

# A Masterwork that Sheds Tears ... and Light

## A Complementary Study of a Fang Ancestral Head

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with Marc Ghysels  
translated by Rachel Pearlman



(this page and opposite)  
**1a-c** Fang head, Gabon  
III.C.7400, Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel (Switzerland)  
Acquired from Father Henri Trilles in 1902  
PHOTOS HUGHES DUBOIS, PARIS AND BRUSSELS, 1991

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Fang ancestral sculpture of Equatorial Africa figured among the most emblematic and esteemed genres of African art. These anthropomorphic effigies, with an often haphazardly oozing black patina, of upright posture and subtle craftsmanship, were mounted on sewn-bark relic boxes containing the remains, including the skulls, of lineal ancestors. Every family had one or more. Honored and often “consulted” during rites of propitiation or of divination, these sculptures and the skulls they magically protected constituted the basic wealth of the Fang peoples of the past, a source of welfare, strength, and social power. Who among African art lovers today does not know the Fang reliquary head at the Neuchâtel Musée d'ethnographie<sup>1</sup> (MEN), Head III.C.7400 (Fig. 1), the famous *byeri* that “cries”, so often exhibited and written about? Paradoxically, for a long time the object's very familiarity led to neglect of the carefully preserved archives that accompanied it over a century ago. In 2005, on the occasion of the MEN's centennial, the staff took action to complete the study of this exceptional object by means of state-of-the art technology, particularly physiochemical analyses. The results, which provided surprising revelations, make possible both an improved approach to the piece itself and a more nuanced stylistic classification of Fang sculptural art.

### FANG OBJECTS OBSERVED *IN SITU* IN GABON BEFORE 1900

The first sculptures collected by Europeans in Gabon were statues of the Fang peoples, or rather the “Pahouins”, as they were called at the time. The collectors were the French naturalist Alfred Marche and the Marquis de Compiègne, who had gone off to explore the Ogooué basin, supposedly a gateway to East Africa. These sculptures can be seen in an engraving (Fig. 2) on

the title page of volume II of their 1875 work *L'Afrique équatoriale: Okanda, Bangouens, Osyéba*. In particular, a “*déesse pahouine*” [Pahouin goddess] of Betsi Fang workmanship (Fig. 3), features a crested coiffure extending down the back of the neck and large, protruding breasts, with a light-brown patina. The object was first received as a gift by one of the expedition sponsors, Mr. Pilastre, a merchant in tropical products at Le Havre. Two somewhat larger statues with round heads, apparently forming a couple, are less representative in structure. They were also collected in the same region and sent to Mr. Bouvier, a naturalist from the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de Paris, who was interested in the activities of explorers.

Diverse Gabonese oral traditions report that, at the time of the first European exploration of Central Africa, the Fang were feared by all neighboring non-Fang peoples, including the Seki, Mpongwe, Benga, and Kele, and were still not very well known to outsiders. Paul Du Chaillu, whose expeditions in 1855 and 1865 made him the first explorer to have traveled into the Gabonese interior to any significant extent, had first reconnoitered to the north of Libreville<sup>2</sup> in the then-unknown region of the Muni estuary and the Monts-de-Cristal foothills. The young French-American learned the Myènè language around 1848 during his adolescence in Libreville, where his father managed a business firm. He was the first to encounter the vanguard culture of the Fang peoples, then at the end of their migration toward the ocean. He stayed a few days in “Fan” and “Osheba” villages (among peoples also known as Okak and Maké Fang) and went home both fascinated and appalled. In fact, having been warned and “conditioned” by

the Mpongwe from the coast, who considered the Fang peoples savage warriors, he largely misjudged what he observed—particularly from the Ngil or Melan cult sites—and was convinced of the Fang’s anthropophagy. Despite the fact that the consensus of other explorers in the second half of the nineteenth century did not in any way confirm Du Chaillu’s outrageous assertions, for more than half a century suspicion of the Fang peoples and their customs endured—particularly regarding their ancestral cult and the preservation of human skulls.

From the start of the twentieth century, northern Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and South Cameroon were traveled by colonial officers, missionaries, doctors, and the first forest exploiters, all more or less interested in the opportunity to collect “souvenirs”: assegais, headgear, cutlasses, stools, everyday implements, ornaments, and sometimes masks and sculpture. The artifacts that reached Paris between 1900–1910 attracted the attention of secondhand-goods dealers of colonial souvenirs, then of artists or other avant-garde intellectuals; as we know, interest in African art expanded during this period, as evidenced in Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik* (1920). During WWI, several military operations took place on Fang territory, in zones under both German and French influence. The intermixing of populations consequent to these events and the setting up of vast forestry territories of the Woleu-Ntem (northern Gabon) triggered relative social disorganization and thus less vigilance over ritual objects that had previously been hidden carefully from foreign eyes. Collecting Fang art objects, at least antiques, reached its peak between 1920–1925.





(this page, l-r)

**2** Sculptures collected by Alfred Marche and Marquis de Compiègne during their journey in Gabon in 1873.

PHOTO: DE COMPIÈGNE 1875:FRONTISPIECE

**3** “Déesse pahouine” of Fang Betsi workmanship, 29 cm (11½”), collected in 1873 in Ogooué Valley by Marche and de Compiègne, ex-Pilastre collection, Le Havre.

PHOTO: ARCHIVES, SOTHEBY'S NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 14, 2003.

(opposite)

**4** Chief from Mount Tembo, sources of Ntem and Woleu Rivers, before 1901

PHOTO: HENRI TRILLES © MEN

#### FATHER TRILLES AND THE GABONESE FANG PEOPLES IN 1900: AN AMBIVALENT CONFRONTATION

Henri-Louis-Marie-Paul Trilles (1866–1949) took his vows in the Missions africaines de la Congrégation des Pères du Saint-Esprit et du Saint-Cœur de Marie and was sent off to the “French Congo” in 1892. Newly arrived in Libreville, he devoted his linguistic training to the Fang and Myènè dialects. Shortly afterward, assigned to the Donghila Mission on the Gabon estuary, the young Father Trilles consecrated his pastoral action in the Fang areas around Libreville and its hinterlands (near Mondah Bay to the north and the Como and Remboué Rivers to the southeast). Tirelessly, on foot and by pirogue, from 1893 to 1898 Father Trilles crossed the Fang lands—those of the Betsi on the east, and of the Maké and the Okak on the north—quickly becoming a connoisseur of Fang customs despite sacerdotal functions that often led him to misunderstand what he observed.

In 1899, Mgr LeRoy, Father Superior of the Gabonese Spiritains, chose Father Trilles to take part in an exploration expedition precisely in Fang country, from the Atlantic coast (near Bata to the Rio Muni) as far as the Cameroon borders and the Djah valley, as columnist and guarantor of eventual territorial agreements with the local chiefs, at a time when the region was in dispute among the Germans, the Spanish, and the French. Father Trilles was chosen for his knowledge of Fang dialects and customs, and also because he was an experienced and robust bushman. He thus made his way along with his companions from August 1899 to late March 1901 through Fang villages where nary a European had ventured before. Trilles was in charge of plotting the itineraries and drawing up geographical sketches of known areas, and he also took photographs (Fig. 4)—an amazing exploit in 1900, considering the fragile and burdensome equipment and pictures printed on glass

plates that needed protection during transport by backpack and unstable pirogues for months on end.

His writings after returning from Gabon in 1907 abound in information and observations from those years. No doubt he also collected many artifacts from these isolated villages, as others had done, to bring home as “souvenirs” or “evidence” of the astonishing life led in Africa. After 1902, Father Trilles wrote more than he traveled “in the bush.” From his notes, he edited a series of articles for the *Les Missions catholiques* review (Lyon) during 1902 and 1903, describing the trek between Bata and the Djah valley and sharing many firsthand ethnographical observations, which he used again in 1935 for his book *Mille lieues dans l'inconnu: en pleine forêt équatoriale chez les Fangs anthropophages* [One thousand leagues in the unknown: in the depths of the equatorial forest with the anthropophagic Fang peoples]. After 1910, Trilles worked on a memoir of ethnographic character: *Quinze années au Congo français (chez les Fang)* [Fifteen years in the French Congo (with the Fang peoples)], published in 1912. In chapters 11 and 12 he reports what he was able to see and understand of Fang socioreligious customs, the *byeri* ancestral cultic rites, and those of the fearsome Ngil.

#### FATHER TRILLES'S OBJECTS AT THE MEN

Despite the lack of formal documentation, did Trilles perhaps “collect” the reliquary head from an inner village during his trek between 1899 and 1901? It is more likely that the effigy was tendered as penance by a newly converted Fang within the missionary-oriented zone of the Donghila Mission between 1893 and 1898. Whatever the circumstances, when Trilles returned to France in Spring 1901, he took the sculpture with him, along with numerous other ethnographic objects and even some skulls.



When and under what circumstances did Father Trilles and Charles Knapp, subcurator of the Neuchâtel ethnographic collections, make contact? There too, for lack of archives, we must make a few suppositions. It is more than plausible to evoke the *Société neuchâteloise de géographie* [Neuchâtel Geography Society, NGS], of which Knapp was the active library archivist for thirty-six years, from its foundation in 1885. At the start of the twentieth century, Trilles's publications were referenced in the bibliography of the NGS's *Bulletin* and a future contribution was announced. In 1901, he was appointed as a correspondent-member (no. 53 on the register). In addition to appealing for *Bulletin* articles and lectures for the NGS, Knapp rarely missed an opportunity to fill the display cases of the museum section under his charge. On June 28, 1901, "C. Knapp, Prof Conservateur du Musée ethnographique" requested from the "Département fédéral des péages" in Bern an exemption from entry rights taxation for "une caisse renfermant des objets ethnographiques des îles Salomon" [a container of ethnographic objects from the Solomon Islands] as well as for a hundred "objets pahouins" privately sent from France by Trilles.<sup>3</sup> Previous contact and a certain conviviality between Father Trilles and Charles Knapp is confirmed by a letter dated July 2, 1901, to the "Reverend Father" in Tours, only then requesting a valuation of his collection.<sup>4</sup>

When Trilles came to Neuchâtel to give lectures the next year, the Society paid 200 francs in *francs-or* (which at that time corresponded to €680 or US\$840 today) for the ninety-nine pieces on the Spiritan Father's list, a purchase very briefly mentioned in the 1902 *Report* (Fig. 5a-b).<sup>5</sup> Beginning in 1905, the *Bulletin* published a series of contributions on the topics of the Fang and their skulls by Father Trilles (1905),<sup>6</sup> Lausanne University professor Dr. Alexandre Schenk (1905, 1909–1910), and Geneva University professor Eugène Pittard (1908). Schenk's 1909–1910 essay is illustrated by a full facial view and profile of Head III.C.7400, photographed on a glass plate, where Father Trilles's tiny label with blue edges is still visible in the middle of its forehead (Fig. 6).

For the 1910 Brussels Universal Exhibition (Figs. 7–8), Trilles continued to seek out skulls, along with artifacts, among which the *byeri* head, displayed above a Fang mask, is recognizable from a photograph at the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum's stall. This participation brought distinction to the Museum, in which Knapp expressed great pride.<sup>7</sup> The same photograph from the BNGS was published by Arnold Van Gennep in his essay for the ambitious *Revue Suisse d'Ethnographie et d'Art comparé* (1914).<sup>8</sup> His caption to display cases 13 and 16 perhaps explains the origin of future errors regarding the head: "Tête sculptée fang surmontant un coffre d'écorce renfermant des crânes d'ancêtres" [Fang carved head on top of a box containing ancestral skulls] (1914:67, 69). For the 1930s revised presentation of the "Gabon" display case (Fig. 9), the skulls and the reliquary head were not dissociated, and this remained the practice for a long time to come.

#### MEN FANG HEAD IN THE EXHIBITIONS

Until after WWII, more interest was shown in the skulls than the wooden head. The general European public (as opposed to its artists, intellectuals, and connoisseurs) in the early twentieth century was far more fascinated by human relics—which reminded them of the relics of Christian saints—than by "primitive" wooden sculpture. Skulls were also of scientific interest during this period, when physical anthropology was especially in the fore. After WWII, however, the piece gradually gained its own reputation; like the Mona Lisa for the Louvre, the Fang head became one of the emblematic objects of the Neuchâtel Museum, one century after being "collected" from the field. The head appeared in several temporary exhibits both at the museum itself and elsewhere, and was published many times. In the 1960s, during the exhibition "Parures et bijoux dans le monde" [Ornaments and jewelry of the world] (Gabus 1961:41, 1962:27), by a sort of ethnographic hypercorrection, the carved head was driven into the disintegrated bottom of an overturned cylindrical bark box (Fig. 10), one that had nothing to with the original which the effigy had first protected. Father Trilles expressly indicated in 1901 that the head was no longer associated with any box: Due to lack of preservation, the one containing the skulls had decayed.

According to Raponda-Walker and Sillans (1962:316), the relic boxes were generally crafted with the bark of young *Olex viridis Oliver*, a common palm tree of the Gabonese forest, called *ekobe* by the Fang peoples. Its rough, grey bark had a strong characteristic smell of garlic. The bottom and lid were of light wood, held in place by rattan fibers on the circular side, itself made of one rolled and tied piece. Nevertheless, this true-life chimera endured to the time of the exhibit "175 ans d'ethnographie à Neuchâtel" (Gabus 1967:168) in 1967 and sometimes appears as a misleading reference in other catalogs and publications (e.g., Perrois 1972, 1997:207) or is still sought after, as heads-with-boxes are scarce today.

Its renown from then on widespread, Trilles's carved head was requested for the Fang exhibit at the Dapper Foundation, Paris (1991–1992), then figured in "Byeri Fang: sculptures d'ancêtres en Afrique" [Fang *byeri*: African ancestral sculpture] at the Musée des Arts Africains, Océaniens et Amérindiens de Marseille (1992), before leaving on a long tour in the United States with the exhibition "Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals," orga-

## BEYOND APPEARANCES—WHEN PHYSICS AND CHEMISTRY SHED LIGHT ON ART HISTORY AND ETHNOLOGY

The Fang exhibit at the Dapper Museum in 1991 had brought to light by careful analysis that certain Fang pieces were sometimes “charged”, i.e., contained exogenous components (metal/bone fragments) invisible without the help of X-rays. In 1997, during its sojourn in Bordeaux, Head III.C.7400 was X-rayed, revealing a zone of stronger material density behind the eyes, unexplained at the time.

A chemical analysis was also run on the famous “tears” that exude from the head, more or less profusely, when transported, an odd and ever-fascinating phenomenon. For a hundred-some years, in fact, the head has exuded—particularly under the eyes, the chin, and at the tip of the braids—a highly viscous, sticky brownish-yellow liquid with reddish highlights. According to the preliminary results of the analysis from the Institut Européen de l’Environnement de Bordeaux, made concurrently with the X-rays, the liquid is totally soluble in standard organic solvents but not at all in water, which proves its lipophilic character. Contrary to what was intuitively believed, it was not possible experimentally to prove that a fluidity increase linked with temperature could explain the “tears” phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

In 2005, Professor Raphael Tabacchi of Neuchâtel University undertook complementary studies on two different samples. The conclusions of these investigations tend to confirm the first results:

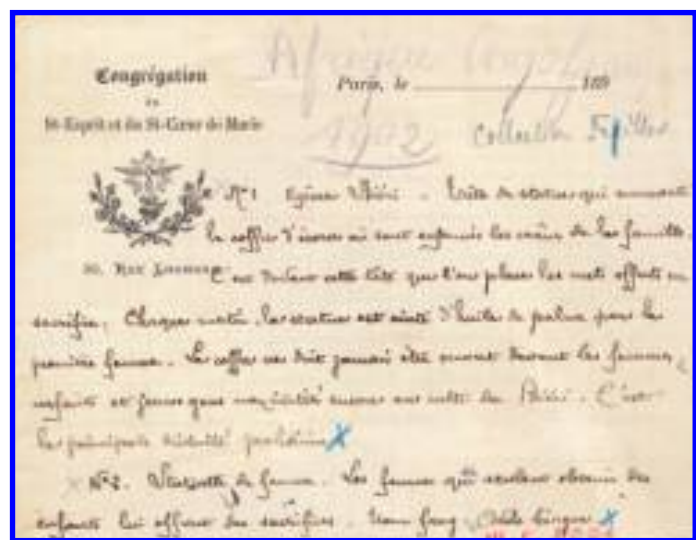
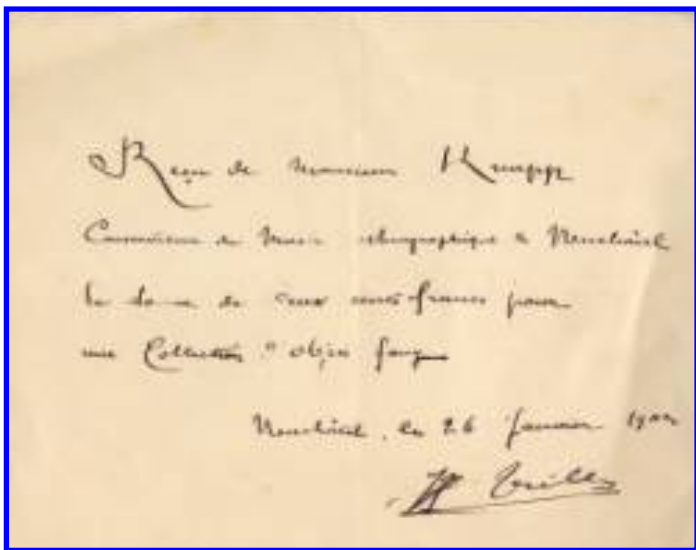
The Nuclear Magnetic Resonance spectra ( $H^1$ -NMR, in acetone solvent) show typical signals in the methyl, methylene, methylene near to carbonyl function, so as ethylenic protons. Several long saturated and unsaturated aliphatic chains are present. The direct analysis by mass spectrometry (APCI+ ionization) and by GC-MS (EI ionization) confirms the presence of fatty acids  $C_{16}$  –  $C_{18}$  issued from triglycerides. The relative abundance (%) of the fatty acids is as follow (on an average):

C9: nonanoic	1.35%
C12: lauric	2%
C14: myristic	5.35%
C16: palmitic	16.3%
C18: stearic	5.5%
C18:1 oleic	25.4%
C18:2 linoleic	15.1%
C18:2 other	23.6%
C18:3 linolenic	5.2%

These components are typical constituents of fresh vegetable oils (except C9).

Bibliographical data regarding the composition of palm oil indicate about 44% palmitic acid, 4.5% stearic acid, 40% oleic acid and 10% linoleic acid. Important differences and essentially the presence of a second C18:2 isomer, are observed when comparing with the obtained analytical results. On a purely chemical point of view, one cannot thus state that the head has been treated, only, with pure palm oil.

In such a case, we are probably in presence of an oil (or a mixture of oils), which has very slowly polymerized at open air during the time, remaining flexible, which is degrading and partially depolymerised now. It is a known phenomenon involving radical reactions which cannot be controlled. Nevertheless, one notes the presence of a high quantity of insaturated fatty C18:2 acids (Kaehr 2006:173).<sup>12</sup>



5a Receipt signed by Father Trilles, January 26, 1902.

5b Beginning of the autographic list by Father Trilles, annotated and checked by C. Knapp, subcurator of the Musée d’Ethnographie de Neuchâtel

PHOTO: © ARCHIVES MEN

nized by the Museum for African Art, New York (1993–1995);<sup>9</sup> hardly back from America, it joined the huge exhibit “*Lesprit de la forêt, Terres du Gabon*” [The spirit of the forest, Gabonese lands] at the Musée d’Aquitaine de Bordeaux (1997–1998) and, selected by Harald Szeeman, at last occupied a place of honor in the Swiss National Bank’s exhibit “*Argent et valeur*” [Money and Value] at the Swiss National “Expo 02” (2002). This made it possible for L. Perrois to ascertain that the reliquary head at the Neuchâtel Musée d’ethnographie is one of the two or three world references regarding Fang sculpture of Equatorial Africa, along with the one at the Metropolitan Museum of New York (former Paul Guillaume then Jacob Epstein collections).<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, we must bring together these physiochemical observations with definite botanic and ethnographic data. According to Raponda-Walker and Sillans (1962:316–17), the Fang peoples traditionally used a siccative (drying) oil with properties highly analogous to those of linseed oil, drawn from the seed of a tree called *añgek*, botanic name *Ongokea gore* (Hua) Engl., from the Olacaceae family. From both the 1999 and 2005 analyses, which were strictly independent of each other, and these ethnobotanical comments, we can thus ascertain that in addition to palm oil as binder, other components were found within the oleoresinous coating used by Fang artists to darken the yellowish wood of the upper surfaces: charcoal powder (coloring), copal resin (*Copaifera*, a coloring and fixative), and part of the siccative *añgek* seed oil specially reserved to harden the applied varnish.

We can perhaps suppose that the Neuchâtel Fang head originally had an overall patina that stayed more or less lacquered and dry for decades. Chemical alteration due to the ageing of the components of the oleoresinous “smear” would thus explain the running “tears” when the sculpture is moved or exposed to ambient air (rather than when exposed to heat); the phenomenon is thus more of mechanical than thermal nature.

#### NEUCHÂTEL FANG HEAD SCANPROOFED

The choice in 2005 of the MEN’s carved head by the French/German educational television channel Arte as a subject for its TV film series *Arts du mythe* prompted new research, looking at the sculpture even more carefully and asking questions never before dealt with, as well as redoing certain analyses by more modern techniques. The piece was taken to Brussels and scanned by Dr. Marc Ghysels on October 22, 2005, and the ensuing results (sidebar, pp. 50–51) proved extremely revealing in several ways.

The CT scan study confirmed what was already visible to the naked eye: the existence of a cavity under the chin in close contact with the front of the mouth and extending even further upwards, and of a horizontal perforation at the top of the coiffure, bringing to mind the suspension hole in the handle of forge bellows. If the first cavity had perhaps been meant for receiving a magic “charge”, the second provided a place to fix the tuft of feathers with which each *eyema byeri* was coiffed. The scan study also revealed that the head and its support, made of a single piece of wood, was carved from the vertical axis of the tree trunk; the heart of the log would have been about 10mm in front of the nose. Aside from some tunnels caused by wood-eating insects, the wood presents no other defects.

The scan showed heavy impregnation by an oily liquid both from superficial manual application and simple passive capillarity action. The depth of impregnation varies depending on location, as some places appear to have received preferential application (face, coiffure, and side braids). The original depth of the oily penetration could be clearly seen by observation from various viewing angles; this viewing also revealed a recessed line that is perhaps linked to the mysterious “sweating” that has lasted so long (as with the recurring drop under the chin), which incidentally leads one to wonder how long the sculpture will continue to “cry”.

However, the most intriguing discovery is probably the metallic fragments, wholly unsuspected upon direct observation: not



6 The first publication of the Fang Head, Gabon, Ill. C.7400, in 1909, from glass photographic plate in the *Bulletin de la Société neuchâteloise de Géographie* vol. 20, Neuchâtel, 1909–1910. The work still carries very obviously, in the middle of the forehead, the small label of identification affixed by Father Trilles.  
PHOTO: © ARCHIVES MEN

only two metallic pins localized within the prolongation to the rear of the eyes (already somewhat distinguishable in the 1997 X-ray), but new components hidden by the thick facial patina, namely two decorative triangular patterns at the ears. Further analysis detected metallic fragments at the cheeks, most probably linked to decorative plates, nailed or otherwise fastened and long since lost. Two thin metallic strips, finely crimped, must have formerly extended over the face in a V shape, from the ears horizontally to the eyes and from the ears down to the corners of the lips (see p. 51). Such decorative patterns are known in Fang statuary, both in Cameroon and Gabon, but are particularly rare on the heads alone (Perrois 2006:Fig. 5 and p. 128). And, under the oozing patina, the surface of the wood is slightly rougher in those areas.

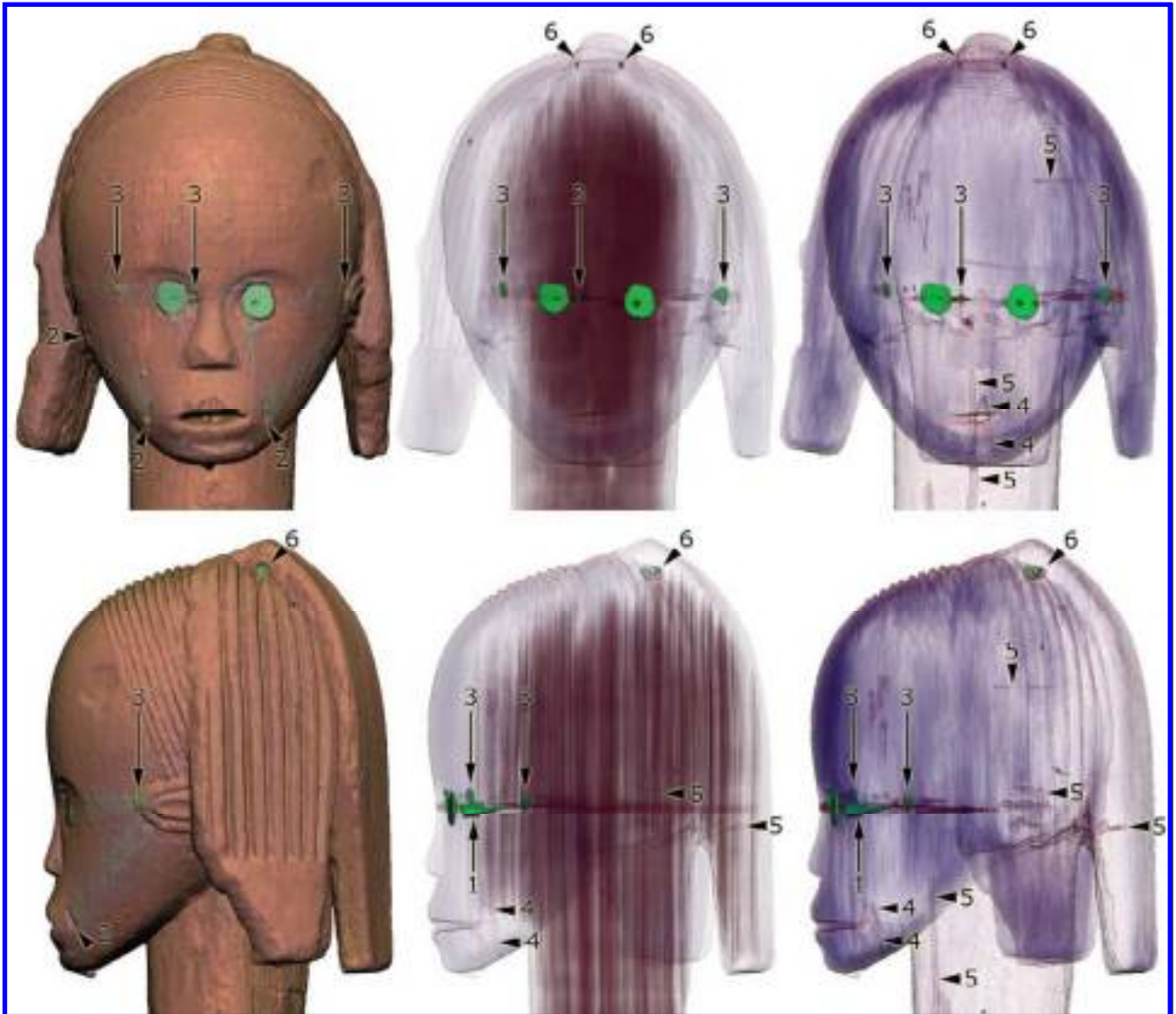
Lastly, the empty space behind the mirror fragments that currently constitute the eyes has triggered more questions. If the piece is antique, which is manifestly the case, the mirrors could only be a secondary, relatively recent addition that must have replaced metallic rings that depict the eyes, a more traditional and ancient component of which numerous examples exist in reference collections. A subsequent, more thorough analysis of the tomographies has in fact confirmed the existence of discrete metallic traces at the eye sockets, explaining the presence of the residual metallic pins, proven relics of the anchor nails of the original discs.

Concurrently, identification of the wood was made by discrete sampling, some fragments of which were also sent to the ETH Laboratory, Zurich, for carbon dating. Through comparison with

## A Tomodensitometric Analysis by X-ray Scanner

**Subject:** according to the owner's statement (Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel, Switzerland - Inv. III.C.7400):  
Fang reliquary head (*eyema o byeri*), Gabon.  
Wood with an oozing patina (palm oil, resin, charcoal) - 19th century.  
Height: 272 mm (476 mm with the base) - Width: 183 mm - Depth: 170 mm.

**Objective:** General assessment.



**Observations:** The scan highlighted the following features:

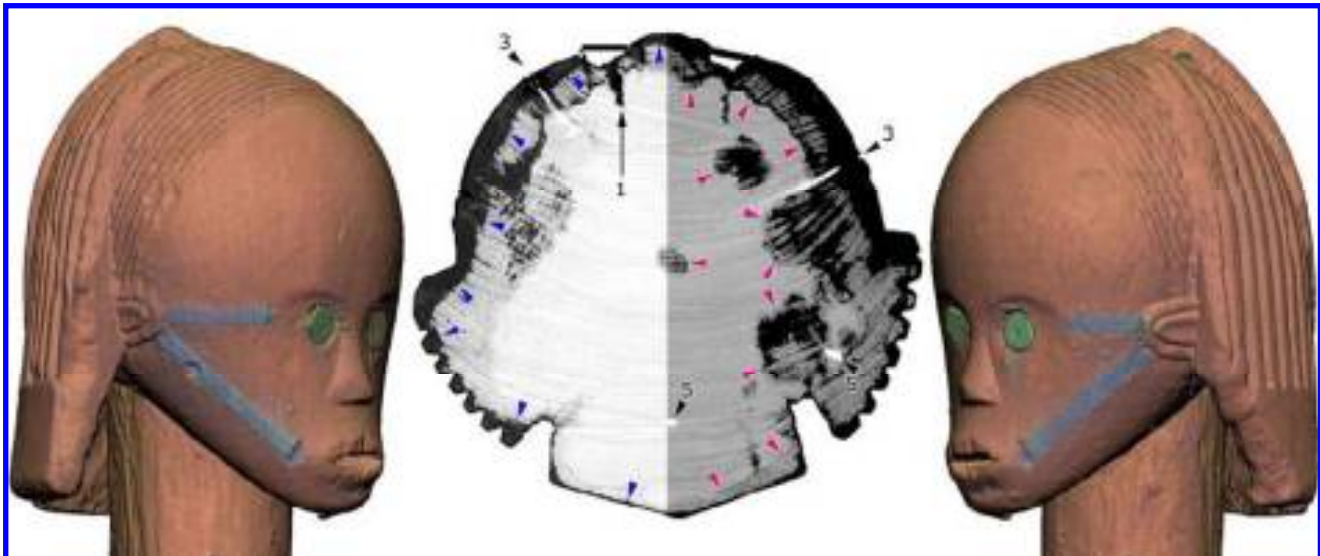
- this monoxyulous head has been carved from an upright billet of a density around minus 875 Hounsfield units [HU]; the heart of the log is about 10 mm in front of the tip of the nose, thus avoiding splitting as the wood dries;
- in general, the wood is largely impregnated by an organic fluid (palm oil) to a depth of several millimeters, increasing the density of the wood to plus 100 HU;
- more particularly, the face, hairstyle and side braids are intensely impregnated with oil to a maximum depth of 15 mm (see blue arrows), and more lightly to a depth of 50 mm (minus 500 UH, pink arrows); this is probably due both to manual

Fang reliquary head, Gabon

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application of oil to the surface (anointing) and to passive impregnation by capillarity;

- the central braid and the back of the neck are only very superficially impregnated;
- behind the circular mirrors forming the eyes (16 mm in diameter) there are two empty cavities, 5 mm deep, into which metal pins have been driven, the longer of which, on the left, measures 23 mm (1);
- faint metallic impregnations can be detected in strips running horizontally from the ears to the eyes and diagonally from the ears to the corners of the lips; they show that the head was once decorated with metal motifs (see simulations below), 8 to 10 mm wide, attached by nails which have left holes (2) and fragments of metal buried in the wood (3);
- the back of the mouth cavity is connected to a vertical drill hole, 11 mm in diameter (4), piercing the underside of the jaw and able to contain an animation device;
- a few tunnels, 3 to 4 mm in diameter (5), bored by wood-eating insects, have no impact whatsoever on the sculpture's solidity;
- a tunnel, 6 mm in diameter, has been drilled horizontally through the hair on the crown of the head and the ends have been blocked by dense plugs (6).



Conclusion:

The scan of this monoxyloous head shows:

- that the sculptor has avoided the heart wood to reduce the risk of splitting,
- the depth of the initial penetration of palm oil (see pink arrows),
- the line marking the edge of the residual oil after a century of oozing (blue arrows),
- traces of metal strips that once decorated the cheekbones and jaw,
- a tunnel giving access to the back of the mouth (perhaps to work a tongue).

*The above CT scan report answers the question set out in the objective only. It is in no way intended to certify the authenticity or age of the piece submitted for analysis.*

Dr Marc Ghysels

Appendices:

A set of computerised tomograms (1.2 mm thick) performed on a multidetector helical CT scanner: 40 axial slices, 40 frontal slices and 40 sagittal slices completed by 120 opaque and translucent projections from various angles and about twenty animated video sequences on CD-ROM.

Fang reliquary head, Gabon

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(this page, top-bottom)

7 View of the ethnographic section at the Brussels Exhibition, 1910

PHOTO: © ARCHIVES MEN

8 The exhibition diploma

PHOTO: © ARCHIVES MEN

(opposite page, l-r)

9 "Gabon" display case in the 1930s

© ARCHIVES MEN, PHOTO: THÉODORE DELACHAUX

10 Head driven into the bottom of an overturned box (III.C.2239.a-b), in a display case at the MEN. This true-life chimera endured to the time of the exhibit "175 ans d'ethnographie à Neuchâtel" in 1967 (Gabus 1967:168, fig. 5)

© ARCHIVES MEN, PHOTO: WALTER HUGENTOBLER



$^{14}\text{C}$ -AMS dating	$\delta^{13}\text{C}[o/oo]$	calib. age [BC/AD]
ETH-31535	235 ± 40 -	25.8 ± 1.1
		AD 1521–1584 (10.9 %)
		AD 1625–1686 (43.4 %)
		AD 1731–1809 (38.5 %)
		AD 1924–1948 (7.2 %)

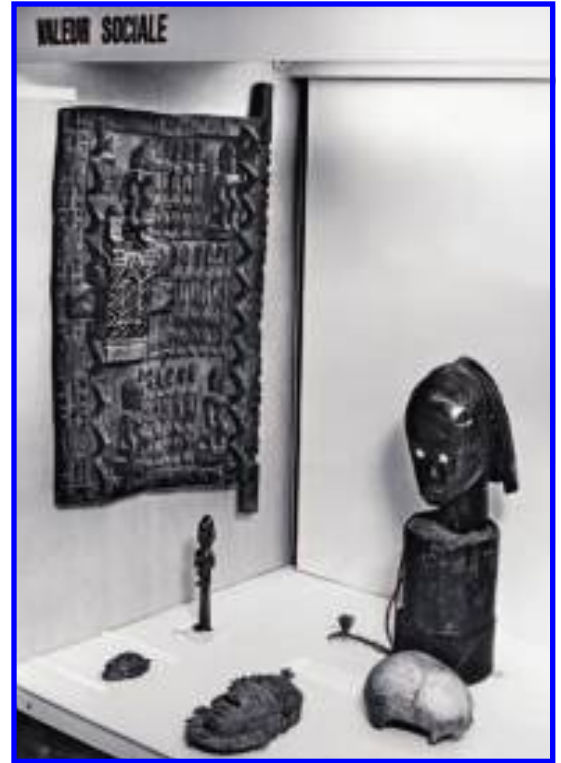
This great age explains both the disappearance of the metallic plates that adorned the cheeks (only a few anchor holes showed up on the scan) and some surface changes such as the accidental breaking of the lower part of the left braid, which became almost imperceptible over time under the thick patina, and finally, the replacement of the metallic eyes by mirror fragments. The lengthy time span would also be the origin of the oily sudation phenomenon, by degradation of the original oleoresinous compound. Other damage can be explained by different causes: As with many Fang pieces, this one is eroded around the mouth, probably deliberately. Indeed, it was usual that the officiants of the *byeri* took fine chips from the wood image likeness in order to reinforce by empathy the power of magic "drugs".<sup>12</sup>

#### HEADS AND STATUES: WHICH CAME FIRST ?

Günter Tessmann "had already suggested that solo heads must be an *initial expression* of ancestor worship, the carved wood being a direct representation of the skull of the *byeri*, which must have preceded the carving of more elaborate figures, busts or full-length statuettes" (Perrois 2006:29). John McKesson revived this theory (1987:7-21) by asserting that the heads-with-columnar-neck alone were the archetype of the earliest *byeri* sculptures. The American ethnologist James W. Fernandez concurred: As of 1976, he had even suggested that these columnar puppet

reference samples, Hans Beeckman, head of the Wood section of the Tervuren Museum, Belgium, identified the slices as a variety of *Alstonia* (Apocynaceae family), *Alstonia congensis* or *boonei*, a lightweight wood called *ekukh* in the Fang vernacular, known in local tradition for its medicinal properties.

The Carbon-14 dating, carried out on February 8, 2006, by Dr. Georges Bonani of the Zurich Federal Institute of Technology, Switzerland, confirmed the head's antiquity, indeed going back somewhat further than had been imagined. Four points are apparent on the graph of the result sheet, two of which must be eliminated (the most recent—impossible—and the oldest), as the probability percentage seems too weak. The remaining two medians correspond to dates of 235 ± 40 BP (counting from 1950), i.e., between the years 1675 and 1755, approximately the early eighteenth century.



heads with heart-shaped faces and rounded foreheads could have been basically of Ntumu creation, the style of the original form of all other Fang artistic expression, a sort of “proto-Ntumu style” (Fernandez and Fernandez 1976:723–46).

From this point of view, the Fang sculptors would have only gradually completed the early archetypal form—at the mercy of circumstances and successive centuries—adding arms and legs onto the columnar neck, seen as a stylized body. This probably led to the upright statuettes that travelers and other colonials observed and sometimes collected at the turn of the twentieth century. Such a development corresponds to a new actuality of embracing Fang art as a “snapshot” and not as a stylistic panorama frozen in time.

Perrois concludes, “In principle, I am not against the idea of an original Fang style, particularly attributable to the Ntumu, but I remain prudent since nothing in the tradition of the other groups, no more than in that of the Ntumu themselves, supports it” (2006:30). Furthermore, this “logic” of a linear and generalized evolution, within a particularly complex and dispersed historical-cultural framework, seems a bit overly tinged with Western Cartesianism and has little to do with traditional Central African systems of thought. On the other hand, the ethnomorphological analysis of the Fang corpus proves statistically the fact of stylistic variations, identified at least for the period at the end of the nineteenth century (Figs. 11–12; Perrois 1992); we may hope that future research here in linguistics, history and, perhaps, population genetics will tell us how they were made and differentiated, and perhaps during which periods.

In 1992, the question had already come up in *Byeri Fang, Sculptures d'ancêtres en Afrique* (Perrois 1992). The representation of the lineal ancestor by a sculptural head alone is in fact not nec-

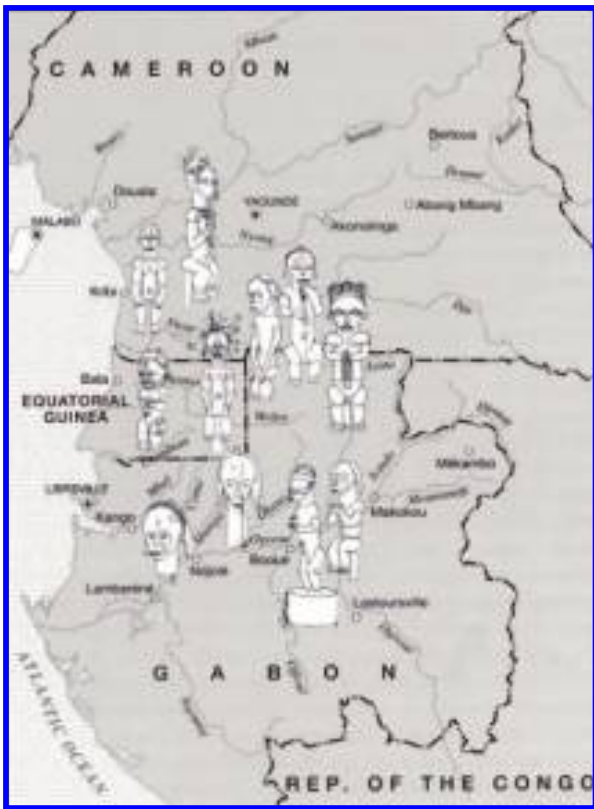
essarily the spontaneous and immediate approach one may first suppose: “In the prehistorical paleolithic art, i.e. at the beginning of ancient art, *entire bodies*, even in a rough manner, are sculptured. To isolate the head as a whole significant image, a long mental and intellectual route is to be followed so that *part* would refer to *whole*” (Perrois 1992:45).<sup>13</sup> It is thus doubtful, from the comparative data of the ancient arts of peoples without an alphabet, that the theme of the ancestral “head-alone” had actually been a “primordial” form that directly replicated in wood (and perhaps stone) preserved reliquary skulls—a “simple” expression, so to speak, that subsequently became complex. On the contrary, we could imagine that it is the specific character of the head-alone, abstractly evoking the ancestor in its entirety, which would be an outcome of thought and artistic practice together. The subtlety of certain works can have us think so.

Concerning the heads-alone, collected mostly in Gabon and to a lesser extent in eastern Rio Muni among the Betsi, Maké, and Ntumu peoples, we can see by studying museum records and other documentary sources that, from 1920 to 1930, they always coexisted with the upright statuettes. During 1904–1909, Tessimann collected both heads *and* statuettes in the different regions where he did fieldwork, in the north and center of Rio Muni. Similarly, in the Ogooué region around 1920, Pastor Fernand Grébert reproduced this dual reality by sketching what he saw in the villages: The “Byeri guardian” is smoking his pipe before a *nsekh byeri* mounted by a head-alone, with bold eyes of copper (Grébert 2003:folio 143), while one of his recently converted flock, a chief of eminent lineage, is offering him a magnificent and antique upright statuette with its reliquary as a token of his new faith (ibid., folio 197). Moreover, according to what customary logic and for what reasons would the Fang peoples have



11 Geographic distribution and reciprocal influence of Fang styles and substyles  
PHOTO: © 2006 LOUIS PERROIS

12 Works typical of Fang styles and substyles  
PHOTO: © 2006 LOUIS PERROIS



kept the heads-alone, a presumably archaic style, when—at least according to the authors cited—they had over the course of time already “improved” them by sculpting full-body statues, supposedly more symbolically complete? On this specific point, no Fang informant has come forth. In the meantime, we still maintain that these two types of expression existed in conjunction with the stylistic differentiation of the variants, without one of them (head-alone) being the actual origin of the other (upright statues), at least throughout the period when these groups were historically known. Regarding the more distant past, all hypotheses are obviously accepted ... but also with evidence.

**BETSI “BRAIDED HEADS” FROM NORTHWEST GABON: REFLECTIONS ON STYLE**

Although Tessmann had collected some heads-alone, *añgokh-nlo-byeri*, in particular among the Ntumu or the Mvae in the Rio Muni (some of which are in the Lübeck Museum today), we must take note that a few of them—according to information obtained—come from the “Fang” peoples, i.e. those formerly known as “Fang Fang” or Okak, settled to the south of the Rio Muni on the fringes of Gabon (Figs 13–14). These precious and early fieldwork references are thus consistent with the attribution of the heads to the “Fang of the South” rather than to the ensemble of the Beti-Fang groups, as John McKesson had implied in his 1987 article. Furthermore, it seems that when we can trust the geographical source by crosschecking original data, most of the heads-alone from major collections come from northwest Gabon or its close outskirts, namely the Rio Muni and the Ogooué Valley (on the left bank, including its tributaries, Como, Okano and Abanga Rivers): Father Trilles’s Fang Head III.C.7400, MEN; one from the Institution des Orphelins d’Auteuil; another from the Fund of the Congrégation des Pères du Saint-Esprit; those drawn *in situ* by F. Grébert in the Talagouga region (Grébert 2003:folio 143, 199, 256); etc. (see Laburthe-Tolra and Falgayrette-Leveau 1991, Perrois 2006). If there had been the same stylistic workmanship of carved heads among the Beti, Ngumba, or Mabéa peoples, German colonists or other travelers would have undoubtedly found them, if only occasionally. This does not then seem to be the case.

On technical, aesthetic, and symbolic levels, it is logical that the *añgokh-nlo-byeri* (“heads-alone”) resemble the heads of the *eyema-beyri* Betsi Fang upright statues, as much by their full volume as by the elaboration of their coiffures. Why would the artists have adopted other carving solutions or other ways to ornament the sculptures, when their activity was at the core of the same symbolic system? Concerning the usage of the heads, they appear to be permanently fixed to their *nsek-byeri* bark reliquary boxes (the neck extended by a columnar tenon, sometimes of quadrangular shape and driven deeply into the very midst of the relics and other “medicine”, i.e., in actual contact with the sacred); their function was especially to “safeguard magically” the family relics by protecting them from theft or sacrilegious curiosity from women, children, or visiting foreigners. The statuettes, having an overall similar role, could be detached temporarily from their reliquaries to be used from time to time as a kind of “puppet” in the liturgy of symbolic presentation of the deceased at the Melan ceremonies, the initiation rites for the young male members. Thus, within a large zone of the Fang of



**13** Fang busts and heads used in Byeri ancestor worship, collected near 1907-1909 by the German anthropologist Günter Tessmann in North-East Rio Muni region (nowadays).  
a (l-r) Fang (= Fang-Fang or Okak, south of the Rio Muni); Fang; Ntum or Mvae (= Ntumu or Mvai).

PHOTO: TESSMANN 1913:118.

**14** Ntum Head  
40cm (15¾")

Inv. n° 70-13:1, Völkerkundesammlung der Hansestadt, Lübeck.

PHOTO: LABURTHE-TOLRA AND FALGAYRETTE-LEVEAU 1991:58.



the South, at least between 1850–1920, heads and statues constituted two types of ancestral representation, much more complementary within a synchronically organized cultural experience than historically different.

Stylistically speaking, the Betsi heads alone can also be differentiated by their coiffures. We find various sizes, some of which are impressive in their monumentality, such as the one preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, measuring 35cm tall (13¾"), 46.5cm (18½") with the neck (Perrois 2006:Fig. 1 and p. 128); others are much smaller, more intimate sculptures, such as the "juvenile" MEN head measuring 26cm (10¼"); *ibid.*, Fig. 3 and p. 128), plus 22cm (8⅔") for the columnar neck and rostrum, 48cm (19") in all; or perhaps of dramatic effect, such as the head of the former Helena Rubinstein Collection, 16.5cm (6½"), 45.5 cm (18") with columnar neck (*ibid.*, Fig. 4 and p. 128). Their facial morphology is in fact recognizable everywhere, with its wide, rounded forehead shaped like the quarter of a sphere and hollow, heart-shaped face more or less triangular and elongated, softly curved near the mouth with thick, stylized lips, the eyes sometimes depicted by coffee beans, big brass discs, or pieces of mirror glued by resin.

If most of the heads have an almost-spherical volume visible at every angle, or are pear-shaped, others have been worked with a high relief technique, flattening the volume as if shortened in space, to be viewed only from the front (in the darkness of a small, smoky structure, this technique is imperceptible), which reinforces the idea that the effigy-sculptures were not used for purposes other than the static guarding of the reliquaries. On the other hand, the coiffures are quite varied: either three or five thick, stylized braids, more or less flat, falling onto the nape of the neck or along the ears in locks; or with crested "helmet" and lateral extensions recalling the shape of the *nlo-o-ngo* hairpieces worn in the past by the northern Gabonese men and women; or with a chignon knotted with motley shapes made from thin plaits (*ekoma*). Most of these effigy-sculptures have been skillfully finished with perfectly polished surfaces and thick blackish

patina —the embodiment of exceptional woodcarving craftsmanship that stems from secular tradition. Their grace commands admiration, especially if we bear in mind the harsh living conditions of these groups within the equatorial forest context, where the presence and survival of human communities can never be taken for granted.

On the morphological level of some of the most accomplished works (Perrois 1972:93, 94, 314–30, 337, 339, 340, 350), we recognize a great similarity in design, especially in the coiffures, namely those with straight braids from the Haut-Okano region or with the "transverse occipital chignon" from the Como valley in the region of the estuaries of northwest Gabon (Figs. 15–17). This leads us to think in terms of either contemporary workshops organized around sculptor-masters (*beba*, sg. *mba*), producing effigy-pieces for a whole series of lineal "customers", or of specific regional "modes" by which all the sculptors were momentarily inspired (Perrois 2001:120–39).

#### CONCLUSION

If one cannot doubt the exceptional esthetic quality of the MEN Fang *byeri* head, very often reproduced in publications dealing with the art of Gabon and presented in numerous international exhibitions, or its old age—attested by the museographic documentation which accompanies it—its appeal mainly lies in the fact that it has continued oozing ever since Father Trilles brought it to Europe in 1901.

The conjunction of three modern scientific analyses has started to reveal its mysteries. The wood in which the masterpiece is sculpted was determined as a variety of *Alstonia*, to no surprise. A CT scan at first pinpoints the part of the tree trunk it was taken from, making possible the deduction that this choice was not at all a random but due to technical reasons, i.e., to avoid the wood splitting as it dried up. The examination then shows the importance of the wood impregnation with a liquid, an irregular impregnation already partly absorbed. The chemical analyses of this oily liquid, separately carried out by two specialized laboratories in France and Switzerland, both conclude there is a complex mixture of substances, known through ethnobotanical fieldwork especially, with properties resembling those of flax oil, which could explain the pearling of “tears” under certain circumstances, in particular when the object is moved.

But above all, the <sup>14</sup>C dating—of course despite its relative reliability—suddenly ages the artifact more than a full century, thus pushing back its date of origin to the beginning or middle of the eighteenth century, implying—given the history of the “Fang” peoples—that it had been carried for a long time, along with the migration of the lineage owning it, from Southeast Cameroon

to the Atlantic coast of the Gabon River estuary. This manifest antiquity of a work from Equatorial Africa, where environmental conditions for conservation are the worst, leads us to understand that the head had not only been impregnated many times with vegetal oil during family rituals, but had also been retouched, so precious it has always been for its community. Thus, although it was known for a long time from standard X-rays that there was “something” behind the mirror-made eyes, it was uncertain whether it was teeth or bones.

The scanning undertaken for this study has definitively shown that these dark masses were in fact long metallic points, the oxidized traces of old nails used to fix metallic eyes (made of iron or copper disks, as proven by light metallic fragments in the orbits). These have deteriorated or broken off in the meantime, and were replaced at the end of the nineteenth century by what one sees nowadays, pupils made of mirror fragments. Identical traces remaining on the maxillary and cheekbones also reveal that the head was formerly adorned with metallic sheets, a practice preserved in South Cameroon rather than Gabon.

The thorough technical study of the Fang head of the MEN thus expanded our knowledge of the mores and skill of the sculptor artists in former times, its symbolism, the rituals encompassing it, and the ancient history of the human group to which it belonged.

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(clockwise from top)

**15** Reproductions of Fang heads in Basler 1929:pl. 41 a–b, ex-Brummer collection (now at Musée Dapper, Paris) and André Derain collection (now Barnes Foundation, Merion, USA)

PHOTO: LOUIS PERROIS

**16** “Classic” Betsi head in Basler 1929:cover, ex-Vicente Huidrobo and Paul Guillaume collections, 46.5cm (18½”) now at New York Metropolitan Museum of Art

PHOTO: LOUIS PERROIS

**17** “Classic” Betsi head (Ratton 1931), ex-Charles Ratton collection, Paris, before 1931, 28.2cm (11”).

PHOTO: ARCHIVES CHRISTIE’S NY, MAY 19, 1992, P. 69, NO. 133.

## Notes

- 1 <http://www.men.ch/>
- 2 Libreville was founded in 1849 to serve as a refuge for enslaved persons who had been freed from capture by the slave ship *Elisa*, not far from the American mission station of Baraka created in 1842 (*Journal des Missions Évangéliques* 1961: 156–62). This city was called “Libreville” from its founding (see Kaehr 1997).
- 3 Copy of letters I P° 84.
- 4 *La caisse renfermant les objets fang que vous avez adressée à notre Musée vient de me parvenir. Je l'ai déballée et en ai opéré la reconnaissance. Malheureusement, j'ai eu de la peine à identifier toutes les pièces, plusieurs n'ayant ni n° ni étiquettes, mais vous nous donnerez un supplément d'informations l'hiver prochain quand vous viendrez à Neuchâtel nous faire les conférences promises. Mon Comité a très favorablement accueilli vos offres obligeantes. Deux des pipes étaient cassées. L'accident s'est-il produit en route ? On pourra, je crois, les remettre facilement en état. Les flèches empoisonnées proviennent-elles des nains [Pygmy] ? La collection des crânes est très intéressante. Je la ferai étudier. Veuillez encore, s. v. p., me faire savoir à quel prix vous évaluez votre collection ? En attendant de vos bonnes nouvelles, veuillez agréer, Révérend Père, mes salutations et mes vœux les plus affectueux, ainsi que mes très sincères remerciements* (Copy of letters I P° 85).
- 5 The following year the museum bought a run of twelve copies, large format (50cm x 37,5cm; 19½" x 14"), glued on cardboard from negatives on glass plates. The purchase was to be completed by forty-some objects in 1904 and another twenty-some in 1907 after the clergyman's final return from Africa.
- 6 Also in offprint edition by Paul Attinger Press, the work was republished in 2002 by Henry Tourneau, Karthala Editions as *Contes et légendes fang du Gabon* [Fang legends and tales from Gabon] with the famous head on the front cover.
- 7 *Le Musée ethnographique de Neuchâtel est l'un des Musées qui, par leur participation à l'Exposition ethnographique [sic] de Bruxelles, en 1910, ont obtenu collectivement le diplôme du grand prix, la plus haute récompense dont disposait le jury de cette exposition* (Rapport annuel [...] Exercice 1911:3–4).
- 8 Also published as an offprint by Attinger Frères, éditeurs.
- 9 “Reliquary head, Fang, Gabon, wood, kaolin [?], fiber [?], palm oil, H. 9%”. The Fang reliquary cult was suppressed during the colonial period, and the bark relic boxes, which had been protected by sculpted heads and figures, were expropriated. Artists and owners consequently began to incorporate fragments of the ancestral relics into the very sculptures themselves (Fernandez 1982). Collection: Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel” (Nooter 1993:154, cat. 77).
- 10 *La tête de reliquaire du Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel est l'une des deux ou trois références mondiales en termes de sculpture des Fang d'Afrique équatoriale, avec celle du Metropolitan Museum of Art de New York (anciennes collections Paul Guillaume puis Jacob Epstein)* (Perrois 2005:257).
- 11 *dans les conditions d'expérimentation, une augmentation de la fluidité avec la température pouvant expliquer le phénomène des 'larmes'.*
- 12 Personal communication, Professor Raphaël Tabacchi, University of Neuchâtel, 2005; see also Kaehr 2006:173.
- 13 *Comme beaucoup de pièces fang, celle-ci est érodée autour de la bouche, probablement de façon volontaire: en effet, il était habituel que les officiants du byeri prélèvent sur l'image de bois de fins copeaux afin de renforcer par empathie la charge de certains 'médicaments' magiques* (Perrois 2005:258).

13 *Dans l'art préhistorique paléolithique, à l'origine de l'art, ce sont des corps entiers qui sont sculptés, même de manière fruste. Pour isoler la tête comme une image [signifiante] à part entière, il faut parcourir tout un cheminement [mental et] intellectuel tendant à rapporter la partie au tout* (Perrois 1992:45).

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