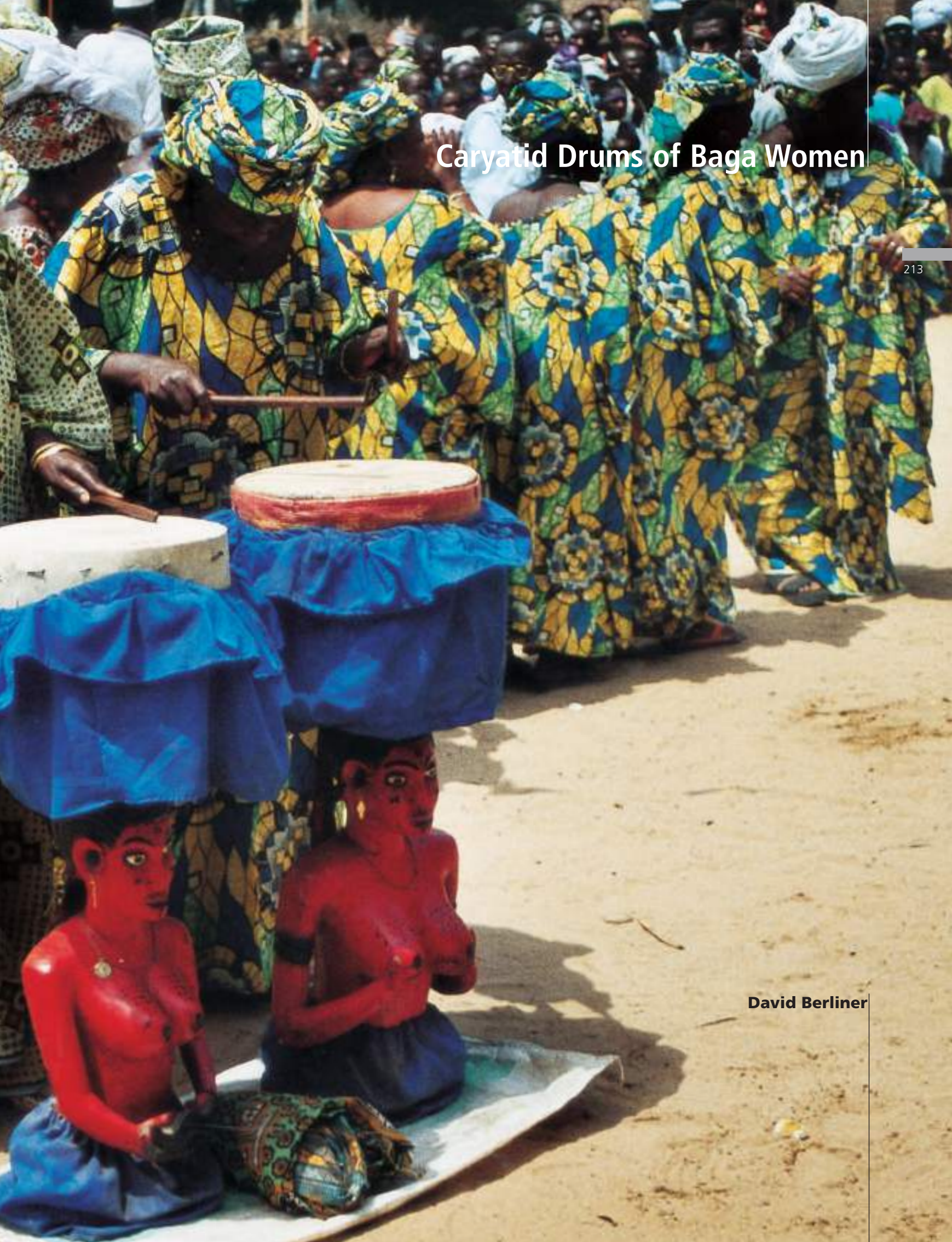




Caryatid Drums of Baga Women

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David Berliner

Finely sculpted caryatid drums are among the objects that have established a reputation for the Baga in the art world. I have mentioned elsewhere¹ the difficulty involved in accurately identifying most objects from the Guinea Coast found in Western museums. The permeable borders of societies such as the Baga, Nalu, and Landuma, present serious problems for anthropologists and art historians in determining stylistic attributions to objects. Notwithstanding the shortage of resources required to accurately identify them geographically and historically, a focused ethnography can shed some light on their previous uses.

The Barbier-Mueller collection includes three “Baga” drums from the coastal region of Guinea-Conakry. One of these (**fig. 2**), an enormous drum supported by a horse with two women on either side, is undoubtedly a *timba*, a men’s drum that Frederick Lamp described as the symbol of both masculine initiation and the power of old men.² Two other caryatid drums in the collection (**figs. 3 and 4**) are indisputably linked to women’s associations. These associations once flourished in the Bagataye (the Baga region) where they continue to perform ritual practices today. Indeed, while the men in most Baga subgroups no longer employ percussive instruments (or, at least, not the drums that are so skillfully decorated), women’s associations continue to use them. The following description of the ways in which these caryatid drums are currently used in women’s groups is based on ethnographic research that I conducted in one of these subgroups (the Bulongic, with whom I carried out the major part of my research).³

Title pages: *Women dancing for the all-important inauguration of a school in the village.*
Photo by the author.

Fig. 1. *Such sculptures may also be found supporting drums like figs. 2 and 4. Height 66 cm. Former Maurice de Vlaminck collection. Acquired by Josef Mueller in the 1930s. BMG 1001-3. Barbier-Mueller Museum.*

Fig. 2 across. *Large Baga drum supported by two female caryatids on either side of a horse. These instruments were brought out and used only for male ceremonies such as boys’ initiation rites or funerals for elders. Height 172 cm. Former Josef Mueller collection. BMG 1001-14. Barbier-Mueller Museum.*



Fig. 1.





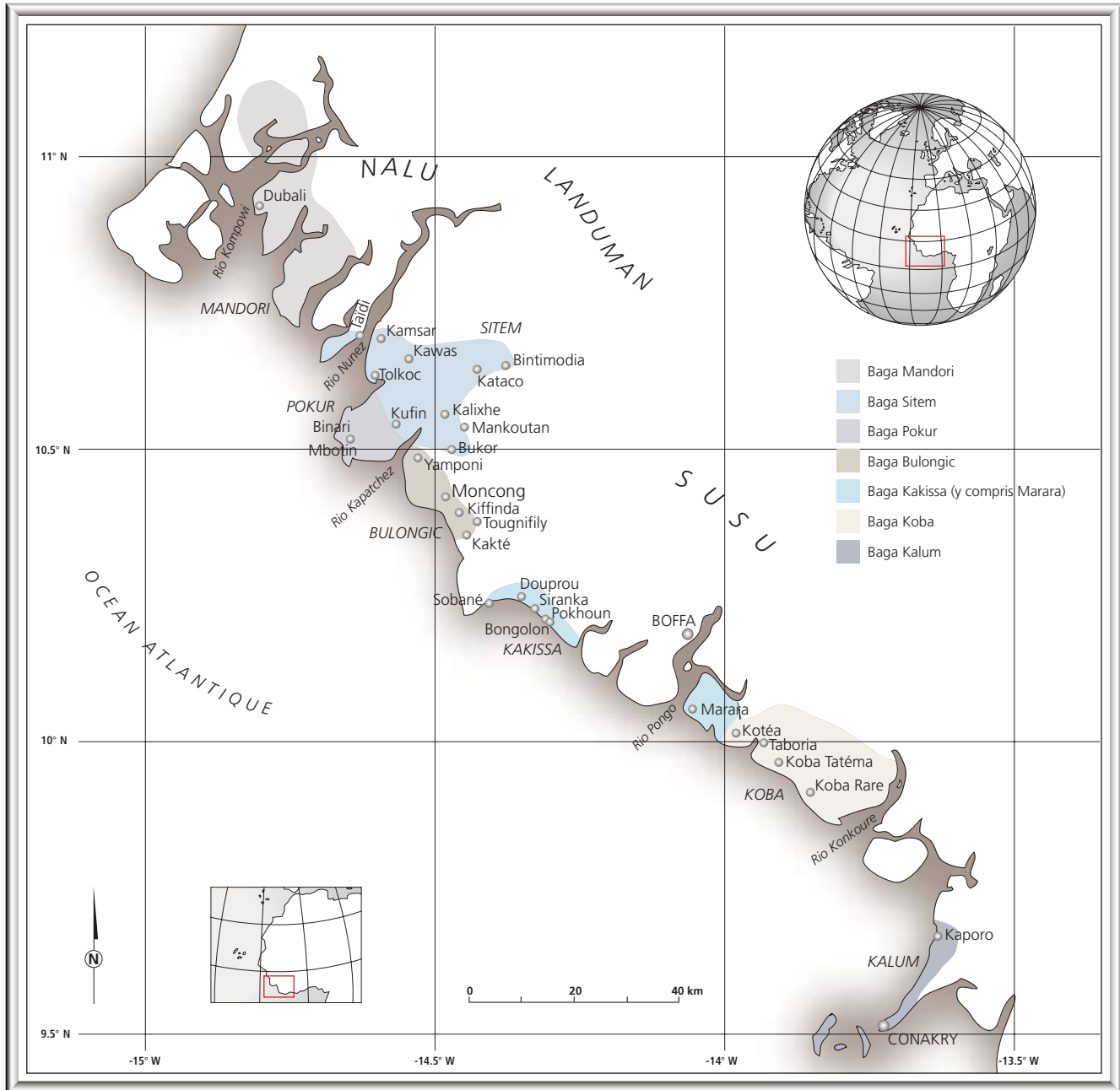


Fig. 4. Large drum supported by a female caryatid.
Height 98 cm. Former Dr. Henri Barbier. BMG 1001-13.
Barbier-Mueller Museum.

Approximately six thousand Bulongic live between the Baga Sitem to the north and the Baga Kakissa to the south. The Susu call them the Baga Forè (and they are better known by this name in anthropological literature). They claim to be (and are acknowledged as being) indigenous to the Rio Kapatchez.⁴ Before the 1950s, these coastal populations were characterized by the presence of mask societies responsible for the initiation of young boys. Numerous sculpted objects (statuettes, masks, and drums, among others) were used in ritual life. These “customs” were maintained primarily by the men. In the name of Islam, however, these latter have ceased their former ritual performances as well as a large number of sculptural practices. A Koranic expert by the name of Asékou Bokaré passed through the Bulongic region in 1955 and definitively put an end to most non-Islamic practices.⁵ The initiation masks were no longer sculpted and the rituals were never again danced.⁶ The drums of initiated men were silenced.

Fig. 3 across. Ceremonial drum representing a kneeling woman holding up or presenting a child. Height 76.2 cm. Former Julius Carlebach. BMG 1001-25. Barbier-Mueller Museum.

During my stay in the Bulongic region, however, I was struck by the ritual dynamism of women’s associations. These associations continue to use certain objects, notably the women’s caryatid drums (known as *endef* in Bulongic), during collective dances. The existence of women’s societies in the Guinea Coast is poorly documented. Only Frederick Lamp mentions the existence of *keke*, a secret women’s society in the Bulongic region, which he compares to the *a-Tekan* of the Baga Sitem.⁷ *Keke* is a ritual organization and Bulongic women, outside of their daily tasks, occasionally take part in its activities. Each Bulongic village possesses an independent association with its own ritual spaces (sacred forest and ritual quarters), and the entire female population of the village and surrounding hamlets gather around the most respected and most elderly women from each neighborhood. The elders say that, in the past, a prerequisite for joining their associations was to have given birth to a child. Today, all Bulongic women, and those married to Bulongic men, can take part in the organization’s ceremonies without any prior initiation.



Map. Location of the бага groups

Although, the *keke* women come together and dance for circumcision rituals and funerals of elder followers, they are particularly concerned with illnesses related to witchcraft. Indeed, as is the case for many women's societies in the subregion,⁸ the *keke* primarily exists as an anti-witchcraft society. Its public activities consist mostly of collective dance sessions during which certain participants become possessed. Each year, the *keke* women meet to perform *otonion* (sacrifices) dedicated to honoring their spirit. As a general rule, these ritual events are held at the beginning of the rainy season (in early May) to promote the coming of the rains and the successful harvesting of the fields. The women sing and dance throughout the night of the *otonion*. Over the course of the dancing, some of them, wild-eyed and dripping with perspiration, become possessed by the spirit (**fig. 5**). The entity takes hold of them, seizes them, and speaks through them. In the course of this possession, some women develop the abilities to divine into the future or see the source of someone's misfortune.⁹

Caryatid drums, when they are available, are utilized during these women's gatherings. Sometimes the drums are beaten by men (**fig. 6**) and other times by the women themselves. During the *otonion*, for example, hours pass to the rhythmical sound of the *endef* drum and the slit drum (*kipem*) beaten by the women (**fig. 7**). The *keke* women, both young and old, sing song after song and dance in a circle with their torsos leaning forward, their buttocks rounded, and their hands on their chests. The dancing space itself is arranged around the drums. Usually, the *keke* women bring out their *endef* caryatid drums when an important group dance is organized. For example, the opening of a new school in the village is a major event (**title pages**), one which requires the active ritual presence of women dancers. A



Fig. 5. A possessed woman shown dancing near a female genie. Under the power of genies, such women develop extraordinary powers such as divination or the ability to recognize an illness in someone. Photo by the author.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

Fig. 6. During female assemblies, drums are beaten by both men and women. Here the drummer is heating the drum to tighten the skin. Photo by the author.

Fig. 7. Drum with a slot (kipem) beaten by a woman of the association. Photo by the author.

woman from the association will often carry the drum on her head and a long procession will form behind her to escort her to the ceremonial venue (**fig. 8**).

Essential for their ritual activities, these drums symbolize the women's associations themselves. This is particularly true in terms of their resistance to the disappearance of such religious practices. The old men in the Bulongic villages are, for the most part, fiercely opposed to these women's ritual practices and would like to have them prohibited. Indeed, such women's rituals lead to severe gendered conflicts where men often physically attacked the women's groups. In one Bulongic village, it is said that the men refused to allow women who have participated in these dances to enter the Mosque, and confiscated the *endef* ritual drums from the *keke* association. Today these drums are part of a war that rages between the sexes over being either in or not in favor of continuing to observe such religious rituals.

On a formal level, the current caryatid drums resemble those that were made in the past and that now rest in Western museums. Kneeling women bearing delicate coiffure and shown with generous bosoms, scarification on their cheeks, and decorations around their breasts and waists are featured on the pieces owned by the Barbier-Mueller collections as well as on the drums I observed in the Baga region. Furthermore, these elements continue to symbolize the basic canons of beauty among Bulongic women (**fig. 9**). Today, most of these drums are carved on special order from women's groups by professional sculptors in Conakry or Kamsar. These costly commissions are often placed by relatives living in the cities, whose interest in perpetuating the tradition encourages them to contribute to the purchase of the drum for the village group.



Fig. 8. A long procession is shown being formed to accompany the drum endef to the ceremonial site. Photo by the author.



During my visits to other Baga subgroups (in the Sitem region, for example), I was fortunate to witness the playing of caryatid drums that were very similar to those I observed among the Bulongic (**fig. 10**). They may well have been purchased from the same town-based sculptors.

In conclusion, I want to consider several points regarding current perceptions of Baga reality and their art. The concept of Baga culture as a “vanishing culture”, increasingly lacking in traditional objects and rituals and constantly eroded by population pressure from their larger neighbors (the Susu) and by Islamization, can already be detected in the work of Denise Paulme, the only anthropologist to have conducted research among the Baga before the independence of Guinea. Paulme adopts a tone abounding in romantic sentiment: an

anthropologist witnessing the disappearance of the Baga before her very eyes. “The anthropologist,” she writes, “has arrived too late to capture these beliefs or to set down these rituals; the people themselves no longer understand the meaning of these rituals, in the cases where they still practice them.”¹⁰ A similar vein of nostalgia runs through works that appear after 1984, when the regime of Sékou Touré came to an end. Frederick Lamp (1996) and Marie-Yvonne Curtis (1996), art historians, both in quest for this lost El Dorado of African Art, give the impression of being more interested in what the Baga once were than in what they are today.

There is no doubt that the different Baga subgroups have experienced dramatic religious changes, from colonization by the French to the “scientific marxism” advocated by Sékou Touré, without omitting the



Fig. 9. A caryatid drum currently used by the Baga. Photo by the author.



Fig. 10. Caryatid drum that has been on display for the arrival of tourists in the Sitem region. Photo by the author.

influence of their Susu neighbors. Islam is spreading steadily across this once-evangelized region, initiation institutions ceased to exist in the 1950s, and the vast majority of objects were subjected to an Islamic *auto-da-fé*. The objects that remained became nomads and eventually found their way into the White Man's museums in a context of colonial and post-colonial violence. However, field experience has taught us something else. The Baga may no longer sculpt the Bansonyi and other Banda that established their international reputation, but they continue to carve and to use objects, including the many drums used in women's rituals. The production of these objects is different from what it once was (production locations, magnitude, and techniques, among other features, have changed), but there remains some continuity maintained notably by women and their religious associations.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

1. Berliner 2004.
2. Lamp 1996.
3. This article is based on information gathered on my first two missions financed by the Friends of the Barbier-Mueller Museum. The missions were conducted in 2000 and 2001 and were supported by the Belgian *Fonds national de la recherche scientifique* (FNRS). Although they cannot be named here, I wish to thank all those people who provided me with invaluable assistance in the Bulongic and Sitem regions.
4. Further anthropological information about them can be found in Camara (1984), Paulme (1956, 1957, 1958), Tyam (1975), and Berliner (2002).
5. For a brilliant description of the process of Islamization in the Sitem region, see Sarro 1999.
6. See Berliner 2005b and Berliner forthcoming in 2007.
7. Lamp 1996.
8. Teixeira 2001.
9. For a detailed description of these sessions, see Berliner 2005a.
10. Paulme, 1957: 7.