

ABBIA STONES

ABBIA STONES: A FOREWORD!  
By Bernard Fonlon

William Eteki Mboumoua, Minister of National Education invited me to launch a Cultural Review for Cameroon back in 1962.

Instinctively, I felt that such a Cultural Review should have a Cameroon Stamp, thanks to a name that was typically Cameroonian.

The problem then arose to find a name that was apt. I had heard of a Duala word, *Dikalò* and it captivated my attention because of its Duala sonorosity. Unfortunately I was told that the name had been already used for a paper in Duala. So the search for the name continued.

By a stroke of luck, I discovered The ABBIA ART and decided to baptize The Review with that name.

Today, looking twenty years back, I am myself surprised at the reputation this decision has achieved. Now the art is used in the making of rings, necklaces, cloth designs. The walls of the REUNIFICATION MONUMENT are decorated with ABBIAS.

There is in Yaounde town a Cinema Hall which was named Abbia and the proprietor, in despite of vehement protest on our part, used our symbol to decorate his building. Thus giving the impression that the Abbia Review had commercial links with the Cinema Hall.

I here declare that the Abbia Review, in constant struggle for survival, has no links whatsoever with the moneyed Cinema Hall.

But that as it may, I found it very difficult to have the name accepted by my colleagues. The current opinion, at that time, was that this name was under the weather, because the ABBIA Cotyledons were used for gambling and had been prohibited by the French Government.

I made answer that, what attracted my attention was the beauty of the art and the fact that it was found nowhere else but in Cameroon. What then was more appropriate than to baptize the Review with such a god-sent name!

In any case, the launching of the review was a gamble. Who could have foreseen that, in despite of its ups and downs, it would still exist twenty years after.

Before long, this art began to attract the attention of prominent intellectuals. Foremost among them was the Benedictine monk, Dom. Luitfried Marfurt of the Mont Febe Community. He made a large collection of the Abbias and classified them with teutonic thoroughness, according to the themes expressed

by the artists. It was from him that I got in April 1981 at the Blindenheim Hore Luzem, the specimens that I have published in this introduction.

Another, was Frederick Quinn who, at the time, was a Cultural Attaché in the American Embassy in Yaoundé. Back in America he returned to University and got a doctorate in Cameroon Studies. His article follows this introduction.

Thanks to these scholars and thanks to the REVIEW, this art has been known and recognized as of specific and special interest wherever it has gone in the world.

Furthermore, the Review, thanks to its cover has kept alive the memory of Fon Njoya of PAMUM, whom as far as we know is the only African in these parts to have invented a script. It is therefore with joy that we enrich Dr. Quinn's collection with that of Dom. Marfurt. A close scrutiny of both shows that, although they look alike, at the first glance they are in fact notable for richness and diversity.

ABBIA STONES  
By FREDERICK QUINN

*«With the Abbla game it is like this:  
... reasonable people do not play it, only those who are out to steal.  
For when somebody has lost all his possessions  
in the Abbla game, then his heart thinks only about stealing.  
That is the reason why all the other people do not like the game».*  
Paul Messi

The Beti are a Bantu-speaking people numbering approximately 500,000 who live in the vicinity of Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon. The land is rain-forest for the most part, set on a plateau which is broken by deep ravines and a few hills, and becomes savannah toward the north. Until the Germans arrived in the 1880's, Beti government was characterized by several thousand headmen, each acting independently of one another, or bound in alliances by ties of friendship, kinship or marriage. Each compound was ruled by its own headman and usually contained his unmarried brothers, wives, and their children. The Beti practiced hunting and limited agriculture, including the growing of root crops. Because of the tsetse fly, only household animals were kept.

Few forms of traditional Beti art survive. The Beti once made masks and statues, especially in conjunction with the Sso (antelope) initiation rites for young men, but that art disappeared, probably with the outlawing of the Sso ceremonies by the Germans about 1910. Several years ago, a Beti informant, at that time in his late seventies, described the masks used in the Sso ceremonies by saying: "They were terrible to see." The initiation rite which he had experienced as a young man marked the transformation of the liminal state of adolescence to incorporation as warriors in the rainforest society. Included in his statements on the art and culture of his people was a fairly extensive description of the Beti's highly decorative art of the *Abbia* stone.

*Abbia* was a very popular game in the Cameroonian rainforest and among the Beti. It was not a game of skill, but almost entirely a game of chance, much like throwing dice. *Abbia* stones (*mvia*) were carved from the hard pits of the *Mimusops Congolensis* tree. Paul Messi, a Beti who served as assistant for Yaounde languages at Hamburg for several years following World War I, described the gathering of the fruits of the tree, which he referred to as *elan*: "*Elan* is a big tree in the forest. It gives fruit only every second year. *Elan* fruits are poisonous. If somebody eats them, he dies. Therefore, we do it like this: when the *elan* tree has borne fruit and the fruits have fallen to the ground, the women and children go into the forest and pick up the fallen and rotten fruit. Sometimes even adult men go into the forest; however, it is usually the women and children. They do not bring the fruits to the village, but only the hard pits. They do not bring the fruits themselves because they are afraid that the domestic animals, the goats, chickens, and pigs would die from them. If they eat the *elan* fruits, they perish. When they arrive [at the village] with the *elan* pits, they sell them to the *Abbia* players. The *Abbia* player cracks the nut into two parts carefully, and carves the game stones out of them. With these stones they can then play the *Abbia* game. The *elan* tree is indeed very dangerous; the fruits as well as the insides of the pits and the leaves are all poisonous; if somebody eats them, he dies on the spot. That much I know of it.

The stones are about the size of a large button, but elliptical in shape, and dark brown or black in color. The carving is done in such a way that the picture remains in relief forming the brown surface of the pit, while the carved-out background is a lighter color. Players were supposed to carve their own

*Abbia* stones, but not all did. Ready-made stones were rarely available for purchase, since *Abbia* stone carving was not considered a profession in itself. Sometimes if a man lost all his possessions and could not continue to play, he would sell his stones. Those who did not know how to carve could go to a good friend or one with a reputation as a skilled carver and ask that a set of good stones be made. In such a case, the carver, rather than the player, usually decided the objects to be depicted on each stone. These objects could be divided into three groups: inanimate objects, living beings, and supernatural beings. The second group, living beings, was the most frequently carved. As the carvings served no functional purpose in the *Abbia* game itself, it would appear that they are primarily the result of the Beti's desire for ornamentation. An experienced carver could produce up to five or six stones a day. Every player owned several stones, and some had hundreds. Messi remarked on the carving and symbolism of the stones as follows: "When the women and children used to come to sell the *elan* nuts to the gamblers it was like this: one uncarved stone cost two little iron staffs. One carved stone cost five staffs. The things carved on the stones do not have any special meaning [the decorations do not have any relation to the game; one could also play with totally undecorated stones], be it man or animal, bird or fish. These things exist in various forms, but nobody carves a particular person or a particular object. They carve like this: a man, an animal, a bird, a chicken—the last two are totally alike. Animals that look like humans, gorillas and chimpanzees, are usually depicted exactly that way. Parrots can be recognized for what they are only by the way they look like humans. The same thing is true of the hawk and the raven. All other birds look the same. The horse and the donkey are shown as one animal. Man and woman are also usually the same. Except that a woman is usually depicted with a loincloth or raffia leaves in the back — by this we recognize: this is a woman. If she does not have a loincloth on, we call her only a human, since we do not know what she is, whether man or woman.

The stakes are high in an *Abbia* game; the loss of wives was common in former times, and it was not infrequent for a man to gamble himself into slavery. The game was played by men who sat in a circle around a plate-shaped woven basket and placed their carved stones in the basket, along with undecorated discs (*sa*) cut from the peel of the calabash. Messi described the game itself as follows: "The *Abbia* game is like this: the people come with iron staffs and money and sit in a circle. Every participant has his carved stones, and they also bring a braided grass basket. They put the stones in the basket, and also several other pieces. These are called *sz*, playing discs. One person who is experienced in the game is seated next to the basket and decides all things connected with the game. He lifts the basket and throws it to the ground upside down. With the basket still covering the stones, the players put down their staffs (make their bets). When the basket is removed, the positions of the seven discs indicate who has won. If there are six *Abbia* stones and seven discs in the basket, and two, three, or four of the stones lie with the carving on top, and two or three of the discs also lie with their backs up, then you know that the stones with the carved side up are the winners. The ones with the carved side down have lost. If one stone goes the same way as all seven discs, the other way, then stone goes one way and all the other discs and stones go the other way, then you know that the stone that went its way alone has won, and all the others you have lost (are dead). If two stones and all of the discs go one way, then you know that just these have lost. When all of the discs and stones lie on their backs, the throw is inviolated."

Sets of Abbia stones can be found in several German museums. It is also possible to purchase them from the Benedictine Abbey (Yaounde, Cameroon) where Père Lutfried Marfurt, a Swiss monk who has spent many years in Cameroon, has helped restore this art form.

The stones shown here demonstrate the remarkable range of inventiveness and subject matter of the Beti carvers. They are reproduced from the illustrations of an article «Das Abia-Glücksspiel Der Jaunde Und Die Darstellungen Auf Den Spielmarken» by Otto Reche, in the *Mitteilungen aus dem Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg, Volume 9, 1924.*

The eight Beti songs which follow show aspects of life, love, death, and warfare in the rainforest. The songs were collected during the summer of 1967 for a history I was writing about the Beti. They were recorded by Pierre Betene, a researcher, and translated by him from Ewondo, the Beti language of the Yaounde region, into French. In presenting the songs in English, I have shortened the texts, eliminating some refrains and repetitions, while attempting to retain the narrative line.

Most of the songs were sung in the evening by the women, who often performed as both soloists and chorus. Accompaniment could be by drum, flute, xylophone, or *mvet*, a long piece of bamboo from which two or three long, thin strands were cut and tightened over a bridge. The strings terminated in half-gourds, placed on each end of the bamboo stick, thus providing resonance. These were not the songs of the professional praise-singers, also known as *mvet* (*African Arts/Arts d'Afrique*, Vol. II, No. 4, page 17).

#### NO WAR SINCE THE WHITE MAN CAME

«No war since the white man came»  
 My mother, no one can do this to me;  
 Atano Odi will kill me,  
 Eneye Abene will kill me,  
 That is not something I desire;  
 My mother, how can I sleep tonight?  
 The son of Mfege will kill me,  
 My mother, what can I do?  
 Refrain: «No war since the white man came».

A young Beti warrior complains that he cannot fulfill his natural inclinations toward combat, and that his enemies can easily kill him. The chorus answers that since the white man has come, for better or for worse, they have sought to keep peace among the tribes.

One of the first interests of the Germans, after they arrived in the interior of Cameroon in the late 1880's, was to put an end to Beti warfare.

#### MINSANGALI, OPEN THE DOOR FOR ME

«Minsangali, lovely lady, open the door for me»  
 «Who is there that I should open the door?»  
 «It is I, the Panther, the most gallant in the forest»  
 «Panther, go quickly back from where you came...  
 It is Minsil-Ebana-Zene who is my fiancée.

*I do not think of anyone but him for whom my  
 hair is well-dressed»*  
 «Aie! Aie! Look at me, rejected by a woman!»

The panther as a trickster is a familiar rainforest image.

#### HOW DID YOU GET IT IN YOUR HEAD?

*How did you get it in your head...?*  
 You, Ovuvgugu, that you are a lord?  
 The sparrow has been killed,  
 The sparrow has been killed,  
 The sparrow's throat has been cut  
 The sparrow of what the wren did,  
 Because of what the wren did,  
 How did you get it in your head that you were a chief?  
 How did you get it in your head that you were a chief?  
 You, Ovuvgugu, how did you get it in your head?  
 The sparrow has been killed and the other bird killed...

«Ovuvgugu» is what the Beti called the first German to come to that part of central Cameroon circa 1887. Perhaps «Ovuvgugu» is how the Beti heard his name. «Sparrow» and «Wren» were his unfortunate companions in this ironic song of the first encounter between the Beti and the colonizers.

#### DEATH

*Death, having taken my father, also took my mother  
 And I went out on the roads, crying:  
 «Is it I that have brought death?»*  
*Death, having taken my mother, also took my brother,  
 Death, having taken my brother, also took my father's father  
 And I went out on the roads, crying:  
 «Is it I that have brought death to earth?»*

The Beti considered misfortunes such as crop failures, sickness, and death as coming to earth because the ancestors were displeased with the conduct of their living successors. Diviners determined the cause of the misfortune, and a council of those concerned, men and women met and offered a sacrifice to propitiate the ancestors.

#### WAR SONG

*Wife of Nkodo Embolo, wife of Zoa Anaba, whose maternal uncle is Ondoo  
 Akumu,  
 Come, help us.  
 The enemy gathers in large numbers and small,  
 War will break out.  
 Come, help us.  
 My children, bring guns and all your arms and come.  
 Will our brother Owona Ada be left to die  
 like a pig?*

Traditional Beti warfare was largely feuding with other Beti groups. Bands of combatants could range from twenty to one hundred participants, usually com-

posed of kinsmen or neighbors. The use of European rifles, or those made by coastal tribes, was fairly widespread by the late nineteenth century.

#### ATANGANA NTSAMA, THE WAR IS OVER

*Atangana Ntsama, the war is over...  
Hé! Atangana Ntsama, the war is over!  
The cannon are broken,  
Go tell it to the son of Ndono Edoa,  
To the great man who is the son of Ndono Edoa,  
Run quickly, why do you languish there?  
All you Ewondo, come and run quickly,  
Command run quickly, brothers;  
Go tell it to Mindill Ebulu, son of Ndono Edoa.  
How is it that you would like me to leave so many goods behind?  
Hé! They will surprise you in your greed!  
Such richness. I should take some!  
You others, move off, what are you doing there?  
Friend, there were as many goods as in a market;  
Friend, we have marched through all of that without taking anything!*

This is a song the Beti women sang at the end of World War I. Charles Atangana, (Atangana Ntsama in the song) was a Beti headman whom the Germans named *Überhaupting*, or Chief of all the Beti, shortly before the war broke out. He is also referred to as Mindill Ebulu, or the man whose house is so large that it had a roof divided into nine sections instead of the two sections of an ordinary dwelling. (Mindill=roof sections in Ewondo; Ebulu=nine, a number with powers above all numbers).

On January 1, 1916, Atangana and seventy-two other chiefs, several thousand Beti, and the Germans began a two-month exodus to Equatorial Guinea. This song announces the end of the war. It also relates an incident which took place on the march: some of the women wished to seize the departing Germans' goods, which they compared to those in a market; but others urged the women to leave the goods and march south without them.

#### MY MOTHER, DO NOT CRY FOR ME

The child sings this song to its mother shortly before its death.

*Do not bury me in a dunghill,  
For there people pour anything,  
Leave anything,  
Throw anything.  
Do not bury me in the courtyard,  
For there anyone can sit,  
Do not bury me under the footpath,  
Where anyone can pass.  
Do not bury me in the forest,  
Where there is too much noise,  
Where people cut anything,  
Where they hack trees down,  
Bury me among the raffia grass*

*For there the frogs will cry,  
The frogs will cry a lot...  
My mother, do not cry!*

Death was no stranger to the rainforest. The average life expectancy was under forty years, and infant mortality was high. Consequently, many Beti songs deal with death, and some of them show a great dignity and stoicism. The child's plea against an inconsequential burial is not far-fetched, because funeral rites among the Beti were usually limited to elders.

#### THE PYGMIES KILLED MBARGA NSUDU

*The Pygmies have killed Mbarga Nsudu,  
And with our spears we bat his head out,  
And make a mosquito net of his small intestine;  
His nose will serve us as a whistle,  
His eyes are mirrors for us,  
And his teeth our combs;  
The Pygmies have killed Mbarga Nsudu.*

This song is sung by the chimpanzees in the rainforest who have a cynical joke about the fact that the Pygmies have killed a certain Mbarga Nsudu. The Pygmies were the original inhabitants of the part of central Cameroon into which the Beti eventually migrated, and were renowned for their ability to move through the rainforest undetected. Chimpanzees and gorillas figure in many Beti songs and proverbs, usually as symbols of strength or age.

By Frederick QUINN

#### THE NEW YORK HILTON At Rockefeller Center

FREDERICK QUINN holds a doctorate in history from the University of California at Los Angeles, where his thesis was on 'changes in Beti Society, 1887-1960'. He was public AFFAIRS OFFICER AT THE AMERICAN EMBASSY in YAOUNDE FROM 1966 to 1968, AND HAS PUBLISHED ON THE BETI in *Abbia, Tarigh, Cahier des Etudes Africaines, Africa, African Art*, and elsewhere, and is currently writing a book on the French Overseas Empire 1500-1900. He and his wife who is also a historian, live in Chevy Chase, Md.

1. SMALL ARMADILLO. 2. MAN SITTING BY A RIVER BANK. 3. A CHIEF: RECOGNIZABLE BY HIS POSTURE. 4. MAN WITH A GUN HUNTING MONKEYS. 5. MAN AND WOMAN CHATTING. 6. WOMAN WEARING LOINCLOTH. 7. HAWK KILLING FISH. 8. POLICEMAN WITH BAYONET. 9. WILD CATS. 10. GORILLA. 11. RAVEN. 12. SIX MONKEYS. 13. BIRD. 14. ANTELOPE. 15. BIRD OF PREY. 16. CHICKEN NESTING ON EGG. 17. LEOPARD. 18. FISH. 19. ANTELOPE RESTING PLACE. 20. DOG. 21. BIRD OF PREY. 22. BAT. 23. TWO BIRDS. 24. RAT. 25. LEOPARD WITH RAT. 26. FISH. 26. MAN DANCING. 27. TWO WOMEN CHATTING. 28. TWO PEOPLE IN A RAFFIA TREE. 29. TREE. 30. FOUR FISH. 31. THREE MEN WITH WINE CONTAINER. 34. WOMAN WITH RIFLE AND BAYONET. 33. CALABASH PALM WINE CONTAINER. 34. WOMAN CATCHING FISH. 35. CHIMPANZEE. 36. MAN WITH IVORY TUSK. 37. CALABASH WITH TWO HOLES, FORMERLY USED AS AN INSTRUMENT. 38. DONKEY CARRYING SUITCASE. 39. MAN PLAYING MUSICAL INSTRUMENT.





**This article is Copyright and Distributed under the following license**



**Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike  
CC BY-NC-SA**

This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon your work non-commercially, as long as they credit you and license their new creations under the identical terms.

[View License Deed](#) | [View Legal Code](#)

**Cet article est protégé par le droit d'auteur et distribué sous la licence suivante**



**Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation  
Commerciale - Partage dans les Mêmes  
Conditions CC BY-NC-SA**

Cette licence permet aux autres de remixier, arranger, et adapter votre œuvre à des fins non commerciales tant qu'on vous crédite en citant votre nom et que les nouvelles œuvres sont diffusées selon les mêmes conditions.

[Voir le Résumé Explicatif](#) | [Voir le Code Juridique](#)

### **Copyright and Take Down notice**

The digitized version of Abbia seeks to honour the original intentions of the paper publication. We continue to publish under the patronage of the Ministry of Arts and Culture: permission for this was given by the minister of Arts and Culture on 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/.. It has not proved possible to track down the surviving authors so we are making the material available under a more restrictive noncommercial CC license. We have setup a takedown policy to accommodate this. More details are available from [here](#).

La version numérisée d'Abbia vise à honorer les intentions originales de la publication sur papier. Nous continuons à publier sous le patronage du Ministère des Arts et de la Culture: permission a été donné par le ministre le 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/. Il n'a pas été possible de retrouver les auteurs survivants, c'est pourquoi nous rendons le matériel disponible sous une licence CC non commerciale plus restrictive. Nous avons mis en place une politique de démantèlement pour y faire face. Plus de détails sont disponibles [ici](#).