

THE THROAT AND THE BELLY: BAGA NOTIONS OF MORALITY AND PERSONHOOD

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Introduction

THIS article discusses issues of moral agency and personhood among the Baga, a group of swamp rice farmers living on the coast of the Republic of Guinea (West Africa). In the first part of the article I shall show that it is difficult to translate the concept of 'the person', as we in the west understand it, straightforwardly into their language, or to translate their notions into our own languages. However, the intention of this article is not to show that cultural translations are impossible, but rather to stress that the human problems behind different cultural conceptions are very similar. In the second part of this article, therefore, I shall show that, although the Baga do not have a notion that translates directly into 'person', they do have a complex set of interrelated ideas about the internal constitution of the individual, its relation to the group, and the boundaries of the moral community. Many of

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these ideas sound strange to us: that the concept which refers to the mental and moral actions of individuals, *amera*, also means 'throat'; that invisible witches can eat human flesh; and that there are two different ways of dying. That the Baga have reached *these* particular solutions is probably the result of a cultural history as complex as the history behind our own notion of the 'person'. Because we do not know that history, their notions may look very 'exotic'. But if we turn our attention to the human problems these notions address, they look uncannily familiar.

Classifying the Human Being

In my experience, discussions of personhood with Baga colleagues and friends tend to revolve around the meanings of three categories and the relationships between them: *fum*, *wubaka* (from which the western concept of the 'Baga' as an ethnic group derives), and *wan ka fum*. *Fum* (pl. *afum*)¹ is a generic term for human beings. It is mostly used as a descriptive category, but is not devoid of moral value. Indeed, from *fum* is derived the normative concept of *dofum*, a quality that all adult people are supposed to have. The concept of *dofum* allows Baga people to discuss issues of 'sameness' and common humanity beyond language, religion, and ethnicity. In principle, all human beings are *fum*, irrespective of ethnicity, colour, or gender (but not age, as I shall show below). However, even this basic principle can be questioned. Thus I once heard someone, hearing a noise at the back of his house, ask whether there was anybody there, and someone else, after checking whether there was, answer '*afum nga yi fe de, afula nga yi*', which means 'there is nobody [literally '*fum* they are not']; it is just some Fulbe' (the Fulbe, or Fulani, are an ethnic group who often come into conflict with the Baga). However, this was contextual; one should not conclude that Baga think Fulbe are not persons.

What is clear is that babies are not *fum*. Some people have told me that babies are not *fum* until the moment they begin speaking a human language. When they are born they come from *dabal*, an invisible realm or second reality, and they have 'second sight', that is, the ability to see what is going on in *dabal*.² Their babbling

¹ I shall indicate the plural of Baga words when they first appear, but for ease of expression subsequently only use the singular form.

² 'Second sight' is the western expression for the ability to see things that are invisible to most human beings (for a rich historical discussion, albeit dated, see Spence 1951). The Baga also associate this ability with sight, calling it 'smashed eyes', the implication being that, in order to see invisible things, it is necessary to get rid of the sensorial vision offered by the eyes. This relates to complex notions of perception of 'falsehood' and 'truth' (*yem* and *kance*, respectively) that are beyond the scope of this article. Incidentally, the idea that children have 'second sight' is not unknown in western cultures: in the film *Wings of Desire* (Wim Wenders, Germany, 1987), for instance, children are the only humans who can see the two angels that are invisible to adults.

is perceived as being the language they speak with spirits who are invisible to adult human beings. Thus, the process of learning to speak the Baga language, which is necessary for the child to be *recognized* as *fum* by the community, is also a process of forgetting the language of the spirits, and of forgetting their second-sight abilities too (although some individuals, I am told, manage to keep the 'second sight' all their lives).

The claim that babies are not *fum* may indicate that in fact *fum* is not the 'person' but the social role, the *personnage* in Mauss's classic distinction (1985 [1938]). This would also account for the fact, already mentioned, that in some cases strangers are said not to be *fum*. Or it may be that neither 'person' nor *personnage* translates the full meaning of the Baga *fum*. In any case we should be very careful before translating this kind of statement into, for example, 'According to the Baga (or any other group, for that matter), babies are not persons'. All translations are betrayals, but this would be a particularly irresponsible one.³

The second category is *wubaka* (pl. *abaka*), which can also be translated as 'person', although the meaning of *wubaka* is in fact one of the most contested issues in Baga philosophical thought. Many Baga say that the 'real' Baga were the Baga of the past, and at this level the concept reaches almost mythical proportions. At a more 'mundane' level, however, the Baga are those individuals whose behaviour is collectively, rationally, and morally approved. When I asked informants, both men and women, what the definition of *wubaka* was, many replied '*wubaka fum wotot oyone* (or *ofo*)', which literally means 'a Baga is a good human being (*fum wotot*)'. But *wotot* here means being morally decent and rationally sound. For instance, when I asked someone to give me an example of an occasion at which I could hear the expression *bafo wubaka oyone* ('this one is not a *wubaka*'), I was told: 'Imagine we hear that one of your Spanish relatives has jumped from an airplane over Madrid without a parachute; then we would say, "well, it's not a *wubaka* who does that".' This may seem a rather extreme example, but it made me realize that intention is an important element in defining personhood.

Like *fum*, *wubaka* can be predicated upon anybody, even (no matter how paradoxical it may sound to our ethnically loaded way of thinking about Africans) to members of other linguistic and cultural groups. Even the Fulbe, whom the Baga consider by and large to be arrogant and undesirable, can be described as *wubaka* if they demonstrate socially approved behaviour and a pleasant attitude towards other people. To call someone a *wubaka* is a sign of respect. Likewise, even people born Baga can be said not to be *wubaka* if they behave incorrectly, or

³ The question as to whether children are persons is an unsettled one in our own culture. Some authors describe personhood as something that has to be acquired (see, for an example, Smart 1972). Conversely, other authors claim the opposite, namely that babies become adults because we treat them as persons from our first contact with them, and that 'personhood' belongs to the very conditions of possibility of any human encounter (see, for instance, the Kantian approach of Spaemann 1996).

if their rationality is questioned for good reasons. The Baga know that there is a double meaning to the word 'Baga' and that it is used both to indicate an ethno-linguistic group (or set of groups) and for humanity at large. The Baga Sitem, the group I have been working with, insist that anybody can be Baga, but that they, the speakers of the Citem dialect of the Baga language, are the *wubaka wutem* (pl. *abaka atem*) or 'old Baga'.⁴ Another group, the Bulongic, who are also considered Baga (by themselves as well as by strangers), but who speak a completely different language to the Baga Sitem, say, when speaking Susu (the lingua franca of coastal Guinea), that they are the Baga Fore, basically 'old Baga'. Beyond the fact that these two groups do not agree as to who are the oldest inhabitants of the coastal mangroves, what this shows is that the notion of *wubaka* (or, I suppose, the equivalent notion of *ilongic* among the Bulongic) is very much based on notions of seniority and hierarchy. As one informant put it to me, quite enigmatically: 'Here we are all Baga, but there are Baga and Baga.'

Although the concept of *wubaka* might seem to be the equivalent of our concept of the person because of its implications of morality and rationality, in at least two respects it is clearly different. First, it is processual. Age and initiation make one become more and more (or a better and better) *wubaka*, and the meaning of *wubaka* for a youngster is not the same as its meaning for an adult. Elders are considered to be more or better *wubaka* than youths, and elders of the past better *wubaka* than those of today. Secondly, understandings of what *wubaka* means are strongly gendered. Men insist that being a *wubaka* is related to initiation and that, at least in the past, only those who were initiated into Amanco (the highest male cult) could be said to be real *wubaka*. Some men, but by no means all, express doubts about the 'Baganess' of women. Women, however, do not accept that only men can be *wubaka*. They are very proud of being Baga and relate it to their reproductive potential and to their own cult, Ateken, which, incidentally, is much stronger today than its male counterpart Amanco. I shall return to this later.

The third category with which the Baga express personhood is *wan ka fum* (pl. *awut ka fum*). *Wan ka fum* means 'someone's child', although it is used to mean 'someone else's child' (literally 'child of *fum*'). Similar notions exist in other African languages.⁵ This term is always used to refer to someone else. The phrase 'I am a *wan ka fum*' would represent the same sort of nonsense in Baga as the phrase 'I am someone else' would in English. As a concept it is both inclusive and

⁴ The three words mentioned, *wutem*, *citem* and *sitem* (a corruption of *citem*), are linked to the root *-tem*, which denotes seniority.

⁵ Consider, for example, the capital importance of the concept of *mwan mot* (literally 'child of man', or 'the generic person', as the ethnographer glosses it) in the Bwiti cult of the Fang as analysed by James Fernandez (1982), or the Taita way of referring to both children and adults as 'somebody's child', in order to stress their ritual and social dependence (La Fontaine 1985: 130-1).

exclusive: it predicates *dofum* upon the individual referred to, but it converts her into a child of someone else. On the one hand, its *inclusive* aspect is clear when it is used to express sympathy. For instance, Baga men and women who are not used to watching television may express their compassion towards, say, dead bodies being shown on television with a 'but this was a *wan ka fum!*' Whatever the nationality of the person killed, there would be no doubt that she was someone's child. On the other hand, its *exclusive* aspect becomes clear when it is being used to indicate distance from the speaker. Thus the ethnographer who does not fully understand all the nuances of Baga culture and society is constantly reminded that he will never understand everything, because he is just a *wan ka fum*. Sometimes I would just get a '*ah, wan ka fum*' with a sigh when I kept asking irritating and probably naïve questions.

The concept of *wan ka fum* involves conceiving descent as the basis of *dofum*. We, from our characteristically individualistic way of thinking about personhood, might assume that *fum* is a good enough concept to convey one's humanity. But for the Baga, it is essential not only to stress the *dofum* of each individual, but also to indicate that the individual is the child of certain other human beings. Being human means participating in a chain of genealogical succession. Humans are expected to be the children of someone else, as well as to become the parents of certain other children.⁶

The concept of *wan ka fum* achieves three objectives. First, it confers *dofum* on whoever the speaker may be talking about. Secondly, it denies them a *specific* genealogy: they are not the children of such-and-such a member of such-and-such a descent group, therefore this usage deters the outsider from being allocated a specific social position. Thirdly, it situates the individual *below* the speaker by making her a *wan* (child). The concept does not deny humanity to strangers, but again it stresses that *dofum* is about being an adult member of the community.

The Good Throat

Early studies of personhood in Africa tended to give the impression that African people could not think in terms of the individual. Analyses such as those by Germaine Dieterlen (1951) and Françoise Héritier (1977), for example, showed that, in Bambara or Samo thought respectively, the individual cannot be thought of as a self-contained unity. The 'individual' is like a jigsaw puzzle, composed of many principles. When you have deconstructed the individual and try to reconstruct it

⁶ Although I was never explicitly told that having children was a necessary condition for someone to be considered a *fum* or a *wubaka*, the notion was implicit in many discussions. Similarly, Meyer Fortes found that among the Tallensi having children was a necessary condition for being considered a person (Fortes 1973; see also La Fontaine 1985: 132).

again, what you obtain is no longer an individual, but the whole of the society. In opposition to such 'holistic' interpretations, other authors have insisted that Africans *can* conceive of individuals, no matter how strong their communitarian ethos or ideological systems may be. According to Brian Morris, who is directing his criticisms not only at earlier Africanists but also at contemporary authors who postulate a relational theory of personhood in non-western societies, a clear-cut division between individualistic (western) and relational (non-western) views of the person is very problematic because these represent two sides of *any* theory of personhood, western or not. Referring to Marilyn Strathern's *Gender of the Gift*, Morris writes: 'The idea, for example, that Europeans eat simply for bodily nourishment while Melanesians eat to express and monitor "relationships" (Strathern 1988: 302) hardly accords with the literature on food habits among European people' (Morris 2000: 47). The German philosopher Robert Spaemann, who is generally unaware of anthropological analyses and works purely in the western philosophical tradition, might be invoked here in support of Morris's claims. Spaemann advocates a strong relational notion of personhood, and has argued that notions of personhood and consciousness in western philosophy are always relational (with the exception of the utilitarian tradition rooted in Locke):

The separation of the biological from the personal fails to grasp that personhood is situated in the life of human beings. Fundamental biological functions and relations are not something apersonal; they are specifically personal performances and interactions. Eating and drinking are personal acts (*actus humani*, as the scholastics said, not merely *actus hominis*).⁷ They are embedded in rituals, provide the focus of many forms of community life, and stand at the centre of many cults. (Spaemann 1996: 255)⁸

For me, what is most striking and relevant for my argument in the ideas of both Morris and Spaemann is the fact that eating is given such centrality. In using eating to define different modes of personhood (relational, individualistic), we are in fact doing exactly what the Baga would do. Eating for them is central to making adults members of the community, expressing their moral agency, and stressing the relational aspect of being a member of a moral community. All this is conveyed by the different meanings of the throat and the belly, as I shall show below. However, I would hesitate to collapse the two modes of eating (western and Baga) as hastily as Morris might, since for the Baga it is clear that eating (a concept that, for a start, has two different verbs in the Baga language) is linked with notions of

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I^a II^a q.1 a.3; q.17 a.4 (from a footnote in Spaemann's original text).

⁸ I quote here from Professor Oliver O'Donovan's unpublished translation of part of Spaemann's text. I am very grateful to Professor O'Donovan for his permission to do so.

co-substantiality and idioms of life, death, and witchcraft that are mostly absent in western cultures.

Many African social practices, such as greeting your own brother by your common patronym instead of by his first, individuating name, tend to stress common identity and deny individuality. However, I think this is precisely because these practices are meant to prevent or counteract existing individualistic tendencies: they are not an expression of their non-existence. Godfrey Lienhardt argued that Africans have a strong sense of individual self, and often a strong reluctance to make public the most intimate aspects of their selfhood (Lienhardt 1985). In a similar vein, Dominique Zahan's detailed analyses of Bambara initiation rituals (1960) show that initiation is not only about the integration of individuals into the group; it is also a way of making them well-integrated individuals, not only with social awareness, but also with strong mechanisms of self-mastery and self-knowledge.⁹ Recent studies of African systems of witchcraft and sorcery, and concomitant notions of individual success and failure, have shown that Africans live in a delicate tension between 'centripetal' tendencies that tend to collapse the individual into a member of a corporative group and 'centrifugal' tendencies towards individualistic excellence and success (Rowlands and Warnier 1988: 123-5).¹⁰

Baga know both the individualistic, 'centrifugal' tendencies and the communitarian, 'centripetal' ones, and have very ambivalent attitudes towards both of them. Individualism can be very bad if it turns into selfishness, but every descent group is very proud of (and often receives a lot of material help from) those members who have 'succeeded', live in Conakry, Dakar, or Paris, and have built tin-roofed concrete houses in their native villages, at the risk, sometimes, of awakening the envy of their neighbours.

The tension between individualistic tendencies and the communitarian ethos is expressed in explicit bodily metaphors that allow the Baga to think of the human being in terms of both individuality and relational personhood. This body imagery allows us (and them) to reach a compromise between the 'individualistic' and 'relational' views of personhood. We might indeed say that the Baga have an individualistic view of their heads and throats, but a communitarian view of their bellies. Individual thinking (*kakili*) is situated in the head, especially when it is related to individual problems and anxieties about one's destiny (the kind of anxieties they

⁹ However, we must be careful with Zahan's inspired books, since it is not always easy to disentangle his own Neoplatonic philosophy from the ideas provided by his informants. Besides, like many other authors dealing with West African notions of personhood and their relation to initiation rites, he is clearly only discussing male initiation and therefore male personhood. For a critique of Zahan, see Riesman 1986: 86-7.

¹⁰ The tension between 'centrifugal' tendencies of individuality and 'centripetal' tendencies towards group cohesion has been studied by Charles S. Bird and Martha B. Kendall (1980) in an analysis of notions of heroic action in Mande epic narratives. I borrow the terms 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' from them, though I give them more general meanings.

refer to by the term *kontofili*).¹¹ Envy and jealousy, two major sources of social anomie, are seen as individualistic elements arising from the eyes of the individual. But the substantial unity of members of a descent group, as I discuss below, is stressed by the fact that they use the same word, *kor* (pl. *cor*), to refer to both the individual belly and the descent group itself.

Thinking happens in the head, yet the word the Baga use to translate 'spirit' or 'soul' in linguistic questionnaires, Biblical translations, and general conversation is *amera*, throat. *Amera* (pl. *mera*) is obviously a part of the human body (*dis*), but it is equally obvious that its competence goes beyond the body. The concept of *amera* roots in the body two rather abstract and transcendent concepts—moral agency and intelligence—as well as speech. Speaking is an individual action and responsibility, but good speaking comes out of a good throat; it is the outcome of a combination of morality and intelligence, and the expression of a right balance between individual thinking and communal awareness.¹²

To have a good throat (*kibot amera*) is quintessential to being a good person, whether *fum* or *wubaka*. The expression *kibot amera* is in fact directly translated as 'to be a good person'. As in any other culture, being 'good' is a very complex matter. It means being able to express nice thoughts and words, as well as being socially aware, since individuals who have a good throat think about their neighbours, not themselves. The throat, which is located midway between the belly and the head, between the individual and the group, between ingested food and uttered word, is the physical expression of personal integration and harmony.

However, the first sign of having a good throat is not to be found in speaking or in showing high moral integrity: it comes from eating (*kidi*), most particularly from eating rice, the staple food of the coastal peoples of Guinea. Boys and girls demonstrate that they have a good throat by their willingness to share food. Of one who, when eating his dish of rice, offers rice to a passing stranger, the Baga will say '*om bot amera*', 'he has a "good throat"'. To have a bad throat (or, as they more usually say, not to have a throat at all) would be to eat without sharing, to swallow without considering others. That would be a sign of selfishness, which not only displays a lack of community awareness but also, and more alarmingly, is one of the main characteristics of the *wuser* ('witch'), a category that encapsulates the

¹¹ It is worth noting that the two words associated with mental processes, *kakili* and *kontofili*, are not Baga, but obviously Susu loans. It is impossible to know today how Baga-speakers described individual thinking before the adoption of these words, which have become fully integrated into the Baga language.

¹² The balance between the head and the belly as an expression of personhood is found in other African cultures. For the Fang, this equilibrium is not only central to their religious imagination, it also finds expression in their wonderful art, as perceptively studied by Fernandez (1971). Another example of the equilibrium between head thinking and abdominal thinking (mediated, in this case, by heart thinking) is found among the Oromo as described by Michael Jackson and Ivan Karp (1990: 16).

opposite criteria from those of the socially approved person. By showing that they have a good throat, that they are willing to share their food, children are beginning to show that they are proper *fum*.

But the Baga throat is not only linked to goodness; it is also linked, as I have said, to intelligence. Just as we would consider a body with no spirit unthinkable, so Baga think that a body without a throat would not be able to think properly. '*Kiyo fe amera*' ('not to have a throat') is a common phrase used to refer to silly things that are done without sufficient thought. And not to have a throat leads to the most selfish and stupid of all conceivable beings—the 'witch'.

Types of Eating

Before analysing the social dimensions of the *amera*, we must take a closer look at the meaning of 'eating', or rather of the two types of eating. As in many other African languages, the Baga language has two verbs for eating, *kidi* and *kisom*, which, in relation to personhood, open up two antagonistic symbolic domains. While *kidi* is related to the making of persons, *kisom* is related to their disappearance and to witchcraft. In normal usage, *kidi* is the verb used for food that does not have to be masticated, that is, it is not violently broken up while being ingested. *Kisom* refers to eating something that has to be violently broken up with the teeth (such as meat, kola nuts, raw manioc, etc.). The effect of *kidi* is to bring together rice in the belly and, by doing so, build up *dofum*. The action of *kisom* is one of breaking up and disuniting things. *Kidi* makes life, *kisom* brings death. Humans eat (*kidi*) rice, witches eat (*kisom*) people. *Kidi* is the action of the throat, *kisom* the action of the teeth.

It is easier to grasp the importance of eating (*kidi*) in making personhood, in bringing together life, by analysing the two main substances that are to be eaten: rice (*yec*) and 'secrets' (*tolom*, pl. *molom*). *Kidi yec* (to eat rice) is a very important part of 'Baganess': not only do the Baga consider that, strictly speaking, they have not eaten until they have eaten rice, but, more surprisingly, many an individual, if asked how to say 'to eat' in Baga Sitem, will immediately reply '*kidi yec*' (for a long time I thought, quite wrongly, that '*kidiyec*' was one word meaning 'to eat').

As for *tolom*, the eating of which also seems very important in the making of persons, it is difficult if not impossible to translate it into satisfactory English. 'Secret' is the word normally used to translate *tolom*, a usage I have followed here, but *tolom* covers a much wider semantic field. Some masks and ritual objects, as well as the spiritual entities they are associated with, are *tolom*. The Baga use the expression *kidi tolom*, 'to eat secrets', to describe the collective rites that we call 'initiation'. The concept expresses the collective and substantial aspect of knowledge. The metaphor that describes African initiation systems as 'bush schools' or as 'traditional education' is misleading in that it projects western notions of

cultural transmission on to African ones. For the Baga, the 'secrets' transmitted during initiation are not described as semantic information to be retained by the brain, but as a substance that is ingested by the throat and the belly, thus transforming them into a different kind of person, very much as rice affects their personhood too. The Baga initiation cycle, which has mostly been abandoned today, consisted of different stages, in each of which the initiates 'ate' some 'secrets' and became rather different persons, in both their social role and their experience of themselves. As already mentioned, many informants told me that in the past only those (male) members of society who had been initiated into Amanco (the highest cult among the men) were said to be real *wubaka*.

We must return at this point to the question of gender mentioned earlier. Men use their initiation to stress their Baganess, and therefore they sometimes imply that women are 'less' Baga than themselves. This is a rather common aspect of African notions of initiation and constructions of personhood. According to Hérítier, for instance, the Samo of Burkina Faso wonder whether women are quite as fully persons as men (although it is not clear whether this worry was expressed to her by men, women, or both; Hérítier 1977: 73). Other ethnographic texts describe a similar lack of full personhood in women (see the Lugbara and Taita cases discussed by La Fontaine (1992: 92)). Among the Baga, there is a different situation. I have never heard any woman agree with men in this respect. They know that men boast about becoming Baga in their initiation, but they adopt a rather sarcastic attitude towards it. As one woman once told me, 'men can eat as many secrets as they want, but they will never have the biggest secret of all', namely the ability to bear children. Initiation into manhood appears, among other things, to be an attempt by men to appropriate the productive forces of women. Women give birth, but men produce *wubaka*. Women's relationship to Baganess as mediated by the production of people seems to be opposed to that of men. Men are *made* Baga by being initiated; women have to *make* Baga in order to be initiated into their own cult, Ateken. Women with no children are not accepted into Ateken; in fact, they are not considered women, *aran* (sing. *wuran*), but children, *awut* (sing. *wan*). Since initiation puts a seal on womanhood, it is important for the children that are born to be integrated into the social community. A woman who leaves a village and marries an ethnic stranger will not be accepted into Ateken, even if she has children. The fact that Ateken is still very active among women today, while male initiation has been abandoned, makes people say (justifiably, I think) that Baga tradition (*mes mabaka* or *kutum kabaka*) is better kept by women today than by men.

Whether it involves rice or *tolom*, Baga know that eating (*kidi*) is a fundamental activity in the making of persons (and of inequalities). But while we would see this activity as fundamentally individual, Baga perceive eating as fundamentally social, not only because one never (or only rarely) eats on one's own, but more importantly because the belly, as opposed to the head and throat, does not stress individuality, but communality.

The Belly and the 'Witch'

Obviously from a strictly biological point of view, whatever people eat through their own throat goes to their individual belly (*kor*, pl. *cor*). But *kor* is a polysemic word; it not only means 'the belly', but also the patrilineal descent group to which all Baga belong. Popular etymology also connects the word with *kur* (pl. *cur*), the place where the harvested rice of the descent group is placed before being taken into the different households of the descent group. The concept of *kor* expresses the corporative and substantial unity of the members of the descent group, especially the unity of consumption. However, it is not only that members of a *kor* eat together. Their corporativeness is also expressed in the notion that they are *eaten* together, that is, in the idiom of witchcraft. Each *kor* has among its oldest members some who are said to be *wuser* (pl. *aser*), a concept I gloss as 'witch'. A minimal definition of a *wuser* might be 'someone who eats human beings', but she does it in the invisible reality of *dabal*. I have never heard anybody acknowledge having witnessed such a sinister feast, apart from a fifteen-year-old boy who was clearly lying to me. His friends told me that if he had really seen what he claimed to have seen, this would mean that he too was a *wuser*, for only a *wuser* can see what the other *wuser* are doing. Witnessing a cannibalistic meal would make one a *wuser* and, in fact, compel one to participate in the meal.

Who the witches in a descent group are is not known, although sometimes there are clear suspects. In any case, witches are responsible for the deaths and misfortunes of younger members of the descent group. Only witches from the *kor* itself can do harm to its own members: witches can only 'eat' (*kisom*) people from their own *kor*. Witchcraft needs, and expresses, co-substantiality.¹³ Belonging to a *kor* offers protection and identity to its members, but it can also annihilate them if they do not act for the well-being of the whole *kor*. If members of a *kor* excel in anything, they will fear that the older witches of their descent group will try to annihilate them, either as a 'punishment' for their individualism or out of sheer envy. But their own enrichment will also cause younger members of their *kor* to suspect that they are themselves witches, and the deaths and misfortunes of younger members will be related to their success. Good life is a scarce resource: if someone gets too much of it, it is because they are consuming the good life that belongs to younger relatives.

Being so intertwined with notions of kinship, African witchcraft (*deser* in Baga) may be seen as 'the dark side of kinship', as Peter Geschiere has recently

¹³ This co-substantiality is so strong that in descent groups that were formed from the fusion of previous groups, witchcraft cannot bypass these fusions. If *kor* A had *kor* B incorporated into it (no matter how many generations ago the fusion happened or what the reasons for it were), witches from A cannot 'eat' members of B and witches of B cannot 'eat' members of A, even where members insist that now they are one single *kor*. Witchcraft gossip sometimes offers hints of previous fusions of descent groups, which are not normally spoken about in the public arena.

put it (1997: 42)—as an ideological mechanism that ensures that the wealth of the descent group is equally shared. ‘This is an egalitarian society’, a Baga man once told me; ‘we all keep our heads at the same level. If someone wants to raise their head above the rest of us, they will have it chopped off.’ This is a ‘jealously egalitarian’ society, as Edwin Ardener described the Bakweri of Cameroon (1970: 146).

The notion that human beings are the eaten instead of the eaters is an inversion of the social, human world. The witch encapsulates the opposite attributes to those of a proper *fum*—so much so, in fact, that by analysing the characteristics of witches, one can obtain a very good but inverted picture of what a moral person and a moral community should be like. It has to be said that the opposition between ‘witch’ and person only works at the level of categories. As normative concepts *wuser* and *fum* are mutually exclusive, but as attributes predicated upon real people they are worryingly overlapping. Someone who was thought to be a good person in life may be found in a postmortem investigation to be a witch, and more importantly, while everybody thinks of themselves as a proper *fum*, nobody can be sure that deep in their heart (or throat) they are not really a *wuser*. In what follows, I shall analyse some of the main characteristics of the *wuser*.

First, the *wuser* are selfish and care only about their own enrichment. They lack all social awareness. In fact the *wuser* could not care less about their relatives: they are quite willing to eat them in their selfish ventures. In that respect, the *wuser* is the opposite of a morally socialized *fum*, who always cares about the group. Individual action is in fact rare, apart from hunting, which is not a major activity for the Baga anyway. Almost everything else, including things that we in the west happily do on our own, like eating or even sleeping, are by and large communal activities. Individual isolation, I was once told, is a symptom indicating that you are either a ‘witch’ or a sick person.¹⁴ However, I should also hasten to add that it did not take long for my Baga friends and hosts to understand that these things are culturally dependent, and they very soon accepted that I was neither sick nor a ‘witch’, but simply needed to be left alone more than they normally did.

Secondly, while social life is characteristically diurnal, the *wuser* act by night. During the day, people interact: they talk to one another, they eat together, they greet and acknowledge one another, sometimes using long salutations that require a great deal of knowledge about the composition of the village. At night, people do not greet one another and do not say anything to one another even when passing very close: ‘At night, you do not greet because you do not know whom you are greeting’, I was once told. The implication is that if by chance you happen to greet a witch and engage in conversation with him, you would *ipso facto* discover that you too were a witch. I shall come back to this point in a moment.

¹⁴ Similarly, Michael Jackson states that, among the Kuranko (a group living on the border between Sierra Leone and Guinea), ‘anyone who sets himself or herself apart from others is quite simply “not a person” (*morgo ma*)’ (1989: 90).

Thirdly, the *wuser* do not eat rice, as persons do, but eat persons. It must be said that the cannibalism imputed to the *wuser* is rather 'symbolic' (for want of a better word), because there is no evidence whatsoever of any 'real' cannibalism, that is, of people actually being eaten. This has posed many epistemological problems as to the 'rationality' of claims about witchcraft. It is known that, in colonial times, hundreds of people were accused and tried because they admitted to having 'eaten' someone, and sometimes they would have to be acquitted because, despite their confession, the dead body of the person they admitted having eaten was found. In some cases, the authorities expressed puzzlement at finding the body and yet hearing the confessions of accused elders.¹⁵ Why do people insist that witches eat persons if nobody is actually eaten? This raises the question as to whether the Baga have a notion of a 'double' similar to that of the *mere* of the Samo (Héritier 1977: 52) or the *kashira* of the Uduk, which Wendy James (1988) aptly glosses as 'the personal Genius'. Then we could say that witches are people who leave their bodies (or whose 'double' or 'personal Genius' leaves their bodies) and go to *dabal*, where they eat the 'double' (or 'Genius') of their victims. But to the best of my knowledge the Baga do not have such notions. Some Christian, French-speaking people have told me that witches do not eat the flesh of members of the community. To say so is to use a metaphor, because what the witches eat is their 'soul' (*âme* in French). But this interpretation is not accepted at all (in fact, it is vigorously rejected) by most of my interlocutors, who do not subscribe to either the theory of metaphorical eating or the theory of the 'soul'. They insist that the victim is actually eaten, that witches *eat* people (like we *eat* chicken, as a friend once put it), not 'souls', and that if there is a contradiction between this claim and the fact that people, at the observational level, just die and are not eaten, this is due to the 'mysterious' nature of *deser*, to the ability of witches to fool us. I do not want to explore these cognitive issues here. Suffice it to say that, as in many other domains, there is no consensus among informants (let us remember, incidentally, the lack of consensus in the west as to whether the body of Christ is 'really' or 'metaphorically' eaten in the Eucharist), and that in any case what is relevant to my analysis is not the 'reality' of *deser* or *dabal*, but the prototypical opposition between the person and the witch as moral agents. This allows us to recognize that, as Riesman so concisely puts it (1986: 77), 'the common African understanding of the person, which perceives the self as connected to forces and entities outside it, carries considerable risk and dangers of its own'.

In any case, the death of young people is almost invariably expressed in the idiom of cannibalism. 'She has been eaten by the *wuser*' is a usual way of

¹⁵ There were many of these cases. A well-documented one took place in Youkounkoun (Guinea) in the early 1920s, when four elderly men were accused of cannibalism but acquitted because the corpse of the girl they confessed to having eaten was found during the trial. The documentation can be found in the Archives d'Outre-mer (Aix-en-Provence, France), 1 AFFPOL /Carton 582/ d. 3, 'Sacrifices humains en Guinée française'.

accounting for the otherwise inexplicable death of someone who was still in the prime of life (elderly people, by contrast, die 'naturally' and become ancestors, as I will discuss in the last section of this article). In the accounts I have been given, eating a person is an inversion, a travesty, of the sociability of eating. In diurnal, social life, individuals share rice. An invitation to share a dish is sometimes difficult to reject without feeling embarrassed or insulting the person who has offered it. One is expected to join in eating other people's dishes, just as one is expected to share one's own dish. In many ways, by agreeing to eat with someone else, one becomes indebted to them. Witches likewise eat (*kisom*) together in their invisible realm of *dabal* and also invite occasional passing visitors to join in their sinister meals. For rather 'mysterious' reasons, these potential visitors cannot refuse the invitation. Even if they wanted to refuse, the invitation to eat human flesh would be so compelling, so fascinating, that they would not be able to resist it. Just as in diurnal, social life, once someone has participated in a meal of human flesh they are indebted to those they have eaten with, having to offer a member of their own descent group in a future meal. Thus the life of witches in *dabal* always works, as does the social life of persons in the village, through the logic of exchange, indebtedness, and recompense. The difference is that, while in the village rice is the 'social glue' that brings together persons, in *dabal* persons themselves become the very glue that brings together witches.

Of course all these malevolent things happen in *dabal*, the invisible reality, and therefore 'normal' individuals, who do not have 'second sight', need not worry: whatever witches are doing in *dabal*, they cannot be seen. However, as I have indicated, things are more complicated than this, because nobody can be sure that they do not possess 'second sight'. What if one said hello to someone in the night and the latter took one to eat a meal of human flesh? If this happened, not only would one become a witch oneself (or realize that one was a witch), one would also become indebted to the other witches with whom one ate, and would have to provide an individual of one's own descent group in return.

Let us note here the transformational character of food. While sharing food in the village makes you human, by accepting the food of witches you become a witch.¹⁶ In West Africa, as Rosalind Shaw has indicated in her work among the Temne (a group very closely related to the Baga in geography, language, and history), people become anxious if they dream of being offered meat, because this meat might be human, and the dream might actually be the visit of a witch (Shaw 1997: 859).

¹⁶ The transformational capacity of food was noted by Maurice Leenhardt in his perceptive 1947 ethnography on notions of personhood among the Melanesian Canaque. Leenhardt noted that, according to Canaque beliefs, the gods, inhabitants of the underworld, had to give food to recently dead human beings so that the latter would acquire the 'odour of death' and could thus be transformed into proper dead beings (see Leenhardt 1979: 49).

Fourthly, the *wuser*, no matter how good their teeth must be to cut human flesh, have no *amera*. This lack of *amera* makes them both morally bad and stupid. 'Witches are stupid,' someone said to me, 'because if they were intelligent, they would use their secret knowledge to benefit the community, as you white people do.'¹⁷ Here we have a contradiction, since if it were true that witches had secret knowledge (and, so people say, they have invisible aeroplanes, radios, and many other technical instruments that they use in their secret gatherings in *dabal*), this would imply that they have intelligence as the west understands it. But for the Baga what is important is social intelligence. An intelligent person who is also selfish does not count as a person. 'Selfishness is what has kept Africa behind', said one old man to me in 1994: 'If our witches had been more intelligent, like yours, you would have not conquered us, because all the technical things that you have, we had them already, but they were restricted to the use of a few witches, who kept them secret.'

Whatever the reality behind Baga notions of *deser*, the truth is that the pervasiveness of *deser* causes much anxiety and sometimes deters people from venturing into 'individualistic' domains. For instance, the fear of witchcraft was often mentioned as a cause of the puzzling lack of involvement of the Baga in the Compagnie des Bauxites Guinéennes, an international mining consortium based in Kamsar (once a Baga Sitem village, but today an industrial city with more than 30,000 inhabitants), which has been providing quite good jobs to the people of the region since 1973. However, this has not applied so much to the Baga Sitem, the native inhabitants of Kamsar, who in general have preferred to remain working in their paddy fields. As a result they moved out of Kamsar, which is today mostly inhabited by Susu, Fulbe, Kissi, and people from other regions of Guinea. However, it would be cynical to assume that, for the Baga, altruistic behaviour results simply from a fear of witchcraft or from group pressures. Any Baga individual belongs to a corporate unity, the *kor*, and emotional fluidity among the members of this *kor* is explicitly acknowledged. 'When you step on the tail of a monkey, the pain goes up to its head', says a proverb: in other words, the pain of one member of the group is felt by *all* its members, not just by the one who has had a misfortune. If the goods, wealth, and material success of individuals are to be shared by the rest of the group, so is the individual's pain.

The Good Death

As with the two modes of eating, and in relation to it, the Baga distinguish two modes of death: complete annihilation (being 'eaten' by witches) and what,

¹⁷ As in many other parts of Africa, the most usual expression used among the Baga to refer to western technical achievements is *deser databo*, 'the witchcraft of the white people'.

borrowing the term from Fortes (1973), I call the 'good death', that is, arrival at the final stages of one's life, leaving offspring behind one. What Michael Jackson (1989: 99) has to say about the Kuranko is fully applicable to the Baga as well: 'to die alone, to be refused a decent burial, to have one's lineage die out: such things are terrible, not one's own extinction'.

Good death is not perceived as annihilation but rather as one more transformation in the cycle of life: becoming an ancestor. However, this is more a western interpretation than a native notion. Like many other African peoples, Baga do not have a word for what we call 'ancestors' but refer to the dead members of their descent group by means of generational notions such as 'the elders' (*abeki*), 'the fathers' or 'mothers' (*apa nga, iya nga*), or 'the grandparents' (*aparan nga, mama nga*), that is, using the same concepts that are used to refer to living elders. The famous poem by the Senegalese writer Birago Diop, which ends with the paradoxical claim that *les morts ne sont pas morts* ('the dead are not dead'), illustrates this aspect of West African thought. The community is made up of representatives of both the living and the dead. The latter can even come back in the form of a newborn child, although this is in no way obligatory—some dead people have so far never come back.¹⁸

In any case, whether 'ancestors' or 'elders', complete annihilation is not an issue for those who manage to make it to a good death. A good death is not a reward for having been a good person: a good person may still be 'eaten' by envious witches. The contrast between the two kinds of death is common in many African cultures and is very important in understanding various movements aimed at the suppression of death. The colonial authorities in West Africa saw some anti-witchcraft movements as irrationally promising 'eternal life' to their neophytes.¹⁹ This was, of course, because they did not understand the cultural imagination of African religions. It is unlikely that anti-witchcraft movements would promise something impossible like physical immortality. Their aim was rather to eradicate the particular type of death that is caused by witches, as well as the anxieties it stimulates, and to make sure that all the members of the community can attain a

¹⁸ The notion that elders come back, combined with the notion that babies come from *dabal*, might suggest that the dead go to *dabal*. But this is always denied in response to direct questions. Dead elders ('ancestors') go to *dabiya*, a word derived from *debi*, 'the hole', and seem to carry on a rather gloomy and uninteresting life down there, enlivened only by the libations the living offer them. How they 'transfer' from *dabiya* to this world when they decide to come back in the form of a newborn child is something that no one has ever quite been able to explain to me.

¹⁹ See, for instance, the promises of 'eternal life' in the *nyambuan*, an anti-witchcraft movement that arose among the Tiv in 1939 (Bohannan 1958). According to José M. Ortuño (personal communication), who is currently writing a doctoral thesis on the *nyambuan*, the archival documentation available does not allow us to conclude that the movement ever made promises of eternal life.

good death. It is only reasonable to assume that those who lead a good life should have the right to make it to an equally good death, a death that inscribes itself into the perpetuity of life, rather than being its ultimate and tragic end.

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