



## International Journal of African Studies

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Narrative Article

Open Access

# *Adzap* or The Tree of Knowledge and the Archeology of a Performance: *Mvett*

Dieudonné Christophe Mbala Nkanga<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor of Theatre Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States. E-mail: [mbalank@umich.edu](mailto:mbalank@umich.edu)

### Article Info

Volume 2, Issue 1, June 2022

Received : 07 February 2022

Accepted : 24 May 2022

Published : 05 June 2022

doi: [10.51483/IJAFRS.2.1.2022.27-38](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJAFRS.2.1.2022.27-38)

### Abstract

This article presents an attempt to analyze the narrative of *Mvett* performance of the Fang/Pahouin people of Central Africa (Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Cameroun, and Congo-Brazzaville). Almost all the studies pertaining to the *Mvett* focus on the literary aspects of its text, even those that propose to look at its performance, quickly turn to the mentioned aspects. In this article, the author seeks to understand the intrinsic symbolism of the origins of the performance and its narrative, from materials contained in the myth itself. He uses a pseudo-archeological perspective to fill the gaps of the weakness of physical evidence in investigating the initial actions of the narrative. The author calls his approach pseudo-archeological because Archeology is based on digging and analyzing the vestiges of material culture on the field, which is not the case with *Mvett*, an essential but immaterial patrimony of the Fang people.

**Keywords:** *Adzap*, *Aba (meba)*, *Mvett*, *Odzabomga*, *Archeology of Performance*, *Fang people*, *Engong*, *Oküi*, *Oyono Ada Ngone*, *Nkum Ekiegn*, *Iron Smelter*

© 2022 Dieudonné Christophe Mbala Nkanga. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

*Archeology should be able to make significant contributions in the study of performance and power through the analysis of theatrical space, iconography, and material objects by placing theatrical events in specific social and historical contexts.*

**Takeshi Inomata and Lawrence S. Coben (Eds.) (2006),** *Archeology of Performance*, p. 33, Altamira Press.

At the conclusion of what they called the “Overture” for *Archeology of Performance*, Takeshi Inomata and Lawrence S. Coben announce the agenda of the book, which is to “bring the question of theatrical performance back to the central stage of archeological inquiry” (12). Archeology is a field of inquiry studying human activity in the past based on the recovery and analysis of the material culture and environmental data left behind in the form of tools, artifacts, architecture, human and animal remains. In that sense, archeology operates with excavated physical objects that represent, upon analysis, the presence and the activities of people of the past in particular location. Inomata and Coben remind their readers of the shift in the archeological paradigm and approach. From its iconographic interpretation to the study of symbols and attempts to contextualize found objects, archeology gives the researchers multidisciplinary approaches that lead to a better understanding of the past and the life practices of people involved in it. Many scholars of performance have used archeological methodology, not because of its subject matter of material culture, but because of the pertinence of symbols, visual and vocal signs, and their meanings as they transpire in

\* Corresponding author: Dieudonné Christophe Mbala Nkanga, Associate Professor of Theatre Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. E-mail: [mbalank@umich.edu](mailto:mbalank@umich.edu)

performance events. Performance links the past and the present in a communication experience between performers and audience members within a community.

As I start this rumination about “*Adzap*” or the tree of knowledge and life in the *Mvett*, I remember the circumstances that lead me to it. While staying at a friend’s apartment for few days in June 1990, I found myself immersed in reading Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume’s double volume of *mvett*.<sup>1</sup> I had spent three days and almost three nights in a row, reading what I thought to be the most incredible story of mythical characters. In two volumes, Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume, the writer, pictured in the first image on page 11 below with his personal *Mvett* instrument, presents a mythical world where mortals fight to gain immortality while the immortals seek unsuccessfully to become mortals through death (Figures 1 and 2). The sheer violence of their fights matched the fantasy of their world and the beauty of the descriptive language used by the writer. This is the world of *mvett*, the main epic of the Fang people of Gabon, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Congo-Brazzaville.<sup>2</sup> For the Fang people, the characters of the epic are their ancestors (Figure 3). They are the founding fathers of their ethnicity. This is the main reason why *mvett* is performed all over Fang territories and in the cities where they live.



**Figure 1: Tsira Philippe Ndong Ndoutoume Copyright: Mbala Nkanga (2001)**

<sup>1</sup> That was in July 1990 in Bloomington, Indiana. Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume would subsequently publish a third volume in 1993. See *Le Mvett, épopée fang*. Présence Africaine, 1970, 1972, and *Le Mvett: L'homme, la mort, et l'immortalité*. L'Harmattan, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Fang people, also called Pahouin people, are found in the Central African countries of Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. Such a spread in territory can only come with a variety of forms in the Fang language due to locations and the colonial factors. However, most observers agree on the fact this group of people is divided into many subgroups [Pierre Alexandre and Jacques Binet, *Le groupe dit Pahouin (Fang – Boulou – Beti)*, Paris: PUF, 1958]. Each subgroup is divided into many tribes, also called Ayong. The main subgroups are: Mvae, Mékê, Ntoumou, Betsi, Nzaman, Boulou, Okak, Eton, Ewondo. The main tribes are: Agonavèign, Ebah, Angonavele, Ebifil, Esabck, Nkodgeign, Efak, Essamekois, Esakora, Esokè, Esibikang (Esabezang, Yemetone, Esindua, Esissong ou Esatua, Esisis ou Esabègne ou Mebum, Essanguï, Essanang, Essimvous, Ngamou, Yengü, Yemendzime, Yenkwakh, Esobam, Oyek, Nguè, Esametok, Bekwe, Esambita, Esakonon, Yembivè, Yendzok, Yenguïh, Omvang, Yengol, Yemesom, Yiveng, Oyekh.



Figure 2: Tsira Aloïs Mezui Me Ndong Copyright: Mbala Nkanga (2001)



Figure 3: Rebuilt Fang Cauldron/Smelter Copyright: Mbala Nkanga (2011)

Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume's work is a major feat of artistic and scholarly undertaking. As a traditionally trained master *mvett* player, or *mbômômvett* in Fang language, he endeavored to transcribe the epic from oral form to the written one. More importantly, he translated it from the Fang language onto the French, thus making it available to readers who may not have the knowledge of the original language, including the native themselves. Ultimately, his work has become the principal reference document of the Fang oral traditions. Albeit, one statement by the author captivated my attention, even intrigued me. He confessed to having violated tradition and having betrayed his masters by putting the epic in writing (1970, p. 18). For him, the written text of the epic as presented in the book was "flat, imperfect, because nothing in the world can replace the environment of the village, the atmosphere of the corps-de-garde (*Aba*), the rhythm of the bells and sticks, the melody of the *mvett* (instrument), the vibrations of the bird feathers and animal skins on the performer's head and arms"(18).<sup>3</sup> For this, the author earnestly requested the reader's forgiveness (19).

His request for forgiveness is justified by two main reasons, which are interconnected. First of all *mvett* is originally intended for public execution through the *mbômômvett*'s performance. He retells the story while supporting himself with a musical instrument and the audience clapping wooden sticks. Everything is individually called *Mvett* (story, musical instrument, and event). Secondly, the *mvett* story is both arcane and esoteric. As Pascal Boyer noted once: "Aux extravagances du récit fantastique les poètes ajoutent l'ésotérisme de la connaissance initiatique." (1988, p. 99)<sup>4</sup> In other words, the *mbômômvett*, as a poet, uses his creative imagination to combine the episodes of the story that are common knowledge and reflect the collective memory of the Fang with esoteric knowledge he received during his ritualistic training under the tutelage of his master *mbômômvett*. As Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume and many other *mvett* performers I visited with and interviewed between 1992 and 2012 along with the general Fang public have declared, *mvett* is for anyone who has interest in the ethnic knowledge of the Fang people. However, as Boyer pointed, there are limitations and barricades or cultural defensive barriers, which limit the access of the Fang mythical world to uninformed and uneducated people, including Fang themselves.

I have been working on this manifestation for over 20 years now. I attended performances in Libreville and Oyem, alongside many other small villages around these two cities in Gabon. Fang people see the *mvett* as the basis of their culture and their identity. Every time I visited with friends and colleagues in Gabon, I was always struck by the serious attitude towards everything pertaining to *mvett*. I published my initial observations in an article: "*Mvett* Performance: Retention, Reinvention, and Exaggeration in Remembering the Past" (Mbala Nkanga, 2010, pp. 83-101). The main points in that paper pertained to the definition, happening as a performance and the audience experience, and the issues of memory as they are linked to the recollection process of the past.

This essay is driven by two key concepts related to *Mvett*: *Adzap* and *Odzamboga*. The first concept (*Adzap*) is a giant tree in the equatorial rain forest, or at least how it is presented.<sup>5</sup> The second is the grand narrative of the Fang people relating the mythical migration movements of the Fang people throughout the central Africa. My objective is to decipher these two concepts as they participate in the overall symbolism of the *mvett* performance, to explore the ways by which they contribute in producing the traditional ethnic knowledge of Fang society and culture, and to investigate their social and political ramifications in the making of grand narrative for the Fang people.<sup>6</sup>

## 1. What is *Mvett* and who is the *Mbômômvett*?

*Mvett* is a very complex artistic and literary activity that encompasses epic songs and stories, topical songs, personal lyrics, a musical instrument, a performer-storyteller (*mbômômvett*) and his audience, and the performance itself. It recounts the adventures of a supernatural people of a quasi-mythical world, usually identified as Fang or as ancestral to them. It is perceived by the Fang people to be the repository of ancestral knowledge, wisdom, and language. *Mvett* presents a wide array of Fang culture and life that have direct bearing on spirituality, social and individual behaviors,

<sup>3</sup> *Aba* (*Meba* in plural) is the formal location for an *Mvett* performance in a Fang village. It is a rectangular shed open to all winds and covered with either thatch or galvanized iron roof. It is also the center of all the male activities in the village where women are excluded. My translation from the French.

<sup>4</sup> "To the extravagances of the fantastic narrative poets add esotericism of initiatory knowledge." Pascal Boyer, *Barricades mystérieuses et pièges à pensée: introduction à l'analyse des épopées Fang*. (Paris: Société d'Ethnologie, 1988)

<sup>5</sup> *Baillonella toxisperma* as it is scientifically called. Because of conflicting report about its actual existence and its relation with the *Mvett* epic, it can also be a baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*.) However, this interpretation faces a problem: the baobab tree does not grow in the forest.

<sup>6</sup> In his now classical work, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Les Editions du Minuit, 1979), Jean-François Lyotard replaces the notion of grand narrative in what he calls tribal times, meaning long past times, when myths and legends formed the basis for the production and transmission of knowledge. As a narrative, they also explained, legitimated knowledge, and functioned as a legitimation of the existing power relations, customs and so on, in social relations.

violence and warfare as well as social structures. Most importantly it is a performance during which a performer (*mbômômvett*), in chorus with his audience, recounts epic stories for the sake of enjoyment, information, and education. Thus, the performance event is a powerful intertextual event during which a dialogue is established between the original stories, and the text as the audience understands and completes it with physical and vocal comments.

The *mbômômvett* deliberately creates moments to coax the audience into creating their own meanings and understandings of the human and social conflicts that apply to their own situations. This moment of exchange is more than just a mere “social and political contextualization of many stagings”, it is a lived experience that generates meanings and messages through the opening up of the linear fable and its dramatic illusion (Patrice Pavis, 1987, p. 208).<sup>7</sup> It leads to a transformation and transposition of the participants in the mythical universe of the epic. Shared knowledge in this case creates a modality of social competence in both understanding and praxis (action). His demeanors are those of a medium transported into the mythical past while at the same time he addresses the audience. He thus recounts what he had supposedly actually experienced with his body and his mind. The recurrence of his enactment affects his memory to the extent that his own persona gives way to those involved in the story. Since all the situations he evokes take place in the mythical world of *Engong*, the *mbômômvett* supposedly travels from the material world of every day to the ancestral spirit domain of *Engong* during the performance.

However, it is important to point that personal and collective social and cultural experience of living in Fang society determines the participants’ response to the event. Thus participants are personally invested in the issues as man or woman or as someone devoted to contemporary social-political situation. Ultimately, *mvett* is a communal event aimed at social interaction during which a double operation of communication takes place. It involves the exchange of knowledge about a mythical Fang past and critical cultural information pertaining to the daily challenges to Fang identity. It is the moment when the *mbômômvett* shares with his audience the ancestral knowledge about the challenges of life, and how to overcome them. At the same time, it involves an appraisal of messages in relation to actual social and personal experiences.

Native Fang and observers agree that the *mbômômvett* is a musician and a skilled storyteller. He is a ‘memory man’ and an *Nnem*, a connoisseur of the Fang way of life, a knowledgeable man who is supposed to have a double existence: earthly and ancestral. As such the *Nnem* can be compared to a Demiurge who, according to the Platonic and Neo-Platonic schools of philosophy, is an artisan-like figure responsible for the fashioning and maintenance of the physical universe. As an *Nnem*, he is the master of the esoteric knowledge. He is a fashioner. Like the demiurge, during his performance, he fashions the universe as if it was his creation, as if he was an eternal being who predated the existence of the universe. He also remains an itinerant observer of society and culture.

Among the many things to consider when experiencing and studying the *mvett*, one should ponder the mythical and historical aspects of the origins of the epic in the context of the Fang migrations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the challenges they faced in crossing vast areas. *Mvett* has always served as a motivating force, a prime mover, and invigorating influence in leading their migration or *Odzamboga*. All scholars and students of the *mvett* agree on the fact its discovery must be placed in this context of violence and quest for domination of others while fleeing those who were more powerful than them. Taking other people’s territory and properties, including women and children, was prerequisite for their survival. When Oyono Ada Ngone went into coma, he witnessed the violent formation of the Fang universe. In Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume’s words, this formation process resembled the commonly known “Big Bang”. Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume stated in an interview that, when *Eyô*, the uncreated, created the world, he called on Oyono Ada Ngone, the initiator of *mvett*, to witness how he was creating the universe.<sup>8</sup> It is his testimony that makes up the narrative of the *mvett*. Therefore, whenever *bembômômvett* (plural of *mbômômvett*) perform, they relive these primal episodes. They become reporters of mythical events, which only initiates can see.

## 2. Origins of the *Adzap* in the *Mvett*

Everything starts with the mythical incidents surrounding the origins of the *mvett* in a formula every *mbômômvett* uses to start their performance, thus genealogically tying them to the mythical originator of the tradition. *Mvett* represents a particular moment in the evolution of the grand narrative of *Odzamboga*. It marked the instant when dejected and exhausted Fang faced what they thought insurmountable challenges: the presence of the *Adzap* tree blocking their way, followed by a mighty river they had to cross without knowing how to. The discovery of the *mvett* took place during the

<sup>7</sup> Patrice Pavis, 1987, *Dictionnaire du Theatre* (Paris: Messidor/Éditions Sociales)

<sup>8</sup> Nicolas Mba-Zué, 2008, *Mitsim à la quête du byere paternel* (Paris: L’Harmattan)

migrations of the Fang. According to oral traditions (tales and stories), the Fang people originated from the banks of the Nile River from where they were chased by the *Mvélés* or Bassa. During their flight, one of them, Oyono Ada Ngone, a great musician and warrior, suddenly lost consciousness.

They carried his inert body for a long time, probably a mythical week, as the *mbômômvett* usually claim. After this coma, Oyono regained consciousness and announced to the fugitives that he had found a sure means to regain courage. Men, women, and children gathered around him. He harangued them in these terms:

My brothers, the *Mvélés* are more powerful than we are. They are chasing us everywhere, but we need to take revenge. Because we cannot do anything against these pesky *Mvélés*, let us always move forward, conversely let us chase all the people, powerful or weak, we will meet on our way. We shall ransack villages for our supplies, and do to the others what the *Mvélés* have done to us. We are strong. Let us have faith in our strength. Anytime I will say:

- I sow the winds!

You should respond by:

- Yes!

Then I will say:

- I pull the elephant!

You respond by:

- Yes!

Again I will say:

- May your ears listen!

You should respond:

- May they listen to the *Mvett*! (16)<sup>9</sup>

(Thus, that was the first song of the *mvett*.) We will follow the course of the sun. We will have a beautiful country where it goes down. That land will probably be more fertile, richer than that of the “Great Water” we just left (17).

He then took a branch of a bamboo-palm tree. He detached four strings without removing them entirely from the stem. He then installed four knots made of liana at the extremities of the branch. To create the necessary string sounds, he inserted a bridge between the strings and the stem. This created a range of different and complex sounds. Thus, the *mvett* was born.

- I sow the winds!

- Yes!

- I pull the elephant!

- Yes!

- May your ears listen!

- May they listen to the *mvett*!

While playing that instrument, Oyono Ada Ngone recounted the epics of an imaginary people of warriors he named “People of Engong” or Iron People. These epics had the effect of exciting the Fang. One can see this act repeated countless times in the lives of Fang people, as glimpsed in the case of a performance by Tsira Aloïs Mezui Me Ndong, a Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume’s disciple. As a result, they rushed and attacked the people of the southwest regions with the same violence as the heroes of the *mvett*, looting and destroying everything on their path. They followed the Uele and the Ubangi rivers, headed to the west, towards the region of *Kam-Elone*, where a gigantic tree, *Adzap*, blocked their passageway for many years.<sup>10</sup> They had to open a way through the tree trunk. So, the convoy could move through (17).

Moreover, I have to point out that most studies on the *mvett* tend to overlook the importance of the initial incident: when the fleeing Fang people faced the giant *Adzap* (*Baillonella toxisperma*). Although considering some of the characteristics described in the *mvett*, one might think of a baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*.) This giant tree blocked

<sup>9</sup> From Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume, 1970, *Le Mvett*. (Paris: Présence Africaine:16-17)

<sup>10</sup> In reality it was a combination of violent assaults from other warring tribes, as many noted historians and ethnologists have pointed it.

their trek. How could they move on without cutting or piercing the tree? What kind of tools did they have to face that challenging task? Usually, stories and epics deal with agency and the characters involved in the recounted events. The paraphernalia and tools/equipment they use barely make it into the story. It is the same situation in the *mvett* and the *Odzamboga*. Tools are mentioned as they help the heroes to fight each other. The *mbômômvett* in his performance always mention all sorts of armaments, including modern ones that never existed during the time of the mythical migrations. Nonetheless, in the case of working to pierce the *Adzap* in order to make a passage for the fleeing Fang, nothing is evoked.

In view of this omission, I endeavor to establish a link between the *Mvett* and the efforts to slice the giant tree along with the process of making the tools. At this stage of researches, the question seems to be overlooked or does not draw much attention. One would think that archeological diggings might help clarify the question. Here too other questions and issues appear. Oral sources pertaining to *Odzamboga* mention the concept of *Adzap-Mbogane*. It signifies “pierced *Adzap*” in the Bulu form of Fang language. The event of piercing that tree is recorded to have been a crucial for the Fang migration. It allowed them to escape the menacing forces of the *Mvélé* people.

Physically, the action of piercing the giant *adzap* tree could only happen thanks to metal (or iron) tools. In addition to the piercing of the tree, the Fang faced another hurdle, a large river. Tradition has it that, thanks to the *mvett*, they were saved by a mythical serpent (some other sources mention a giant crocodile), which carried all the people on its back to the right bank of the river. Many sources, including by historians and anthropologists, confirm that it was the Sanaga River in Cameroon. *Ngan Medza*, is the totem serpent in the Bulu language, while the Ntumu call it the bloated crocodile. It swelled with mystical powers to help the fleeing people to cross the river. What role did Oyono Ada Ngono and his *mvett* play in these particular events? It is hard to affirm anything here. What is certain is the evidence provided in the *mvett* itself.

The first *mbômômvett* provided the trapped people with the imagination, rather the knowledge, and the courage along with the power to overtake the task of piercing the fateful passage through the trunk of the giant tree. The final event/image double moments: the crossing of the pierced *adzap* tree and the re-emergence of the people on the other side of the passage.<sup>11</sup> However that moment symbolizes the new birth of the Fang being delivered through the womb of the *Adzap* tree. It is a moment of miraculous birth similar to many births in myths around the world. It marks the moment when they acquired the knowledge of life and survival by conquering the skills of smelting and forging metals, especially iron and copper. The *Adzap* became the mythical mother of the Fang people, while copper and iron smelting became the basic knowledge passed to them. The knowledge transformed them into a fearless and brave people prone to destroying all enemies found on their path.

### 3. What is the Importance of Iron and Iron Smelting for the Fang?

What are the relations of *mvett*, as story and performance, with iron smelting? This is a question I asked an elder, Joseph Bibang-Bi-Ndong, in Oyem (May 27, 2012).<sup>12</sup> We were discussing general topics on Fang cultural and social practices. The importance of iron and its importance in Fang traditional economy came up when he showed my company and me vestiges of an old smelting furnace. I wondered aloud if there was any link between the process of iron smelting and the *mvett* narrative. His response was immediate and revealing. Life in Fang country turns around iron and copper rods. It has been that way since the mythical time of piercing the *Adzap*.

As mentioned earlier, Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume tells the story of the relation between *Eyô*, the uncreated force of nature who creates everything, and the master *mvett* player (*mbômômvett*). The interaction between the two takes place in the imaginary, liminal, and initiatory world of the *Mvett* in a moment experienced by all performers starting with Oyono Ada Ngone himself. The story goes as follow: When *Eyô* created the world, he called Oyono Ada Ngone and asked him to look at the way in which he was shaping the world. He took copper; he kneaded it in his hands, and asked Oyono Ada Ngone if he knew what he was doing. “You are kneading copper,” he responded to *Eyô*, who ended up shaping a mass (*akona*) in a vaguely spherical but egg-shaped form, called *Aki Ngoss*. He enclosed the intelligence (*Ossimane*, *Nyeman*) in it. He said again:

I have imprisoned intelligence. I will say something to intelligence since it has no limitation, and it can do anything. It should be disciplined so as it only what is good, what is right. That means it will not liberate itself

<sup>11</sup> In other versions of the *mvett* narrative, Oyono Ada Ngone, provided the strategies to cut the *adzap* tree in order to use it either as a bridge to cross the Sanaga River, or as a big boat used for the same purpose.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Bibang-Bi-Ndong is a well respected elder in the village of Essong-Okui near Oyem in the province of Woleu-Ntem.

without the power for self-discipline. So, he told the intelligence: “Get out of the copper egg shell by your own.” Intelligence responded: “I am unable to get out” (193).<sup>13</sup>

The captured Intelligence could only exit the copper eggshell with the help of Will and Power. After that, Eyô encouraged the Intelligence to apply both, Will and Power, leading to the explosion of the *Aki Ngoss*. In itself *Aki Ngoss* is infinite, an incommensurable sphere that includes all the planets and stars. In so doing the Intelligence became disciplined, or domesticated. However, Eyô promised to withdraw the added forces if Intelligence did not continue properly its work. He provided an unlimited creative power to the Intelligence while he keeps a watch over its use (195).

As a *mbômômvett*, Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume spoke in images, presenting what might be considered a fictional activity, which takes place in an imaginary world. In this world, power is synonymous of immortality. One can see the indecipherable image of the creative imagination of the storyteller through a statement full of mystery on one side, and the visual projection of that image. The copper eggshell and Intelligence coupled with Will and Power can be seen here as the independence given to humans to resolve their problems and challenges. Taking control of the creative explosion is the main advise of the *mbômômvett* to his audience. It is not just a fictional and projected imaginative event, it takes on a “metaphoric function.” It encompasses both the world of the unconscious and that of consciousness.

The *mbômômvett* is a storyteller who lives two different worlds at the same time, the imagined and illusory, and the real that allows the physical and artistic communication with the audience. Not everything he sees in the imagined world of the unconsciousness is communicated to the audience (192). As Marcel Mauss puts it, his nature is that of acting, or embodiment, and imitation of useful activities, which may combine religion and play (performance). The materials he uses contain multiple dimensions. Considering the *mvett* as a grand narrative, and looking the placed given to the violent confrontations of rocks and flames, one sees the work of human imagination and creative intelligence. The *mbômômvett*'s performance becomes a communication loaded with symbolisms, with messages needing a lot more than just listening. It needs interpretation. For the Fang people, the *mvett* is everything. It is important for this study to consider the relation between few powerful images and events.

The first event/image is the *Aki Ngoss* as the eggshell that makes up the incommensurable universe as it becomes impregnated with Intelligence in order to create the universal dynamic of unstoppable creativity. Man is vetted with all power to invent and find solutions to the world's problem. The ancestors of the Fang faced extinction if they did not fight for their survival. Moreover the double image/event of the *Adzap* tree (blocking the passage towards friendlier lands) and Oyono Ada Ngone's initiatic coma replaces the debate over what did he actually receive and transmit to the desperate Fang people waiting for him to wake up. He woke up and made a musical instrument and told them stories. What is then the importance of the iron smelting knowledge for the Fang?

In an interesting paper Eno Belinga and Kozo Watanabe explore oral traditions to find how the Bulu people developed ironwork in memorial times before the colonial occupation of Cameroon. In “La civilisation du fer et l'épopée orale du *mvett* des Bulu du Cameroun (Afrique Centrale)”, they confronted stories told to them by old people who were presumably involved or knew how the production of iron took place.<sup>14</sup> Their analysis leads to the perception that *mvett* is just an allegory of the endless fights between the flames and the hammers in the process of transforming rocks into iron. However, the first Europeans who reached deep in Fang territory in Gabon from the estuary of the Komo River, did not acknowledge the existence of such technology as iron smelting among the people of the area, including the Fang.

Fang people were warriors. They used iron to manufacture handheld weapons such as axes, cutlasses, big swords, pointed axes, and spears. They also made iron rods to demonstrate their wealth, exchanging them for dowries and other social debts. Belinga and Watanabe suggest that the historical domain hardly allows a clear separation of the material from the cultural (459). They both develop a causal relationship. The material evidences the cultural to establish the authenticity of historical facts. In their study, the approach consists in providing technological details as recorded by oral traditions and testimonies from people who have witnessed or participated in the process of transforming rocks into

<sup>13</sup> My translation from the French language: “J’ai enfermé l’Intelligence. Je vais dire quelque chose à l’Intelligence puisqu’elle n’a pas de limite et qu’elle ne fasse que ce qui est bon, ce qui est juste, c’est-à-dire qu’elle ne se libère pas totalement sans Pouvoir pour la discipliner. Il a donc dit à l’Intelligence: “Sors de l’œuf de cuivre par tes propres moyens”. L’Intelligence a répondu: “Je ne peux sortir.”

<sup>14</sup> Eno Belinga & Kozo Watanabe, 1982, “La civilisation du fer et l'épopée orale du *mvett* des Bulu du Cameroun (Afrique Centrale)”, *Folklore in Africa Today*, Budapest, 1-4(XI), 445-487.

iron, then iron to various tools. This approach is also useful in helping to establish material and cultural sites that give justification and proof of the existence of ironwork and the practice of *mvett*.

#### 4. What Does *mvett* have to do With These Details?

I suggest that there is an intimate relationship between *mvett* practice and performance with the activities of Iron smelting especially at the second and third stages of Belinga and Watanabe's description. Modeled on the length of time required to complete the foundry work and the conditions of such a work, *mvett* is clearly an allegory of the physical world of iron making. *Mvett* appears to have worked as a motivating force for the ironworkers. This is not a new approach. Peter Schmidt, an archeologist and historian, working among the Haya people of Tanzania has documented their involvement with iron production.<sup>15</sup> Among many findings, he pointed to the use of storytelling with musical accompaniment of small cithara. The ensemble of songs captures the aura and atmosphere of iron smelting. It refers to the beating of the sheep's skin billows, an allegory of sexual intercourse. For the Haya people view the inside of the furnace to be holding the making of life, the birth of the earth. The music and songs support the process of iron smelting, encourage and stimulate the smelters. Beyond keeping them awake and focus on the work, they remind the workers of the necessity of their efforts for the sake of the community. The result of this intense activity is the creation of agrarian instruments. Thus, smelting iron from ores was equated with the creation of life on earth.

Here again, Belinga and Watanabe using Alexandre and Binet's findings, point to the fact that since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, Fang people were involved in trading and exchanging goods among themselves and with the surrounding neighbors. They even ventured moving closer to the coast to exchange with the Europeans. It is thus established that there is a relation between iron smelting (making wealth through iron), monetary commerce, and the payment of dowry (Bride price). With the advent of colonialism, imported goods from Europe replaced the forged iron in all the marital transaction, thus making iron smelting obsolete.

Moreover it seems that the tradition of iron work did not vanquished with the contact with the Europeans, despite the fact that it is hard to find any site or any specific story pertaining to recent experience of smelting. I suggest that this might be the first hint to the association between *mvett* and iron smelting. I am attempted to consider Peter R Schmidt's archeological and anthropological approach in dealing with the Haya people's oral traditions on iron smelting, along with lessons he learned as a possible model to study *mvett*. When the *mbômômvett* performs, he invites the audience to participate, as we mentioned earlier, in a call and response game to determine the phase of the epic they wanted to hear. The epic cycle of *Akoma Mba* is the most preferred. It is long and extremely dramatic with explosive and violent fights. The main cause is the ambitious effort of the mortal people of Oküi to steal the secret of immortality from the people of Engong. *Akoma Mba* is the hero of the people of Engong. What is more striking is the way Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume (and all the *bembômômvett*) identifies the various clans (or groups) involved in the *mvett* epic. For him, the ambitious people of Oküi are responsible for starting the cycle of everlasting wars. Belinda and Watanabe suggest that the secret of immortality was in fact the secret formula for smelting iron (466).

Here are their identities:

- **The Flames** (or Yemikaba – Oveng Ndoumou Obame)
- **The Thunderstorms** (Nkabe Mbourou)
- **The Irons** (including *Akoma Mba*, the hero, and Engong Ondo, chief warrior)
- **The Rocks** (among them Nzé Mendang, Angone Zok, and Obiang Medja)
- **The Hammers** – according to Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume this is newly formed clan.<sup>16</sup> Their hero is Ndoutoume Mfoulou who is known to be merciless in his killing of his enemies. It is said that he agreed to die since his birth, but never succeeded in reaching that goal. Nobody is able to kill him (18).

Of the Hammers, Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume says: "Etounga beget the Rocks, Mba beget the Irons, and Meye M'Ango beget the Hammers with the aim of breaking the Rocks and mellowing the Irons." So, the conflicts started when Oveng Ndoumou Obame decided to annihilate any trace of iron on the face of the earth. He was convinced the iron could only bring trouble to all the earth's inhabitants. That was the price for universal peace (19).

<sup>15</sup> Peter R. Schmidt (Producer), February 1995, *The Tree of Iron*, color documentary, 1988. A National PBS Black History Month feature.

<sup>16</sup> One can easily wonder when was it created, and by whom.

It is important to consider how all these names relate to the process of ironwork. This work is reserved for men only who operate the furnace/smelter, seen below on page 12. The symbolism of the smelter is also equated to the males' organs. The wars in the *mvett* narrative seem to be an allegory of the smelting process personified. As it stands now, it is early to firmly conclude on this. I can only temporally deduct that immortality equates iron. Thus, the secret of immortality seems to be an allegory of the secret of Iron making. Death also seems to be an allegory of change of status for a new birth, a preparation for immortality.

It is understandable why the first Westerners to be in contact with Fang people could not see or recognize *mvett* practices. They saw and understood the link between Ivory and *Bilaba* (art of agonistic negotiation and wealth building through dowries and bride prices), as opposed to *mvett* and Iron making (wealth producing activities). Westerners could not witness this later activity because of the secrecy attached to it, and territory limitation. They did not have access to the deep territory of the Fang people.

## 5. *Mvett*, an Allegory of the Present

*Mvett* is a metanarrative of a particular moment for the Fang people. It is a grand narrative common to all who identify with the *Odzamboga*. Unlike the postmodernist intellectual who no longer believes in grand narratives, Fang people believe in the *mvett*. Fang grand narrative legitimizes Fang's worldview. Regardless of the structures and political institutions of the post-colonial states in which they live, Fang claim that *mvett* validates and legitimizes (to use Lyotard's idea) ancestral knowledge, and provides social and ethical models for them today. As a grand narrative, it is a compilation of "small narratives" containing the same ideological and philosophical knowledge based on real or supposed common experience in the past. I will not get into Lyotard's opposition to metanarrative here because his views are geared towards what he calls the societies of "postindustrial age."<sup>17</sup> Rather, I will consider the view commonly agreed with among scholars of African epics and legends that, despite its lack of unity, chronology, and coherence, a grand narrative orders and explains ancestral knowledge and experience. Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume pointed out, "*mvett* is everything for the Fang." It is in the epics that Fang people find wisdom and courage. It is also there that they find the knowledge to deal with various social and political challenges.

The main theme of the *mvett* is man's continual fight against all the visible and invisible, close or distant forces of nature in order to domesticate life, to survive and to access immortality. Man's journey on the earth is a vast field of apprenticeship and experiences of that hard struggle that continue even after death. Physically weak, man received from God a powerful weapon: intelligence. (1970, p. 12)<sup>18</sup>

Fighting to domesticate life and access immortality (or even mortality in the case of people of Engong) is the leitmotiv in the world of the *mvett*. All the characters strive to always help one another in any troubled situation. Unlike many other ethnic groups in Africa, the Fang have never experienced the notion of kingdom. Their social structure is based on kinship and attachment to the common ancestors. The power system is organized around the idea of power as passed down by ancestors. Their communities are imagined, to use Benedict Anderson's idea. It is primarily based on the identification with the *Odzamboga*, which is confirmed by the *Mvett* narrative.

In 1947, leaders and representatives of Fang people from all ethnic subgroups and all parts of Africa met in the town of Mitzié in what is Gabon today. Among many objectives, they wanted to withdraw from the colonial territories established by France (Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon), and by Spain (Equatorial Guinea) to create a new nation based on the principles established in the *Mvett* and their mythical experiences of the *Odzamboga*. They launched the UNIFANG or "Union du Peuple Fang".<sup>19</sup> Cyriaque Akomo-Zoghe, a researcher at the GRENAL (Groupe de Recherches sur les Noir(e)s d'Amérique Latine) at the University of Perpignan (France), who studied the details of that congress, explained that the attendants wanted to re-flush the massive cultural patrimony from their common ancestor Afiri Kara. Through the proceedings they also protested against the European occupation of their land. They initiated new terms

<sup>17</sup> Jean-François Léotard, 1979, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, (Paris: Les Editions du Minuit, 3)

<sup>18</sup> My translation from the French language: "Le thème principal du *mvett* est la lutte continue de l'homme contre toutes les forces visibles ou invisibles, proches ou lointaines de la nature pour la domestication de la vie, l'accès à la survie et l'acquisition de l'immortalité. Son séjour ici-bas constitue un vaste champ d'apprentissage et d'expérience de cette lutte ardue qui se prolonge après la mort. Physiquement faible, l'homme a heureusement eu de Dieu une arme redoutable: l'intelligence (12)."

<sup>19</sup> Although the Fang have been divided and placed in different countries thanks to the colonial policies of France and Spain, Fang people seem to be always united and share all the traditional customs and ancestral practices. They do not need border visas for mutual visits.

of the European presence in the region. The congress also determined new conditions for the settlement of Fangs throughout the region as a major step towards the creation of a totally Fang nation-state. It finally established a strategic plan that would have allowed the Fang people from different countries to unite in one nation. An important concept guided this project: *Alar Ayong* or unite the tribe. It consisted uniting villages that shared the same clan identifications, such as Nkodjein, Essangui, Yengui, and many others. That meeting, unlike many others in previous years, shook the colonial establishment. Some of the participant leaders became members of the French parliament (Léon Mba, Jean-Hilaire Aubame).

Moreover, the Mitzic congress launched the revival and the spreading/promotion of the *Mvett* and the legend of *Odzamboga*. They generated excitement and prompted the Fang to start dreaming about the paragon of the legend. They revived what had become unconscious, and brought it to the level of consciousness. The great *mbômômvett* Zuè Nguema (later recorded in 1960 by the ethnomusicologist Herbert Pepper) emerged as one of the leading performers, and helped disseminate this almost forgotten tradition at the time. Although *mvett* is recognized to be the highest form of cultural performance among the Fang, and the greatest motivating and stimulating narrative to Fang identity, its content does not reflect what might be called Fang history.

What is of interest in this essay about the Mitzic Congress is the focus on what the participants accomplished at the end of their proceedings. They adopted a symbol, which would work as a crest for Fang identity and unity. They chose the *Adzap* tree. Paul Mba Abessole reminds of the importance of that tree in the survival of the Fang when their enemies threatened them (2006, p. 60.)<sup>20</sup> They found that mythical tree in the center of the city of Oyem, in the Gabonese northern province of Woleu-Ntem. According to Pierre-Claver Zeng, a famous Fang musician, they named it “NKUM EKIEGN” or a steel column (2001, p. 82).<sup>21</sup> The allusion here is clearly about the steel spine of the Fang culture and identity. The tree became the symbol of Fang unity, whatever their country of origin or stay as imposed by the colonial powers.<sup>22</sup> That tree was perceived to be laying the grounds for the spiritual development, socially, intellectually, culturally, and economically speaking, of every Fang people in the sub-region. They assumed their power to be residing within that tree.

The participants agreed for the Fang elders to assemble around that tree every time the Fang nation faced new challenges, including the education of their children, public health issues, the choice of new political leaders and representatives, and many more. Once a year, at least, the elders met at the foot of this tree to make sacrifices to the ancestors by sacrificing chickens, ducks, goats, sheep, etc. All participants in the ceremony were held to strict code of secrecy. It was assumed that any public disclosure from any of the participants of what happened during the assembly could lead to serious misfortune for the individual and the community. Like the *mvett* and its performance, the Mitzic Congress of 1947, crystallized the importance of the *Adzap* and the *Odzamboga* in the lives of the Fang people. The two concepts have recreated the circumstances to restore Fang self-esteem at a time of colonial division and oppression, by affirming the relevance of the ancestors and the mythical events that characterized their lives.

Throughout this essay, I attempted to dig for the deep meaning and importance of the *Adzap* tree within the context of the *Odzamboga* as performed in the *mvett* epic along with its social and cultural implications for the Fang people. As this rumination has shown, there are many intricacies to the nature of these concepts for the Fang. Additionally, they still have incredible repercussions on how Fang view their community and express their identity. However, most observers of Fang society recognize that ultimately there are less young people interested in receiving the traditional training old *mvett* players received in the past. Like many other aspects of the traditional and ancestral knowledge in Africa, the both the practice of the *mvett* and the promotion of the ideals embedded in the *Adzap* and *Odzamboga* are diminishing today, despite some spurts of Fang nationalism generated by political tensions. Some of them prefer to learn by themselves by memorizing the transcribed and published versions by Tsira Ndong Ndoutoume and others who have emulated him. Overall, the tradition itself is being abandoned. People are evoking new myths and narratives mainly influenced by the newly adopted Euro-Christian ideas. It is not surprising to consider the fate of the *Nkum Ekiegn* in Oyem, which was cut

<sup>20</sup> Paul Mba Abessole, 2006, *Aux sources de la culture fan*, (Paris: l'Harmattan)

<sup>21</sup> “NKUM EKIEGN” is also pronounced “NKUM EKI” in other Fang dialects. It is the title of a song in which he laments the disastrous fate of both the tree and the Fang identity. See in Marc Mve Bekale, 2001, *Pierre Claver Zeng et l'art poétique fang, esquisse d'une herméneutique* (Paris: l'Harmattan).

<sup>22</sup> It is reported that the first president of Equatorial Guinea, Macias Nguema Biyogo, travelled in 1972 to the United Nations General Assembly to present and unsuccessfully defend the project of a united Fang state, as opposed to the current states in the region originated from colonial structures. However, he adopted the *Adzap* as the main logo of the flag and the coat of arms of his country.

by Gabonese army soldiers sent to destroy it in the late 1980s. The Gabonese government controlled by president Bongo Odimba decided to eliminate what was the symbol of Fang unity and also the center of various manifestations by Fang people against his totalitarian regime. For the scholars, many questions are still lingering, especially now that many elements are disappearing. The key questions remain those pertaining to the methodological approach in studying this incredible performance tradition. My aim was to go beyond the usual literary and anthropological approaches to attempt a foray into a pseudo-archeological perspective.<sup>23</sup> This essay is an attempt of contribution in that direction.

---

<sup>23</sup> I call this a pseudo-archeological perspective because of the weakness of physical evidences in the investigation. Archeology is based on digging and analyzing the vestiges of material culture on the field. For future developments of this study of mvett and its attributes, I will explore this approach, especially in the light of the following publication: Takeshi Inomata and Lawrence S. Coben, (eds.) 2006, *Archeology of Performance*. Altamira Press.

**Cite this article as:** Dieudonné Christophe Mbala Nkanga (2022). *Adzapor The Tree of Knowledge and the Archeology of a Performance: Mvett*. *International Journal of African Studies*. 2(1), 27-38. doi: 10.51483/IJAFRS.2.1.2022.27-38.