How to Do Things with Secrets
Secrecy and Historical Imagination among the Baga of Guinea

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Erst in dem Doppelbereich
werden die Stimmen
ewig und mild.
(Only in the double-realm
do voices become
gentle and eternal)

Rilke 'Sonnets to Orpheus'

Abstract

By revisiting my ethnographic engagement with the Baga of coastal Guinea, West Africa, in this article I analyse, in the first place, the ways in which secrecy and its associated verbal arts (silence, metaphor, gesture) has worked as an 'imagination trigger' in a post-iconoclastic religious landscape in the 1990s and early 2000s, inviting people to create in their minds possible scenarios of pre-iconoclastic pastness and notions of 'double-ream', or dabal, *in Baga language; in the second place, and in sharp contrast, I discuss how Baga of today, belonging to a generation historically removed from the traumatic colonial iconoclasm but facing new and dramatic environmental challenges, are relating to historical knowledge in ways that make the arts of secrecy, so prevalent in the field twenty years ago, less relevant, but that nonetheless highlight the plastic, transformative nature of African systems of secrecy. A particular attention is given to the changing relationship between the ethics of secrecy and the presence or absence of slavery memories in the villages.*

KEYWORDS: *Secrecy, silence, remoteness, slavery, writing.*

Secrecy and the Production of Remoteness

The West African Atlantic region known as the Upper Guinea Coast, spreading from Senegal to Liberia, has been one of the *loci classici* of the study of secrecy, secret societies, and initiation rituals. Poro and Sande institutions (a complex set of male and female 'secret societies' found in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia) have nourished anthropological theory on the interface between religion and politics from the early days of colonial anthropology to the recent studies on armed conflict in those countries (for a literature review on Poro and Sande, see Højbjerg 2007). The entanglements between silence, iconoclasm (destruction of ritual objects) and secrecy have been the object of research of many scholars working on the effects of socialist politics in the Republic of Guinea (Højbjerg 2007; Sarró 2009; Berliner 2005; McGovern 2016). Some authors have focussed on the tension between the need to keep things in concealment and the need to make them visible (e.g. de Jong 2013). Others have explored the

tensions between being secretive and engaging with development actors (Davidson 2007). Some authors have dealt with the complex relationship between so called secret societies and the memories of slave trade (Shaw 2000, Ferme 2001). Building upon the seminal work of Murphy (1980) and Bellman (1984), several scholars have stressed the importance of secrecy as an everyday 'rite of institution', to put it *à la* Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1990), a tool to categorically separate elders from youths, men from women, autochthones from strangers etc. (for an excellent case study on the relational logics of secrecy among the Guinean Bassari, see Gabail 2012; a similar approach on the Mandjak of Guinea Bissau is offered by Gable 1997). Although each author tries to stress a different aspect of secrecy, they would all agree that what is important for the anthropologist is, as Simmel had already argued in his seminal study on secrecy a century ago (Simmel 1950), the formal aspect, i.e. the performance of secrecy in daily interactions. Substantially, any attempt to try to get at the heart of what the secret concealed really is is deemed by most of these authors unnecessary, if not counterproductive.

While I endorse the Simmelian paradigm that considers secrecy as a mechanism of bonding, in which the content of the secret is much less important than its performance, over the last years I have been nurturing the hope that secrecy can be more positively approached. Inspired by Fernandez's seminal work on religious imagination (1984), I want to explore a rendering of secrecy that views it not only as a way of telling people 'this door is closed to you', but also as an imagination trigger that incites people to visualize possible 'openings', and thus inspire creativity. Secrecy, in my view, is an index to the potential, a though-provoking device. I am following here the inspirational work of Alessandro Duranti and his team who, in their approach to linguistic interactions, have suggested that linguistics should work towards a stronger link between verbal arts and creativity, thus complementing the performative approach to language first started by Austin in his seminal *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1962). Duranti and McCoy (2019) have argued that it is not only 'generative grammar' that linguists should pay attention to, but also to how language (and sometimes silence and gesture) may generate possible scenarios and potentiality of action in the minds of the interlocutors, which is, I would like to argue, what secrecy is largely about.

Apart from not giving room to imagination, a limitation of the Simmelian approach is that, by default, as it forces us to ignore the *content* of secrecy. Instead, it implicitly forces us assume that secrecy is part of social and individual 'bluff'. Of course, the most elementary research ethics oblige us not to explore the secrets of those who keep them apart from us. But it is one thing to explore people's intimacy and another to tacitly assume that that every time they speak of their 'secrets' they are bluffing. How could we know? Having lived among the Baga, one of the Upper Guinea Coast societies well known for their secret practices and discourses, I can confidently state that they do have a lot of *substantial* secrets.

One of the secrets in particular (the main one, according to one interviewee in 1994) was incredibly delicate, although, as I will comment towards the end of this article, it is today becoming less and less problematic to critically engage with it. It had to do with who was and who was not a slave-descendant in the community. In the mid- 1990s, when I was conducting my fieldwork, Western scholarship had established that 'Baga refused to engage in the slave trade throughout its history', as one of the most

influential textbooks at the time put it (Iliffe 1995). Yet, in the early 1990s, as Iliffe was writing his study, in the Baga village where I was living a man died mysteriously because---or so I was told---he refused to let his son marry a woman in the village, saying in public that his son would not marry a slave. The high spirit Amanco, a powerful social regulator simultaneously feared and admired by my Baga interviewees, had made the man die, I was told, because the latter had made a forbidden act: revealing the impure origins of someone else in public. Among Baga, you are (or were in the 1990s) entitled to refuse to let your son marry a particular woman, but if you wanted to discuss slave origins, you could only do it in the seclusion and secrecy of the ritually sanctioned space called *afan*, often glossed as 'the sacred bush'. You should not bring the issue up in the *abanka*, the open, public space.

On another occasion, an elderly man told me that all the previous Baga interviewees who had systematically claimed that the Baga were not slaves and had no slaves were lying: 'They lie; there are lots of slaves among us'. He then went on to recall an occasion on which a man had killed himself out of shame because his slave origins had been revealed in public, during a ritual in which someone else had chanted them using the *capafo* genre, an obscure and often highly imaginative way of speaking in parables and metaphors. Baga valued speaking in the *capafo* genre, and some Baga elders I met in the 1990s were famous for the beauty of their cryptic metaphors. Slavery was indeed one of the biggest secrets and the main reason why nobody was happy about an ethnographer asking questions about history, kinship, and social structure in the villages.

However, my point is not that secrecy has always to do with delicate information such as slave origins. More often than not, my involvement with secrecy as a social practice was less tragic than the cases invoked above, and much more poetic. Some ethnographic recollections may help to clarify my take on secrecy as an imagination trigger and as a producer of remoteness, a concept I will elaborate further down. The first one goes back the beginning of my fieldwork, in April 1993. Strictly speaking it has little to do with secrecy as such, but it illustrate the way Baga related to landscape in elusive ways of speaking meant to awake imaginations about the past, and in particular about the abandonment of initiation rituals in the late 1950s. I was walking with a young man around his native village when he pointed towards a cassava field and said, 'and this is where our sacred bush used to be'. 'Used to be?' I asked. 'Yes', he replied, 'it was here that we used to do the initiations into manhood, but Asekou cleared it in 1957; he put an end to our custom', he said, referring to Asekou Sayon, a Mandingo sheikh and *jihad*ist who, in the late colonial period, destroyed the ritual paraphernalia of many 'pagan' cultures in Guinea. What made his *jihad* particular was not its iconoclastic take or its religious innovation, common to many social movements in late colonial times, but the fact that his religious iconoclasm paved the way for the overtly political iconoclasm of Sékou Touré's 'demystification' policies (1958–84). Because in colonial times Baga were famous for their rich ritual and material culture, the extent to which iconoclasm has meant a rupture in the knowledge chain and in perceptions of pastness has become a common theme in the work of most scholars dealing with Baga issues (Lamp 1996, Curtis 2013; Sarró 2009; Berliner 2005).

My friend's comment was the first step in my journey to learning to observe Baga landscape with 'second sight'. From that day on, I had to learn to look at a manioc field and see an elders' wood. I had to look at the present and see the past, and to be aware

that, as an elderly Baga man once told me, whatever appears fast in front of our eyes is deceitful: truth always lags behind. The trick, in fact, is not to look at a manioc field and see an elders' wood, but to perceive the elders' wood and the manioc field simultaneously, to see one without losing hold of the other. The young man went on to deplore the lack of the 'sacred bush' in question, explaining to me that in the days when the bush existed, everything was much better and all Baga were connected to one another in a large, invincible community. Like many other Baga interlocutors, he was implying that had I visited them in pre-iconoclastic times I would have been amazed at the richness and coherence of their culture and social institutions. This was a constant impression I gained from my initial period of fieldwork: I was there, in the Dabaka (as Baga speakers call their local world), but the *real* Dabaka was elsewhere. Where exactly? I could never figure it out. Sometimes I thought it was only in people's memories. At other times I was given hints that it was there, inside some ritual houses, in some woods I could not enter, in discussions from which I was excluded, in sacrifices to which I was not invited. In any case, it was not in the phenomenal world that I could perceive through my five senses. The 'real' Dabaka was kept *remote* from me, as well as from most of my Baga friends. I am here using 'remote' in Ardener's sense to mean a blurred space that is imagined before it is 'empiricized' or made accessible to the senses (Ardener 1987). Used in such a phenomenological way, the concept of remoteness has little or nothing to do to with geographical distance. Rather, It has to do with imagination and with the capacity of individuals to build 'as if' scenarios provoked by verbal arts in which whatever is presented to the senses becomes an index of realities hidden 'underneath of things', as the Mende of Sierra Leone would say (Ferme 2001), or *behind* them, as the Baga would rather prefer to put it, in *dabal*, as they call the double domain only visible to those with the gift of second sight. Through mastering verbal arts and secrecy, Baga elders could produce scenarios of glorious remoteness, which in people's imagination got blurred with notions of *dabal*.

My second example takes us to a decade later. In 2003 I interviewed Samsara, an old man, in the same village. Ten years earlier, as I was settling into the village, the youths had made a football pitch in precisely the spot where the sacred wood had been located in the past, thus creating the double landscape with which I opened this article. I asked old Samsara about his feelings about this sporting encroachment on previously ritual space. He did not seem very worried. 'The youths think that this is where our sacred wood was located; but in fact the most important part of the sacred wood remains intact. It was not quite there, but a few meters beyond today's pitch', he clarified, using an ideophone and a very clever change of adverb that opened a totally new indexical field (*bafo nde, ndinda*: not there (*nde*), *over* there (*ndinda*)!). With this, and similar examples, I realized that the Dabaka was not only being kept remote from me, but that keeping it remote was a very valuable ability and probably the only way, paradoxical as it may sound, to keep it somehow present. Indeed, I realized that the question of whether it was there, hidden somewhere, or had been completely destroyed by the iconoclasts was not only a nagging doubt of mine but also a lively topic of debate among the Baga themselves. *Dabaka deyi de* (Dabaka is here, Dabaka exists), said someone. *Dabaka delece* ('the Dabaka is broken up'), said someone else. Sometimes an interviewee would say one thing, and say the opposite a few minutes later. In any case everybody seemed convinced enough that, if the Dabaka existed, it existed only in concealment: the debate was about the capacity or lack of capacity of the Baga to bring

it back to light. 'Dabaka is there', said an old man one day, 'we're just waiting for the right conditions to make things be like before again'.

My third example comes from another village, in 1996. The residents of that village told me that in 1956 the iconoclastic leader Asekou Sayon had marked the spot where the big mosque was to be built a few years later. Today, the villagers proudly show visitors their mosque. Visitors may notice that at the side of the mosque, only one metre away from it, there is a long stone. The first time I visited the place someone pronounced a *capafo* about the stone. On that occasion, the person said something I did not understand at all, and cannot even recollect now. When, months later, I asked him about the pronouncement, he said he did not remember either. But, he told me, he wanted to make sure I noticed the stone. I was told that in the past, when Baga received visits from by the high spirit *amanco ngopong*, the sprit's interpreter had to stand on that stone (*amanco ngopong* always spoke in a secret language). By using their characteristically cryptic ways of speaking, the villagers were making sure that I did not leave the village with the impression that the Baga had simply converted to Islam. By treating me like that, Baga were somehow initiating me into a kind of 'second sight', making sure I learned that the present, 'ruptured' landscape, to use Eric Gable's phrase (1990), hides a remote one that leaks through stones and trees, like memories leak through ruins. But it would be wrong to assume that the villagers were treating me like that because I was a foreigner. Far from it, they were doing with me what they did with their own young people. Lamin once told me that some years earlier, when he was in the mid-20s, the elders of his descent group had taken him on a tour around the village and neighbouring regions and explained to him the meanings of each tree and rock and their relationship to *amanco ngopong* and other spirits. This was not initiation in the classical sense of the word, but it certainly was transmission of knowledge – or perhaps the very making of knowledge through activating imagination and forcing subjects to generate historical hypotheses.

Secrecy and Historical Transformations

'A Baga knows how to shut up' (*wubaka encere kcank*), I heard on many occasions. Secrecy and silence were, indeed, elements Baga presented as being quintessential to their cultural and individual identity. However, we should not follow the essentialist view and assume that secrecy has no historicity. Secrecy on the Upper Guinea Coast, and certainly in post-iconoclastic Guinea, is no doubt a historical product and a very plastic one at that. Historical events (colonialism, Islam, socialist policies, etc) have affected the way people speak about themselves, and the ritual practices they engage with. And the plasticity continues. Among the Baga, we are witnessing today a rather drastic transformation in the ethos of secrecy I could document and experience in the 1990s. From an environment in which, since the mid-17th century to the end of the 20th century (according to written and oral history), being secretive and elusive in the depths of the mangroves was part of a 'protective camouflage' against slave raiders, Muslim iconoclasts, and colonial intruders, we are now transitioning into a new environment in which it does no longer make sense to try and hide from anybody.[1]

[1] I write 'protective camouflage' in quotation marks because I am borrowing the term from Murray Last, who in an unpublished article (Last 1980) on what he called 'deep rural' societies, put forth the hypothesis that peripheral societies---like the Maguzawa in relation to Kano, and I would add the Baga in relation to the Muslim Futa Djalon---have

Hiding deeper and deeper in the mangroves does not protect, for the very simple reason that there are no longer mangroves to protect anybody in the dramatically fast-changing coast of Guinea today. Quite literally, Baga live between the Devil (in the form of mining companies and climate change) and the deep blue sea.

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century sources presented the Baga as highly reclusive and linked to what historical sources refer to as 'secret societies', mostly to one putatively called *simo*. This association with secret societies, however, arose from a misconstruction, for *simo*, a Susu word used on coastal Guinea to refer to 'secret practice,' 'secret', or 'mask', was not really a 'secret society' in any organizational sense (nothing compared to Poro, for instance, even if geographically close). Instead *simo* relates to a body of practices and ways of speaking that were construed and reified into a 'secret society' by travellers, missionaries, and administrators, together with some early ethnographers (e.g. Chevrier 1906; see Sarro 2009 for further examples and analyses). The reputation of being secretive was, for the Baga, as good a protective camouflage as the forest and mud of the mangroves themselves. It indicated to foreigners (slave raiders especially) that they mastered esoteric arts for keeping enemies at bay. Building a stereotype of being 'secret' is however rather paradoxical, especially if you want to stress the secrecy with masks and other material culture aiming at revealing and concealing simultaneously, a paradoxical aspect of Baga art, and o much of West African art linked to initiation and secret/sacred knowledge.[2] I am tempted to venture that Baga overdid the material aspect. They became famous in a large part of West Africa both for having secrets *and* for boasting the biggest masks and ritual objects. These included the famous *nimba* headdress (Curtis & Sarró 1997), but also the elusive *amanco ngopong* (a representation of the high spirit Amanco already mentioned). The latter has never been photographed, but according to elderly people's memories I recorded in the 1990s, it was 20-metre high sculpture. The paradox of having to let publics know, through such impressive material culture (accompanied by music and performance), that you possess powerful protective secrets eventually backfired, leading to the Baga becoming a magnet for Muslim iconoclasts like Asekou Sayon. When, in 1993 and 1994, I interviewed Asekou Sayon, then an old man, he told me he had pursued the *jihad* against the 'fetishist' people of Guinea for a long time (according to him since as early as 1935), but that reaching the Baga, which he did in 1956, and their fearsome *amanco ngopong* was his ultimate goal. Indeed, in the 1940 and 1950s they were the most visibly 'Pagan' people in the French colony.

The Baga learned the lesson. As a direct consequence of the iconoclastic movement, they increased their secrecy so that no more secrets or objects could be stolen from them. "Asekou Sayon could destroy the objects but he could not open up our bellies" an old man told me in 2001, meaning that the knowledge (placed in the belly) of the objects

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a vested interested in being known by their powerful neighbours as 'deep rural' people living inside forests where they find freedom, protected both by the ecology and by stereotypes of 'backwardness' and 'paganism'. Much like the bushes of Northern Nigeria, the mangroves of coastal Guinea were, in the past, alternative spaces of freedom where to find safe refuge from slave trade, Islamisation, and colonialism.

[2] So far, the most thorough collection of essays pertaining to the paradoxical relationship between secrecy and visual arts in Africa is the catalogue edited by African art historian Mary H. Nooter (1993).

was not taken away with the destruction of the object. Today, *everything* is secret for them. A man once told me, 'in the past we knew what was secret and what was not; today we do not know, so before risking discussing things that are secret without realizing, we prefer to treat everything as secret'. 'When in doubt, keep it secret' seemed to be rule at the time of my doctoral fieldwork. In 1995 I asked a young man who held a university degree in agriculture about cattle. I knew that Baga had been reported to be keepers of cattle in the past, even though they now live entirely off agriculture. 'How come Baga used to have cattle and they do not have cattle now?' I asked, assuming it was a safe question. He looked at me with pity. 'I would really like to help you', he said, 'but I am not sure my elders would be happy for me to be speaking about it with a stranger'. Cattle ownership, and the reasons why it had been abandoned, was indeed a secret. But so was rice, history, kinship, naming practices, politics, and art. Every bit of knowledge, even those that neighbouring societies would have been quite happy to share, was deemed 'a secret', and very often '*our* secret'. This has often put the Baga in very awkward situations with development agencies trying to help them improve their rice farming technologies (or learn from them, as the case may be). How do you exchange knowledge with someone who values silence and secrecy? 'Baga are impossible!' a desperate French agronomist directing a development organization told me in 1996.

One more ethnographic recollection may come in handy to illustrate the protective nature of secrecy, and indeed of lying. In 1994 I met a German linguist at the University of Conakry with whom I worked every day on Baga linguistics for three and a half months, together with my field assistant Aboubacar Camara, who I had brought from the village where I had been living for 9 months. On the first day, the German linguist wanted to conduct a preliminary questionnaire about the Baga language, and asked Aboubacar to give the singular and the plural of several words relating to body parts. 'How do you say 'ear'?' he would ask, and Aboubacar would answer, '*alolm*'. And 'ears'? '*Lolm*', etc. When it came to 'eye/eyes', Aboubacar gave the singular as *for* and the plural, to my surprise, as *sofor*. 'I thought the plural of *for* was *dofor*?' I told him after the session. 'You are right', he said. 'Then, why did you say *sofor*?' I asked. In reply he said, 'a Baga is not going to tell the truth to a foreigner the first day they meet'.

Blatantly lying, however, is an extreme solution, and some people may not even need to resort to it if they know how to master the verbal arts of secrecy. Perhaps the best example of how secrecy and its twin, secretion, work is that of Maître Albert. I use 'secretion' here to mean the leaking of secrets that is part and parcel of secrecy as a way of speaking, as well documented by Andras Zempléni (1976, 1983). The first time someone mentioned Albert's name to me was in the village where I was living in 1994. Jean, a man who was very kind but always reluctant to tell me explicit things, came to me one day and said: 'If you want to know about our history you ought to go to [the village of] Kariya and meet Albert; he knows a lot, he has kept books and manuscripts from the missionaries, including a sketch of [the high spirit] *amanco ngopong* that he shows to selected people; go there, but do not tell him it was me who told you to go'. In fact, I did not need to go to Kariya, as Maître Albert came to the house where I was living one day. 'Ah, you are the ethnographer', he said. He told me that nobody had ever done a proper ethnography of the Baga because of the 'secrets'. Like others before him, he told me he felt sorry for me. As he was leaving the house, Albert asked me: 'By the way, do you know what the word 'Baga' means?' My answer was negative. 'Well' he said, 'give it

up. You will never find it out; we the Baga are very proud of our secrets'. Later, some other interviewees also told me that the meaning of 'Baga' (which they never revealed) was the highest of the secrets taught, or 'eaten' (to use their own language), during the initiation in the sacred bush.

Despite all this orientation towards secrecy, I found a tension among Baga between centripetal notions of concealment and centrifugal revelation through writing. The tension is common in West Africa. In that part of the world, most of the charms people use to protect themselves against the evil eye are pieces of paper with some inscription (often Qur'anic) on them, wrapped in leather and hidden from sight. A Baga example of this hybridizing between writing and secrecy is found in the concept of *sebe labe*. *Sebe labe*, according to some interviewees (who very cagily pronounced the word to me), was glossed as solemn secret learnt in the sacred bush. Yet, *sebe* is the Mandingo word for 'writing', while Labe is a Muslim centre of learning in the Fouta Djallon, the highlands where the Baga place their mythical origins (from where, they claim, the Muslim Fula expelled them in the eighteenth century). Whatever *sebe labe* was, it was, among other things, an appropriation of Muslim ways of learning and a hybridization between secrecy and literacy of the kind Louis Brenner (2000) has written about in his works on Sufism, and Julien Bonhomme has covered in his work on Bwiti initiation in Gabon (Bonhomme 2006).

Probably because of the presence of French missionaries in the Baga region since the late 19th Century, writing (often in French) has been quite common practice among the Baga, though very often the practice had to come to terms with the prevailing ethos of secrecy. One day, Abou came to me with a handwritten notebook. It contained a narrative that a relative, a Catholic young man, had collected by sitting next to an elderly man and writing down the stories that the latter told him. The manuscript contained valuable information about the history of the village and, needless to say, my eyes goggled when I saw it. Yet, Abou said to me: 'You can read it, but I forbid you to use it'. 'Don't do that!' I protested, 'how am I to read a text on the history of the Baga and not use it while I am writing a thesis on the Baga'? Abou insisted: 'Just read it; you will learn a lot from it.' I did read it, avidly, and I guess I learned a lot from it (while trying as hard as I could to memorize the specific narratives it contained). Whether I ever 'used' it or not is a matter of interpretation, but perhaps this was what Abou was trying to convey to me in his cagey way. We have to learn how to use knowledge and how to navigate Baga ways of speaking and of learning. In any case, the existence of the notebook is revelatory of the tension between written documentation that passes from hand to hand, occasionally reaching the ethnographer, and the centripetal secrecy of the Baga. There were lots of such notebooks among young people, I realized later. As long as the knowledge is kept in notebooks, it is fine. It is the publication of such knowledge that makes people anxious as I realized in Conakry in 2001. I was at home, reading a published article on Baga history written by a Baga intellectual (Bangoura 1989). Two young Baga men studying in Conakry came to visit me, and I told them I was reading about their culture. To my surprise, they became very apprehensive when I started to read the text aloud, and asked me to shut up. I told them that that the article was a written, published document. They replied that they were appalled that the author, a Baga man, had decided to unveil so many secrets. They attributed it to the fact that the man was a Catholic and a native of Katako, a huge village that, owing to the presence of a large Catholic mission there since the early twentieth century, has gradually moved individuals away from Baga ways of speaking towards Christian narratives and an

explicit 'folkorization' of their pre-Christian religious culture. The two young visitors were from a smaller village where fear about powerful spirits is much more tangible. But it certainly was not the semantic, propositional knowledge transmitted in the text that worried them, for they did not even pay attention to it. It was the fact that some of the *words* used in the text sounded too 'uncanny', and one in particular, *somtup* (my fingers still tremble as I am typing this article 25 years later), provoked an emotional reaction of immediate avoidance. For them, listening to that word was (to use an analogy Aboubacar suggested once) like seeing a chameleon: you run away from it without asking too much.

The two contrasting notions of knowledge transmission, 'eating secrets' and 'writing books', rarely met. Yet there were interesting mediating cases, like Maître Albert's. In the past Albert had been a ritual specialist in charge of making sacrifices to the spirit with whom the owners of his spirit province had signed a contract. He later went to Conakry, where he stayed for many years as a city dweller. He was trained as a schoolteacher and later sent to a school in his native region, where he successfully reintegrated himself with the village. I often hear gossip according to which he had a 'secret library' that included a sketch of *amanco ngopong*. I was once told by someone who knew him well, that Albert had inherited the documents that a famous French missionary, Mgr Raymond Lerouge, had left to villager Eugene Caro, the first ever Baga Catechist. Lerouge was a keen amateur ethnographer who very often drew sketches of Baga objects in his field notebooks. While most of these notebooks are located in the archives of the Holy Ghost Fathers in France, some---and certainly the one containing the sketch of *amanco ngopong*, which Lerouge himself referred to in another text---are missing. Despite his initial reluctance to talk to me and his off-putting question about 'the meaning of Baga' referred to above, Maître Albert and I became very close several years later. He is indeed the most informed man I have had the privilege to work with, and has given me much precious information, including about such delicate issues as slavery. So, one day I asked him openly about the library. 'I know people think I have a secret library, but it is not true. Eugene did not leave anything. My knowledge comes from having listened very carefully to my elders; they chose me because they saw I was very keen on learning', he told me.

Whether true or false, the alleged secret library of Albert and its secret public exemplifies the mutual feedback between oral and written modes of cultural transmission. Given how prolific Catholic missionaries were on the subject from the 1920s onwards and the vast number of university dissertations on Baga Sitem written by educated city dwellers since the mid-1960s, today the quantity of written sources literate Baga can access is huge, and provides Baga with a series of narratives that are helping them secure a peculiar sense of identity and place in the world. Albert's story is an example of how texts are incorporated into the lived world of the peasants and of the compromises that arise between centripetal notions of secrecy and centrifugal notions of writing.

People who had been initiated in colonial times are now dead. Systems of knowledge are changing fast, and Baga live today in a particularly accelerated new environment, losing their mangroves to climate change and to bauxite mining companies (in the 1990s there was only one mining company operating on the coast where the Baga lived; no less than 15 new one have arrived in the same place over the last 7 years). Besides, since 2001, more and more American citizens have been visiting the coast of Guinea in

search of their own historical roots, and archaeologists have started to dig in the slave sites of Boffa and Conakry. In the historical centre of the coastal town of Boké a 'slave route' has been created for tourists and locals. Faced with this publicity of the memories of the slave trade, many Baga people today do not understand today why the elders two decades ago were so reluctant to discuss the engagement of Baga in it. 'I do not know why we have to keep on saying we had nothing to do with slavery as our elders claim', a young man told me already in 2003, when he was the president of the youth association of his village, 'for all I know, I may have some relatives in the US'. Perhaps he represented a new generation of historical consciousness, I thought. The new generation that was emerging with the new millennium is certainly having a different take, I can now certify. As a very old man once said on national TV, during a Baga cultural festival in a village in 2016: 'the youths are taking over', meaning young people today know more than elderly people do. As a researcher, I find this theoretically and ethically challenging. 25 years ago information about slavery was given to me in tiny doses and making me feel very uneasy about using the highly sensible data. At times I wished Iliffe had been right in his assessments so that I did not have to deal with the awkward ethical situation in which I found myself. If someone, whether a villager or a scholar, subscribed to the stereotype reproduced in history books about the lack of involvement of the Baga in the slave trade I did not know whether my moral and scientific obligation was to contradict them or to remember that 'a good Baga knows how to shut up' and do like them, as the information on slavery I had had been given was very often in strict confidence. Today, I find myself in a totally different ethical scenario, one in which younger people want to know more and more about their past, and come to terms with historical contradictions. Having been involved in the trade in one way or another, either as raiders or refugees, does not bring them shame, and they are more and more eager to interact with Westerners who visit Guinea in search of their roots. In fact, as recently as April 2019 I was accompanying a French man of Baga origins and his wife around several Baga villages, and we engaged in lively discussions about the transnational dispersion of African cultures across the Atlantic. At no point did I experience any sense of embarrassment or apprehension on our interlocutors at the possibility of their Baga ancestors having been agents in the making of the contemporary Atlantic.

In my recent visits to the Dabaka in 2018 and 2019 I found that all the elders who had the verbal arts to create a remote Dabaka with their silence, their deictic gestures, and their extraordinary ability to use the *capafo* genre have all gone (even younger interlocutors, like the friend who in 1993 had pointed out to the cassava field and told me about the sacred bush, have left us). This was the generation of men and women who were young enough to remember the colonial times when initiations existed, and many of them had indeed been initiated in the last recorded initiation (1948). They died, but the Dabaka they produced before disappearing did no gone with them. New ways of speaking are emerging to nourish the imagination of the public about a distant and glorious past. Thus, a popular musician in the mining port and city of Kamsar, a man in his mid-30s, has composed a highly successful song entitled no less than 'Amanco', a name which twenty years ago nobody would have dared to use for a song. More explicitly than any veiled reference to the high spirit Amanco in the past, much more semanticized than ever before, the spirit of Amanco is emerging from the iconoclastic ruins and moving towards the dance floor of Kamsar nightclubs. It is difficult to say how the elderly people back in the 1990s would have reacted if a young person would have dared to compose a song about Amanco, but the truth is that without their secretions,

their gestural performances and their insinuations through *capafo*, this emerging 'mythologization' of Baga religious culture would have not been possible. It was through secrecy, not despite secrecy, that the concept of Amanco has been construed in younger people's imagination and is now being commodified by young men who fear no spiritual punishment from the spirit. In being imaginative and let their inspiration flow, the emerging generation of Baga, perhaps a 'postmemory' one, in Hirsch's terms (Hirsch 2012), are critically engaging with Baga history and culture. How important, if at all, it will be for them to perform Baganess by shutting up, as their elders did, is early to say. Perhaps future researchers will find that the days of Baga secrecy are done and dusted, and that new environments require new ways of speaking. For the time being, in the critically endangered fragile mining landscape in which they are navigating, Baga young people probably think it is much more urgent for them to perform Baganness by singing rather than by remaining silent.

Conclusion: The *Poiesis* of Secrecy

In the introduction to this collection of articles, Coleman and Dulin make a suggestive bridge between the ethics of discernment and what Matthew Engelke has called a 'problem of presence' (2007). By understanding secrecy as an 'imagination trigger', I am also engaging with the problem of presence. Presence is indeed a 'problem' for any culture that, although once very rich in visual and material culture linked to spiritual agencies, has suffered the brutal consequences of iconoclastic rage. By being secret, post-iconoclastic Baga were sheltering their cosmological convictions and preventing other religious reformers (whether Muslim or Christian) from attempting to destroy them again. They did not need to make their spirits present with masks and sculptures as they did in the past, for, as we have seen, 'iconoclasts can destroy objects, but they cannot open our belly'. The belly (*kor*) becomes here not only a metaphor for power, as is typical in African political imagination (Bayart 1982) but of the putative 'deep knowledge' that lies underneath what is said, beyond words and semantics, as Apter has argued in relation to the Yoruba (Apter 2009:15–33), and which is a reservoir for resistance and, perhaps, future rebellion.

The dialectics of presence and absence, between semantics and pragmatics, to put it *à la* Apter, does not limit itself to the Baga's concealment of objects, making them invisible and un-presentable. When the Baga told me that everything was secret, they were not only concealing; they are also producing. If the material 'presentification of the invisible' (Vernant 1983) was quintessential to the religious culture of the pre-iconoclastic Baga of a hundred years ago, more recent generations learned that by being silent, elusive, and secretive they can indeed produce spiritual presence in non-material and non-visual ways. Secrecy is an art of creativity. Indexing a tree, saying a *capafo* in front of a stone, are ways to guarantee you are awakening the imagination of those who listen, encouraging them to reflect upon their relationship with the place, and to weave it with others. I have argued that secrecy helps the Baga construct, and inhabit, a 'remote' world, a world in which the sensorial has given way to the imagined. In 1957 Baga youths destroyed the objects and the sacred woods, but secrecy helps them live in a world of ambiguity, a world in which what you see though your senses conceals another world, behind the appearances, or in 'the underneath of things' as the neighbouring Mende people would rather say (Ferme 2001). This underneath of the Mende---very similar, if not identical, to the invisible realm Baga call *dabal*---is in many ways much

more real than the sensorial appearances. A Baga man once told me that whatever appears to our eyes first is *yem* (a concept often translated as 'falsehood' or 'lie'), whereas *kance* ('truth') lags behind.

Secrecy has been for generations of Baga a weapon of the weak, used to fight against those who want to steal everything the Baga have, from beautiful wooden 'fetishes' to knowledge about rice or slavery. Baga have gone through a violent age of slave raiding and trading, through a violent colonization, through a very violent iconoclastic movement, and through a violent series of unfair postcolonial governments, some with totalitarian overtones. Secrecy has been the oil that greases the wheel of resilience that allows them to endure through such difficult times. Baga remember the initiation they went through, the pain they suffered together, the sense of individual completion that going through the initiation gave them. Through their arts of secrecy, the elders have kept the world of the past distant from the youths who did not live through it. But, at the same time, by repeating once and again how very little they can say, how sworn to secrecy they are, and by *showing* what they cannot *say*, they create possible worlds for their audiences, and provide them with an ideal *Doppelbereich*, to use Rilke's uncanny concept, a concept I have related to Ardener's 'remoteness'. The worlds of the past, worlds once destroyed by iconoclastic fury, are restored in the imagined world, and inevitably projected towards the future, towards the potentiality of attainability. Baga construct hope by stressing nostalgia. 'The Dabaka is broken' is a pessimistic statement, but it gives impetus to young people to try to restore it. 'What can you do when your world starts to fall apart?' asks Anna Tsing in her latest book (2015). Whatever the answer is, 'using your imagination' is certainly part of it, and this is what Baga incite pubics to do with their verbal arts and ways of speaking. Today there are vivid discussions among young Baga as to the possibility or not of returning to old ritual practices and bringing back ritual objects, to have an 'empiricized' Dabaka, to use Ardener's terms, with clear boundaries and political control of the territory. As discussed in this article, one thing I have noticed is that this empirical politicization of the Baga identity and territory is accompanied by increasing talk about, and acceptance of, slavery in the villages. There seems to be what I would call an ecology of secrecy. As the environmental and agricultural conditions of possibility of Baga social life are changing, so are the ethics of disclosure and discernment. Both historical knowledge about the Baga in past centuries, when the mangroves protected them, and the situation in which we find them today, in which they seem to expect that someone helps them protect the mangroves, suggest an intimate link between voice and environment, and confirm the need to approach secrecy in a holistic way, as but one part of a living social body that changes and adapts across time and space.

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