



The Katakó Sacred Hoard

I will give you the unseen treasures and hidden riches of secret places. (Isaiah 45:3)

”וְנָתַתִּי לְךָ אוֹצְרוֹת חֵשֶׁךְ וּמְטֹמְנֵי מְסֻתָּרִים” ישעיה מה:ג

The Katakò Sacred Hoard

Eleven masterworks hidden for
60 years deep in the Guinea Jungle,
surviving Jihad and iconoclasm

The Katakò Sacred Hoard

Guinea, River Nunez

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On the cover : Nimba headdress,
1880 (detail; see p. 65)

Dimensions are given in centimeters,
height × width × depth

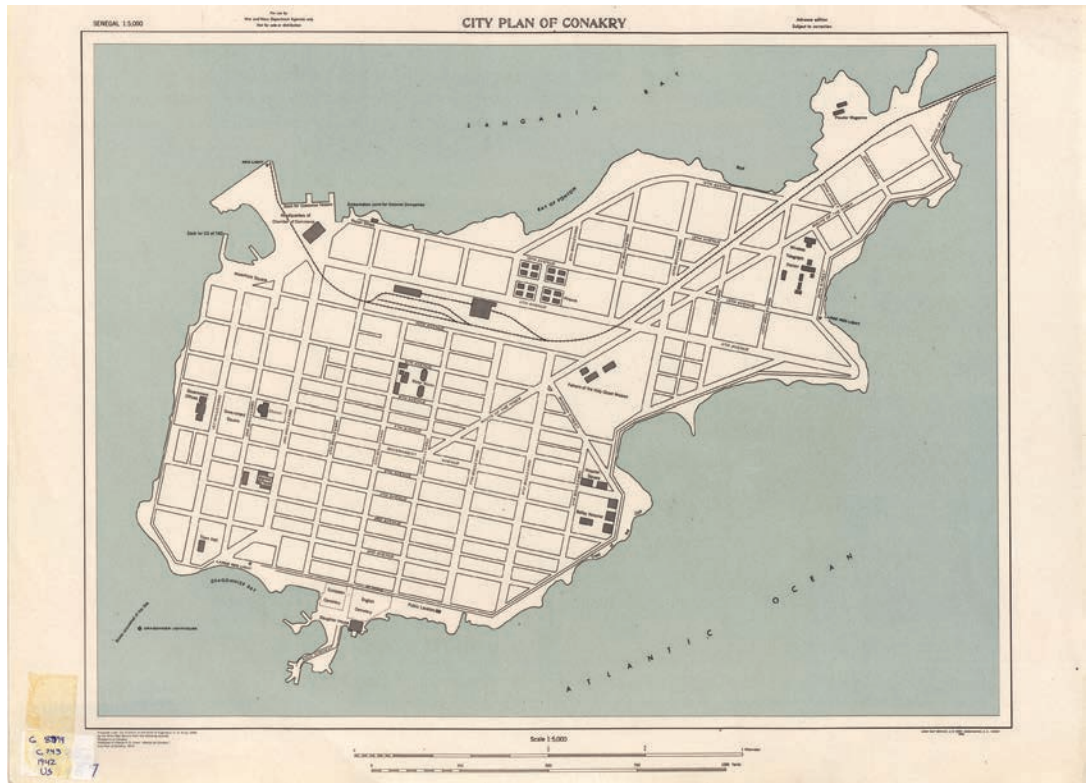
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The Katakò

Sacred Hoard

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Conakry city map,
U.S. Central Intelligence
Agency, 1947

The Path to Discovery



Conakry Office Development,
M.Weiss architects

Unearthing the Katako hoard was the pinnacle of a decade-long journey, starting with my arrival to Conakry in early 2009. I found a dilapidated city just awakening from 50 years of totalitarian regimes, a city whose crumbling infrastructure lay witness to years of total neglect and the devastating effects of the harsh sub-tropical Guinean climate.

Conakry's lack of land reserves combined with no available modern office space appealed to my vision as a real-estate developer. Little did I know of the complexity of actual building in the sub-Sahara bracing myself for the Ebola epidemic, complicated codes of conduct and a totally different concept of time. But the long process had its advantages. Being an architect, appreciating art is part of one's DNA. I was immediately smitten by my first glimpses of Baga art, then still available in the city markets. A decade ago, the only reference book on the subject was Lamp's 'Art of the Baga' which I devoured immediately.



Masked Serpent Dancer, Boko, 1954,
Museum du quai Branly, inv PP007124



Serpent Dancer, concealed
dress apparatus

Later, other scholars joined the ranks, such as Sarro, Berliner, and Curtis. But these books, as elaborate and comprehensive as they were, could not answer seemingly mundane questions, such as how a dancer performs wearing a two-meter-long snake headdress attached to his scalp without breaking his neck.

It took years, long-term relationships and friendships with Guinean collectors and scholars until the richness and sophistication of the Baga culture became apparent to me.

In the middle of 2017, Nkai Sidime, a master sculptor, scholar and a long-term friend and teacher, informed me that he was approached by representatives of the Katako's Baga elders wishing to depart from a group of pre-iconoclasm sacred statues which they kept in total secrecy. Nkai, being



Art of the Baga, Lamp Frederic,
NY the Museum of African Art &
Prestel, 1996

Master N. Sidime, Conakry, 2015

Master N. Sidime and the writer,
Conakry, 2016

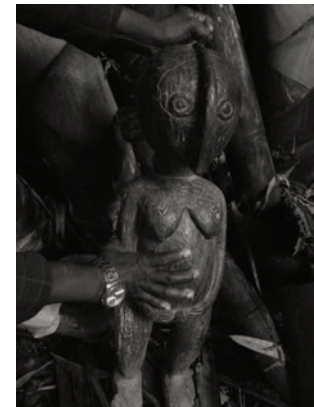


Katakó Map
Graphic design, Studio RenD.

a master craftsman who regularly supplied the Baga Women's Association with modern paraphernalia needed for their gatherings, knew of the group's existence and helped in its day-to-day wood-maintenance, but was obliged according to society rules to keep their existence a secret.

A team was hastily organized and embarked on a trip to Katako, which during colonial times, used to be the Baga's regional administrative capital. Today it is a dormant small village with a few hundred residents, nestled deep among the mangrove swamps of the Nunez river. It took a laborious year, many subsequent trips, and offering numerous sacrifices to appease the spirits. In addition, the team accepted and fulfilled substantial infrastructure and financial obligations on behalf of Katako's Baga community, until all parties involved: spirits, community members, women and men's associations, were satisfied. The hoard, hidden from sight since the

1957 Muslim Jihad, was ready to emerge from its underground hideout, located deep in the women's sacred groove, sheltered by the canopy of the sacred cotton silk trees, where it found refuge for more than sixty years.



Katako Sacred Wood, 2019, The Hoard resurfacing from 60 years in hideout



Katako Sacred Wood, 2019, The Hoard resurfacing from 60 years in hideout

A Time Capsule

The hoard is composed of eleven sculptures. All are immaculately detailed, revealing gestures and finery of a culture long gone. Some sculptures, although using Baga iconography, are Christian in nature and clearly show the Katakato missionaries' successful indoctrination into Baga culture and religion.

The art is sculpted from extremely hard and heavy teak wood, weighing 20-30 kg each. All of the sculptures were dated using I.R.S. technology, with results ranging from 1890-1950.

One of the Masters can be easily identified according a similar sculpture purchased by Fred Bowald in 1935, (currently in Zurich), during his expedition of the Nunez river. (Coinciding with I.R.S. dating – 1935).

All of the group's sculptures were veneered deep in the sacred wood to which access, even today, is restricted to initiates only.

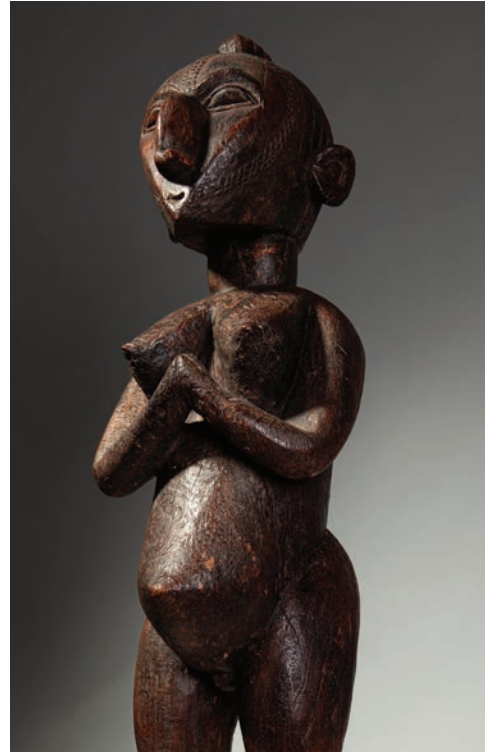
Female figure III, H 102 cm, IRS
dating Circa 1930

Female figure, H 82 cm,
Volkerkunde Museum of Zurich
University, acquired 1934

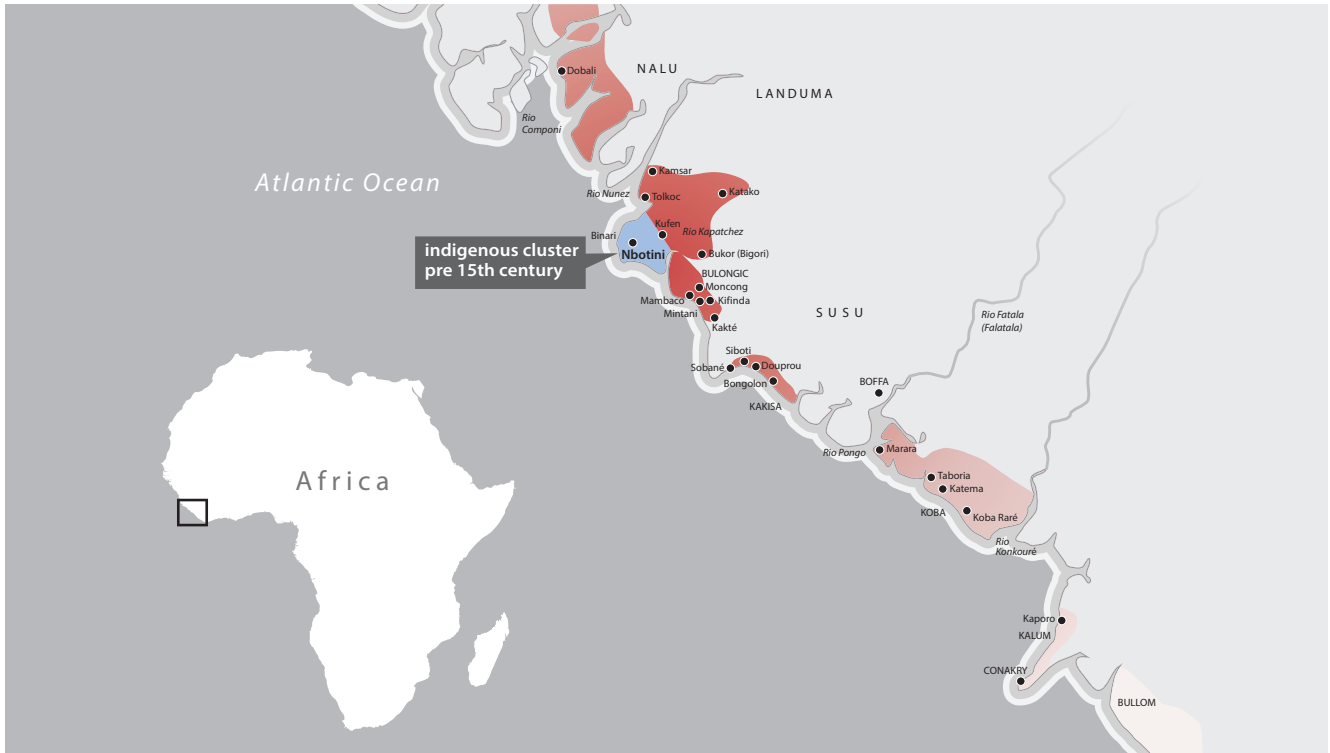


The sculptures are the pinnacle of Baga culture. Therefore, when calamity approached, they were carefully hidden from sight and stored in secrecy near their place of worship. For the past 60 years, their existence was shared only with a few, selected members of the associations who commissioned them, i.e., only those who could be trusted with such a responsibility.

It is the first time that Baga secret society paraphernalia, pre-dating the 1957 iconoclasm, is shown. It was a society, which at its zenith, created works of transcendental and everlasting beauty.



Praying Female Figure, H 88 cm, IRS dating Circa 1930



The Baga spread along the Guinea coast, according to linguistic and ethnic boundaries, graphic design Studio RenD

The Baga

These works were created by master sculptors and clergy of the Baga people of Guinea.

The Baga – in Susu “inhabitants of the sea”– or “those of the frontier land” are a small, deeply rural community of 35,000, as of a 1950s census.

A coastal indigenous society, documented as being in the Guinean Atlantic coastline since the 15th. Century, the Baga were dispersed over some 80 villages set among subtropical mangrove swamps and brackish lagoons, which even today can be accessed only by boats, and are virtually sealed off during the heavy rain season. The scenery’s primal magic is composed of pristine beaches, oil palm trees, gigantic silk cotton trees, and lush red and white mangroves.

Each village usually housed three extended families. All public decisions were made after lengthy

discussions amongst the elders of each of the households. Life was organized according to a cross-section of age and work groups, incorporating all of the households. Rites of passage, circumcisions and other religious ceremonies took place mainly late at night, conducted within the natural cathedrals created by the ravines of the sacred silk cotton trees' gigantic roots. Social and family public affairs, such as weddings, funerals, etc., were lavishly celebrated with dances, performances and ample palm wine, incorporating several villages and thus forming larger political and social networks.

The Baga liturgy and paraphernalia united the entire congregation and enabled the community to act in cohesion and harmony, in which every individual was designated and committed to his age group, his secret society and his extended family.



Mangrove swamps along river Nunez



Dance of the Nimba, Moncton village, photo Beatrice Apia, 1938



Dance of the Signal – Katakoto village, photo Frederic Lamp, 1987

A Safe Haven During the Global Slave Trade

The Baga livelihood throughout the centuries was based on tidal rice cultivation supported by fishing, hunting and salt production (“we Baga salt & rice”). A comprehensive labor-intensive irrigation system based on tides and fresh water flow evolved, enabling the Baga to produce rice in commercial quantities, supplying friend and foe alike.

The Baga constantly needed working hands and were always ready to accept newcomers to their ranks. The endemic malaria and the virtual inaccessibility of the mangrove swamps created a marginal safe haven from the invading Muslim cavalry, who were constantly seeking men to supply the endless demand for captives for the global slave trade. Therefore the Baga territory upstream from the Nunez river was proclaimed as an asylum, attracting refugees fleeing the mainland.



Oryza Glaberrima, rice indigenous to the Guinea Coast



Baga Tidal rice fields



Deep Roots - Rice farmers in West Africa, Fields Edda, Indiana University Press, 2008



Rice farming amongst the Baga
Log of the slaver Sandown 1793-94, National Maritime Museum, London

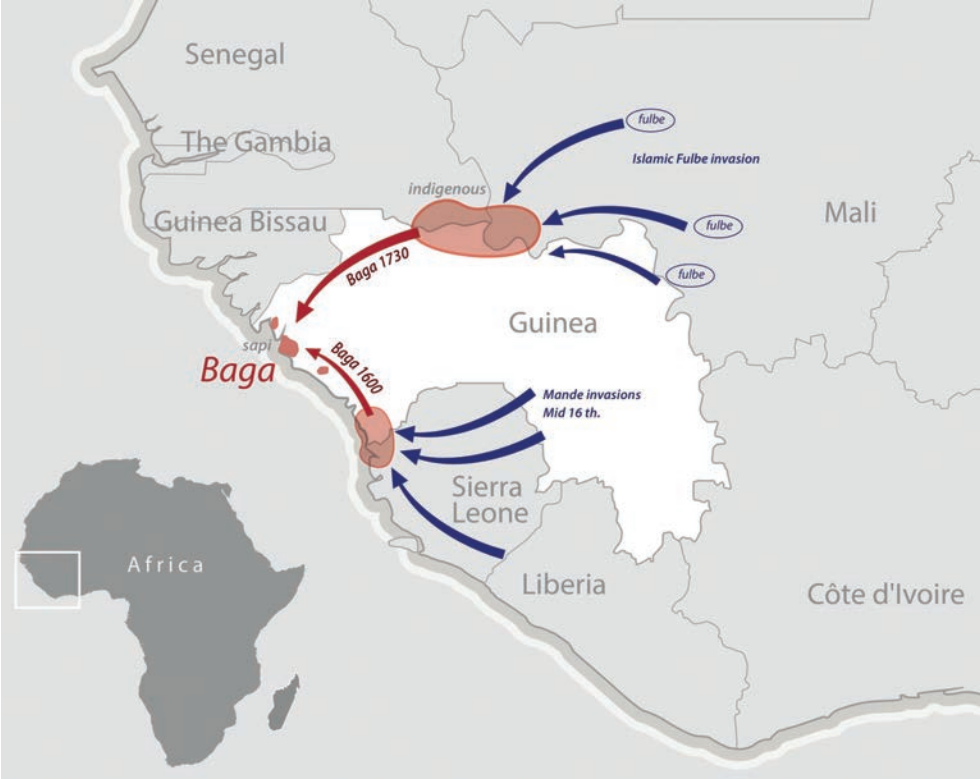


Baga Mangrove tidal rice fields, farmers using the kop – the Baga's traditional hoe



Fulbe warrior – the Mangrove swamps were inaccessible to the Muslim cavalry

Migration to the safe heaven of the Mangrove community, Studio RenD



Culture and Art in the Last Frontier

Two major migration waves formed the Baga culture manifested in the 20th century.

The Mande invasion of the 16th century, into what is today's Sierra Leone, forced the indigenous high Sapi culture to disperse. Those arriving to the Guinea coast brought with them a rich and cultivated formal vocabulary, traces of which can be easily seen in Baga sculptures. Other groups arrived in the 18th century from the Guinean highland, escaping Jihad and enslavement. These new groups, originating from the mainland, were larger and less peripheral communities, and thereby triggered the formation of a complex liturgy.



Elaeis guineensis – oil palm. Sap was collected from a cut in the palm tree flower



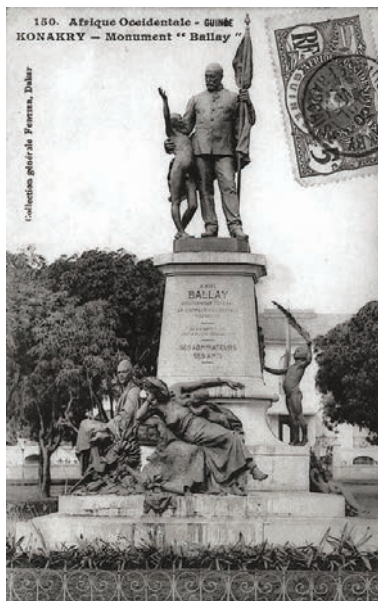
Palm wine tapper. The sap is naturally fermenting to a minimum of 4% alcoholic beverage

Pagan versus Islam

Much of the Baga culture, in which the consumption of palm wine was a basic habit and serving palm wine to the elders was part of the chores expected to be fulfilled by the youth, has evolved around the Baga standing conflict and opposition to Islam.



Palm wine consumption was intrinsic to the Baga culture



Inauguration of the Nael Bailly monument in Conakry, 1904

Colonial rule

The Baga did not put up a real resistance to the French. Other than the Capitol, Conakry, from which they were expelled, the Baga continued their lives largely undisturbed. The creation of cantons in the 1920s governed by locals appointed by the colonial authority, enabled the Baga to maintain their autonomy practically unchanged.

Katako was chosen as the capital of the Baga canton, and Mr. Baki Camara, and later his descendants, were nominated as chiefs. In 1909, the first Catholic Missionary Church was established.

The Camara family served the French authorities well, especially in the mid-1940s, collecting vast quantities of rice for the Vichy regime. “Being Pagan was hard work for the youth.”



Baga Art and the West

Picasso's Nimba, acquired by the artist in 1926,
Archive Roberto Oterio, Museo
Picasso Malaga

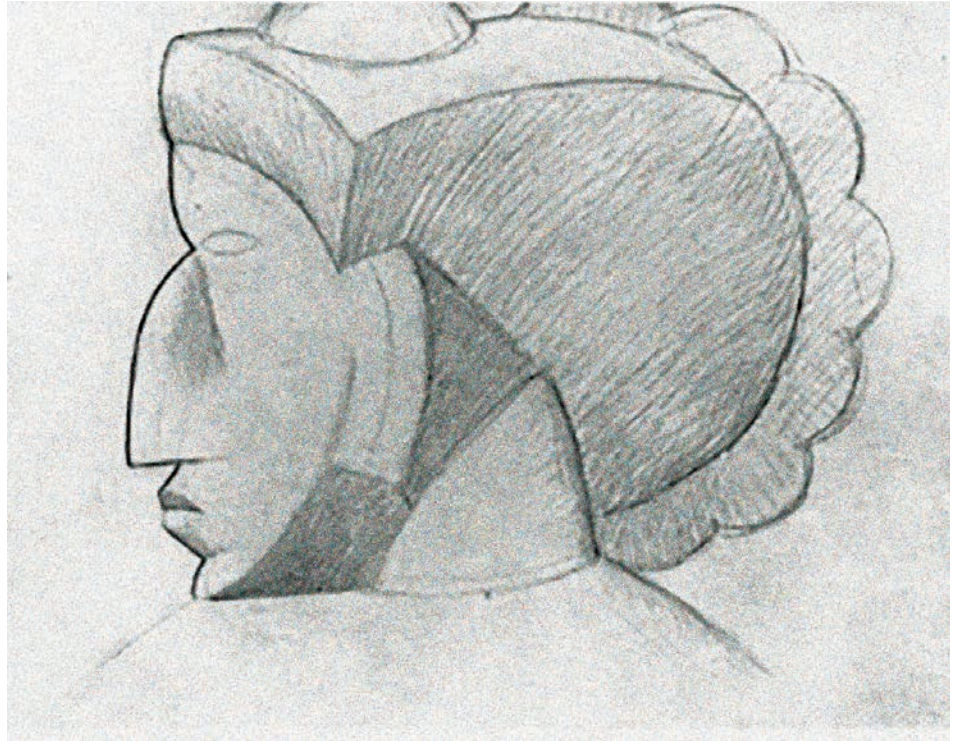
Although western culture did arrive to the shores of West Africa in the 1930s, the rural mangrove community was not enriched by it. Instead, The Baga art exported to Paris ended up influencing Western culture.

Almost all of the avant-garde artists of the beginning of the 20th century acquired, and were influenced, by African art, of which the oversized Baga sculptures with their unique colors and rich morphology were particularly appealing.

These artists, especially the Dada, turned their back on the Western cultural establishment. They saw the African works of art as an alternative and a new spiritual forbearer, a primary and purer father with whom they could identify. They became completely divorced from Western culture; a culture which ultimately led to the atrocities of World War One



Portrait of Marie Therese Walter, 1931



Pablo Picasso, *Head*, estate of the artist

Picasso bought his Baga Nimba mask in 1928 and it had a great impact on his search for a new visual language for the 20th century.

“I experienced my greatest artistic emotions when the sublime beauty of the sculptures executed by the anonymous artists of Africa suddenly became apparent to me. These religious, passionate, and rigorously logical works are the most powerful and beautiful things the human imagination has produced.”

Without any of their creators’ knowledge, the works of the “deep rural” Baga, created worlds apart from Paris, became ‘objects of great desire’ to French high society. Their display, alongside modern art, was perceived as a mark of good taste, cosmopolitanism, and sophistication.

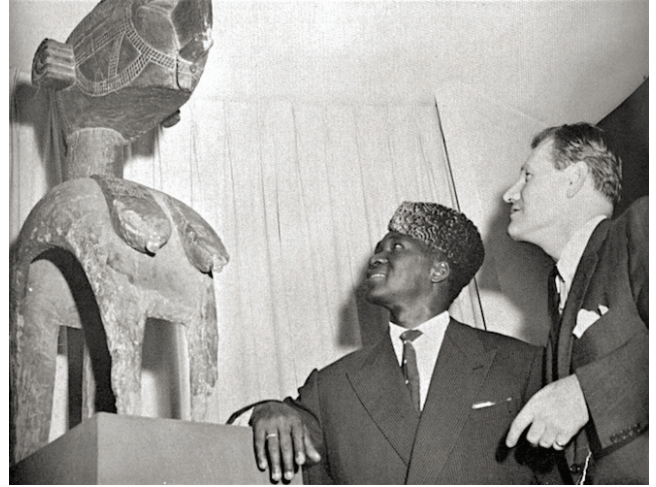
The Great Colonial Exhibition of 1931, which attracted more than 9 million visitors, disseminated and reinforced the connection between modernity and African art, in general, and the Baga art, in particular.



Entrance ticket for the Great Colonial Exhibition, Paris, 1931. The exhibition attracted a record of 9 million visitors



Peggy Gougenheim, Palazzo Veiner, Venice



President Sekou Toure and New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller admiring a Nimba headdress at the Museum of Primitive Art, New York, 1959

Revolution

World War II, the complete collapse of the old order, followed by the abolition of the canton mechanism, and the 1946 Brazzaville conference, led to the end of colonial authority over the Baga, and with it the end of the gerontocracy of the first dynasties. The Marxist ideology and the Pan-African Islam appealed to young societies. The generational tension, that was inherent in Baga culture, erupted into an open rebellion against the tradition, identified with reactionary pro-colonialism which finally culminated in the late 1950s in a Jihad against the Baga elders.

Chairman Mao Zedong with Sekou
Toure, 1960,
The Wilson Center digital archive





Iconoclasm

One of the reasons that Baga's economy could not expand and meet the changing times was a chronic lack of land. In addition to extreme tropical weather conditions, each village was surrounded by a belt of sacred forest composed of gigantic cotton silk trees and natural flora – this belt was off limits to all, apart from the initiated elders. Any future development necessitated the desecration of the forest.

In February, 1957, the Marabou Alseco Sayo was invited by the Baga youth organization to perform a Jihad and get rid of the old regime and its ways.

Sayo stayed in Katako for four months, laying the sacred forest bare, and felling the great cotton silk trees. They forced the elders to relinquish their masks, symbols of power and tools of sorcery. Sayo burned some of the art. Being aware of the masks' commercial value, he sold most of the loot to French representatives who followed his mob.

First Baga Iconoclasm 1956-1957
Asekou Sayon heading the Muslim
mob posing in front of the loot,
photo – Jacqueline Nicaud, 1957



Cultural Revolution & Demystification

Hellen Leloup Kamer hoarding
Baga sacred paraphernalia looted
during the 1956 Jihad, Photo
courtesy Leloup Gallery Paris

The Guinean independence in 1958, and the Marxist regime of Sekou Toure, comprised the beginning of the end to the Baga's religious art. In 1961, all of Guinea's forest tribes were declared as the enemy within – their cults were restricted – and a demystification program began, in which theater groups passed through the villages and presented the elders' tradition and beliefs as degenerate and regressive. The cult and its production of religious paraphernalia were stopped almost entirely. In 1968 – coinciding with the Chinese Cultural Revolution – a violent campaign was declared. The elders of the community were beaten, the old cult and their masks were deemed unlawful, their operators were taken, stripped naked, and exposed as charlatans. The remaining Baga Liturgical paraphernalia was collected. Some was taken and exhibited in state “museums”, but most was burned.

While Baga sculptures were viewed in the West as the spiritual forebearers of 20th century art, and any collector or museum tried to display “the source”, - the Baga Nimba, placed on a pedestal looking down at its surroundings as a proud forefather. In Guinea, they have almost completely disappeared.

Uprising, Konaalov Serge,
Charcoal 75x58 cm, , Circa 1965,
Soviet Propaganda study

Execution in Camp Boiro, a
concentration camp built in Conakry
by Czechoslovakia, in which an
estimated 50,000 inmates, an
approximate 1% of the Guinean
population in the seventies,
perished

Public Executions by hanging in
Conakry, 1971







The Katako Hoard

Cultural Revolution 1965-1984,
Ruth Phillips, 1970.

A Twenty years long persecution by the Guinean government against all aspects of indigenous culture.

The question as to whether or not all the Baga sacred paraphernalia was really totally destroyed was never answered. It was rumored that some was saved and hidden. Western scholars working in the area from the 1990s related stories and rumors of statues still in hiding, but none has surfaced.

Sekou Toure's Marxist regime labeled all "Forestiers", including the Baga, as the enemy within. They conducted a violent and structured 20-year long campaign against any manifestation of Pagan beliefs. All existing religious or semi-religious societies were strictly banned.

As early as 1957, the Katako Baga elders knew of the advancing Jihad and the devastation of other Baga communities to which the Islamic preachers arrived.

They urgently sent delegates to the French authorities asking them to prevent Sayo's entrance to the village, but the delegation failed. They have, therefore, entrusted their most sacred objects for safe-keeping in the hands of local missionaries serving in the Katako's church. The church grounds were deemed off-limits to the Jihad and its mob.

The abolishment of the chiefdoms at the end of 1957 was followed by Guinea independence in 1958. This changed the world, from which the statues sought a temporary refuge. The French administration left the country in total disarray, destroying whatever meager infrastructure that it created during its fifty-year regime.

The Katako Catholic missionaries were regarded as colonial representatives and were ordered to close their schools. By 1967, they left Guinea completely. During the same year, the government directed a

“cultural revolution” campaign emulating the Maoist model in China, and as a result of the campaign, the art was returned to their owners and immediately buried deep in the off-limits, sacred wood. These are the hideouts from which they are now emerging.

The Baga elders resumed their practice slowly in the late 1980s, but secrecy is part of the culture. Most of the artifacts were created and used for the Women's Association, an organization which managed to hold its rank and power, even during Sekou Toure's darkest hours.

Unlike other cultural groups in the Guinean rainforest who could have sent their youth to initiation camps in Liberia and maintain their traditions, the Baga people were completely surrounded by the Susu Muslim population. The Baga power, therefore, slowly diminished. “Once we were Baga, now we are Susu.”



The Katakoto Catholic mission, 1930

The last Baga initiation camp was held in the early 1950s. Dances and rituals are still maintained in the village as a symbol and tradition for Baga's unity, but practice in the sacred wood ended long ago. The congregation aged and the youth are seeking their future elsewhere.

The Nimba, once the Baga's main symbol, was appropriated to serve as Guinea's national symbol. The Baga's remaining elders, therefore, decided that the old spirits will perform on behalf of their community, a last act of generosity. Then, they will be set free on a journey to seek different audiences elsewhere.



Elders of the Baga women association, 2018



The Baga Nimba, Guinea's national symbol



Katako Sacred Wood, 2019, The Hoard resurfacing from 60 years in hideout



1600 – 1900

Human harvest for slavery reduces the sub-Saharan percentage in world population from 18% to 6%.

1630

Migration to the safe heaven of the BAGA mangrove swamps.

1931

The Great Colonial Exhibition – Paris. Baga art exposed to 9 million visitors.

1957

Asekou Sayon leads a Jihad against the Baga. The hoard is hidden at the Katako Catholic mission.

1963 – 1984

Guinea is subjected to a Marxist cultural revolution and iconoclasm.

1967

The hoard is buried at Katako's women association sacred grove.

2008 – 2018

Rice imports to Guinea increases by 16, Baga traditional subsistence economy becomes obsolete.

2018

The Hoard resurfaces after 60 years in hideout.

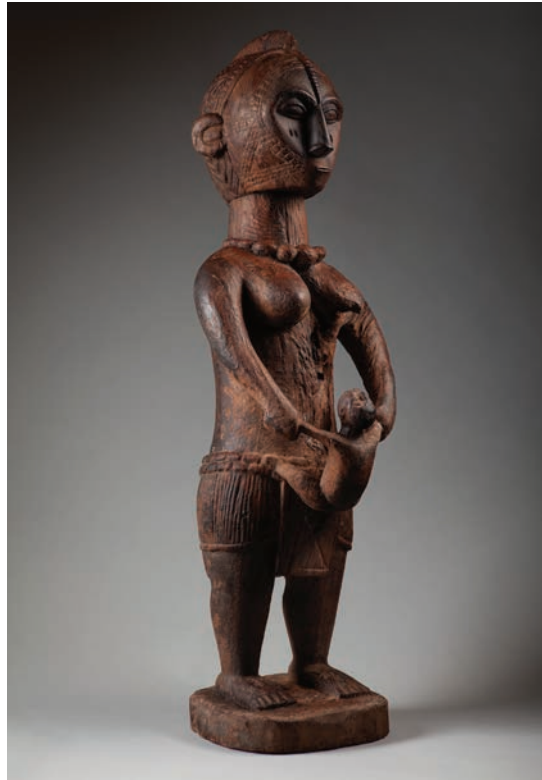
The Eleven Katako Masterworks

Hidden for 60 years deep in the Guinea Jungle,
surviving Jihad and iconoclasm

Female figure I

Circa 1930
98 × 32 × 37

This female figure is depicted in full Baga regalia, holding an animated child. It is the only known such example, that has survived the three decades long iconoclasm and may embody Christian iconography assimilated by the Katako community.









Female figure II

Circa 1935
88 × 25 × 34

This figure is depicted in a Christian praying position. In this piece the hands, which in the Baga iconography are clasped under the chin, accentuating a closed mouth thus stressing the society's members pledge to secrecy, are stopped midway, and point to an open smiling mouth, while the head and eyes are tilted upwards in a clear exogenous gesture. The figure is portrayed as a medium between the community and an external being, and as manifestation of an independent Baga sacred entity, as in the Baga traditional canon.





Child figure

Circa 1935
85 × 24 × 37



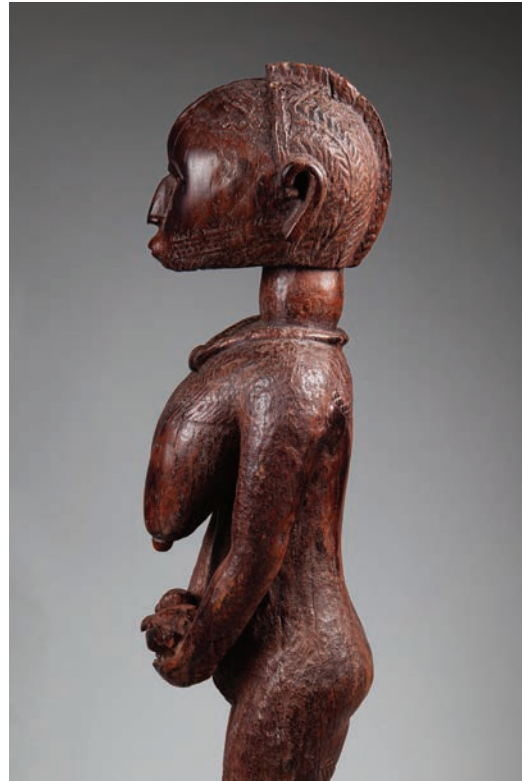


Female figure III

Circa 1930
102 × 26 × 29

A female figure carrying what appears to be a dead child. In the Baga beliefs this alludes to the close inter relationships between the world of the spirits and the world of the living.



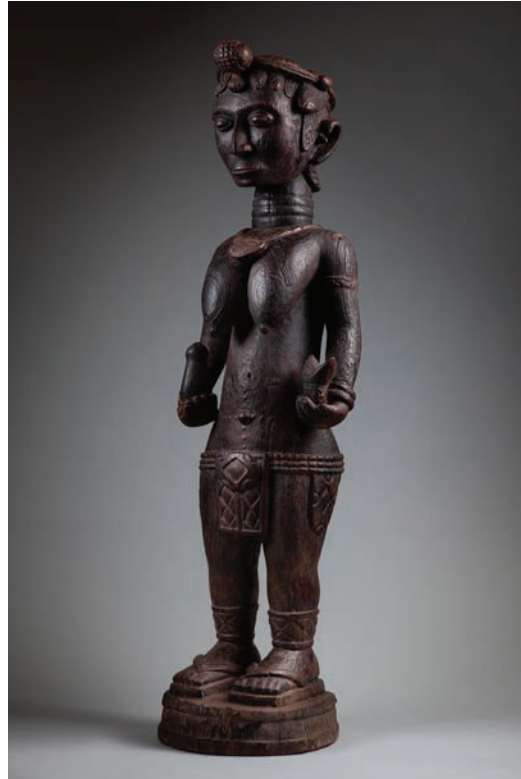


Female figure IV

Circa 1950
102 × 35 × 33

A monumental naturalistic female figure associated with the women's role in the Baga society, as fisherwomen.

The figure's elaborate coiffure is adorned with a fishing net, in which several entangled fish are depicted, and is holding in her right hand a lagenaria bottle and clasping a fish's tail in her left.





Nima headdress

Circa 1880
74 × 34 × 34

The Nimba is not a deity, but a figure of spiritual power. An image of a great mother who has given birth to many children, nursed them to productive adulthood and is the ideal of the female role in Baga society.

Nimba (D'mba in Susu):
De – a small baby,
Ba – My mother.
The son and the mother
(Arman Bangura)
is a representation of an
abstract idea of Baga
goodness and benevolence.
The power of the universal
mother.









Ceremonial staff

Circa 1945
63 × 16 × 19

A ceremonial staff of the Baga women association. Depicting a kneeling female figure perched on top of a fish, while another adorns her coiffure. Such a staff, apart from its use in celebrating the abundance of the catch, may have been associated with fertility.



Nimba bust headdress

Circa 1940
96 × 32 × 34



Elder masks (I, II, III)

The three Katako's Elder masks were used deep in the off limits to all uninitiated, sacred grove. They were adorned by male elders during ceremonies which were held late at night at the natural cathedrals formed within the ravines created by the giant cotton silk trees monumental air roots.

These masks exemplify the Baga notions of Tolom – Secret (sacred wood), as opposed to Powolsene – toy (village).



Elder mask I

Circa 1950
74 × 33 × 21

An elder mask is adorned with two serpents, traditionally used to evoke the Mantsho na Tshol, a powerful and dangerous Baga spirit, into being.



Elder mask II

Circa 1950

101 × 22 × 22

An elder mask adorned with
a female power figure.





Elder mask III

Circa 1940
92 × 22 × 28

An elder mask adorned with
a female power figure.





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