Swiderski interviewed a host of bwiti members from throughout the Estuary in the 1960s and 1970s. They regularly talked about attempts by missionaries and guards to tear down bwiti temples and harass initiates in the 1930s (Swiderski 1990: 298-302). Surviving victims of this persecution recalled whippings, torture, and even the deaths of several adepts at the hands of the militia.

Written accounts rarely furnished personalized accounts of abuses in the way that stories told by men in Estuary Fang communities did. Though only a small number of individuals can still recall being drafted to toil without pay, tales of life on the *corvées* and the behavior of guards are still told and reshaped in Fang villages. Men in Nzamaligue and Donguila, two villages over 40 miles from Libreville, spoke of the oppression that family members and themselves faced before 1945. Their stories certainly were meant to convey the pain that colonial rule brought to the region. However, their subjects allowed for liberal commentary on relationships between men and women and the reformation of local political authority. Tales involving militia members and guards give a sense of the confusion and controversy of everyday life between the 1920s and the 1940s.

Guards were associated with violence linked to the reshaping of local society by administrative fiat. Ambala N'ning Nzolo, over 80 years old, told of his father and his uncles working in *corvées*¹⁶. One of his uncles died on a forced labor detail, and Nzolo's father endured severe whippings at the hands of guards. Nzolo's story lacked the graphic detail of Mba's presentation, but his sense of disgust was clear enough. Endame Emane, another farmer around born roughly in 1920, described how his brother had died during a *corvée* and observed that the commandant didn't care in the least. In his story, the upheaval that villagers faced included coerced movement. People living near Chinchoua, a village on the southern bank of the

13. ANG 2Dj(IV)5, Fonds de Medouneu, Chief sub. Médégué, "Rapport d'ensemble de fin d'année 1915", January 12, 1916.

14. ANG 2Dj(IV)5, Fonds de Medouneu, Rapports politiques 1915-1919, Chief sub. Médégué to Chief circ. Estuaire-Como, June 23, 1917; ANG Carton 911, Vivres frais 1921, Chief circ. Estuaire Moesch to Gov. Gabon, December 29, 1921.

15. ANG Carton 141, Affaires politiques et sociales, diverses plaintes et requêtes concernant la dot, les dettes, litiges, coups et blessures, Territoire du Gabon 1926-1957, Pierre Doutoume to Inspector of Administrative Affairs, August 31, 1926.

16. Interview, Ambala N'ning Nzolo, Nzamaligue, March 24, 2000.

Estuary, were expected to labor many miles away on the Point-Denis peninsula across from Libreville¹⁷. Albert Etoughe Ndong spoke of guards and forced labor together: guards grabbed men for *corvées*, and men would struggle for weeks on road work watched by the militia¹⁸. Forced labor inspired other forms of resettlement. Several informants noted that the rise of obligatory rubber collection during World War II inspired Estuary Fang people to leave behind their old homes for the Libreville neighborhood of Nkembo¹⁹.

Only a few men I spoke with had first-hand experience with forced labor. "Crocodile" Nguema (1917-2000), a spry man known for his dancing skill even in his 80s, was not keen on sharing details about his time in a detail²⁰. "The work was bad and the food was bad", he stated as he resentfully recalled receiving no money for his time. Like all the other Fang people I spoke with, he did not recall women doing forced labor but he noted that wives were sent to bring food to husbands building roads. Another man with bitter memories of colonial rule spoke with more detail about his two weeks on duty²¹. Obame Mba spoke with such vehemence about his dislike for the French that he said he never would speak to them if he had a chance. During his labor detail, he never had the opportunity. Administrators did not talk to forced laborers. When he finished his time, an official signed a piece of paper and allowed Mba to leave. The power of documents was highlighted by other men, who noted that one had to keep the piece of paper to go home²². The use of paper to signify colonial power fit well with administrators' use of maps and written correspondence to reshape African space.

Nzong Mba, a 60-year-old Nzamaligue resident in 2000, told a series of stories that illustrated the collapse of older hierarchies of age and masculinity²³. Besides the story of the younger brother being forced to fight his older sibling, he also noted how guards also disrupted conventions of gender as well as age. Mba claimed to have watched a raid by militia on his village. Troops entered the home of a married couple. They then bound the husband, placed him underneath the couple's bamboo bed (*enong*), and one of the guards raped the man's wife with her spouse underneath the bed. Much of the interview with Mba was not recorded, but he demanded that I tape that story along with his declaration that he had seen it with his own eyes. This vivid image connotes the impotence of Fang men in the face of colonial power, as well as makes a link to traditions of clan warfare

17. Interview, Endame Emane, Donguila, March 21, 2000.

18. Interview, Etoughe Ndong Albert, Kango, August 10, 2004.

19. Interview, Ndong Felicien and Ondo Jean, km 12, Libreville, March 1, 2000.

20. Interview, Nguema "Crocodile", Donguila, March 25, 2000.

21. Interview, Obame Mba, Lalala, Libreville, February 5, 2000.

22. Interview, Albert Etoughe Ndong, Kango, August 10, 2004.

23. Interview, Nzong Mba and Enengba Enengbe Julianne, Nzamaligue-Donguila road, March 22, 2000.

before World War I in which fighters from one clan would make off with women from their rivals during a skirmish. Village men had gone from expressing a form of masculinity that celebrated and encouraged violence against women to one that used stories of brutality to articulate their own sense of powerlessness.

Mba is hardly the only Estuary Fang man who told stories of cheated husbands and vicious guards. Villagers from Akok, located near the Atlantic Ocean north of Libreville, as well as residents of settlements almost one hundred miles eastward along the Como River all told similar stories in 2004. Mendame Obame, the elderly chief of the village of Kafélé, remembered seeing guards march into his neighbors' homes. They snatched up chickens and bananas before assaulting married women²⁴. A group of older men from Kango spoke of a brawl between townspeople and guards in the late 1920s that commenced after fishermen returned home to find militamen sleeping with their wives²⁵. They, along with residents of Kougouleu some miles west of Kango, remembered the rapacious nature of guards who grabbed food and wives during their visits²⁶.

A central motif within these stories is the guards' brazen violation of reciprocity. By taking food and women by force, guards in these tales parodied common forms of exchanges between newcomers and members of a village community. Missionaries and officials visiting Estuary villages regularly received meals when they arrived, but oral traditions present these offerings as a sign of hospitality rather than an onerous obligation²⁷. Treating guests to a meal also demonstrated control over labor, as women would be expected to cook. Exchanges of women were perhaps the greatest sign of reciprocity between villages. Fang marriage practices in the early twentieth century prohibited marriages between members of the same clan. Thus, wives came from outside communities. Husbands also offered wives to visitors and associates through the practice of *amvi* (friendship)²⁸. Guards could sidestep the reciprocal nature of these exchanges by simply taking what they wanted with impunity. One Fang man summed up his views of guards: "All the guards were the same. Fang, *bilop* [a Fang label for non-Fang speakers]—they were the same. They were all bad"²⁹. Guards, clothed in their uniform that denoted their service to the state, could ignore the regular protocol that came with exchanges of respect and goods.

24. Interview, Mendame Obame, Kafélé, August 12, 2004.

25. Interview, Etoughe Ndong Albert *et al.*, Kango, August 10, 2004.

26. Nson Oyone, Kougouleu, August 6, 2004; Interview, Mvi Mba Antoine, Kango, August 11, 2004.

27. Interview, Medame Obame, Kafélé, August 12, 2004.

28. For a typical complaint from missionaries, see Donguila Mission Archives, Donguila, Gabon, "Voyages 1915", Voyage July 7-24, 1915, Wongwè River, Ayèm village entry.

29. Interview, Albert Etoughe Ndong, Kango, August 10, 2004.

Do these narratives accurately expose the vulnerability of women in Estuary Fang villages? Certainly, it is easy to believe that African guards and soldiers coerced sexual favors from local women. However, men's stories of sexual assault were far more concerned with weak husbands than victimized women. Nzong Mba's insistence that his story be recorded makes it evident that this narrative was meant for outside consumption to show the horrors of colonial times. Fang women may have very well been raped, but images of bound men had as much to do with imperiled masculinity as they did with state-sponsored atrocities. Albert Etoughe Ndong, a Kango resident who remembered watching guards snatch up women, expressed a common feeling among male informants. "Oyeeh! Men felt hate [about the guards]! But where were you going to talk about it? Oh no! They'd put you in jail", he said³⁰. Other men said their fathers fled or were scared into silence—hardly behavior becoming of the warrior ideal of days of clan fighting³¹.

In stories told by men, women appear mainly as passive victims that local men could no longer protect against the menace of government raiders. None of the informants I spoke with ever indicated that women resisted such brutal treatment. However, the archival record suggests that these historical memories left silent ways women's negotiations with guards and chiefs in ways that challenged the authority of Fang men. A petition authored by Fang men in the small Estuary town of Coco beach in 1943 accused guards of stealing their wives. When questioned by state authorities, these women complained about the brutality and stinginess of their Fang husbands, and asked to be divorced so that they could marry the guards who supposedly had spirited them away by force³². Although such documents could have been produced under duress, the points made by these Fang women matched those made by other wives seeking to divorce their husbands in Estuary courts in the 1930s and 1940s. Historical memories of the impotence of Fang men neglect female agency, especially actions that threatened male authority.

A sign of privilege among Estuary Fang communities was the ability to tame the threat that guards, and the power of the colonial state that they embodied, on family life.

30. Interview, Albert Etoughe Ndong, Kango, August 10, 2004.

31. Interviews, Mvi Mba Antoine, Kango, August 11, 2004; Obame Raphael, Kango, August 13, 2004.

32. ANG Carton 1172, Région de l'Estuaire, Correspondance 1930-1948, Dossier Cocobeach, "The Cocobeach population" to Gov. Gabon, September 13, 1943; ANG Carton 1172, Région de l'Estuaire, Correspondance 1930-1948, Administrator Raymonenq, "Déposition Nzang Guema", September 19, 1943; ANG Carton 1172, Région de l'Estuaire, Correspondance 1930-1948, Administrator Raymonenq, "Déposition Nzara Nze", September 21, 1943; Administrator Raymonenq, "Déposition Mbiang Nze", September 22, 1943 and "Déposition Ndouma", September 23, 1943.

State-appointed chiefs did not fear and malign guards, for they too enjoyed the fruits of government authority. Children and family members of canton chiefs could avoid *corvées* much more easily than other Fang. Kin of the powerful canton chief Eyeghe Ndong boasted that he would have guards guilty of abuses punished after speaking with an administrator³³. As the daughter of a chief who governed Nzamaligue in the 1940s, Ada Nkoghe Veronique was a member of a privileged class in rural society³⁴. She remembered guards arriving in the village seeking labor. “The guards came and told my father to assemble the people. Once they came, they had cords put on their necks like animals or those who had the *évus*”, she said. The *évus*—a sinister spirit creature said to give its hosts the power to become rich and influential through its ability to kill others through supernatural means—is tremendously feared to this day among Estuary Fang people. The image of ordinary men being treated like beasts or those suspected of carrying feared supernatural forces suggests on the one hand the topsyturvy nature of life under colonial rule. However, Nkoghe’s account makes her father out as merely a powerless cog in the state machine.

Memories of state-sponsored violence drawn from a set of older and predominately male Fang informants illustrate how people in the Gabon Estuary resented the new impositions of government power in their lives, but they do more than simply reinforce the truism of the brutality of colonial occupation. The reordering of everyday life and political power that Fang people experienced between 1920 and 1945 placed respect for age and gender roles under question. Images of powerless husbands passively watching the brutal treatment of their wives, younger brothers beating their elders, and cruel outsiders usurping the authorities of chiefs and male councils depicted a world where Fang men’s independence and their hold over women were under assault. It is little wonder religious bwiti movements that offered esoteric forms of protection from supernatural harm grew in popularity between 1920 and 1945 among Estuary Fang men feeling such tremendous insecurity. However, this common vision of impotence and weakness obscured the variety of responses by Fang men to the challenges of the interwar period. Generational, class, and religious differences also are obscured by these images of bound husbands and broken families. Felicien Endame Ndong and Léon Mba, two Estuary Fang men who became state-appointed chiefs in the 1920s, exemplify how men could negotiate with local gender anxieties and the colonial bureaucracy.

33. Interview, Ekore Ndong Jean-Pierre, Ayémé, August 15, 2004.

34. Interview, Ada Nkoghe Veronique, Nzamaligue, March 29, 2000.

Redefining Male Authority in Estuary Fang communities: Félicien Endame Ndong and Léon Mba

Léon Mba (1905-1967) and Félicien Endame Ndong (1880-1955) were among the most powerful and controversial Estuary Fang leaders in the interwar period. Mba's mission education and his ability to sway European and Gabonese communities led to a rapid rise to political authority. Officials appointed him as a chief in 1923, exiled him to Ubangi-Shari (the Central African Republic) for embezzlement and abuses of power in 1932, and allowed him to return 14 years later. Eventually, he and his Bloc démocratique gabonais (BDG) party gained power through the support of the French administration in the 1950s, and Mba became the first president of independent Gabon. His political career has been discussed elsewhere, but his efforts to both assuage Estuary Fang male anxieties and to reform Fang gender conventions has not received much attention (Weinstein 1966; Bernault 1996: 216-234; Keese 2004; Metegue N'nah 2006: 137-149, 153-157). To place Léon Mba's career in perspective, I have chosen to compare his engagement with Fang masculinity with Félicien Endame Ndong, a state-appointed chief who controlled much of the Kango region in the eastern part of the Estuary province. Though almost entirely forgotten today, Endame Ndong's formidable power and very different style of manhood and political maneuvering offers an interesting comparison to Mba. Both men consciously sought to forge new idioms of manhood and political power that drew selectively from missionary influences, French colonial bureaucracy, and the mixed collection of ideas about manhood and authority that Fang people had before 1914. These certainly do not exhaust the ways one can examine changing Fang masculinities in Gabon, but they do provide opportunities for starting points to exploration innovations and continuities.

During two visits to different parts of the Estuary region in 2000 and 2004, older village residents recalled a series of events that insulted the honor of local people. Many of them featured one individual: Félicien Endame Ndong. Moïse Meyo-M'Obiang, an elderly retired clerk from Kango, recalled Félicien Endame Ndong's heyday in Kango more than five decades after the canton chief had died. "He was Christian, but mean", the old man remarked³⁵. Among Estuary Fang people, the chief's name still is synonymous with tyranny. A lust for power and a taste for public humiliation made Endame a symbol of colonial oppression in the Kango region. Instead of highlighting his violent style of rule, administrators depicted the chief as an orderly and resourceful ally in comparison to superstitious and lazy Estuary Fang people.

35. Interview, Moïse Meyo M'Obiang, Lalala, Libreville, August 18, 2004.

Endame's early life is obscure, but by the time he became a canton chief in the early 1920s, he recognized the benefits of putting French interests first. Officer after officer posted to Kango evaluated the chief as the best servant of the administration in the Estuary region³⁶. In 1943, a report described Endame as a reliable and respected leader who promoted cocoa and rice cultivation³⁷. His salary of 12,000 francs dwarfed the pay of other chiefs; no other chief made even half of Endame's yearly wages during World War II³⁸. Endame sat on the prestigious albeit ultimately powerless Gabonese-staffed advisory council to the colonial administration that was created after the leftist Popular Front took power in 1936³⁹. A striking difference between oral accounts of Endame's life and colonial reports are the lack of detail on Endame's exact duties as a chief. Political reports never discussed the exact duties of state-appointed chiefs. Estuary Fang men and women described Endame's style of management in radically different ways. First, Endame publicly displayed his authority in the same manner as any administrator. Rather than walk, four men carried him in a litter, known as a *tipoye* in colonial parlance. *Tipoyes* was a tangible sign of European privilege and control over colonized labor, and officials and missionaries in French African colonies often traveled in this manner (Pieterse 2003). This manner of travel had not existed in Estuary Fang communities prior to French rule, and only a tiny number of chiefs employed it. Endame used it to the point that one informant shook with indignation as he said, "His feet touch the ground? Ehhh! Never!"⁴⁰. Others recalled Endame's retinue of guards arriving on large canoes as the chief inspected villages as drums signaled his arrival⁴¹. One man summed it up: "Even a white commandant would have been better"⁴².

His flamboyant manner of travel signaled power over Estuary communities, as did Endame's none-too-subtle methods of command. Ntutume Nkobe Justin remembered how Endame manhandled his father sometime in the late 1930s or early 1940s. The chief and his guards marched into the village, and then Endame slapped Ntutume's father squarely on the face⁴³.

36. ANG Fonds de Kango 2Da(II)1, Circulaires 1937-1967, Chef dépt. Estuaire to Chef Sub. Kango, January 22, 1940.

37. ANG Carton 1100, Affaires politiques 1946, Chef sub. Kango Mercy to Chef dépt. Estuaire, April 14, 1943.

38. ANG Carton 1100, Affaires politiques 1946, GGAEF, "Arrêté", ANG 1100 P.R. Affaires politiques 1946, August 31, 1944.

39. ANSOM 6Y1, Registre des procès-verbaux du Conseil des notables du département de l'Estuaire 1937-1946, "Procès-verbal du Conseil des notables du département de l'Estuaire", July 21, 1937.

40. Interview, Ndong Albert, Kango, Gabon, August 8, 2004.

41. Interview, Mvi Mba Augustin, Kango, Gabon, August 10, 2004.

42. Interview, Meye M'Obiang Moise, Lalala, Libreville, August 18, 2004.

43. Interview, Nkobe Ntutume Justin, Kango, August 11, 2004.

What made this display especially galling for Ntutume was that his father was a village chief himself. Even respected leaders had to accept punishment quietly or face Endame's wrath. When asked why his father did not respond, Ntutume Nkobe laughed and said: "What could he have done?" The canton chief also selected men for forced labor details, and often sent guards to snatch workers without warning. French colonial law between the 1920s and 1946 required men unable to pay taxes to work for two weeks without pay, but Endame kept laborers for months⁴⁴. Endame's unquestioned ability to choose men for construction details was a common and bitter memory among Estuary Fang men half a century later.

Fang men despised how the canton chief obtained the labor of other men's wives. French authorities, increasingly concerned about what they viewed as the decline of traditional Fang families, gave state-appointed chiefs the right to participate in legal arbitration of marriage cases (Jean-Baptiste 2005: 130-171). When women demanded divorce, Endame allowed them to stay at his compound and work his rice fields while he judged the case. Other Fang men felt Endame stripped them of control over their wives. Informants accused Endame of dragging out divorce cases and taking bribes so that he could retain access to female labor in his fields⁴⁵. Petitions against Estuary canton chiefs like Endame invariably accused these leaders of encouraging divorce and appropriating female labor from married men⁴⁶. The chief advised officials in the wake of the timber crash of the early 1930s to lower bridewealth and set limits to the amount of money returned to a husband in case of divorce due to the economic downturn that made hard cash difficult to find (*ibid.*: 130-131). Such a move could have hardly endeared him to men seeking the return of bridewealth from their wife's families in divorce cases, especially since bridewealth prices had risen dramatically during the timber booms of the 1920s (*ibid.*: 95-119). Officials never restrained Endame's appetite for workers or questioned his role as a referee in disputes between married couples. His meddling made clear the ability of state authorities to alter gender relations that angered Fang men.

Endame Ndong's cultivation schemes show how older notions of wealth could be achieved in the new colonial order after 1918. His access to women with marital problems and men assigned to forced work details allowed him labor for his fields. He grew extensive fields of manioc and plantains. Furthermore, he was one of the few Fang men to plant cocoa

44. Interview, Meyo M'Obiang Moïse, Lalala, Libreville, August 18, 2004.

45. Interviews, Ntutume Nkobe Justin, Kango, August 11, 2004; Ndong Albert, Kango, August 11, 2004; Meyo M'Obiang Moïse, Libreville, August 18, 2004.

46. ANSOM 5D61, "Jugement du tribunal indigène de la circonscription de l'Estuaire", September 6, 1926; ANSOM 4(1)D44, "La Population indigène" to Governor General of French Equatorial Africa, August 8, 1936 (JEAN-BAPTISTE 2005: 145-153).

and rice in the 1940s⁴⁷. Plantation agriculture had never drawn much attention in the Estuary: insect pests, poor soil fertility, bad roads, and the dominance of timber placed cash crop production at a serious disadvantage. However, the district chief remained committed to growing products for sale. In a parallel fashion to *Beti* chiefs in southern Cameroon, who married scores of women to labor in their fields in the 1920s, Endame Ndong demonstrated his control over people and his ability to generate wealth thanks to his government position (Guyer 1978).

Endame acted ambivalently towards missionaries who wished to remake Fang masculinity and family mores. Missionaries based at the Catholic missionary at Donguila continually criticized Fang Christians for refusing to abandon polygyny, and found that even many catechists themselves married multiple spouses. Other chiefs, such as the formidable Eyeghe Ndong, were said to have over 30 wives in the 1930s⁴⁸. None of the 15 people I spoke with in Kango recalled Endame Ndong having more than one wife, and his former secretary Moïse Meyo M'Obiang recalled him to be a strict Catholic who disdained *bwiti*⁴⁹. The chief instead acted as a patron of Catholic missionaries. He sent food to the Donguila school in 1929 during a famine⁵⁰. In turn, some priests acted to reinforce Endame's prestige. A visiting Gabonese priest recommended a woman who wished to go to Donguila to tell her husband to discuss the matter at Endame Ndong's home⁵¹. However, some mission records indicate Endame Ndong did not endear himself entirely to missionaries. He may have selected to support mission efforts without adhering to Catholic teachings that directly opposed Fang male concerns. A mission report noted in a 1933 visit to the leader's village of Mafou that few people arrived to meet a visiting priest, "following their chief's example"⁵². Father André Raponda Walker (1993: 193), the first Gabonese priest and a very accomplished scholar, described Endame Ndong as a "particularly tyrannical" chief who obliged anyone who wished to discuss an issue to kneel before his cane. His consolidation of power and ambivalence towards missionary influence fit older traditions of Estuary Fang big men, who alternately challenged and made partnerships with missionaries from the 1870s onward (Rich 2006).

Félicien Endame Ndong successfully profited from his role as chief, and combined older forms of wealth in people with his service to the colonial government. He supplanted older notions of clan organization of councils of village elders through manufacturing an autocratic style of rule that celebrated dominance. Inspections, *tipoye* rides, and genuflections before his

47. ANG Carton 1100, Affaires politiques 1946, Chef sub. Kango Mercy to Chef dépt. Estuaire, April 14, 1943.

48. Interview, Akore Ndong Jean-Pierre, Ayeme, Gabon, August 15, 2004.

49. Interview, Meyo M'Obiang Moïse, Lalala, Libreville, August 18, 2004.

50. DPA, "Journal de la communauté", June 10, 1929 entry.

51. DPA, "Voyage Bokwe Como", January 7-14, 1933, Nzokmintang entry.

52. DPA, "Voyage Omvan-Como", September 4-18, 1933, Mafou entry.

cane all expressed his authority in ways that no Fang man could have done before the war. His control over the means of physical violence was a far cry from the unruly and well-armed Fang men of the late nineteenth century. However, his draconian policies alienated Fang men by pointedly reminding them of the autonomy they had lost and the ability of the state to supersede Fang male control over women and dependence. Léon Mba, Endame's rival, would also benefit from his connections to state power in the 1920s, but fashioned a style of rule much more acceptable to discontented Fang villagers than the arrogant masculinity of the Kango district chief.

From his youth, Mba promoted a new model of manhood that celebrated an invented notion of heroic Fang warriors while making room for a new style of leadership based on knowledge of both older traditions and French bureaucratic governance. Before World War I, it is hardly likely that someone like Mba could have become a political leader so quickly. A young man would have to develop commercial ties to build up the needed merchandise to obtain bridewealth and develop ties through patronage. By obtaining a government job as a customs agent through his Catholic mission education in Libreville, Mba drew the attention of Charles Testevin, a French colonial administrator. Testevin despised Fang chiefs who he deemed as corrupt. He launched two criminal inquiries against two state-appointed chiefs in 1926 who had demanded payments for settling marriage quarrels⁵³. Testevin's search for a new kind of Fang leader, untainted by patronage politics, may have led him to choose Mba as a district chief.

Mba wrote two essays to French colonial officials on Fang society: a short overview in 1927 and a longer essay on Fang customary law authored during his exile outside of Gabon in the mid-1930s. These text draws from his personal experiences and the images of barbaric yet virile Fang migrants drawn from European accounts from the nineteenth century. One major theme throughout these accounts is a contrast between the strength of Fang men in the past and the confusion they encountered under colonial rule in the present. Mba (2002: 29) admitted, "Many [Fang] are still atrociously savage", but went on to quote from Victor Largeau's 1899 *Encyclopédie Pahouin* to praise the activity and intelligence of Fang people. He presented the past as a time when men needed to be loyal to their families, to be strong, and to be prepared to attack. Mba (*ibid.*: 106) wrote of a tale where the creator god, Mébègue, told his male children: "A man is always crafty, warlike, and he always remembers a wound. He is also cruel, but vigilant like a dog, and he marches with a club in his left hand and a knife in his right." With the end of clan fighting, people could travel freely between villages and clans once at war were governed by the same chief. Mba (*ibid.*: 68) wondered if these circumstances had led individuals

53. ANSOM 5D61, Jugement du tribunal indigène de la circonscription de l'Estuaire, September 6 and October 2, 1926.

to abandon their families. Children in the past had learned from their parents and through initiation into power associations their duties as a “real *mone-fame* (young man) or *mone ménéga* (young woman). But now, the ease with which children make money, purchase merchandise or wives, and the end of wars between villages, seems to have incited them to desert their parents” (*ibid.*: 90).

Mba joined other educated Fang men in denoting the corrupting influence of coastal Mpongwe communities upon Fang families. Since the mid-nineteenth century, American and European observers had imposed notions of racial degeneration on coastal peoples. The willingness of Mpongwe people to dress in European style, to claim equal legal status to French officials, and to assert their equality with French residents of the colony irked administrators, travelers, and officials. Critics of the Mpongwe claimed that their willingness to form sexual unions with Europeans had led to immorality, venereal disease, and race suicide (Patterson 1975; Rich 2005). These ideas filtered into Fang men’s discussions of Mpongwe people. Mba (2002: 31) argued in 1927 that the corrupting influences of the coast had infected Fang communities, especially through the “frightening frequency” of abortions that posed a threat to the great fecundity of Fang women in earlier times. Though Mba ultimately called for an alliance between Mpongwe and Fang people in the 1940s, his earlier statements fit with common anxieties Fang men expressed about urban life and Mpongwe people. According to Rachel Jean-Baptiste (2005: 213-215), elder men warned younger Fang male residents of Libreville to beware promiscuous and diseased townswomen in the 1940s and 1950s. A petition by 15 Fang political leaders opposing the right of a Mpongwe to govern them as a chief in 1938 declared that Fang people could never accept Mpongwe leadership because Fang men were too manly, did not only rely on supernatural force to attain prestige, and never accepted orders from women as did some Mpongwe. They added, “We add that the Fang, accustomed to treating the [Mpongwe] as women in every way, only accept the sovereignty of France, our Mother Country”⁵⁴. The images of effeminate Mpongwe men so pervasive in European and American views had entered Fang male self-representations as well.

Mba celebrated a past age of male authority, when individual men showed their value through work, war, and having children. However, he also pushed for innovations. Mba had faith in a new generation of mission-educated Fang men that could redeem the race. He listed in 1927 the names of over thirty Fang men who labored as clerks, priests, masons, and soldiers who, in his words, “are able to be considered as the pinnacle of French civilization among the Fang and true pioneers of Fang development” (Mba

54. ANSOM 2D61, petition of 15 Fang notables and chiefs including Bernard Mba, Auguste Meviane, and Ignace Bekale to Governor General of French Equatorial Africa, March 1, 1938.

2002: 47-48). Older chiefs, by contrast, were illiterate, ignorant, and often tempted to mistreat other men in their single-minded effort to obtain more wives (*ibid.*: 50). Mba presented himself as an official in French bureaucratic fashion: he used a telephone, had a male secretary, and maintained an office while he served as *chef de canton* (Rapontchombo 2002: 102-104).

Yet it would be a mistake to argue Mba (2002: 52) wished to defend women's rights within marriage. Rather, he contended that divorce and adultery were threats, especially in his efforts to present a codified Fang customary legal code. "To favor divorce among the Fang is to encourage and facilitate the twins of promiscuity and sterility", Mba warned. He argued in 1927 that Fang men only truly had one chief wife, with some auxiliary spouses, and rejected the idea that Fang men married several wives only "to satisfy his bestial passions" (*ibid.*: 44). After his exile, he openly argued that "polygamy [in the past] was everyone's dream. All Fang wanted [multiple wives]. The possession of numerous wives was a tangible sign of wealth" (*ibid.*: 84).

Not only did Mba spell out the rules of marriage that favored men; he also set himself as the arbitrator of Fang gender relations. This strategic move paid great dividends, as both Fang men and colonial officials sought to renew and strengthen male leadership of families from 1930 to 1960. Rachel Jean-Baptiste (2005: 130-170, 276-277) has noted how fears of female autonomy in Libreville helped to bring about the creation of customary courts in the 1930s. Although women often successfully used these legal institutions to obtain divorces and challenge spouses, some judges turned to Mba's writings to justify their decisions by the 1940s. Efforts by educated male Fang men to create a new sense of Fang ethnicity at the 1947 "Congrès Fang" at Mitzic in northern Gabon often included proposals to limit high bridewealth and more controls over wives (*ibid.*: 196-200). Against these anxieties, Mba presented himself upon his 1946 return to Gabon as a wise judge able to settle disputes.

Not surprisingly, Mba's maneuvers did not please Félicien Endame Ndong. Endame reported to officials in 1948 that Mba had illegally set up his own tribunal and was weakening Endame's own authority (Keese 2004: 151). Mba fought back. In 1951, he charged that Endame had interfered with a cousin of Mba's divorce. According to the letter, Endame had decreed that the woman's family had to return 40,000 CFA (the currency of colonial Gabon after 1945) when the bridewealth was only 4,000. Mba added Endame encouraged bridewealth inflation that made it difficult for men to marry and supposedly encouraged the break-up of families. Officials sided with Endame by noting he took into account inflation between the initial payment in 1938 to the 1951 divorce⁵⁵. Such maneuvers may not have led to policy changes, but they do show how Mba tried to separate

55. ANG Carton 872, Administration générale, Correspondance au départ 1938, Léon Mba to Chef sub. Kango, September 27, 1951.

himself from the likes of Endame by championing the cause of Fang husbands against corrupt chiefs.

Swaying the hearts of worried Fang men may have also been behind a number of other decisions made by Mba. Florence Bernault (1996: 216-234), among others, has noted how Mba's ties to bwiti religious movements allowed him critical distance from missionaries and state authorities. Though the gender politics of bwiti is a subject that still sadly has attracted little attention, bwiti movements offered their initiates a chance to develop secret knowledge needed to fight off supernatural threats and to bring back a spiritual order thrown into chaos by colonial rule and missionary teachings. Mba's negotiations with Fang bwiti adepts remain shadowy, but he did position himself as the defender of Fang manhood against missionary interference in similar fashion to bwiti practitioners. He criticized priests for their hypocrisy in siding with a Catholic Fang man who apparently had married two women in 1929⁵⁶. In an anti-missionary tract written presumably by Mba in the following year, missionaries appear as double-dealing schemers out to ruin Fang marriages: "I have seen missionaries whip poor devils for not wanting to become Christian, but on the contrary accept women at the Nuns' house, and incite them to divorce their husbands and becoming Christians. As divorce as become second nature for these women, how can it be shocking that prostitution is the rule [...]"⁵⁷. Even after his return from exile, Mba occasionally portrayed missionaries as disrespectful to Fang dignity. In 1948, he complained that a priest at Donguila wanted to take posed photographs of Fang villagers that featured people in simple clothes and bare-breasted women. Mba asserted such images made Fang people out to be nothing but *nègres*⁵⁸.

Other decisions made by Mba touched on the loss of male privileges during the colonial period. Mba promoted more liberal policies regarding gun permits. Obtaining modern firearms and permits to hunt large animals became very difficult for Gabonese after 1914. Florence Bernault (2006: 226, 313-315) has noted how Mba promised his supporters more gun permits and punished partisans of the opposition USDG party by refusing them authorization to purchase firearms. Fang men resented laws restricting their access to modern rifles. Requests for gun permits from the 1950s almost invariably claimed these weapons were needed to protect fields from wild animals⁵⁹. Mba positioned himself as the defender of rural Fang men in

56. ACHS, Boîte 2D60.1b Fonds Pouchet, Relations avec l'administration française, Correspondance Affaires africaines 1929-1948, Léon Mba to Father Defranould, May 16, 1929.

57. ACHS, Boîte 2D5.5b, Fonds Berger, Circulaires du Père Berger 1934-1950, Léon Mba, "Un ennemi insoupçonné des Noirs", no date [c. 1930].

58. ACHS, Boîte 2D60.1b, Fonds Pouchet, Relations avec l'administration française, Correspondance Affaires africaines 1929-1948, Léon Mba to the Reverend Superior of Libreville, February 26, 1948.

59. ANG Carton 141, Affaires politiques et sociales, diverses plaintes et requêtes concernant la dot, les dettes, litiges, coups et blessures, Territoire du Gabon 1926-

a 1957 letter to the Governor General of French Equatorial Africa. "It would be fitting, in my view, to take into account of the interest that the majority of farmers in the interior provinces attach to the possession of a firearm, which is for them, the best means of not only supplying meat to their families, but especially to protect fields from the depredations of wild animals [...]. Thus, one should protect less the animals than the man and the fields that assure his survival", he wrote⁶⁰. A French administrator pleaded with Mba to limit gun permits to protect animals in 1959, and argued that Mba's goal of gaining votes through guns would spell the doom of wild animals in the Estuary region⁶¹.

Mba kept focusing on issues related to gender tensions even after independence, but did so in ways that favored his self-image as a modernizer of masculinity rather than as simply an unquestioning defender of male privilege. American ambassador Charles Darlington found it odd that Mba would intervene on behalf of a Gabonese woman to try to convince her French husband not to divorce her (Darlington 1968: 121). He met with a delegation of wives from Port-Gentil concerned about the unruly behavior of their husbands (Nyonda 1994: 163). Rachel Jean-Baptiste (2005: 281) has discussed how Mba passed in 1963 a ban on bridewealth on the grounds that high bridewealth prices had made marriage into merely the sale of women. Ironically, Mba ultimately endorsed the same opinions that Catholic and Protestant missionaries had expressed for decades rather than defending the interests of rural men. Just as his early writings had called for reform in men's aspirations, his career as president suggests he remained a firm proponent of innovation in gender practices rather than always endorsing firm controls over women.

If one examines Mba's career in light of Fang men's experiences and concerns, it is striking to see how his exceptional life engaged with issues that many Fang men grappled with in the colonial era. Mba managed to successfully harness state institutions in the beginning and at the pinnacle of his political experiences, but he also suffered greatly at the hands of colonial officials. Like most Fang men of means, Mba married multiple wives and agitated at times for stronger controls over women. However, he also called for reforms such as reducing bridewealth that favored younger men over older elders. From his relationship to bwiti to his embracing of Western education, Mba presented himself as both the standard-bearer of

1957, Nguema Kene, Chief of Okala-Enkene to Gov. Gabon, December 26, 1953; ANG Carton 988, Administration générale, Correspondances diverses 1957-1960, Tsoungou Alphonse to Chief Reg, Estuaire, November 8, 1958; Minko mi Mba Samuel to Chief Reg, Estuaire, December 1, 1958; Mba René to Chief Reg., Estuaire, December 23, 1958.

60. ANG Carton 86, Correspondance au départ adressée au GGAEF 1957, Léon Mba to Governor General of French Equatorial Africa, June 7, 1957.

61. ANG Carton 988, Administration générale, Correspondances diverses 1957-1960, Chef Reg. Estuaire Roland Combes to Léon Mba, June 22, 1959.

older traditions and new changes. Through other Fang men might draw from this *bricolage* in radically different ways than Mba, their constructions of proper masculine behavior drew from many of the same ingredients.

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The increased power of the French colonial administration and the timber economy radically altered the options available to rural Gabonese men after World War I.

It is little wonder that the shocks of defeat and famine exposed anxieties among Fang men. Since the seminal studies of George Balandier and James Fernandez in the 1950s, social and cultural developments among Fang communities have long been considered responses to the existential challenges posed by colonial rule. However, these approaches do not historicize the varied issues and gender tensions that emerged in the ways Fang men sought to cope and prosper in the new environment of the interwar period. It is not just a fear of malevolent occult power that haunted the imaginations of Fang men in this era. The power of chiefs and guards to usurp the ability of husbands to control women and use force also angered Fang men. Oral narratives of forced labor, guards, and chiefs all highlight the powerlessness of rural Fang men to oppose the goals and agents of the French administration. However, these stories also obscure the ways some Fang women might find new opportunities to obtain autonomy from family members and how Fang men might find benefits in the new colonial order.

Félicien Endame Ndong and Léon Mba's engagements with French administrators, missionaries, and other Gabonese denote a wide range of responses to the rise of state power in Gabon in the 1920s. Compared to most other Fang men, both politicians led a fortunate life. Endame Ndong and Mba both used their government connections to avoid the loss of freedoms that most Fang people faced after World War I, from the loss of access to firearms to toiling on forced labor details. Each individual crafted new understandings of male leadership that selectively appropriated and ignored older understandings of masculinity. Through ruling over Fang people regardless of clan and by manipulating his position to gain access to the labor of other men's wives, Endame Ndong challenged the primacy of husbands' control over wives and the key role of the clan in determining social identity. His alliances with missionaries contrasted greatly with Léon Mba's criticisms of priests, yet both men showed a willingness to selectively draw from and ignore missionary programs and aspirations.

It is easy to see how supporters of Mba might disregard Endame Ndong as a craven collaborator, but it would be a mistake to simply deem Mba to be the opposite of the wily Kango leader. Mba had no qualms controlling African forced laborers, intervening in marriage disputes, and even trying to destroy bridewealth altogether. Both men used the vehicle of state power

to try to alter Fang marriage practices at different points of their career. Their mutual efforts to domesticate state power for their own interests irked other men at times. Endame Ndong remains a paramount symbol of colonial oppression in historical memory in Kango. As for Mba, his use of government authority irked some other Fang men as well. In 2000, former Senator Jean Ondo recalled with laughter how Léon Mba was snubbed by his neighbor Augustin Mbava at independence. Mbava, a Fang gardening entrepreneur, scornfully told Mba that he had not worked himself to earn his money and refused to shake the president's hand⁶².

Mbava's anger exposes yet another style of masculinity that coexisted with Endame Ndong and Mba, and points to the diversity of opinions on success and proper conduct for men in colonial Gabon. Everyone had to deal with the problems and opportunities that the increased might of the colonial state brought to Estuary Fang communities after 1914, but it would be a mistake to assume a hegemonic consensus on masculinity emerged, even if fears of impotence and powerlessness were commonplace. Though as yet we know little of the different tactics and aspirations of individual Fang men in the late colonial era, more research on gender issues and conjunctions of masculinity would reveal insights on the rise of bwiti and the hopes and anxieties of Gabonese people in the colonial era, as well as providing a context for the strategies and tactics of the first generation of Gabonese politicians who took power in the 1950s and 1960s. Much of Gabonese society has been shaped by men who came of age in the late colonial period, and a thorough treatment of colonial masculinities would help illuminate many of the religious and political structures that shape Gabon today.

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ABSTRACT

Fang communities in coastal Gabon underwent a series of challenges between 1914 and 1945. World War I greatly weakened the ability of rural Fang people to resist the growing authority of the French administration. French officials appointed chiefs to rule rather than respect older traditions of political authority, restricted access to modern firearms to guards, and banned raiding between villages. These policies, along with the changing economy, placed old strategies of accumulation by Fang men in jeopardy. Oral testimonies by Fang men highlighted the abusive powers of state-appointed chiefs and guards to interfere with married men's control over women. Such stories express the frustrations of Fang men, but neglect to discuss how Fang women might find to avenues to obtain autonomy from family members, as well as the success some privileged Fang men had in harnessing the colonial state for their own personal benefit. State chiefs such as Léon Mba and Félicien Endame Ndong each developed new understandings of masculinity that incorporated state patronage, older concerns over the control of women, and the new fears of state power among Fang men. These varied concerns about masculinity show the diverse impact of colonial rule on Fang gender conventions.

RÉSUMÉ

Gardes cruels et chefs inquiets. Masculinités des Fang et pouvoir d'État dans l'estuaire du Gabon, 1920-1945. — Les communautés fang de l'estuaire du Gabon subirent une série de défis entre 1914 et 1945. La Première Guerre mondiale affaiblit la capacité des paysans à résister à la puissance croissante de l'administration française. Les autorités françaises nommèrent des chefs pour gouverner au lieu de perpétuer les anciennes traditions politiques, limitèrent aux gardes l'accès aux armes à feu, et interdirent les guerres claniques. Cette politique, conjointement avec l'évolution économique, menaça les anciennes stratégies d'accumulation des hommes fang. Des témoignages de Fang mirent en évidence les abus de pouvoir des chefs et des gardes qui interférèrent dans le contrôle des femmes par les hommes mariés. De tels récits exprimèrent les frustrations des hommes fang, mais négligèrent de montrer comment des femmes fang ont ainsi trouvé des moyens d'obtenir leur autonomie au sein de la famille, ainsi que l'habileté de quelques hommes fang à utiliser le colonialisme

pour avancer leurs propres intérêts. Des chefs d'État comme Léon Mba et Félicien Endame Ndong développèrent chacun une nouvelle conception de la masculinité qui intégrait les liens avec l'administration coloniale, les anciennes considérations sur le contrôle des femmes, et les craintes nouvelles des hommes fang face au pouvoir d'État. Ces diverses inquiétudes concernant la masculinité montrent l'impact diversifié de la colonisation sur les relations entre les femmes et les hommes au sein de la société fang.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Gabon, Fang, Félicien Endame Ndong, Léon Mba, chiefs, guards, masculinity/*Gabon, Fang, Félicien Endame Ndong, Léon Mba, chefs, gardes, masculinité.*