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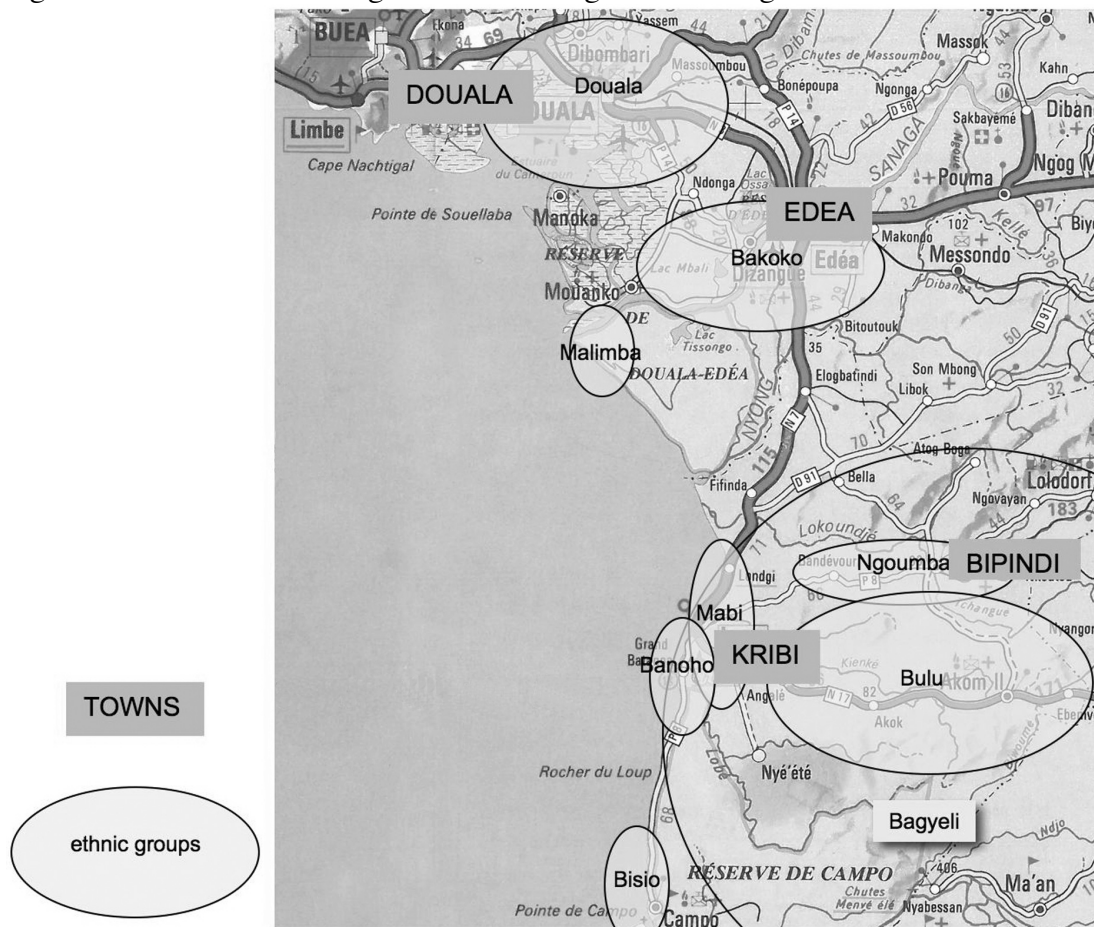
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## Recordings of the Mabi people, different places same time:

### Cameroon 1908 and Berlin 1909

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The *Berlin Phonogramm-Archive* hosts wax cylinders with music from the town of Kribi - located on the South-Cameroonian Atlantic coast - and its surroundings. The documentation indicates that these recordings concern mainly the musical culture of the Mabi<sup>1</sup>, but a closer look reveals that they also include music from the other ethnic groups who live in the area. Indeed, there is a certain amount of confusion in the documentation of the Phonogramm-Archive concerning the ethnical origin of the songs.



Map 1: The Coastal Region of South-Cameroon: An Ethnic Mosaic

[69]

## CONTEXTS

### *The Kwasio people*

The Mabi belong to a larger group named Kwasio, which includes the Bisio from Equatorial Guinea and the Ngumba, living some sixty kilometers away from Kribi and the coast. Oral memory, anthropological and linguistic research agree that these groups migrated together from East-Cameroon during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dugast 1949, interviews Fűrniiss 2012-2015, see below). They had and still have very intense social, ritual, and musical exchanges. According to the context, these groups are considered as "the same" by several of their members. Indeed, Mabi intermarry with Ngumba and Bisio and share the same lineages. It seems as though the musical repertoires have mainly been the same for the Ngumba and Mabi. This is slightly different for the Bisio who have maintained a larger musical heritage over the last century (De Aranzadi 2009).

### *Collectors and collections*

Kribi and its hinterland is mentioned three times in the *Archive's* files, namely in the collection of Georg August Zenker (1908), Hans Waldow (1907) and in the archival recordings by Erich Moritz von Hornbostel (*Archiv Kamerun*, 1909). The recording situations of these collections are very different, as two collectors – Zenker and Waldow – have actually been in Cameroon and acquired personal knowledge of the local cultures, whereas Hornbostel only heard snippets of Mabi music through solo versions of collective songs, without having any experience of Africa. Although one might expect detailed descriptions at least by Zenker or Waldow, it is astonishing to state that in all cases, there exists hardly any data to accompany the cylinders and to contextualise the recordings. The present study aims to furnish information concerning the recording contexts, recorded repertoires and cultural practices, as well as interethnic relationships and individual life trajectories.

### *Fieldwork between 2012 and 2015*

I have dedicated three fieldtrips<sup>3</sup> to the identification of both the contents and the ethnic origin of the recorded items in three collections: Zenker, *Archiv Kamerun* and Waldow (see below). My interlocutors were the traditional chiefs of the different communities and the culturally [70] competent people to whom they introduced me: community elders, retired teachers, church elders, amateur historians and musicians. They were all particularly interested in the local traditions and the maintenance of their memory. The most important among them will be presented throughout this article.

In about thirty collective or individual interview sessions, I played the historical recordings and discussed the musical and textual contents of the pieces, as well as the social and religious context of the repertoires. Several sessions were dedicated to the personal experience of the elders and their memory of what their parents and grand-parents had taught them. Besides the work on the historical recordings, I recorded several current musical practices and participated in the annual Mabi music festival.

## THE COLLECTIONS

### *Georg August Zenker*

Georg August Zenker (1855-1922) was a botanist and "planter" who worked for the German colonial administration before settling independently as a plantation owner in



Bipindi, 66 kilometers away from Kribi. He was the first head of the Yaoundé "station", which later became the Cameroonian capital.

In 1895, he had to leave the German administration, because he was living with three African wives (Laburthe-Tolra 1970, Jung 2012). Later, he founded a large family with a Cameroonian wife and settled in Bipindi where he lived until the end of his life. He is buried with one of his wives and his eldest son in the domain which is still in the hands of his descendants.

Zenker was the only German to be allowed to stay in Cameroon after 1916. His special status in the country is the reason why his very modest collection of only seven items is of particular interest, not only for the knowledge of the documented traditions, but also for a better understanding of German activities in colonial Kamerun.

### *Zenker and the Mabi*

Zenker lived at an important intersection of roads and paths among the Ngumba and the Bagyeli. He was a good hunter and was initiated into a hunting society of the Bagyeli-Pygmyes with whom he went on elephant hunts. According to oral records among the Mabi, Zenker encouraged a group of Mabi from Kribi to settle near his domain, in the village of [71] Bifum<sup>o</sup>. Besides his interest in natural history, Zenker spent time studying the Mabi culture. He wrote a manuscript of 27 pages, which was published in 1904 in the *Ethnologisches Notizblatt* (Zenker 1904). He collected plants and birds, but also a considerable amount of ethnographical objects, which he then sent to Germany. The Director of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, Felix Luschan, called Zenker an "old benefactor", a sponsor of the Museum, who provided approximately 100 ethnographical objects from the region. There are only few Mabi items, as most of the artefacts are Ngumba, Bulu and Bakoko.



Figure 1: Georg August Zenker, Bipindi, 1898 (Photo in Chamier-Glisczinski 1925).

### *Zenker's recordings and metadata*

According to the archival documentation in Berlin, the Phonogramm-Archive provided Zenker with a phonograph and probably 50 wax-cylinders<sup>vi</sup>. He sent back a set of 8 cylinders recorded in January 1908, one of which was already broken on its arrival in May of the same year. As Hornbostel pointed out on the reception of the cylinders<sup>vii</sup>, all of them had suffered from mould. The alterations of the material due to the difficult climate (heat, dust, humidity) and bad transportation conditions are the reason why these recordings are nowadays very difficult to listen to, which makes the identification both of the contents and the ethnic origin so problematic.

In 1908, Zenker made some recordings in Kribi: ritual and recreative music, canoe-songs, two dance repertoires and songs from the initiation ritual, *ngi*. He compiled a simple list, which arrived covered with grease, according to an internal note at the Museum<sup>viii</sup> :

[72]

Zenker's list	Handwritten additions concerning the ethnic origin of the recordings
I. Sending of Phonocylinders 1. Namoballa, women's song, dance 2. Ngisa I. } 3. Ngisa II } Dances 4. Songo [or LONGO] Canoe-Song 5. Ngi } 6. Onomngi } sung during the Ngi 7. Isanga ISANGA-} 8. Baja BAJA } Dances recorded January 1908 G. Zenker	<i>Buli, indicated "Mabea"</i> <i>("Mabea") Bakoko</i>  <i>Mabea</i> <i>Buli or Mabea</i> <i>Mabea Buli</i> <i>Mabea</i> <i>Mabea</i>

The recordings themselves contain no other indications, although Zenker must have known the instructions (Luschan 1908) which were provided by the Archive to each potential collector. Indeed, each recording starts with the reference tone of the tuning fork, but Zenker omitted to orally announce the contents of the recording.

### *Challenges: titles and ethnic origins*

The list of cylinders contains titles of the recordings. But what do these titles really designate? Are they names of repertoires? Or names of dances? Or song-titles? At the beginning of the 20th century, European scholars – and even less so musically untrained people like Zenker – did not yet know that African traditional music heritages are mostly organised in repertoires linked to a specific context (Arom *et al.*, 2008). It is very usual that these repertoires are named. Within these repertoires, there are specific songs whose first words generally function as the "title" of a piece. My fieldwork in Cameroon revealed that item 4 of the Zenker collection provides a perfect example of this possible confusion: *Longo* is the name of a song, but the repertoire of the canoe-songs is *ngusi*.

Another challenge is the question of the ethnic origin of the pieces. The handwritten additions to Zenker's list are quite ambiguous, as two ethnic groups are mentioned next to four of the seven items, either Mabi and Bulu or Mabi and Bakoko. The Bulu and Bakoko live at a distance of less than 100 kilometers from the actual Mabi-territory in Kribi. During the last century, these populations intermingled and the knowledge of each [73] other's musical heritage was common, as much as nowadays. The indication of Kribi as the recording place is therefore not proof that the recorded music is part of the musical heritage of the people living in Kribi.

During my fieldwork, it appeared that nowadays, the supposed ethnic diversity is even higher and the uncertainty remains. The main result is that only one of these recordings seems to be of genuine Mabi origin, although not from Kribi, but from the border with Equatorial Guinea where the Mabi's "cousins", the Bisio, live.

Three repertoires have been confirmed and, although this is a very small collection, items 5 and 6 are of greatest interest for the tradition holders of the 21st century. Let us emphasise these recordings, as well as the canoe-song, which are representative of the traditional culture of a hundred years ago.

### *The Ngi initiation ritual*

The Ngi was an important and widespread initiation ritual at the beginning of the last century. In a letter to Prof. Luschan, the Director of the Ethnographical Museum in Berlin, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1905, Zenker writes:

"Bipindi is the intersection point of three tribes who are very different in their activities and speak different languages. They share the Ngi-ritual, but practice it in different manners. [...] I will observe the Ngi and will write to you later about it."<sup>ix</sup>

This was corroborated in 2012 by the Chief of the Nziou quarter in Kribi<sup>x</sup>, according to whom the Ngi was also practised by the Mabi who joined Zenker near Bipindi.

Zenker's recordings – which are identified as Bulu – are supposed to have been collected in Kribi. However, very few Bulu live(d) in Kribi. Zenker recorded two phases of this complex initiation ceremony. What we know from Tessmann's study on the related Fang people (1913) is that it appeals to a masked spirit – Ngi – who is guided by the official leader of the ceremony, the *Onom ngi*, literally "Head of the Ngi".

The Ngi was practised two generations ago, but it seems to be out of practice nowadays as most of the people of the region are either Catholic or belong to the African Protestant Church.

### *The voice of Ngi?*

Item 6, entitled *Onom ngi*, contains a regular alternation between a soloist and choir, preceded by a long diatribe by the soloist. One clearly hears that the singer's voice is modified by a mirliton or a guttural vocal [74] technique. Whereas my interlocutors confirmed that the choir is composed of the initiated, a doubt remains as to the identity of the soloist. If the soloist is the "Head of the Ngi", not the mask itself, his utterance should have been produced in a normal voice. The voice modification however is normally an indicator for the voice of a mask<sup>xi</sup>. Who are the initiates answering to: the spirit or its human guide?

The documentation in Berlin contains a card which sheds light on this question and which seems to confirm my hypothesis. It specifies namely that the Ngi

"[...] takes the saliva from the dead and eats it in order to obtain his voice which may apparently be heard a mile away and on behalf of which he enjoys his "big name" all over the country"<sup>xii</sup>.

That a singer swallows a substance in order to disguise his voice as a spirit's voice is a known phenomenon in the region. Whether this may be a dead person's saliva has to be confirmed. But we know that the Tsogo in Gabon, for instance, swallow special herbs which irritate the vocal folds for a similar result (Sallée 1968, Zemp 1996:43).

### *The limits of the research*

The information I could obtain from several elder Mabi concerning this subject in 2013 and 2015 seems contradictory<sup>xiii</sup>. On the one hand, the Ngi wore a wooden face mask which may function as a voice modifying device. This kind of mask was sent by Zenker to the



Ethnological Museum<sup>iv</sup>. On the other hand, some said that the Ngi was not supposed to sing and that item 6 is an invocation of the spirit. The notes in the Archive, however, seem to indicate the contrary. Zenker's collection of ethnographical objects also contains some mirlitons. A list in the Museum's archive indicates that one of them<sup>v</sup> was played during a Ngi-ceremony: "Instrument used for the Ngi dance (sounds like a comb and tissue, is used in the same way)". Either the historical gap between the recordings and my interlocutors is too great to be bridged, or the ritual secrets are still protected when talking to a foreign uninitiated white female ethnomusicologist. This seems to be a limit to any actual fieldwork.



Figure 2: Mirliton from the Zenker-collection, Inv. N. III C 10660, Berlin, SMPK, Ethnologisches Museum (Photo S. Schulz).

**[This photo has not been published in the final version of this paper]**

Another intriguing question is the recording context. Nowadays, out-of-context recordings of ritual music do not generally make the related spirits appear. Moreover, characteristic features of the ritual situation will generally be omitted. The fact that one clearly hears the transformation of the voice is indicative of a recording in a ritual context. Considering the immobility and the spatial constraints of the recording device, this would [75] be most exceptional. This is another mystery which will probably remain unsolved.

#### *Archive recordings by Erich v. Hornbostel and Jakob Malapa*

Erich von Hornbostel recorded Mabi songs sung in Berlin by an inhabitant of Kribi, Jakob Malapa, who had the opportunity to travel to Germany. One of my very aged Mabi interlocutors had been in Primary school with Malapa's son Honoré in 1935 and the memory of this event was still present. In 2015, I was very lucky to find the step-daughter and two grand-children of Malapa, but who unfortunately did not know much about the circumstances of their elder's journey. According to the family memory, he went to Germany as a cook. He married a German woman with whom he had a son, before he went back to Cameroon at the end of the 1920s<sup>vi</sup>. The quality of the recorded songs proves that the young man, Jakob Malapa, who came to visit Hornbostel in the Berlin Archive had a beautiful voice and was a gifted singer.

Hornbostel recorded 41 cylinders with songs by Jakob Malapa and Paul Mukeke from Malimba, another young man from the region. The ethnic puzzle comes up again, as Malapa was Batanga-Banoho, and Mukeke was Malimba<sup>vii</sup>. They sang songs from the Mabi, Duala, Bakoko, Malimba, Banoho and Bulu. Ten songs by Malapa are identified in the list as being of Mabi origin.

#### *Identifications of Archiv Kamerun*

Cross-questionnaires with competent people from most of these cultures revealed that – from today's perspective – only three songs are clearly identified as being of Mabi origin;

while another is identified as being from their Bisio cousins. Apart from the poor sound quality, a difficulty was the question of language change over a hundred years and the existence of secret languages for ritual songs.

Malapa seems to have sung mainly *ngósò*-songs - songs that comment on diverse situations of daily life. The same type of repertoire exists among several cultures of the region, which is the reason for the great linguistic diversity of the songs. Although the lyrics are not always intelligible nowadays, the meaning of the songs has been identified. Various types of relations between men and women, difficulties with the German steamer company, subjects related to the seaside, but also proverbs [76] are represented in the songs of the *Archiv Kamerun*-collection recorded in Berlin.

#### *The same canoe-song in two collections*

One song was recorded by Zenker in Cameroon, but also by Hornbostel in Berlin<sup>viii</sup>. It is the paddlers' song, called Longo by Zenker.



Figure 3: “Longo”, Canoe-Song. *Archiv Kamerun* 37, 1909 (Transcription S. Fűrnis)

The documentation of *Archiv Kamerun* reveals the same confusion as the Zenker collection concerning the ethnic origins of the songs: this item is attributed to the Mabi and/or the Batanga-Banoho who also live in Kribi. My different Batanga-Banoho and Mabi interlocutors, however, identified both versions of this song as being of Bakoko origin, another coastal people living north of Kribi. As in colonial times, they were the main transporters on the sea and the rivers, they travelled a great deal and their songs were known all over the coast. Several stops were placed along the rivers and the coast in order to allow the paddle-teams to relay. Longo, the "title" of the recorded song, was a station on the Lokoundje River, which flows through Bipindi. As to the contents, people mentioned a secret language, as it might have been addressed to the water spirit, Mami Wata.

This song repertoire *ngusi* or *ngósò* was sung when the paddlers arrived at one of these stations. Besides these common occasions, the people could hear the paddlers' songs during canoe competitions, which were occasion for very popular festivities. Even nowadays, at the annual festival of the Mabi<sup>ix</sup>, a canoe competition is part of the activities. But unfortunately, nobody sings anymore and I have not yet met a paddler who still knows these songs.

[77]

#### *Hans Waldow*

Hans Waldow (1870-?) spent from 1904 to 1915 in Cameroon as a medical doctor of the colonial administration and head of the hospital in the town of Limbe, in former Victoria (Ziegler 2006:386). His professional activities brought him to Lolodorf, 44 kilometers north of Bipindi in February/March 1907. He recorded 29 cylinders which show quite heterogeneous contents: 11 Bagyeli, 3 Ngumba, 3 Bulu, 4 Ewondo, 4 Ewe (Togo); the others are unidentified.



The three cylinders contain four Ngumba songs:

- 1) a) Dancesong (for women) „o Jamgo, ombe ngwan“, sung by Maffia, a Ngumba boy, approx. 8 years
- b) *idem* „o Janga o wue“ see text
- 2) a) *idem* „wah ge digi“ see text
- b) *idem* „o dombe dombo“
- 3) Repetition of 2 (?)

Waldow did not give any contextual explanation for his recordings, but he provided song texts or at least the contents of the songs. He had a Bulu assistant who had been trained in phonetical notation and who was in charge of the transcription and the translation of the lyrics.

### *Interviews 2012-13*

Although Waldow recorded in Lolodorf, some of his informants came from Kouambo, five kilometers South of Zenker's residence in Bipindi. It is consequently at this place that I conducted my main fieldwork - among the Ngumba. Other interviews have been conducted in the village of Lambi, some 8 kilometers north.

The discussion on the name of the singer brought to light that it should be Massia and not Maffia, which indicates a very probable copy error from Gothic hand-writing to machine-typing, as the Gothic "s" within a word is very close to a modern "f".

As for the contents, the very bad tone quality of the recordings was certainly the reason why three of the songs could not have been identified. The general sound image and the topics of the written lyrics made my interlocutors recognise certain mystical contents of the songs and relate them to the singer of epics or his wife, but they could also have been songs for other ritual and entertainment contexts.

[78]

### *Permanences in the Waldow collection: The Ngumba bride's ceremony*

In spite of a certain discouragement in trying to find out the social and symbolic context of these songs and what they mean to the society today, the current research includes a feature that encourages this type of re-examination.



Figure 4: The women of Kouambo reconstitute a bride's ceremony for the ethnomusicologist. (Video S. Fürniss 2012).

Cylinder 3 is accompanied by the following text:

*O dombe dombo, yolo dombō dombō me nyine ma mura labo, Dombō yan o  
dombō dombo, yolo dombo  
me nyin ma mura laboo*

When you receive a new wife, the elder women sing: I have seen a woman who knows how to talk a lot.

My verification of the text in 2012 together with Mbille Dieudonné, a person of note in Kouambo<sup>33</sup>, showed not only that the transcription was excellent and still comprehensible but also that this song is still sung and that the text, as well as the melody, has hardly changed (except for the pitch...).

O Dombo, beautiful Dombo,  
I have seen the woman who talks  
My Dombo, beautiful Dombo, etc.

[79]

The image shows a musical score for a song titled "Dombe". It is divided into two parts: "Solo" and "Choir".

**Solo part:** The first staff is a treble clef with a melody of quarter notes and eighth notes. Below it, the lyrics are: "O \_\_\_\_\_ Do - mbe \_\_\_\_\_ Do - mbe \_\_\_\_\_ Do - mbe \_\_\_\_\_ Do - mbe \_\_\_\_\_". The second staff continues the melody with eighth notes and quarter notes, ending with a double bar line. Below it, the lyrics are: "\_\_\_\_\_ Do - mbe \_\_\_\_\_".

**Choir part:** The third staff is a treble clef with a melody of quarter notes and eighth notes. Below it, the lyrics are: "O \_\_\_\_\_ Do - mbe Do - mbe \_\_\_\_\_ Do - mbe \_\_\_\_\_ Do - mbe \_\_\_\_\_". The fourth staff continues the melody with eighth notes and quarter notes, ending with a double bar line. Below it, the lyrics are: "\_\_\_\_\_ Do - mbe \_\_\_\_\_".

Figure 5: "Dombe", one of the songs of a bride's ceremony. Video S. Fűrniiss 2012.  
(Transcription S. Fűrniiss)

Mbpille's translation of the Ngumba words reveals that Waldow had probably not noticed that his Bulu assistant had added his own comment to the mere translation of the song lyrics. So, he did not mention that this song was sung by the elder women during the welcome ceremony, *màliú mágywàl*, for the new bride who comes to live in her husband's village. The lyrics express the bridegroom's wish that his wife may be wise. A bride's quality is indeed not to "talk a lot", as Waldow's translation suggest, but to "talk well", *i.e.* to know how to talk to her husband and to be polite and diplomatic.

Although it is an old custom, this ceremony may still be celebrated and many of its songs are still sung by the women of Kouambo.

### HOW TO BRIDGE THE HISTORICAL GAP?

In the case of the two collections I have analysed here, the problem is the same: it is very difficult to link the archived sounds to their cultural meanings over the gap of tremendous changes of culture and social behaviour during the last century. In the case of the Mabi, most of the documented music is no longer practised. And nowadays, there are dances and games which were not documented in 1908 and others which were created afterwards.

Fieldwork gains a new methodological dimension, as the research for hints and clues has to be conducted with people of several generations, but who are not - in any case - contemporary to the archived material. Two [80] Mabi elders, a 92- and a 93-year-old, were of tremendous help, as they belonged to the generation of Jakob Malapa's son<sup>xvi</sup>. In the generation of people in their fifties, some people remembered what their parents or grandparents had told them about their experience with rituals which are abandoned today<sup>xvii</sup>. The information recorded on the Archives' documentation sheet was helpful in some cases, but it remains difficult to evaluate to what extent they may have induced answers, at least those concerning the textual contents and the social context of the songs.

This work is delicate, as it appeals to different types of collective and individual memories, which are then rendered according to the way the person would like to present herself/himself or her/his community. Thus, the collected information remains uncertain and, for some of them, hypothetical.

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> The author wants to thank Laurence Fayet for her attentive reading and the very constructive revision of this text.

<sup>ii</sup> The colonial designation for this ethnical group was "Mabea". This exogenous name is still used in Cameroon, outside the Mabi-community.

<sup>iii</sup> September-October 2012, November-December 2013, and June 2015; thanks to financial support from the programme Corus PatriMuS (2012), the Labex BCDiv (2013), and the ANR programme DIADEMS.

<sup>iv</sup> Interview with architect Ernest Gouialpfouo-Nzouangou (born in Bifum) whose father started to work for Zenker when he was ten years old and specialised in bird-hunting and conservation (September 28, 2012).

<sup>v</sup> Letter from F. Luschan to C. Stumpf, October 19, 1906 [E. No 1859/06].

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> Letter from E. M. v. F. Luschan, May 20, 1908 [zu E944/08].

<sup>viii</sup> Register entry from May 7, 1908 [zu E944/08].

<sup>ix</sup> [E No 195 87]

<sup>x</sup> Majesty Joseph Nong. His grandparents practiced the Ngi at Bifum-village, two kilometers from Zenker's domain, Bipindihof. Interview September 27, 2012.

<sup>xi</sup> See the excellent CD *Masques Dan* by Hugo Zemp (1993).

<sup>xii</sup> I wish to thank the librarian of the German Goethe-Institut in Yaoundé, Uwe Jung, for his help with deciphering this hand-writing (which is *not* Zenker's hand-writing). The complete text: "Ngi is used in order to find the poison of an illness. He stands still at the place where the poison is in the earth and brings it out for a good payment (spear...). Is originally from Bulu-country: even when looking for [81] another [xxx], he finds it out. No women may then be on the street. He takes the saliva from the dead and eats it in order to obtain his voice which may apparently be heard a mile away and on behalf of which he enjoys his "big name" all over the country. His presence is announced by a herald or a young man, the *mbone ngi*."

<sup>xiii</sup> I discussed this particular subject several times each year with the chiefs of the Nziou and Lobé quarter, with a group of knowledgeable elders and a still active female healer.

<sup>xiv</sup> Inventory number III C 19091.

<sup>xv</sup> Inventory number III C 10660.

<sup>xvi</sup> Interview with Malapa's step-daughter, June, 2015.

<sup>xvii</sup> In June 2015, I was lucky to meet two nephews of Paul Mukeke in Edéa.

<sup>xviii</sup> Item 4 of the Zenker collection and item 37 of *Archiv Kamerun*.

<sup>xix</sup> *Nguma mabi* "Mabi Pride" is an annual festival which gathers all Mabi chiefs and officials for an important parade on December 15<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>xx</sup> Mbpille passed away in 2014. His work was confirmed by Majesties Nong and Tsagadigi in Kribi.

<sup>xxi</sup> Bama Joseph and Ngalli Taddée, both still alive in 2015.

<sup>xxii</sup> Such as Majesty Tsagadigi Blaise who had still attended initiation.

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