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Innovation crushing cultural memory: harps in South Cameroon

Susanne FÜRNISS

In memory of Pierre Sallée

Introduction

Musical instruments are particular carriers of cultural knowledge and history. Their variability over time may be a testimony to the individual or collective creativity which is inherent in a living tradition. Instruments may also be indicators of social, cultural and religious change. The objective of this essay is to illustrate this phenomenon through the study of the eight-stringed *ngueme* harp among the Fang Ntumu in South Cameroon.¹ On one hand, historical sources – recordings, photos and descriptions – going back to the German colonization at the beginning of the 19th century show some harps with a sculpture representing a man. On the other hand, the current practice of a harp with a polychrome female sculpture in the context of the syncretic Bwiti cult (see below, p. 2-3). The difference between these instruments – all of them named *ngomo* or *ngueme* according to dialect – raises the question of how such a change could have occurred². What are the aesthetic or symbolic implications of the transformation of this instrument?

This article illustrates and deepens an observation made in 1985 by Pierre Sallée in his doctoral thesis on the harp in Gabon.³ This French researcher, who passed away too soon, had noted that, although the Fang no longer remember it, a harp of slightly different morphology had existed in their culture long before the reintroduction of this instrument through the borrowing of the *Bwiti* cult in which the harp is currently practised among the Fang. I corroborate this finding with material evidence from South Cameroon.⁴

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Harps in Cameroon, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea

Harps are to be found in Cameroon in the North among Tchadic populations⁵ and in the South among the Ntumu (a subgroup of the Fang people), a majority of whom live in Gabon and in Equatorial Guinea (figure 1). In Gabon, the harp is played by several ethnic groups among which the Fang subgroups Ntumu and Mveng or Mvaï in the North and Meke in the Center are the most relevant for the present study.

¹ The reader will find in this article several endogenous names for the harp, as well as for the cult in which it is practiced today. The Ntumu of Southern Cameroon are a sub-group of the Fang, of which other sub-groups live mainly in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. There are several dialects according to which the harp is called *ngomo* or *ngueme*, or *ngombi*. Similarly, the cult is called either *Buti*, *Bwiti*, or even *Bwete* among the Tsogho of Gabon. Here we will use the term corresponding to the sub-group in question or to the terminology used by the authors cited.

² For a glossary of terms, see appendix 2 at the end of this article.

³ Pierre Sallée, 'L'arc et la harpe: contribution à l'histoire de la musique du Gabon' (PhD, Université de Paris X-Nanterre, 1985).

⁴ This research has been conducted in the framework of two projects conducted at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris by my colleague Sylvie Le Bomin and myself. The data for this article have been collected thanks to the financial support of several institutions: field work in Cameroon (2018 and 2019) by the Muséum National d'Histoire naturelle (ATM NGI project) and the Alliance Sorbonne Universities directly (KUNDI project) or via the Institut for Heritage OPUS (ARCHIFANG project); documentary research in the collections and the Phonogramm Archive of the Ethnology Museum in Berlin via the *Collegium musicæ*

⁵ Gerhard Kubik, 'Cameroon, Republic of', *Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed 22 September 2021.

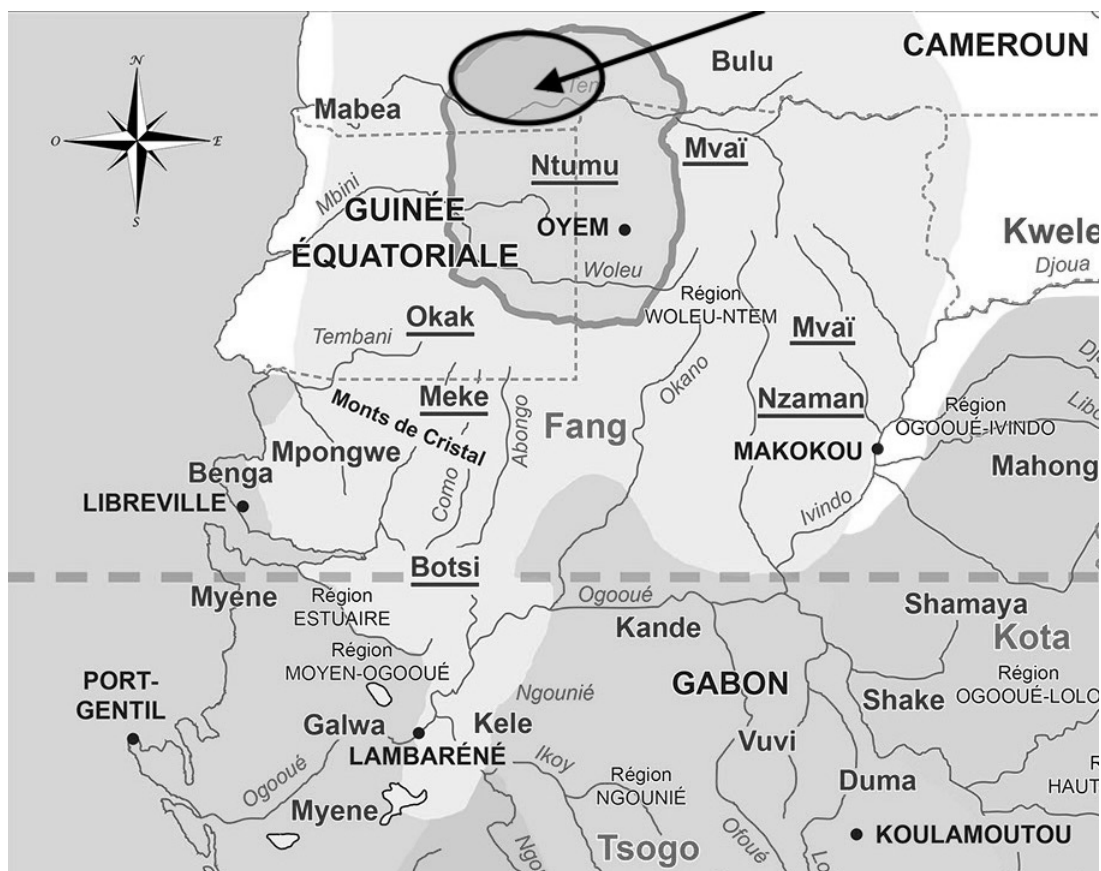


Figure 1: Map of South Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon⁶; underlined: Fang subgroups; arrow: area of the author's fieldwork.

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The harp among the Fang and related people

The Fang play the harp as part of the *Bwiti* cult. This cult has been taken over from the Tsogho who are supposed to be at the origin of this syncretic Fang ritual. There is a very rich literature concerning this ritual in Gabon (see below, p. 15). The musical and organological aspects have been particularly worked on by Pierre Sallée⁷ for the whole of Gabon; by Sylvie Le Bomin⁸ and Émeline Lechaux⁹ for the *Bwete* of the Tsogho; and by Marie-France

⁶ Régis Ollomo Ella, 'Onyùmónyùmà, le règne olfactif chez les Fang-Ntumu du Gabon', *Revue d'ethnoécologie*, 18 (2020), 2.

⁷ Sallée, 'L'arc et la harpe'.

⁸ Sylvie Le Bomin, *Dossier de presse des nuits de Bwiti, culte des ancêtres des Tsogho du Gabon* (Montpellier, 2002); Sylvie Le Bomin et al., 'Ce que "faire ensemble" peut vouloir dire en musique', *Cahiers d'ethnomusicologie*, 21 (2008), 175–204.

⁹ Émeline Lechaux, 'Tisser le fil de la mémoire: contribution à l'histoire des répertoires musicaux des cérémonies de bwète chez les Mitsogo du Gabon' (PhD, EHESS, Paris & UOB Libreville, 2015).

Mifune¹⁰ for the *Bwiti* of the Fang, which interests us here. In Cameroon, the cult is named *Buti* in the Ntumu dialect. Its harp has been described by Hervé Rivière.¹¹ The harp has a parallelepiped body with a flat base so that the instrument can stand vertically without support. The body is extended upwards by a sculpted summit. Regardless of the ethnic group concerned, this summit shows a more or less stylised female sculpture. According to Sallée,¹² this characteristic trait is one of the relevant morphological features to identify the 'Gabonese instrument' – and by extension that of South Cameroon – among the other harps of Africa. More recent field research by Sylvie Le Bomin throughout Gabon, by Marie-France Mifune among the Fang in northern Gabon and by this author in southern Cameroon corroborate this characteristic (figure 2). The Fang instrument is particularly coloured which, according to Marie-France Mifune,¹³ is clearly a specific characteristic that distinguishes it from other *Bwiti* harps at the present time. This is in line with the observation made by Jacques Binet¹⁴ for all the sculptures relating to the Fang *Bwiti*.



Figure 2: Bwiti/Buti harps in Gabon and Cameroon: a) Thierry N'No, Fang-Mveng, Gabon, Minvoul; b) Meli Obam Yebe Anicet, Fang-Ntumu, Cameroon, Ambam.

The *Bwiti* harp represents, for the Fang, the first sacrificed initiate, Nyingone Mebeghe, the female ancestor of the Fang cosmogony assimilated in this syncretistic context also to the Virgin Mary.¹⁵ As a result, the different morphological elements allude to the female body.

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Fieldwork in Cameroon 2018-2019

Ntumu harps in Cameroon today

Fieldwork among the Ntumu in 2018 and 2019 led me to three *Buti*-temples in the town of Ambam, one of which, named Miwaliatsengue, is the original temple in the region. The

¹⁰ Marie-France Mifune, 'Performance et construction identitaire: Une approche interdisciplinaire du culte du bwiti chez les Fang du Gabon' (PhD, EHESS, Paris & UOB, Libreville, 2012).

¹¹ Hervé Rivière, 'L'instrumentarium musical des Ntumu', *Journal des Africanistes*, 69:2 (1999), 121–145.

¹² Sallée, *L'arc et la harpe*, p. 29.

¹³ Personal communication, 9 December 2020.

¹⁴ Jacques Binet, 'Drogue et mystique: Le Bwiti des Fangs', *Diogenes*, 86 (1974), 38.

¹⁵ Stanislaw Swiderski, 'La harpe sacrée dans les cultes syncretiques au Gabon', *Anthropos*, 5–6:(1970), 833; Le Bomin et al., 'Ce que "faire ensemble" peut vouloir dire en musique', 184.

founder of this temple, Yebe Abesolo Julien, handed over his knowledge to his son Obam Yebe Joseph (figure 10) who was the temple master until his death in 2019. He trained many others in harp-making (figure 3).

His son Meli Obam Yebe Anicet (figure 2b) is a gifted craftsman and has guaranteed the safeguarding of knowledge and practice until now. Besides already being a ritual master, he is a harp maker with an extraordinary creativity and sense for diversity and variation.

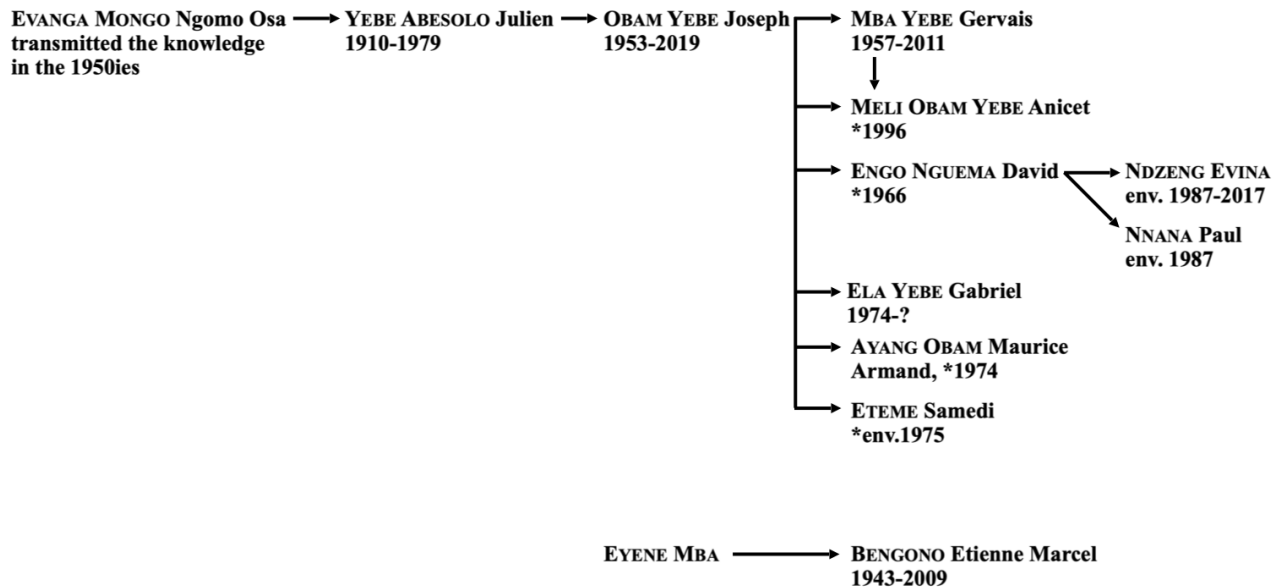


Figure 3: Genealogy of harp makers in Ambam, Cameroon.

The instruments in the other two temples, Miwaliatsengue 2 and Kokonangondo, were mostly made by disciples of Obam Yebe Joseph. Some of these harps are called ‘training’ harps which do not feature in the *Buti* ceremonies, while others are their main support.¹⁶ The sculptures represent a woman with white skin and European features (figure 4). If the hair is visible, it is smooth – often with a parting – and the head is covered with a veil. This veil may be part of the sculpture itself or it may be a piece of cloth placed on the head of the figure who – in a ritual situation – is also dressed in a cape. Sometimes hands are carved, joined in prayer, and allusions to the Christian cross are seen.

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All have a sound board with three sound holes: two small ones – called ‘eyes’ or ‘breasts’, a large one called ‘mouth’ or ‘vagina’ depending on the symbolic level – and a symmetrical vertical axis, often alternating red and white colours which take up a symbolism that is omnipresent in the cult. While a discussion of the symbolism of shapes and colours of the *Buti* harps is beyond the scope of this essay, there are several key texts dedicated to this cult.¹⁷

¹⁶ The harps for training are made without a specific ritual protocol (Mifune, Personal communication, 4 January 2021).

¹⁷ James W. Fernandez, ‘Christian acculturation and Fang witchcraft’, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 2:6 (1961), 244–270; James W. Fernandez, *Bwiti: An ethnography of the religious imagination in Africa* (Princeton, 1982); Swiderski, ‘La harpe sacrée’; Binet, ‘Drogue et mystique’; André Mary, *La naissance à l’envers: essai sur le rituel du Bwiti Fang au Gabon* (Paris, 1983); René Bureau, *Bokayé! Essai sur le Bwiti fang du Gabon* (Paris, 1996); André Mary, *Le défi du syncrétisme: le travail symbolique de la religion d’Eboga (Gabon)* (Paris, 1999); Le Bomin et al., ‘Faire ensemble’; Mifune, ‘Performance’.



Figure 4: Two Buti-harps in Ambam, Cameroon.

A Ntumu harp: 1990s Cameroon

An inventory of the musical instruments of the Fang Ntumu, published in 1999 by the late French ethnomusicologist Hervé Rivière, shows – besides a Bwiti harp corresponding to the observed characteristics – a different type of sculpture representing a male.¹⁸ Rivière gives little contextual information: ‘It is played both as a solo and as a vocal accompaniment, as in the fifties in Gabon’^{19,20} Therefore, in 2018 I also went to the villages near the small town of Ma’an in which he had conducted his fieldwork between 1995 and 1997, in order to understand the meaning of this very different instrument.

I had the opportunity to meet the maker of this harp, Chamberlain from Nkong Meyos, and to discuss with him the differences between the two types of instruments. The instrument he built for Hervé Rivière is called *Akamənam* ‘defend the village’ or *Bəwu* ‘the deceased’

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corresponding to the eponymous invoking ritual. The male-shaped sculpture is supposed to represent a village chief who has taken good care of his clan. It is used to sing invocations, to ask for the protection of ancestors or to inform the village of a danger.

¹⁸ Hervé Rivière, ‘L’instrumentarium musical des Ntumu’, p. 128.

¹⁹ All translations from non-English speaking sources are by the author.

²⁰ Rivière, ‘L’instrumentarium musical des Ntumu’, p. 126.

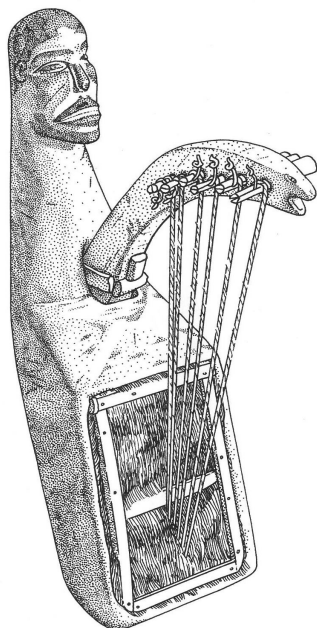


Figure 5: A male-shaped harp made in 1995-7 for Hervé Rivière²¹

In relation to the name *Akamənam* ‘defend the village’, several persons told me independently of each other that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the harp with a male sculpture had been played by elders in the meeting-place in the middle of the village. During the time of colonisation, harp-playing prevented many men and women from being caught by the German colonial administration. When the Germans came to a village during daytime, they mostly only found the elders while the other adults were in the fields behind the houses. As the Germans loved to listen to music and did not understand Fang language, the elders played the harp in order to warn the other villagers and to tell them to stay away as long as the colonisers were around.

But my interlocutors insisted that the main addressees of harp playing were the ancestors which refers to the second name of this instrument, *Bəwu* ‘the deceased’. The ancestors were called upon during the ceremony *Bəwu* for help in difficult moments both for the community and individuals. The harp was mobilised when there were problems in the village, particularly in relation to women’s fertility problems and land sharing. Traditional wrestling ceremonies *Məsing* were organised in the latter case and the harp was played the day before the fighting to invoke the support of the ancestors.

Pierre Sallée and René Bureau²² have documented the ancient funerary function of the Fang harp in Gabon: ‘The new Fang generations know that such an instrument once existed; they name it *ngoma along* and specify that its function was funerary; its music accompanied the last sighs of a dying man’.²³ My colleagues Sylvie Le Bomin and Jean-Emile Mbot confirm this aspect²⁴ with a precision that explicitly mentions the ancestors: if an old and very weak person on the verge of death was late in dying, the harp would have been played to

²¹ Ibid., p. 128.

²² Bureau, *Bokayé!*

²³ Sallée, ‘L’arc et la harpe’, p. 60.

²⁴ Personal communication, November 2019.

make it easier for them to pass into the other life. It is as if the playing of the harp attracted the ancestors to come and take one of their own.

From a morphological point of view, the harp collected in the 1990s has only six strings made of twisted skin strips. Although the maker of the recent harp gave no information about the number six as such, he underlined that the even number of strings results from the fact that the instrument would have been revealed by the ancestors. The material of the strings, which differs from the nylon used for the current *Buti* harps,²⁵ is another indication of the

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instrument's link with the ancestors. Indeed, according to the people of Ma'an, all instruments played for the ancestors must imperatively be made entirely of natural materials.²⁶

Museum Artefacts and Written Sources of the early Fang harp

A diversion through the museum collections will be useful to better understand the problem and to get an idea of the older harps, Fang in general and Ntumu in particular. Male-shaped harps can be found in different museums. I have identified twenty-eight Fang harps in museum collections in Europe and Cameroon.²⁷ Compared to the relative homogeneity of the *Bwiti* harp, these instruments show a great variety of sculptures, body bases and soundboard mountings, but all of them have eight strings. Whereas eight of them have sculptures of females, seven harps show male figures (figure 6).



Figure 6: Male-shaped harps in museum collections: a) Yaoundé, Musée ethnographique des peuples de la forêt; b) Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum: III C 36845.

For many of them, the hair is carved with more prominence than the instrument of Chamberlain²⁸ like, for example, the instrument housed at the Ethnographic Museum of the

²⁵ The difference in materials for the strings has already been noted by Sallée (1985, p. 55), but without any explanation as to its symbolism.

²⁶ In the particular context of invocation of ancestors, the harp has nowadays been replaced by a large lamellophone, *Tam-tam*, which is easier and quicker to make than the harp. It has nine lamellas, the odd number signifying its inferiority to the harp. As for the materials of the lamellas, the instrument played outside a ritual context has iron lamellas which will be removed and replaced for the invocation by bamboo lamellas.

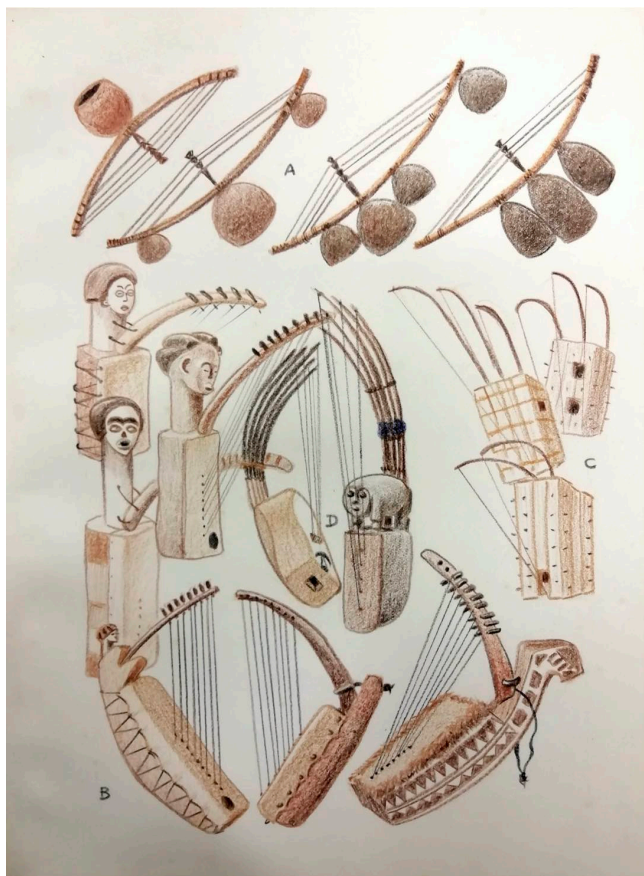
²⁷ See the list of inventoried Fang harps in the appendix. The harps have been described and photographed as part of the KUNDI programme by several people: Géraldine Robillard, Noé Coussot, Marie-France Mifune, and Susanne Fürniss.

²⁸ Studies have to be still done however in order to distinguish clearly the representations of African men of merit from European orientated sculptures which might already belong to what nowadays is called 'airport art', i.e. artefacts that have been produced for Western travelers and that allude to Western images.

Forest People in Yaoundé (figure 6a) which represents a typically male hairstyle named *àsík* in Ewondo language.²⁹

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Fifteen other museum instruments represent either a geometrical form, a head of an animal or a sculpture similar to those of the Fang statuary relating to the *Byeri* cult for the ancestors.³⁰ These instruments entered the collections between 1935 and 1997 and some of them date back to the end of the 19th century,³¹ a period prior to the *Bwiti* cult in Fang culture. They are



*Figure 7: Grebert's drawing of Fang chordophones: A) harp-zithers mver; B) harps engomi; C) and D) bow-lutes akarankam*³².

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a bridge to the written sources from the early 20th century that describe observations of pre-colonial Fang culture and corroborate this special original link to the ancestors that is still in memory nowadays in a small part of the Fang Ntumu country.

The same variety is also documented by the Swiss missionary Ferdinand Grebert who stayed in Fang country in the centre of Gabon from 1913 to 1931 and made a precious series of drawings of great precision and beauty (figure 7).

²⁹ Information from Thérèse Fouda, Director of the MEPP. Ewondo is a Bantu-language from the same group as Ntumu: A70.

³⁰ Louis Perrois, *La statuaire fang: Gabon* (Paris, 1972).

³¹ The harp from Berlin (IIC36845, Figure 6b) was collected in 1895, but only given to the Museum in 1949.

³² Ferdinand Grebert, *Monographie ethnographique des tribus Fang du Gabon*. Unpublished manuscript (Geneva, 1940: Société des Missions évangéliques de Paris), pp. 24-25.

Grebert's drawing also shows a bow-lute with a sculpture relating the instrument to the *Byeri* cult for the ancestors. A statuette of this type was fixed as a 'guardian' on the lid of the bark boxes containing the skulls of the ancestors who were at the centre of this cult. Some rare harps with sculptures of this type are reproduced as photographs in Laburthe-Tolra & Falgayrette³³ and in Sallée.³⁴

The ancient Ntumu harp

The earliest currently known representations of Ntumu harps from South Cameroon are Günter Tessmann's illustrations published in his ethnographic monograph *Die Pangwe*.³⁵ They show either a spoon-like sculpture or a representation of an ancestor's guardian (figure 8a). Tessmann was the head of the *Lübecker Pangwe Expedition* (1907-1909) and stayed mainly in Ntumu area in Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon between. In the section 'Music' of his monograph – which has been written by Erich Moritz von Hornbostel on the basis of Tessmann's field data – we find the following description of this instrument:

Bowharp, ngomo F[ang], ngü'e me Nt[umu] (cf. Figs. 130 and 131). The trough-shaped body made of the wood of *Alchornea caloneura* Pax (ndamaba) is covered with a table made of the bark of *Ficus vogeliana* Miq. (lo, etito), which is pierced by two sound holes. The upper extension of the body, sometimes carved in the form of an animal or human head, has an arched string carrier made of the wood of the *Uapaca guineensis* Muell. Arg. (asa'm).³⁶ The eight strings run from pegs (of any wood) through the soundboard and are fastened under it by short crossbars of raphiamark (a special one for each string!). The strings are made either from raffia

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fibres (kanga dzan) or (less well) from the stems of the orchid *Myrsacidium productum* Kranzl. (anzuma, oko ojob), which have been freed from the outermost layer of bark, or (even less well) from oil palm fibres (kangamalen); finally, as a makeshift, e.g. if a string breaks during playing, twisted strips of stems (nden) of *Sarcophrynium velutinum* are used (and not fresh ones, but old ones with which cassava rolls are wrapped). The strings are plucked with the bare fingers. The harp is used for accompaniment of songs. The bowed harp of the Pangwe is the descendant of the ancient Egyptian instrument that has advanced furthest to the southwest.³⁷

³³ Philippe Laburthe-Tolra & Christiane Falgayrettes (eds), *Fang* (Paris, 1992).

³⁴ Sallée, 'L'arc et la harpe', pp 56–57.

³⁵ Günter Tessmann, *Die Pangwe: völkerkundliche Monographie eines westafrikanischen Negerstammes* (Berlin, 1913), pp 329–330.

³⁶ According to POWO (2019) these trees have no common English names:

Alchornea caloneura Pax (Euphorbiaceae), synonym of *Discoglyprena caloneura* (Pax) Prain, is a forest tree, to 90 ft. high or more. *Ficus vogeliana* (Miq.) Miq. (Moraceae) is a forest tree, 15–60 ft. high. *Uapaca guineensis* Muell. Arg. (Phyllanthaceae) is a tree to 90 ft. high, with stilt-roots.

³⁷ Hornbostel, 'Musik', p. 328.

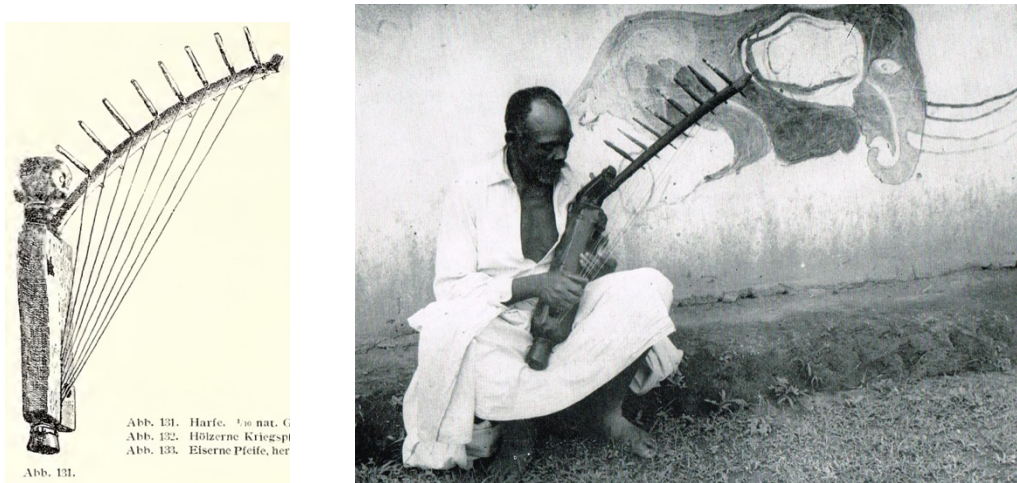


Figure 8: Ancient Ntumu harps: a) Drawing by Günter Tessmann;³⁸ b) Photo by Herbert Pepper.³⁹

Tessmann's description formulated by Hornbostel confirms for the Ntumu the variety of the sculptures stated for other Fang subgroups in Gabon by Grebert. It also adds the mention of animal-head shaped sculptures at the summit of the instrument. This kind of sculpture can be found on a Cameroonian Ntumu

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harp in Berlin⁴⁰ that had been collected by Georg Zenker in 1906. It is identical in shape and sculpture to the field photo taken by Herbert Pepper in 1959 in North Gabon among the Ntumu near Oyem (figure 8b), about a hundred kilometres from Cameroon and of which Sallée says: 'The document is of primary importance because it was probably the last specimen of this ancient Fang harp'.⁴¹ Identical Equato-Guinean instruments named *nguiémé* or *ngómá* are to be seen in Aranzadi⁴² and in Iñigo de Aranzadi's private collection, dated from the 1950s and originating from the actual region of Kie-Ntem that borders Cameroon and Gabon.⁴³

The number of strings (eight) seems to be constant.⁴⁴ An important difference from today's *Buti* harps of the Ntumu is the number of two often almost rectangular sound-holes, arranged diagonally on the soundboard. According to Tessmann, the soundboard was made of beaten bark, which is the case only for one instrument in Berlin.⁴⁵ However, none of the other historical Ntumu instruments have a painted or otherwise decorated box or soundboard, as is the case today. Tessmann's description does not, however, indicate anything about the base of the instrument. Observation of the ancient Ntumu instruments – photos, drawings and objects – reveals that they all have a foot, which is not in principle the case for Gabonese

³⁸ Ibid., p. 330.

³⁹ Archives CNRS-Musée de l'Homme: https://archives.crem-cnrs.fr/archives/items/CNRSMH_E_1959_002_004_003_11, accessed on 16 December, 2020.

⁴⁰ III C 20582.

⁴¹ Sallée, 'L'arc et la harpe', p. 60.

⁴² Isabela de Aranzadi, *Instrumentos musicales de las etnias de guinea ecuatorial* (Madrid, 2009), p. 183.

⁴³ Personal communication by Isabela de Aranzadi, 26 May 2021.

⁴⁴ Hornbostel mentions only in a footnote that a photograph of Trilles (1912, p. 86) would show a seven-stringed instrument. While the photograph in question does not make it possible to determine with certainty the number of strings on the instrument that is depicted, Trilles himself writes elsewhere twice that the harp *ngomé* (Trilles 1910, p. 175) or *mvègne* (Trilles 1909, p.955) has seven strings. This might be a regional variant, as Trilles has stayed in Central Gabon among another Fang subgroup.

⁴⁵ III C 20582.

instruments, ‘apart from a few exceptions due to the ancient harps of the Fang’.⁴⁶ Sallée also highlights the parallelepipedal sound box with a rounded back and the slightly curved stringholder.⁴⁷ He assumes that the harp with these morphological characteristics is a specific feature of the Ntumu, as much as the poetic and musical practice associated with this instrument.⁴⁸

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The playing context of the ancient Ntumu harp

Written sources from the beginning of the 20th century provide little information about the context of playing the harp among the Ntumu, and Fang in general. Trilles provides an impressive body of songs from oral literature, notably tale-songs or songs relating to myth.⁴⁹ He transcribed and translated not only the lyrics but also the sung melody. The scores contain references to formulas played by the harp.

This instrument is specifically mentioned in connection with a ‘Song of Teachings’ or ‘Teaching of the Ancestor’, *Esangela*.⁵⁰ However, the content of the songs noted by Trilles does not seem to be related to the above-mentioned function of establishing the link with the ancestors by invoking their assistance. As to Tessmann, he does not provide any clues as to the ethnographic context and/or function of its playing. Although his monograph contains many linguistic transcriptions, the words of these harp songs are not included.

The image shows a musical score for a harp song with a chorus. The title is '14. (Phonogr.-Nr. 35) Harfenlied mit Chor. Spieler und Vorsänger: Ndong-Si.' The score is written for Harfe (harp) and Gesang (singing). The harp part is in 2/4 time, and the vocal part is in 2/4 time. The score includes various sections: A Chor, B (Solo), C, D, and a Solo section. There are also markings for '(Solo mit Chor usw.)' and '* Variante:'. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 84. The key signature is one flat (B-flat).

Figure 9: Transcription by Erich Moritz von Hornbostel⁵¹ of a harp song recorded by Günter Tessmann (N^o 35) between august 1908 and february 1909 in Bebai, Equatorial Guinea, on the border to Cameroon

⁴⁶ Sallée, ‘L’arc et la harpe’, p. 29. As Sallée pointed out (Ibid., p. 55), this establishes a proximity with the Ngbaka from the Central African Republic, some 800 kilometres as the crow flies further East, who are the only population in this country whose harp has an anthropomorphic sculpture at the base of the string-holder. The sculptures of all other Central African instruments – if there are any – are situated at the summit of the stringholder (Brugière & Grootaers, 1999; Fürniss, 1993).

⁴⁷ Sallée, ‘L’arc et la harpe’, p. 55.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 62.

⁴⁹ P. Henri Trilles, ‘Les Légendes des Bena Kanioka et le folk-lore Bantou’, *Anthropos*, 4:4 (1909), *Anthropos*, 5:1 (1910); *Chez les Fang ou quinze années de séjour au Congo français* (Lille, 1912).

⁵⁰ Trilles, *Anthropos*, 5:1 (1910), 170.

⁵¹ Hornbostel, ‘Musik’, p. 331.

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However, he not only made descriptions and photographs, but also sound recordings on wax cylinders. These recordings, which are held by the *Berlin Phonogrammarchiv*, contain three recordings of songs accompanied by the harp (cylinders 22, 35 and 36). The only indications given by Tessmann directly on the recordings are, for no. 22 ‘Solo performance on the Negroe-harp’ and for nos. 35 and 36 ‘Harp with choir’. Hornbostel made the musical transcription of cylinder 35 (figure 9) under the title ‘Harp-Song with Choir’, but the words are not noted as it is the case for some others of his transcriptions.

More than 110 years later, Régis Ollomo Ella, professor of linguistics at the Omar Bongo University in Libreville, would transcribe and translate the words of this song.⁵² It is the lament of a distraught orphan. He plays the harp alone in the courtyard and mourns his dead mother who is about to be buried at the foot of a Kevazingo tree, *Guibourtia tessmannii*, a tree considered sacred.

Refrain: Son of my mother, I’m dying. I am distraught. Who will still say sweet words to me?

Soloist: I sing on my harp, poor me, for you are now going to rest at the foot of the Kevazingo.

Choir: Refrain

Soloist: I wander along the courtyard, as we mourn the nephew of the village Mbang.

Choir: Refrain

Soloist: I sing on my harp, poor me, for we are crying Mama, the one who gave birth to me.

Choir: Refrain

Soloist: I go, I come, I wander, because we are mourning the nephew of the village Mbang.

Choir: Dear brother, I am dying. I am distraught. Who will still say sweet words to me?

Soloist: I sing on my harp, poor me. We mourn Andeme Ndong, my mother.

Choir: Refrain

Here we see that the loop is closed. The context that appears through the lyrics of this song shows its proximity to the funerary context still remembered in

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recent decades: ‘Traditionally, the Fang play the harp in the court of the man who is about to die’.⁵³

All the information relating to the playing context of the ancient Ntumu harp shows that it belongs to a coherent cultural complex which no longer exists as such today. As we can see by comparing the Ntumu harp made in the 1990s with those collected and documented at the beginning of the 20th century, the memory of the morphological aspects has only been maintained in relation to the sculpture representing a male chief who had well taken care of his community. The instrument as such was no longer in use in that time, which confirms the observation made by Pierre Sallée for Northern Gabon in 1985: ‘The instrument is not attested in the Woleu-Ntem today’.⁵⁴ In order to understand the particular position of

⁵² Régis Ollomo Ella carried out this transcription and translation as part of our collaboration in the ARCHIFANG project. See Susanne Fürniss & Régis Ollomo Ella, ‘Les enregistrements de musique fang par Günter Tessmann’, in Susanne Fürniss, *Walzenaufnahmen aus Südkamerun/Enregistrements sur cylindre de cire du Sud-Cameroun. 1907-1909*, CD, (Berlin 2021), 126–153.

⁵³ Bureau, *Bokayé!*, p. 88; the metadata of Herbert Pepper’s photograph (figure 9) also mention a lament.

⁵⁴ Sallée, ‘L’arc et la harpe’, p. 55.

the Ntumu among the other Fang subgroups, it will be necessary to look closely at the history of their movements and the contacts and influences which, during the first half of the 20th century, shaped the harp and its use within the *Buti* cult in South Cameroon today.

History: Of migrations and borrowings

The first arrival of the harp in South Cameroon

It is clear that there was a harp among the Ntumu before the adoption of the *Buti*. A study of their settlement in the area they now occupy and of the cultural history of the last century shows that the harp arrived in two waves and from different directions. The Ntumu have not always been in the area they currently occupy between South Cameroon, North Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea. They arrived in this region with the other Fang subgroups during several decades of a migration which began towards the end of the 18th century in the North-East Cameroonian savannah, probably in the Adamaoua. According to Alexandre,⁵⁵ the Fang have arrived around 1850 near Oyem in Gabon – which is less than 100 kilometres south of Ambam in Cameroon. The Ntumu remained in their present area while other sub-groups continued their south-westward progression towards central Gabon and the Atlantic coast where the Fang migration ended at the end of the 19th century.

Tessmann is the first to mention the fact that the Ntumu brought a harp with them during their migration.⁵⁶ For his part, Swiderski confirms this hypothesis through mythology: ‘The myth tells that when the Fang came from

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Ozambogha, their homeland, the ancestors, their first parents, father Ngoo and mother Ngoo, recommended that they take with them not only their skulls (bieri), but also their sacred musical instruments [including the Ngombi harp]’.⁵⁷ But it is Sallée who brings a precision which makes us understand a possible difference between the Ntumu and the other Fang subgroups that might explain the instrumental particularity of the ancient Ntumu harp:

While there is no doubt that the Fang brought a harp in the nineteenth century, this contribution seems to have been made only by the only Western branch of their migration (Ntumu and perhaps Okak). The Eastern migration, that of the “fierce Osyeba” of the Ogowe, who are none other than the Mëkë according to De Brazza does not seem to have known it.⁵⁸

It is assumed that playing the harp was abandoned as a result of the social and religious crises caused by colonisation and increasing Christianisation, which condemned the cult of ancestors (see below, p.15-16).⁵⁹ As noted above, a copy of the old harp survived near Minvoul in Gabon until the late 1950s and its memory was revived, albeit truncated, at Ma’an in Cameroon in the 1990s. But in both cases, the practice had not been documented for several decades, as the last testimonies have been collected between 1910 and 1930 approximately.

⁵⁵ Pierre Alexandre, ‘Proto-histoire du groupe beti-bulu-fang: essai de synthèse provisoire’, Cahiers d’Études africaines, (1965), 503–560.

⁵⁶ Hornbostel, ‘Musik’, p. 330.

⁵⁷ Swiderski, ‘La harpe sacrée’, 841.

⁵⁸ Sallée, ‘L’arc et la harpe’, p. 61.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 62. Sallée hypothesises that at the same time, the epic genre *mvet*, which is accompanied by the harp-zither and that is a powerful rallying point for the Fang and their cousins (Bulu, Beti), would have gained importance and would have pushed the harp aside.

Diffusion of the Bwiti cult and the second arrival of the harp in South Cameroon

As the contemporary harp is closely linked to the religion of the *Bwiti*, it is necessary to retrace the progression of this cultural practice from its origins in the South of Gabon to the Ntumu, first in Gabon and then in southern Cameroon. While the first Ntumu harp arrived in southern Cameroon with the Fang migration from the North, the ‘modern’ harp arrived from the South.⁶⁰ Indeed, the *Bwiti* has its origin mainly among the Tsogho and Apinji of southern Gabon.⁶¹ Today it is practised by many ethnic groups of this country, among whom ‘the Fang were the last population to have borrowed it’.⁶² As is also the case for the *Bwiti* of the Tsogho, the Fang have different branches of the cult, which diversifies practices and

[\[p. 274\]](#) sometimes makes comparison difficult.⁶³ In his comparative work on *Bwiti* music among the Fang in the north and in the centre of Gabon, Sallée shows that there are consistent differences.⁶⁴

The encounter of the Fang with this cult took place far from the lands of the Ntumu, in the logging camps of the provinces of Moyen-Ogoué and the Estuary (figure 1), a point of convergence of logging workers coming from several regions of Gabon.⁶⁵ It was through this labour migration that the *Bwiti* cult was first brought into this region by Tsogho and Apinji-people at the end of the twentieth century. It was then adopted there by other logging workers from different origins. As Marie-France Mifune points out, written sources do not mention the presence of the *Bwiti* among the Fang before the First World War.⁶⁶ Her field research in a *Bwiti*-community from the branch *disumba mongo na bata* north of Minvoul, a few kilometres from the Cameroonian border, has made it possible to clarify the time and circumstances of the transmission of this cult to the Fang:

according to the original myth collected from the *disumba mongo na bata* community, the first Fang initiated to the *Bwiti* would have arrived in the Estuary around 1850 in Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza’s boat. He would have been initiated into the *disumba* branch around 1890.⁶⁷

The cult then spread northwards and reached the border of Cameroon, according to Balandier,⁶⁸ in the period between 1920 and 1925.

In South Cameroon, however, the Ntumu had not yet adopted the *Bwiti* at that time. In fact, among the three temples of the town of Ambam is the one founded by Yebe Abesolo Julien from which the *Buti* spread in the region. Yebe Abesolo Julien had been initiated to the branch *diboki* in Equatorial Guinea in the 1950s. About twenty years later, that is, several decades after it had been attested in the north of Gabon, he introduced this branch of the *Buti* in Southern Cameroon. The harp, as a key element of this cult, was therefore reimported to South Cameroon in the 1970s only.

⁶⁰ Sallée, ‘L’arc et la harpe’, p. 55.

⁶¹ Édouard Trézenem, ‘Notes ethnographiques sur les tribus Fan du Moyen Ogooué (Gabon)’, *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 6:1 (1936), 76; Fernandez, ‘Christian Acculturation’, 251; Mary, *La naissance à l’envers*; Sallée, ‘L’arc et la harpe’, p. 9.

⁶² Mifune, ‘Performance’, p. 26.

⁶³ Mary, *La naissance à l’envers*, p. 11.

⁶⁴ Sallée, ‘L’arc et la harpe’, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Binet, ‘Drogue et mystique’, 34

⁶⁶ Mifune, ‘Performance’, p. 75

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ George Balandier, ‘Aspects de l’évolution sociale chez les Fang du Gabon’, *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, 9 (1950), 80.



Figure 10: Obam Yebe Joseph (1953-2019) at the tomb of his father Yebe Abesolo Julien who introduced the Buti-cult in South Cameroon in the 1970s.

It should be remembered that a large part of the Fang people also live in Equatorial Guinea. As modern state borders do not correspond to cultural boundaries, the innovative *Bwiti* movement from central Gabon was also introduced into Equatorial Guinea. From there it spread to Cameroon, but with strong links to Northern Gabon. Indeed, Yebe Abesolo Julien sent his sons and family members to Oyem to perfect their spiritual knowledge.

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The Bwiti, the ancestors, and the harp

The *Buti* harp alone represents profound transformations in Fang culture. The latter experienced a major crisis following colonisation, which fought against traditional social authorities. This was coupled with the missionary repression of the traditional Fang cult of the ancestors, the *Byeri*⁶⁹ a ‘familiarist religion of allegiance to the protection of the fathers, *esa*’.⁷⁰ The Fang were thus deprived of their modes of ritual expression and their symbolic capital.⁷¹ In response to this degradation, which led to the gradual extinction of the *Byeri*, the Fang sought a way to adapt or transform their institutions. Balandier places the first negative effects of colonisation to 1918, which corresponds to the time of the spread of *Bwiti* among the Fang of northern Gabon.⁷² While Louis Perrois indicates that this date corresponds to that of the last manifestations of *Byeri*,⁷³ Trézenem⁷⁴ places the extinction of *Byeri* in the 1930s.

⁶⁹ Trézenem, ‘Notes ethnographiques’, 76; Balandier, ‘Aspects de l’évolution sociale’, 80.

⁷⁰ Mifune, ‘Performance’, p. 77.

⁷¹ Mary, *La naissance à l’envers*, p. 3.

⁷² Balandier, ‘Aspects de l’évolution sociale’, 81.

⁷³ Perrois, *La statuaire fang*, p. 131.

⁷⁴ Trézenem, ‘Notes ethnographiques’, 76.

There must therefore have been a good twenty years of cohabitation of cults, either within the same subgroup or among different ones.

The borrowing of the *Bwiti* by the Fang gave rise to the creation of a new ritual institution based on a double syncretism which André Mary calls ‘internal’ and ‘exogenous’ syncretisms.⁷⁵ Fernandez resumes the process:

Bwiti was, from the first, a reformatory-type cult of nativistic inclinations. It represented in the early years of the century the attempt by a minority of Fang to rework their own ancestral cult, Bieri, by adding elements from the more elaborate rituals and cosmologies of neighbouring Bantu peoples, with whom the Fang had been brought into contact by their conquest of Northern Gabon. [...] The shift towards Christian symbolism occurred much later. For a surprising length of time Bwiti resisted the authority of Christian evangelisation. After World War II, however, an increasing number of Christian elements found their way into most branches of the cult, so that at the present time there is a Christian dimension to most cult symbolism.⁷⁶

Among the elements of internal syncretism, the harp plays an important role in the transformed continuity of the cult of the ancestors. Whereas the latter

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was materialised by the preservation of ancestor skulls in relic boxes – guarded by sculpted ‘guardians’ to whom the sculptures of some of the harps seen above resemble – the harp becomes the substitute for these boxes.⁷⁷ This is the transformation from the ‘cult of the bone’ to the ‘cult of the harp’,⁷⁸ a fact confirmed to me by a *Buti* master in Ambam. In this reinterpretation, the harp as seen by the Fang Mveng ‘embodies the spirit of an ancestor’.⁷⁹ Studies on the *Bwiti* in Gabon and the myths relating to this field provide further details about the rooting of the Fang harp in the dialogue between living humans and their dead ancestors. Thus, Swiderski reports the following mythological word collected from the Fang of the Estuary region:

The *ngombi* [harp] – said the ancestors – is the dwelling of the dead. It is this *ngombi* who will take your words from the earth to bring them to the dwelling of the dead and who will take the words of the dead to bring them to the earth; this *ngombi* will be the intermediary between the dead and the living so that they may gather in one place. [...] It is a perfect example of the possible exchange between the dead and the living.⁸⁰

But as we have seen above, today’s harps represent two sanctified women, the first sacrificed initiate, Nyingone Mebeghe, and the Virgin Mary. Swiderski assumes that the myth of Nyingone Mebeghe would be specific to the Fang since it would be unknown to the holders of the initial *Bwiti* cult. Playing the harp is seen as a source of strength and blessing that transforms the player’s words into sacred words.⁸¹ Thus, the harp is a person, it is initiated, clothed, bathed, it has a proper name and must be treated with the utmost respect.⁸² This

⁷⁵ Mary, *La naissance à l'envers*, pp 3–4. For more details concerning the link between *Byeri* and *Bwiti*, see also Balandier 1963, Binet 1974, Fernandez 1982.

⁷⁶ Fernandez, ‘Christian Acculturation’, 244.

⁷⁷ Mifune, ‘Performance’, p. 84.

⁷⁸ Mary, *Le défi du syncrétisme*, p. 152

⁷⁹ Mifune, ‘Performance’, p. 117.

⁸⁰ Swiderski, ‘La harpe sacrée’, 841.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 842–6.

⁸² Binet, ‘Drogue et mystique’, 39; Le Bomin et al., ‘Faire ensemble’, 185.

means that it is not exposed to everybody's eyes. In my attempt to make an inventory of the harps in the three temples of Ambam, I was not able to photograph or see all the sacred harps. Similarly, for those shown to me, the handling of this sacred body that the harp represents was strictly reserved for community members. The harps are always placed on a mat or a tablecloth. Some, higher in the hierarchy of harps, are placed on a tiger-cat skin, a symbol of royalty and sacredness which isolates the harps from the profane ground.⁸³

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Conclusion

Let us return to my initial questions about the link between the ancient Ntumu instruments documented by Tessmann in 1908–09, the one made in Ma'an in 1995–97 as a reactivation of the memory of the old instrument, and the *Buti* harps in 2018 with their magnificent creative diversity. Our journey through time, places, written sources, photographs and drawings, objects and recordings helps us to understand the mechanism of cultural transformation that first led to the abandonment of the practice of the ancient harp. Arriving with the Fang during their migration from the North, this eight-string harp has a sculpture at the top of the body representing various beings – animals, ancestors, men – or geometric forms. It has a foot and a laced soundboard. It symbolises a close link with the community of ancestors that humans join when they die. Our journey then showed how another harp arrived from the South by way of the *Bwiti* cult. It has the same number of strings, a sculpture in the same place, but depicts a Western-type female figure. Moreover, it has a flat base and a nailed polychrome soundboard. The Fang then transposed the initial symbolism to this new harp, while adding others, either from the Fang cosmogony or from Christianity, both of which provide elements of this new religious practice.

The importance of this kind of research lies in the fact that in this region, where oral tradition is still predominant as far as cultural practices are concerned, there is hardly any collective memory of the ancient practices of the harp. Also, colonial and post-colonial sources concerning South Cameroon – like museum collections, sound archives and writings gathered in libraries – are scattered over several European countries. The harps in the museums of Yaoundé are very rare exceptions. These sources are not available on a local level, nor on a national or regional one. The access is even more difficult for sources in German language, as the ancient German protectorate *Kamerun* is now francophone (Cameroon and Gabon) or hispanophone (Equatorial Guinea). Thus, it is important that a study of this singular instrument, the harp, brings together these dispersed data and makes it possible to understand the link between current musical and religious practices and the historical testimonies of precolonial religion, craftsmanship and music.

It must be said that the material transformations and symbolic transfers that the harp has gone through are no longer known to everyone. I met *Buti*-practicers in Ambam and the most competent bearers of the tradition near the Equatoguinean border, in the villages where Tessmann had stayed in 1908-1909. In this area where the *Buti* cult is well established, the historical recordings and Tessmann's and Rivière's drawings and photos have not met with a significant response. Fifty years ago, the cultural innovation of the *Buti*

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cult has occupied a place that had already been empty for several decades. As the *Buti* harp has absorbed the symbolic elements of the older instrument, the memory of the older instrument has faded and was replaced by the new one. In a region with less *Buti* activity, however, the memory has been able to be maintained and transmitted for a longer time. Thus, a century after the last first-hand testimonies of the old harp, we have been able to reconstruct

⁸³ Swiderski, *Ibid.*, 842.

a coherent link between the old and the current harps and corroborate the place of each of them in the cultural history of the Ntumu of South Cameroon.

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Appendix 1

Inventory of Fang harps in Cameroonian and European museums and publications⁸⁴

Museum/Publication	Inventory number (name)	Country (Ethnical group)	Donator (Collector)	Year of acquisition (collection)	Type of sculpture
Musée ethnographique des peuples de la forêt, Yaoundé (Cameroun)	PF00317IM	Gabon (Fang)	?	?	Female
	INV-1999.91	? (Fang)	?	?	Female
	Without N°	Cameroon (Fang)	?	?	Male
Musée National du Cameroun, Yaoundé	MNC00316	Cameroon	?	?	Female
Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin (Germany)	III C 2164 Ankermann (1901, p. 17)	Gabon (Fang) [sic; most likely Akele]	Rektor Rensch (Otto Handmann)	1885	Geometrical form
	III C 20582	Cameroon (Ntum)	Georg Zenker	1906	Animal
	III C 20583 (ingombe)	Cameroon	Georg Zenker	1906	Geometrical form
	III C 36845	Equatorial Guinea, Rio Muni/Mbini	August Widenmann	1949 (1895)	Male
Völkerkundesammlung, Lübeck (Germany) / Templin & Kalka (2011, p. 59)	3984a	Gabon	Heinrich Gättens	1887	Ancestor
Musée des Instruments de Musique, Bruxelles (Belgium)	0385	Equatorial Guinea	?	1879	Geometrical form
	1969.018 (Ngombi)	Gabon (Fang)	?	1969	Female
	1988.002 (Ngombi)	Gabon (Fang)	?	1988	Spoon
[p. 280] Africamuseum (MRAC), Tervuren (Belgium)	MO.1955.21.3	Gabon (Fang)	Vandavelde	1955	Female
	MO.1964.58.50	Gabon, Woleu Ntem, Zongomo (Fang)	?	?	Male
	MO.1964.58.150 (Ngomma)	Gabon, Woleu Ntem, Oyem, Zongomo (Fang)	?	?	Male
	MO.1964.58.151	Gabon, Woleu Ntem, Oyem, Zonoano (Fang)	?	?	Male
	MO.1997.5.1	Gabon (Fang)		1997	Male
Musée du quai Branly, Paris (France)	71.1935.61.279	Gabon, Estuaire (Fang)	Alfred Métraux & Henri Lavachery	1935	Male

⁸⁴ More instruments may be found in other German and Spanish collections which have not yet been explored.

	71.1961.120.136 (Ngombi)	Gabon, Estuaire (Fang, Pongwe)	Jacques	1961	Female
	75.2012.0.8D	Gabon (Fang)	Secrétariat d'Etat à la Coopération et à la Francophonie	1962	Female
	75.15608.65	Gabon (Fang)	Secrétariat d'Etat à la Coopération et à la Francophonie	1962	Female
Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (France) / Laburthe-Tolra & Falgayrettes (1992, p. 42)	AM 1984.344	Gabon (Fang)	Magnelli	1984	Ancestor/Female
Laburthe-Tolra & Falgayrettes (1992)	Photo, p. 40	Equatorial Guinea (Fang)	?	?	Ancestor
	Photo, p. 46	Gabon (Fang)	?	?	Ancestor
	Photo, p. 50	Gabon (Fang)	?	?	Ancestors (3 heads)
Museo de Antropologia, Madrid (Spain) / Isabela de Aranzadi (2009, p. 183)	?, (Nguìémé or ngòmá)	Equatorial Guinea (Fang)	?	?	Animal
Isabela de Aranzadi (2009, p. 184)	(Nguìémé or ngòmá)	Equatorial Guinea (Fang)	?	?	Female
Collection Iñigo de Aranzadi / Iñigo de Aranzadi (1998)	?, (Nguìémé or ngòmá)	Equatorial Guinea, Kie- Ntem (Ntumu)	Iñigo de Aranzadi	1950s	Animal

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Glossary⁸⁵

Names for the harp in different Fang dialects (different times, different authors):

- *ngomo*, *ngòmá*, *ngomma*, *ngomé*, *engomi*
- *ngombi*, *ingombe*
- *ngueme*, *ngüe'me*, *nguiémé*
- *mvègne*

The ancient harp in North Gabon: *ngoma along*

- Akamənam*: 'defend the village'; one of the two names of the harp built for Hervé Rivière
Akarankam: bow-lute
Anzuma: Orchid (sp.), *Myrsacidium productum* Kranzl., material for the strings of the harp
Asa'm: tree (sp.), *Uapaca guineensis* Muell. Arg.
Àsik: (ewondo) name of a specific male hairstyle
Bəwu: 'the deceased'; one of the two names of the harp built for Hervé Rivière;
name of a ritual invoking the ancestors

⁸⁵ The terms are not homogenised, but spelled following the different authors

<i>Bieri:</i>	the ancestors' skulls
<i>Bwiti:</i>	syncretic cult practiced in Gabon by several ethnical groups
<i>Buti:</i>	(ntumu) syncretic cult practiced in South Cameroon
<i>Byeri:</i>	cult for the ancestors
<i>Esa:</i>	the protection of the fathers
<i>Etito:</i>	tree (sp.), <i>Ficus vogeliana</i> Miq.
<i>Esangela</i>	'Song of Teachings' or 'Teaching of the Ancestor'
<i>Kanga dzan:</i>	raffia fibres; material for the strings of the harp
<i>Kangamalen:</i>	oil palm fibres; material for the strings of the harp
<i>Lo:</i>	tree (sp.), <i>Ficus vogeliana</i> Miq.
<i>Masing:</i>	Wrestling ceremony of the Ntumu
<i>Mver/mvet:</i>	harp-zither and epic genre
<i>Ndamaba:</i>	tree (sp.), <i>Alchornea caloneura</i> Pax
<i>Nden:</i>	twisted strips of stems of <i>Sarcophrynium velutinum</i> ; material for the strings of the harp
<i>Oko ojob:</i>	Orchid (sp.), <i>Myrsacidium productum</i> Kranzl.; material for the strings of the harp
<i>Tam-tam:</i>	a large lamellaphone of the Ntumu