

Kay Miller – May, 2012 OOM

"Baga Drum," Artist Unknown (Guinea), Early 20th century, #2011.8



Gallery label: This very large drum is carved from a single piece of wood. Its massive body is supported by an elegantly carved horse, and the instrument is so tall that it could be played only by standing on a stool. This type of drum was used exclusively by adult Baga men of high ritual standing, and would resound during male initiation ceremonies, at funerals of important elders, and during celebrations of male ancestors. The meaning of the multi-colored geometric and floral motifs carved on the body of the drum is not fully understood. The horse wears a double necklace on which appears to be Islamic amulets. This may be an early reference to contact with Muslim traders, who would also have been the first ones to introduce the horse in this West African region.

Physical Description: Horse on doughnut-shaped base supporting bullet-shaped drum on its back; horse has carved details of bridle, saddle, and neck ornament; drum has organic curvilinear decorations; heightened in red, white and green pigments; large pegs hold drum head onto drum body; each portion of drum head below pegs are wrapped in plant fibers

Questions:

1. Describe this drum – its size, figures and designs. What most impresses you? Why? How does it compare with other drums you have seen?
2. Who do you think might have played this drum? What is it that you see – or know of – that makes you say that?

3. What would it feel like to play this large drum? It is very tall. What would you stand on to play it?
4. What occasions can you imagine this drum being played for? What would you use this drum to celebrate today?
5. The Baga people in the West African country of Guinea use this drum to celebrate boys and girls coming of age. Those ceremonies remind young people of the power they will acquire as they move into adulthood. How do we celebrate young people coming of age? How do we use rhythm and music to emphasize the importance of that change?

Note: Most of the information in this OOM is drawn from articles, books and an MIA lecture (May 3, 2012) by Frederick Lamp. He is considered the pioneer investigator and pre-eminent authority on the Baga people and is consistently cited by other authors on the topic. He is curator of African Art at the Yale University Art Gallery and is contributing to the catalog for an upcoming MIA exhibition on the Baga. In response to questions I had, Lamp responded by email. Kay Miller

Key Points:

1. This drum would be used in Baga ritual initiations that are virtually unique among African peoples because boys and girls are included in the same ceremonies. Usually, those ceremonies are separate.
2. The Baga [pronounced **Baka**, soft **k**] people are famous for their immense figurative drums, including the MIA's excellent one. The Baga are one of the culturally richest people in Africa whose art is renowned for its monumental scale, variety of forms and complex abstraction. Among their most noteworthy works are spectacular, colossal wooden dance headdresses known as **D'mba or "Nimba,"** which were studied by Picasso, Giacometti and other artists, creating a significant impact on 20th century art of the West. But they also have magnificent human figures, pottery, baskets and shrine figures.
3. This drum represents the Baga's long artistic, cultural and spiritual history. It also helps tell the dramatic story of how the Baga - especially their **strong women** - **secretly** maintained cultural traditions in the face of extreme religious and political oppression. Over hundreds of years, indigenous Baga culture was threatened by European exploration & trade (starting with the Portuguese), French colonialism and Christianity, markets buying up the finest sacred pieces, Islamization, Guinean independence and a centralized socialist government trying to develop mass modern culture. From the mid-1950s on, old Baga rituals were outlawed and virtually all sacred objects were confiscated, destroyed, sold and dispersed to collectors, dealers and museums worldwide. Rituals and customs were outlawed and, after 30 years, virtually forgotten. But under recent, less restrictive governmental policies, Baga culture has begun to revive and, in a sort of African Renaissance, morph into new and interesting art and ritual forms.
4. Women figure prominently in Baga art and have a forceful presence in Baga performance. Baga drums frequently represent women, who are also some of the

most proficient drummers. It is mainly the women who have kept the venerable Baga artistic institutions vital through the past half-century of troubled times.

5. While this Baga drum is not a women's drum, Baga women also have their own drum, called **a-Ndèf**, that is as elaborate as the **Timba**, like the MIA's drum. It is also a rarity in Africa.

MIA's Baga drum [Timba]:

- Property of Baga male elders. Played exclusively by adult men in Baga initiation called **ka-Bèrè-Tshol**
 - Initiation ritual was for **young men and women together**.
 - Highly unusual in Africa to have both sexes in same initiation.
 - Baga have number of customs that are either **unique** or unusual.
- Drum is huge. Meant to be as **impressive & magnificent** as possible.
 - Would have to stand on stool to play. Played with two carved sticks.
 - Celebrates adult power of elders that boys and girls ultimately would become.
 - Played during final dance of initiation.
 - Transformation into adulthood called "**entering the medicine.**"
 - Initiation takes place for three to four weeks during dry season.
 - Initiates sleep in same room - boys on one side, girls on the other
 - Ordeals of initiation: Initiates beaten three times/day. Morning, noon, evening. Visited by terrifying masks. Finally told Baga secrets.
 - Coming out ceremony happens at first rain
 - Dance is at night. Ends at dawn.
 - All succeeding rituals divided into male and female realms.
- Horse and ornaments around the neck
 - Horse: symbol of power from colonial period [Lamp]. Horses came from French administrators. Endowed elders' drum with supernatural authority.
 - Baga certainly didn't have horses. They lived in swamps.
 - It has been proposed that the horse may represent **al-B'rak**, the winged horse that carried Mohammed to the sky to escape his enemies in Jerusalem [by René Bravmann in his book, *African Islam*].
 - ❖ Lamp disagrees with Bravmann's interpretation because **al-B'rak** is "always shown with the human face." [email from Lamp]
 - ❖ "The northern Baga who used these drums were not Muslim to any great extent before 1956," says Lamp. "I don't believe that they had any knowledge or interest in Islamic imagery before then. Furthermore, I don't think that any Islamic imagery would have had any place in this traditional initiation."
 - ❖ "The Baga would have seen French administrators on horseback, and it's my opinion that this is what fascinated them with the horse." [Lamp]
 - Circles, chevrons, lozenges, foliates, florets and abstract designs
 - ❖ Cryptic.

- ❖ Some lined up in rows. Suggests linear reading, as in a **secret script**.
- Drums are usually mounted atop figures that could take many different forms:
 - Horses, mother & child, **D'mba spirit** figure, animals, birds.
 - Substructure similar to elder's stool. Might be **substitute for elder**.
- Carved from **one piece of wood**
 - Only male, professionals carvers made drums, masks and head dresses
 - ❖ True throughout Africa
 - Men traditionally danced the masks, even the women's masks
 - ❖ True all through Africa, with a very few exceptions.
- Top covered in cowhide. Secured by thongs to wooden pegs inserted into barrel.

Amazing Baga women:

- Baga women always were powerful. See it in women's initiation and in wedding ceremonies where women predominate.
 - Have become more powerful. Now take part in rituals long reserved for men. Even dance masks usually reserved for men.
 - Baga women – special/unique. Know of no other African group with rituals in which they are such central players
 - By secretly keeping their own dances/ritual alive, Baga women paved the way for the reintroduction/Renaissance of all Baga rituals and arts.
- **Women's life in Guinea**
 - Work constantly – 5 a.m. to midnight
 - ❖ Carry huge loads on heads, without hands
 - ❖ Take care of village, home, fields, fishing, children, pottery
 - Women's work
 - ❖ Produce salt. Use salt funnel. Actually a sieve of mud. From salty ocean water, sinks down and pours into basin.
 - Baga have worked in salt trade for centuries. Traded it to Mali – Twola people.
 - Huge blocks of salt. Taken to be traded across the Sahara Desert. Salt transported from Mali to Timbutu to Niger River then across Sahara by camel caravan.
 - This is how Europeans got their salt
 - ❖ Babies constantly on mothers' backs. Live with mothers' rhythms
 - ❖ Women carry water from wells in enormous jugs
 - ❖ Women make all pottery. Only women are potters, not men
 - True throughout Africa. Few exceptions
 - Make huge pots for water
 - Large storage bins for rice
 - ❖ Fish with fish traps. Men don't fish.
 - Women have their own canoes. Moored in canoe park.
 - Trap fresh fish every night for dinner table
 - ❖ Women are load bearers
 - Cut, harvest, carry elephant grass to thatch roofs
 - ❖ Harvest rice.
 - Winnow rice after they cut it and thrash it to separate from stalks. Then beat rice and with basket winnow again, chaff blows away in wind

- ❖ Harvest palm kernels for oil. Beat to mush in a mortar. Produce oil in which they cook meals. Pound all day. Exhausting work.
- ❖ Women, as a result, are in great shape. Extremely strong.
 - Drawings of women in past building Baga oval houses. Not necessarily true today. Now houses made of mud blocks
 - Made huge pottery jars for rice = granaries. Not fired.
 - Then, built the round house around granaries. Shows history of Baga women as extremely strong
- Baga **women play the drum** – highly unusual in Africa
- Illustrates power/status of Baga women in ceremonies unique to them:
 - ❖ Joint boy/girl initiation
 - ❖ Marriage
 - ❖ Married Women's Association
- Women's **a-Tekan Society** – one of a number of women's rituals & societies.
 - Society for women who have had children.
 - Adult women also played drums called **a-Ndèf** in **a-Tèkàn** society dances.
 - ❖ **A-Ndèf** is a little smaller than man's **Timba**. Usually supported by female figure.
 - ❖ Baga women commission these drums and own them.
 - Women perform at great funeral feasts, wedding celebrations, reception of visiting dignitaries & foreign chief, colonial emissary, male or female delegation from neighboring village
 - Initiation of new members is most elaborate ceremony.
 - ❖ Takes place during dry season each year.
 - ❖ Lasts one week.
 - ❖ Women gather art objects of female world. Wrap them in vines.
 - ❖ **A-Tèkàn** celebrations would go on all day and all night. Women dance and drum **without stopping**. Follow with ritual meals & palm wine in morning.
 - ❖ During dance, women go into a **trance - spirit possession**
 - ❖ Prayers and offerings are given to ancestors and village spirits. The women pray for protection of children from supernatural beings
 - ❖ Performances entail group of drummers and circle of dancers – all **a-Tekan** members.
 - **Instruments:** drums, huge wooden slit gongs and other rhythm-makers accompany
 - Each dancer holds something – cow-tail switch or bunch of leaves.
 - Many women carry things on heads: rice basket, large calabash, heavy clay water container
 - Gestures include scooping hands forward then placing them on the breasts
 - ❖ Songs accompanying dance are about universal concerns of mothers:
 - Young girls not listening to their mothers
 - Women's refusal to defer to men, to be regarded as second-class citizens

- Flaunting women's powers. Warning men to respect them and their sacred rituals.
- Anti-social behavior, alienation from community, dissension among the women, irresponsibility of men, jealousy, disloyalty to family, infertility, suffering of orphans & the labor force.
- ❖ Celebrates women as "**bearers**" in every sense:
 - Women carry great clay water vessels from well to home
 - Carry large baskets filled with rice
 - Bear and carry children on their backs
- Women not only dance, they do the drumming at these ceremonies.
 - ❖ Usually don't think of women drumming most areas of Africa. Common conception that men do **all** the drumming. But Baga women do **all** the drumming for women's activities.
- For 30 years there were no public mass dances in Guinea.
 - ❖ Old Baga religion, art, dances, drum carving, initiation and other society ceremonies were banned.
 - ❖ Women kept traditions going **secretly**. When dictator died, they brought back women's initiation ceremonies and other Baga rituals.
- Men **do** work but **intermittently**
 - Extremely hard work when they do work: Plow fields – without beasts of burden or tractors
 - Take long breaks (several months) where they do nothing
 - As Islamic men, supposed to be studying Koran. Mostly sit and gossip

Compare Baga women to Mende with the Sande Society mask:

- "While it is common practice in Africa for masked dancers to participate in initiation and other ceremonies, it is only among the Mende, Temne, and a few other groups in Sierra Leone and Liberia, that women own and wear masks for this purpose. A woman must be of certain rank to commission a mask from a carver." [Art Adventure materials]
- "Baga women do not wear masks. They do wear objects on their heads in dance, but no masks," says Lamp. [email]
- "**I do think that women's groups in this region of West Africa are extremely powerful, perhaps more so than in other areas.** [Lamp]

About the Baga people:

1. Live on narrow stretch of marshy lowland along Atlantic coast.
 - Isolated from inland neighbors and foreign visitors by crisscross of inlets from sea and vast swamps
 - Baga – elusive to outsiders.
2. Demographically one of smallest ethnic groups in Republic of Guinea, West Africa.

- Only 40,000 of them.
 - Insignificant in Guinea politics
 - Grow rice. Surrounded by mango and palm trees.
 - Fields incredibly green in rainy season (June-November)
 - Mud brick huts, thatched roofs
3. Renowned for their art. One of the culturally richest people in Africa.
 6. Impressive body of art acclaimed for magnificence, monumental scale, variety of forms and complex abstraction
 7. Baga mentioned in documents dating to 15th c.
 8. Art includes masks, headdresses, shrine pieces, immense figurative drums, human figures, baskets, pottery, furniture and utilitarian objects
 9. Studied by Picasso, Giacometti and other artists. Had significant impact on 20th c. art of the West.
 10. Baga art endured through centuries of foreign incursions. Survived and evolved despite rigorous suppression of Baga religious practices that intensified during last half of 20th c.
4. **View their spiritual world as a world created by human beings**
 - Strong belief in power of human creation
 - Huge implications for role of **artist as change agent.**
 5. Five Baga dialect groups
 6. Ethnohistory begins in magnificent Fouta Djallon mountains 15-400 Kilometers inland. High, rocky escarpments; vast, grassy plateaus; plunging waterfalls; dense forest and moderate climate.
 - Oral tradition & legends record that Fulbe people pushed Baga out of mountains. Baga migrated to Guinean coast before 16th century.
 - ✓ Carried most high spirits with them. Represented by massive costuming and extravagant performance.
 - ✓ Found or invented impressive variety of spiritual beings/ideas on the coast. Manifested in spectacular art forms.
 - ✓ Masquerade and sculpture key to spiritual world. Useful in creating institutions of welfare, polity, justice & guidance.
 - Sequence of arrival on the coast determines social organization
 - ✓ Determines which village belongs to which version of highest male spirit [**a_mantsho-no-Pon**]
 - ✓ Determines which clan belongs to male or female side of village, i.e. whether they dance male or female mask
 - Baga have masculine and feminine clans.
 - Each village has up to five or six clans, ranked according to when they arrived
 - Village government managed through clans or elder who represents each clan in secret assembly. This changed with diminishment of elders' power after installation of chiefs in colonial period.
 - Clan elders had ritual and temporal power.
 - ✓ Elders in correspondence with world of ancestors.
 - ✓ Most venerated in traditional Baga society.
 - What clan Baga person is in determines where clan members live in village – on masculine or feminine side. Strick rules apply.
 - Clan's type determines what masquerades they dance: Male, female, mixed or bird. Everyone keeps the true secrets of his own **to-lom** [sacred ritual].
 7. Baga are masters of improvisation and self-preservation.
 - Much of their art/culture heritage destroyed or purchased from them
 - Each historic period marked by invention, discovery, development of new objects, while continuing and transitioning from past periods

Baga Children:

8. Create their own ritual societies and invent their own masquerades [**to-lom** – “sacred things.”]
 - Some children’s masquerades resemble forbidden high spirit.
 - Children reinvent/reinterpret cultural information.
 - Baga society composed of age grades. Struggle between young & old in maintaining control of religious imagery and youth defying the same.

Marriage:

- Marriage – the most celebrated time of Baga woman’s life.
- Marriage ceremony lasts an entire week
 - Involves numerous masked dances, drinking, gift-giving, dowry and entry into new clan
- Bride dances every day for entire week with basket on her head where she receives gifts of money and rice.
 - Basket is spherical bowl atop conical stem (like wine glass).
 - Wears chain of metal bells at her waist, strands of flat beads around waist, band of sea rattles around ankles

Masks tell stories/values of Baga people:

D’mba Mask – “the Elder Mother” - sculptural representation of ideal Baga woman:

- Belongs to the young men.
- Most beloved of all Baga female masquerades. Also called **Nimba**.
- Used in marriage ceremony. Danced every day in the week-long marriage ceremonies.
- **D’mba** used to express “ideal woman,” give form to Baga aspirations and bring happiness to Baga
 - Beautifully adorned. Very well-groomed. Intricate braids. Head crest. Dark shawl. Raffia skirt. Soaring, slender beaked head – the great “Nimba.”
 - Long, flat pendant breasts on mask. Shows she has given birth to lots of children.
 - ❖ Old men/old women come up and **slap** wooden breasts.
 - ❖ Meant to give honor to women for their sturdiness, long-suffering in bearing children and raising them up.
- Mask: Beak nose of a bird. Shows she’s a spiritual messenger.
 - Picasso owned and copied **D’mba** mask
- Huge mask worn on top of the head. Can weigh up to 140 pounds.
 - Typically, **D’mba** is danced by very strong, muscular young man.

- Two little holes between breasts for him to see out



- **D'mba** danced publicly for weddings, births, wakes, ancestral commemoration, rice harvest festivals, planting, hospitality ceremonies and initiating the dead into ancestors' world, where they continue to contribute to living community's well-being.
- 5,000 Guinea franc note (worth ~ \$1) shows **D'mba** – the Baga mask.
 - Also has representation of Fulbe woman with an elaborate hair style similar to what **D'mba** has. Baga women may have borrowed elaborate hair styles of Fulbe women in northern Guinea as symbol of exotic beauty.





This mask incarnates a feminine ideal as symbolized by the breast of the Mother that nourishes her children. The Beak of the Calao symbolizes fertility, growth and fecundity. In a more general fashion the Nimba protects the foundation of the community by intervening in favor of the important agricultural cycles (sowings, harvests), or for weddings or funerals. The carrier of the mask will alternate slow steps with somersaults - following the rhythms of the drums and the singing of the musicians. The Dancer is hidden under the fibere garnish. He carries the sculpture on his shoulders and looks out through holes pierced between the breasts. When it is not being carried the mask is kept in a sacred hut.

- ***A-Bol – most powerful & sacred female spirit***
 - Called "Spirit of the sea." [Grandmother; the Old Woman]
 - Enigmatic image. No outsider ever permitted to see her. No image of her exists, other than Lamp's sketch, drawn from what little information he was given.
 - Costume described as big as a house. Large, low mound, appearing a bit like huge thatched roof of a hut. Shape of huge Quonset.
- Serpent Spirit [***a-Mantsho-no-Pon***] – highest male Baga spirit
 - Legend: ***a-Mantsho-no-Pon*** led Baga from mountains to coast. There they met ***a-Bol*** (highest female spirit). Male spirit then returned to Fouta. Visits the coast every seven years.
 - In charge of creating & administering Baga Law. Appears at time of initiation of young men into adulthood.
 - Spirit of the mountains. Husband of ***a-Bol***, highest female spirit.
 - Name means: The Grandfather, Teacher of the Ritual Chiefs, The Old Man, or The Man.

- Mask is huge construction - 40-feet high. On mobile scaffolding. Takes 10-15 men to hold it up. Covered with bright fabrics & palm leaves.
- Tall. Phallic. Topped with bird head.
- Masquerade a grand spectacle
- Code of secrecy around this spirit. No photos exist.

Outside foreign and religious influence:

- 1895 – French instituted colonial control over Guinea
 - Replaced existing political structure of Baga.
 - Installed system of chiefs in place of traditional council of elders
 - Undermined ritual order.
 - Created large demand for art objects. By mid-century, few old masks and ritual sculpture remained.
- 1950s – Baga lands invaded by many immigrant groups – European and African.
 - Introduced new languages, political structures, art markets and competitive forces of Islam and Christianity.
- 1956-57 – Most disastrous period for Baga culture. Two Muslim missionaries from inland Mande people [Muslim since 13th century] came in two years before independence. Baga region previously had seen decades of slow Islamic growth.
 - Time of great upheaval/power struggles & war
 - ❖ Capitalized on groundswell of discontent among Baga youth. Got young people worked up against elders.
 - ❖ Brought Malinke to national power – head of new republic
 - New government institute national program of “demystification.”
 - ✓ Ritual practitioners required to divulge their secrets.
 - ✓ Indigenous Guinean religious practice declared illegal. Punishable by prison
 - Organizers youth gangs ransacked each village & private home. Confiscated & burned or sold all sacred objects in every single village.
 - Brought into open sacred objects never publicly viewed. Systematic/brutal destruction of objects
 - Cut down & desecrated sacred forests
 - Tortured anyone, including old, who resisted conversion to Islam.
 - Little underground ritual was sustained. Some few secular dances, even with costumes, continued. Some ritual leaders secretly held fundamentals in reserve
 - ❖ Terrible time in Guinea in 1960s. Similar to Cultural Revolution in China: Spies in every single village.
 - Built big assembly halls in every tiny village. Once a week all villagers had to attend a meeting
 - Kids encouraged to spy on parents and turn them in for ritual practice. Almost impossible to continue rituals, even in private
 - No initiations taking place.

- Most objects that survived were confiscated and sold to French art dealers who “just happened to be behind” looters in pickup trucks.



Helene Leloup and assistant loading Nimba headdresses and Bansonyi snakes in her truck in 1956

- Can recognize dealers by name- Helene Leloup. Bought everything up. Before that, the missionaries burning it. Can argue dealers saved objects – then dispersed to museums. Here we see Leloup and assistant loading Nimba headdresses and Bansonyi snakes in her truck in 1956
 - Sales ended up **financing** Islamic jihad.
 - Few people under age 50 remembered traditional rituals. Those versed in esoteric knowledge were at least 80. No one had insights of ritual elders when practice was current.
- 1958 - Guinea independent from France
 - In attempt to resist conversion to Islam, some Baga migrated to coast
 - Took most revered male spirits [**a-Mantsho-no-Pon**] with them.
 - Towering costumes and extravagant performance.
 - **Women secretly kept rituals going.**
 - Men’s activities curtailed.
 - Women under less scrutiny.
 - 1984 – After 26 year rule, dictator **Ahmed Sékou Touré** [Sec-qui-tur-a] died. Touré was one of the primary Guinean nationalists involved in the independence of the country from France. Led a Marxist government.
 - 1984- Coup d’état. New military regime. Features of pre-Islamic Baga culture & art allowed to return.
 - Cautious rebuilding of ethnic traditions among diverse dialect groups
 - Collaboration of young, educated Baga and few elderly guardians of rituals
 - 1986 – Frederick Lamp arrived. Almost all public Baga rituals were defunct, as result of Islamic jihad. Baga interpreted Lamp’s presence as official authorization to revive traditional customs.
 - Women – secretly doing rituals & dances. Performed flawlessly. First time in 30 years that they could dance publicly
 - **Women largely responsible for keeping Baga culture alive.**

- Lamp didn't expect to see a single dance, certainly not mask dance. Having American coming to study their religion and practices spurred Baga to bring dances back into the open.
 - Women frequently dance with objects on their heads. Heavy clay pots. Sometimes boat-shaped headdresses/other shapes.
- 1986 – Explosion/renewal of rituals. Like a **Renaissance. Reinvention**

Sources:

“Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention,” Frederick Lamp, catalog, The Museum for African Art & Prestel Verlag, 1996. [First comprehensive study of the Baga. Lamp is considered the pioneer of contemporary Baga studies and is cited in many journal pieces.]

“Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention,” Frederick Lamp, African Arts journal, Vol. 29, No. 4, Autumn, 1996., pp. 20-33.

“Women leading the Way In Baga Performance, Guinea, West Africa,” Frederick John Lamp MIA lecture, Thursday, May 3, 2012.

“The ‘Nimba’ Headdress: Art, Ritual and History of the Baga and Nalu Peoples of Guinea, Marie Yvonne Curtis and Ramon Sarro, Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies, Vol. 23, No. 2, Africa Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1997, pp. 120-133.

Email response from Lamp, Wednesday, May 23, 2012. Lamp is the Frances & Benjamin Benenson Foundation curator of African Art at the Yale University Art Gallery, and was previously a curator at The Baltimore Museum of Art. He has conducted research in Sierra Leone and Guinea.