

Naming the Baga: Problems in the Identity of a Guinean Cultural Amalgamation

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Abstract: Along the coast of the Republic of Guinea, the term “Baga” has been used to cover a large amalgamation of cultural groups, always previously misinterpreted. There are five dialect groups called Baga within the Temne language group. The question raised here concerns the etymology of the name Baga, as it has evolved in juxtaposition to the name Temne in Sierra Leone. It is an attempt to parse the intricate use of language to describe the historical and hierarchical relationship between these two segments of the same group.

Résumé: Le long de la côte de la République de Guinée, le terme « Baga » a été utilisé pour recouvrir un large amalgame de groupes culturels, un phénomène toujours mal interprété auparavant. Cinq groupes dialectaux appelés « Baga » font partie du groupe linguistique « Temne ». La question soulevée ici concerne l'étymologie du nom « Baga », tel qu'il a évolué en parallèle avec le nom « Temne » en Sierra Leone. Cet article tente ainsi d'analyser l'utilisation complexe du langage pour décrire la relation historique et hiérarchique entre les deux segments d'un même groupe.

The Bagas have no king; each village is governed by the oldest of the inhabitants, who settles their disputes...They are a jovial people, and fond of drinking...The Baga never visit their neighbors, neither have they occasion to do so, for their own country produces abundance of everything requisite for the subsistence of any really temperate man. They cannot imagine that any nation is better off, and believe themselves superior in

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every respect to all others. I could not gain any information as to their ideas of the Deity...they make gods of anything that comes into their hands...¹

Ethnohistories of the Baga and Temne peoples of the Atlantic coast of Guinea and northern Sierra Leone recount a journey from the Fouta Djallon mountains in Guinée Moyenne, where they were pushed out by larger hegemonic forces, westward toward the coast where they now reside. Though they are now hundreds of miles apart, these two linguistically related peoples are very much aware of each other. The Temne are a large, politically powerful group, occupying most of the northern half of Sierra Leone, with legendary conquerors, kings, and kingdoms, as well as historically large towns, one of which became the foundation for the capital city of Freetown. The Baga occupy only a thin slice of the coastal wetlands of northern Guinea, pushed against the sea, and number approximately 40,000 over five separate dialect groups. Traditionally acephalous, disunified, marooned, and, until recently, politically invisible, they live in small, isolated villages. But they occupy a place of mystique in Temne constructions of identity, and they know that they are quite a special people, as René Caillié observed, above, in 1830.

Along the coast of the Republic of Guinea the term Baga has been used to cover almost everyone and everything, even if much of the material culture and art is actually from other distinct groups, even linguistically unrelated groups who happen to live along the same coast. Some of these groups have been historically much more important in the political and economic spheres of the region, yet the term Baga is preeminent on the art market as having a certain cachet. Part of the problem stems from the local use of the term Baga to designate almost any group of isolated peoples, maroon groups, or “bush people” (as many Africans say), regardless of what they may call themselves or their languages. And that practice may not be unfounded linguistically.

This essay is an attempt to untangle the etymology of ethnic labels applied to the peoples of this region, based upon an understanding of the Baga and Temne languages. It considers the written history and the ethnohistories of the interaction of these two closely related peoples, their structure of kinship, the evolution of contemporary ethnicity and constructs of ancestral lineage in oral narrative, and, particularly, the ancient political construct of inherited rights versus the assumption of rights by seizure, “older brother” versus “younger brother,” and the dialectic between the metropole and the periphery.

¹ René Caillié, *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo and Across the Great Desert, to Morocco, Performed in the Years 1824–1828*, Vol 1 (London: Henry Colburn & Richard Bentley, 1830), 166.

The Broad Cultural and Linguistic Configurations in the Region

By way of situating the Baga and Temne within the larger context of the region formerly known to European mariners as the “Upper Guinea Coast,” the westernmost Atlantic coast of Africa, it should be noted that it is a region of a few very large linguistic groups and many extremely small groups, between which there is little correlation or history. The term “West Atlantic,” now simply “Atlantic,” was coined first in the nineteenth century simply to group together all the miscellaneous languages in this region, approximately 45, from Senegal to Liberia.² They are largely unrelated to each other except as Niger-Congo languages.³ Most of them have noun-prefix structure, but not all, and this is simply a characteristic of Bantu languages in general; some have noun-suffix. Some are more tonal, some less. Most Atlantic languages exhibit consonant mutation, but this is a widespread characteristic of languages. Almost unique to some of these languages is a system of agreement or concordance between the noun and noun modifiers, pronouns, demonstratives, possessives, and sometimes the verb, which is most pronounced among the Baga and Temne, with approximately twenty noun classes. The northern, central, and southern groups of Atlantic are quite distinct.⁴ They share almost no vocabulary except for a very few loan words. Some, such as Bijago or Limba, are quite isolated from the others. But they cannot be left hanging, so the term “Atlantic” serves to put them in a regional grab-bag. It is a term of convenience but of very little use linguistically, and the place of Baga and Temne in it is disputed.⁵

It may be suggested that the distinction between Baga/Temne and the rest of the Atlantic languages is a function of their distinct histories of

² Sigismund W. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana* (1854) (Freetown: Fourah Bay College, 1963); Diedrich Westermann and M. A. Bryan, *Handbook of African Languages, Part II: Languages of West Africa* (London: International African Institute, 1952); J. H. Greenberg, *Languages of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1963).

³ John Bendor-Samuel and Rhonda L. Hartell (eds.), *The Niger–Congo Languages – A Classification and Description of Africa’s Largest Language Family* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989).

⁴ David Sapir, *West Atlantic: An Inventory of the Languages, Their Noun Class Systems and Consonant Alternations*, Current Trends in Linguistics No. 7 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 45–112.

⁵ William André Auquier Wilson, “Atlantic,” in Bendor-Samuel, John (ed.), *The Niger–Congo Languages* (New York: University Press of America, 1989), 81–104; Guillaume Segerer, “Some Hypotheses about Possible Isolates within the Atlantic Branch of the Niger-Congo Phylum,” paper presented at the 36th Berkeley Linguistic Society Meeting, 6–7 February 2010; Konstantin Pozdniakov and Guillaume Segerer, “A Genealogical Classification of Atlantic Languages,” in Lüpke, Friederike (ed.), *The Oxford Guide to the Atlantic Languages of West Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); T. David P. Dalby, “The Mel Languages: A Reclassification of Southern West Atlantic,” *African Language Studies* 6 (1965), 1–17.

movement and interconnections, as well as their ethnohistories of migration. The Baga and Temne have had little historical contact south-to-north along the Atlantic coast with the groups in Guinea Bissau, Senegal, and Gambia, and they continue to be largely oblivious to them, with the exception of the Balanta, who have recently infiltrated the Baga area. Their narratives of origin trace a migration from the Fouta Djallon in the northeast in minute detail, fleeing the incoming Fulbe probably over several centuries.⁶ It is clear from cultural, political, sociological, and linguistic indicators that their ties are closer to the Maninka-speaking peoples of eastern Guinea and southwestern Mali on the upper reaches of the Niger River. Historical sources beginning in the sixteenth century bear this out.⁷ Likewise, there has been little cultural exchange between the northern and southern Atlantic groups, but extensive and deep cultural exchange and influence from the East. A Temne aphorism declares, “It is the East that has power,” which is the foundation theory of all ritual, the direction from which all things flow, the place of birth, the location of the gardens, and the starting place for all ritual processions.⁸

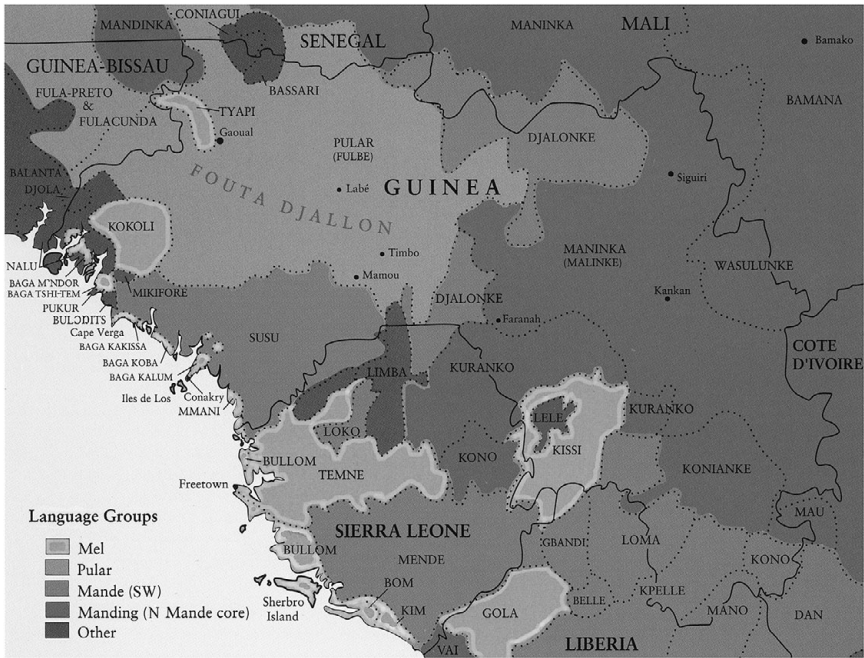
The large circle in question here includes the long semicircular shape of the country of Guinea, as well as Sierra Leone, which it almost completely surrounds (see [Map 1](#)), spreading through disparate geological, topological, and cultural zones. *Haute Guinée* in the Northeast is largely savanna, and is peopled principally by the Malinke (Manding language

⁶ Frederick John Lamp, *Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention* (New York: Museum for African Art, and Munich: Prestel, 1996), Chapter 3.

⁷ Frederick John Lamp, “The Sapi and the Mani: Revisiting the Question of Cultural Continuity/Disruption,” in da Silva Horta, José, Almeida, Carlos, and Mark, Peter (eds.), *African Ivories in the Atlantic World/Marfins Africanos no Mundo Atlântico* (Lisbon: Centro da Historia, Universidade de Lisboa, 2021); Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, Chapter 5; Frederick John Lamp, “Dancing the Hare: Appropriation of the Imagery of Mande Power Among the Baga,” in Jansen, Jan and Zobel, Clemens (eds.), *The Younger Brother in Mande: Kinship and Politics in West Africa* (Leiden: Research School, Centre for Non-Western Studies, Leiden University, 1996); Adam Jones, “Who Were the Vai?” *Journal of African History* 22 (1981), 159–178; Andreas Massing, “The Mane, the Decline of Mali, and Mandinka Expansion towards the South Windward Coast,” *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 25–97 (1985), 21–55.

⁸ Frederick John Lamp, “It Is the East that Has Power: Sapi Stone and Wood Figures,” in Frederick John Lamp (ed.), *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at The Baltimore Museum of Art* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2004), 194–197; Frederick John Lamp, “An Opera of the West African Bondo: the Act, Ideas and the Word,” *The Drama Review* 32–2 (1988), 83–101; Frederick John Lamp, “Heavenly Bodies: Menses, Moon, and Ritual Sanction among the Temne of Sierra Leone,” in Buckley, Thomas and Gottlieb, Alma (eds.), *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 210–231; Frederick John Lamp, “Cosmos, Cosmetics, and the Spirit of Bondo,” *African Arts* 18–3 (1985), 28–43, 98–99.

Map 1. Language groups of Guinea and Sierra Leone. Map created by the author.



group, Maninka-speaking, the northern faction of the larger Mande language group), who extend deeply into neighboring Mali and southeastward into the Ivory Coast, and share their flanks with the closely related Mande groups of Kuranko, Konianke, and Ouassoulounke (Wasulunka), as well as the more distantly related Djalonke (Yalunka in Sierra Leone).⁹

⁹ In this volume I follow T. David P. Dalby, “Distribution and Nomenclature of the Manding People and their Language” (Unpublished paper, University of Liverpool, 1970), in using “Malinke” to refer to the ethnic group of Haute Guinée and Mali, “Maninka” to refer to their language; “Manding” to refer to the group of close linguistic relationships composed of ethnic Malinke, Bamana, Kuranko, Djola, and others (more recently called “Northern Mande”); and “Mande” to indicate the larger linguistic family which includes Susu, Kpelle, Mende (more recently called “South-western Mande”), and many others in addition to the core Manding. The more recent division into “Northern Mande” and “Southern Mande” is a bit problematic because the Susu (Southern Mande) are in the north, and the Vai (Northern Mande) are the southernmost group, on the border of Sierra Leone and Liberia. To add to the confusion, European writers have followed this model, but American writers have tended to use an opposite model – “Manding” for the larger group and “Mande” for the core group of Maninka and Bamana. Following a plea by Valentine Vydrine, in “Who Speaks ‘Mandekan’? A Note on Current Use of Mande Ethnonyms and

To the far southeast, the inland *Guinée Forestière* is occupied by the Kissi (closely related to the Bullom of the Sierra Leone coast) and Loma (Toma in French), both of whom spill over the borders into Sierra Leone and Liberia; the Kpelle (Guerzé in French) and Mano (Manon), who are found in large numbers in Liberia; and the eastern Kono (not to be confused with the Kono of Sierra Leone), extending into Ivory Coast. The Mende occupy most of the forested southern half of Sierra Leone.

Moyenne Guinée, a mountainous savanna, is occupied mainly by the Fulbe (Pular-speaking, called Peul by the French and Fula by the English) and their relatives, the Toucouleur, both of whom also extend broadly into the adjacent regions. They are here surrounded by and mixed with small populations of Badyaranke, Foulacounda, Coniagui, Bassari, Djakanke, and Djalonke extending northward into Senegal; and Limba, Djalonke, and Susu extending southward into Sierra Leone.

In the west, the area that most concerns us here, is *Basse Guinée* or *Guinée Maritime*, and the northern coast of Sierra Leone, where mixed forest and savanna is crossed by rivers and inlets from the sea, called *marigots* in French. This area, in Guinea, is dominated by the Susu (Soso),¹⁰ but also includes a number of small groups such as the Djola (Yola) and Nalu (both extending into Guinea Bissau), the Baga and Kokoli (Landuma), which are both related closely to the Temne of Sierra Leone, and Mmani (or Mandenyi, called Bullom in Sierra Leone), and a few extremely small discrete groups seldom mentioned in surveys.¹¹

Linguistically, the circle of Guinea and Sierra Leone may be divided into three large language families (see the key to [Map 1](#)). Dialects of the Pular language are spoken by various groupings of Fulbe and the related Toucouleur in the northwest.¹² The Mande include the northern languages of the Manding (the nuclear group of Malinke, and satellite groups

Linguonyms,” *MANSA Newsletter* 29 (1995–96), for the European model, it is hoped that this discrepancy is resolved.

¹⁰ I have used the spellings of ethnic names that appear most commonly in the international literature that conforms most closely to a phonetic rendering of the indigenous pronunciation. Susu, for example, is spelled more often in the French literature as Soso, Sosoe, or Soussou, but recent Guinean French literature uses the international form. Some names seldom appear in the non-French literature, so I have left them in the common French form, for easier recognition (e.g., Ouassoulouké instead of Wasulunka). I include alternative spellings and ethnonyms in parenthesis.

¹¹ One of these distinct linguistic groups, the Pukur, who speak sul-Pukur, comprise only two small villages on Kouffin Island, numbering probably no more than a thousand people altogether. As small as this language is, the two villages speak two different dialects, even though they are less than a kilometer apart.

¹² Louis Tauxier, *Mœurs et histoire des Peuls* (Paris: Payot, 1937). Pular (Pulaar), although central to this region, extends far beyond it, through the entire length of the Sahel, from Senegal to Cameroon, in a vast complex of dialects.

of Djakanke, Djola, Mikifore, Kuranko, Ouassoulounke, and Konianke), and a loosely connected group of languages that formerly were called “Peripheral Mande,” but are now called “Southern” or “Southwestern Mande,” including the almost identical Susu and Djalonke in the north of this region, and the closely-related Mende, Loma, Mano, and Kpelle in the south of this region.¹³

The third group, the Mel-speaking peoples, are dispersed in small groups along the entire coast of Guinea (the Baga, Kokoli, and Mmani), along the entire coast of Sierra Leone (the Temne, Bullom, Bom, and Kim), far away on the border of Guinée Forestière and eastern Sierra Leone (the Kissi), and, arguably, at the inland border of southern Sierra Leone and northern Liberia (Gola).¹⁴ The dominant distinguishing feature is the extensive noun-class system using prefixes to designate a large range of categories (humans, animals, plants, inanimate objects, abstract ideas, liquids, size, loan words, etc.), the definite and indefinite, and singular and plural (for example, to use a now international word derived from the Baga and Temne: Coca Cola, from the “kola nut” = *kola* (sing.), *tola* (pl).)¹⁵ Dalby chose the term “Mel,” in 1965 as the common word for “tongue,” with regional variations.¹⁶

On the fringes of the Mel lie a number of small, completely unrelated language groups, the Limba, Nalu, Pukur, Bòlònjits, Bassari, and Coniagui (see Map 1). Nearly all these groups have some connection to Baga political history, ethnography, and cultural history.

From the fifteenth century, Portuguese and other European trading networks began to change the cultural face of the coastal region, introducing the competing force of Christianity along with new economic and cultural alliances. Portuguese traders lived among the coastal peoples, intermarrying with them and adopting local customs. Their legacy remains in linguistic and material continuities. They also wrote many descriptions of the ritual and artistic aspects of the Mel peoples, of which one of the most detailed is that of

¹³ Dalby, “Distribution and Nomenclature”; Vydrine, “Who Speaks ‘Mandekan?’,” 6–9; Valentine Vydrine, T. G. Bergman, and Matthew Benjamin (cartographer), “Mandé Language Family of West Africa: Location and Genetic Classification,” 2006, at <http://www.sil.org/silesr/2000/2000-003/silesr2000-003.htm>, (accessed 01 June 2006).

¹⁴ Dalby, “The Mel Languages,” 1–17. The status of Gola within Mel is contested by Segerer (“Some Hypotheses”), although Tom Güldemann (ed., *The Languages and Linguistics of Africa* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, [e-book] 2018), 106) argues that “all agreement classes of Gola are present across Mel, so that its system can be derived potentially from a more elaborate Proto-Mel system. One can also argue that Gola goes with Mel in having a likely cognate in the animate plural class in a, in which the lack of the initial labial consonant is a shared feature.”

¹⁵ Dalby, “The Mel Languages,” 12, note 2: “The European term cola is a loan from Temne, and is first recorded in early accounts of Sierra Leone.”

¹⁶ Dalby, “The Mel Languages,” 1.

Manuel Álvares, corresponding closely to ritual and art existing up to the mid-twentieth century.¹⁷

Significant differences characterize the cultural spheres from the twentieth century onwards, sometimes seen between distinct ethnic groups, but more often occurring from region to region across ethnic lines. Earlier studies of African art tended to group styles of art according to ethnic boundaries, assigning to each ethnic group a definitive style – “One Tribe, One Style” – from which all departures were viewed as substyles of the given ethnic group, or lesser-quality idiosyncrasies.¹⁸ This was a new and valuable approach, at the time, as a way of classifying the great mass of objects that lay in museum storehouses without provenance or adequate attribution. Most scholars in the field now agree that such classification is misleading and that styles tend rather to develop around particular artists and their workshops, some of whom attract a large regional following, and others not. Often this following adheres to ethnic clusters, but in other cases it may be cross-ethnic and international, and may not even be universal within any one ethnic group. The culture clusters described here are identified by their dominant ethnic designation, with the caveat given above.

The Atlantic maritime region in the west coast of Guinea is home to traditions that are generally attributed simply to the Baga who range along the coast. But a number of small groups adhere to some central “Baga” cultural principles, and can be included with the Baga in a ritual cluster: the Nalu in the north, the Kokoli (Landuma) somewhat inland, Pukur, and Bòlòjits.¹⁹ Like the distant forest peoples, these coastal peoples have created some face masks with costumes, but they have concentrated more upon large-scale wooden headdresses often weighing up to 100 pounds. These include several different types of horizontal composite-animal masks, some immense

¹⁷ Frederick John Lamp, “Manuel Álvares, ‘The Various Ceremonies Pertaining to Public Order among the Manes, Calus, Bagas and the Other Kinds of Heathen in This District,’ in *Ethiopia Minor and a Geographical Account of the Province of Sierra Leone*, c. 1615, Annotated,” with a transcription of the Portuguese manuscript by José da Silva Horta and Maria Manuel Torrão, *Mande Studies* 18 (2016), 5–27.

¹⁸ William Buller Fagg, *Tribes and Forms in African Art* (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1965); Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, “One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art,” *History in Africa* 11 (1984), 163–193.

¹⁹ Béatrice Appia, “Masques de Guinée Française et de Casamance,” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 13 (1943), 153–82; Fred Bowald, *In der Sümpfen des Rio Nunez* (Zurich: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1939); Lamp, *Art of the Baga*; Denise Paulme, “La Notion de Sorcier Chez les Baga,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Afrique Noire*, ser. B, 20–3/4 (1958), 406–416; Mamadou Sampil, “Un Société Secrète en Pays Nalou: Le Simo,” *Recherches Africaines* (Conakry), H.S. 1 (1961), 46–49; Artur Augusto da Silva, “Arte Nalu,” *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa*, 11–44 (1956), 27–66; David Berliner, *Nous sommes les derniers buloNic* (Ph.D. dissertation, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2003); F. K. Erhard Voeltz, “Les langues de la Guinée,” in *Cahiers d’étude des langues guinéennes* 1 (Conakry: University of Conakry, 1996).

vertical superstructures such as D'mba (the huge female bust), Banda (the horizontal mask with a crocodile jaw), a-Mansho-ŋa-Tshol (the Serpent), and a great many types of female busts carried on top of the head in dance, in general characterized by brightly colored patterns. The aesthetic here leans toward a form of rather naturalistic figural sculpture characterized by large bulging eyes and a long aquiline nose, traits which may be traced through their large corpus of art in other styles. Monumental figurative drums are also important. These traditions never extended very far inland, and were shared by isolated coastal villages, serving (among other purposes) as the principal means of seeking social and political cohesion.

The Baga Groups

Various small ethnic groups occupy the narrow stretch of lowland along the Atlantic coast of the Republic of Guinea. Villages are fairly well isolated from each other by marshes and inlets from the sea, which both impede and facilitate transportation. This isolation increases in the rainy season, when travel along footpaths and roads becomes extremely difficult (virtually impossible for a foreigner, although the Baga do trudge through the mud on the footpaths).

The distinct peoples who identify purely as Baga are the most prominent of these groups, and they range along the coast from the Kalum Peninsula at Conakry northward to the Rio Componi just south of the border of Guinea Bissau. They are comprised of five distinct dialect groups (in order from north to south): the M'ndor (Mandori), tshi-Tem (Sitem/Sitemu), Kakissa (or Sobane), Koba, and Kalum.²⁰ These groups, together with the Kokoli of inland Basse Guinée and the Temne of Sierra Leone, form the "Temne language cluster."²¹

Cultural groupings somewhat overlap but are distinct from the linguistic groupings. Geographically contiguous with Baga are the Nalu (separating the two northern Baga groups), the Pukur (commonly called Baga Mboteni or

²⁰ Many of the indigenous ethnonyms among the Baga groups and their relatives were distorted or unknown before I published my book, *Art of the Baga*, in 1996. I made it a special quest during my fieldwork to identify exactly the villages and territory each Baga group inhabited, and what they called themselves, and to strip away the Susu veneer that obscured our understanding of the Baga. Words are key. "Sitemu" is an erroneous nomenclature that escaped me and every other researcher before Voeltz did his study in 1996 (too late for my book), largely because this is the term that all Baga writers had used up to then, especially in "Memoires" produced by Baga students at the University of Conakry to satisfy degree requirements, and it was the term used by all my Baga consultants. It is, in fact, an example of the "Susuization" of the Baga, adding the common Susu "u" or "i" ending to nouns, and deforming the Baga noun prefix "tshi" to "si."

²¹ William André Auquier Wilson, "Temne and the West Atlantic Group," and "Temne, Landuma, and the Baga Languages," *Sierra Leone Language Review* 1 (1962), 26–38.

Baga Binari), and the Bɔ̀lɔ̀njits (previously known as Baga Foré – literally “the Black or Wild Baga”), the latter two separating the Baga tshi-Tem from the Baga Kakissa to the south. These are separate single linguistic units vaguely related to each other but not to the Baga and Kokoli, with which they share, nevertheless, much of a common culture.²² What we know as the art of the Baga derives from all these groups, and is itself divided into many different linked cultural traditions. Though linguists sharply separate the Pukur and the Bɔ̀lɔ̀njits from the Baga, the people of these groups, in my experience, rather ignore the linguistic distinctions, and consider themselves to be one unified cultural group with the Baga tshi-Tem.²³ Language difference is a minor inconvenience: the Pukur, who number only two very small villages, learn to speak, from infancy, Pukur, Baga tshi-Tem, and Susu (as well as French, in school), so they were sometimes puzzled by my attempt to differentiate them from their Baga tshi-Tem neighbors.²⁴ The Baga tshi-Tem are largely endogamous, and this further highlights the relationship between these three unrelated language groups, as the Pukur and Bɔ̀lɔ̀njits are included in this endogamous scheme, but the Susu living in the same circle are not, nor are the other four Baga dialect groups.

The territory of this larger cultural grouping is now quite infiltrated by peoples from the East who speak Mande languages: the Susu (Southwestern Mande), the Mikifore, and Maninka/Malinke (both northern Manding), as well as by the Pular-speaking peoples, the Fulbe/Peul/Fula. The Mande peoples, in particular, have had a profound historical influence on Baga culture.²⁵ Susu and Fulbe immigration to the coastal regions has continued through the twentieth century. The Susu now really control what was once the larger Baga territory, in which the few extant Baga villages are now simple

²² Güldemann, *The Languages*, 108; Frank Seidel, “Nalou, ses locuteurs, et la situation sociale, culturelle et historique,” *Horizons* 13 (2016), 8; Voeltz, “Les langues de la Guinée.”

²³ The influence from the Malinke is historical, probably predating the descent from the Fouta Djallon and continuing into the twentieth century, while the influence from the Susu is several hundred years in the making, as they moved toward the coast. It is impossible, given our current state of knowledge, to determine what, if any, interaction the Baga had with the Djalonke in the Fouta. Susu vocabulary has extensively entered the Baga language, and Susu has become a lingua franca along the entire coast of Guinea. Maninka (Malinke) vocabulary is deeply embedded in Baga tshi-Tem, even in the basic greeting, tanatefe (lit., “no problem?”). See Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, 1996, 55–57, 101–102, 196–198; Lamp, “Dancing the Hare.”

²⁴ For example, there is the allegiance to founding male spirits shared by the Pukur and the Bɔ̀lɔ̀njits with the Baga. There is also an annual pan-Baga football tournament that includes the Baga tshi-Tem, Pukur and Bɔ̀lɔ̀njits, but not the four other Baga dialect groups.

²⁵ Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, 101–103, 138–140, 208–213; Lamp, “Dancing the Hare,” 1996.

insular ethnic pockets. Susu is the language of preference throughout Baga-land, except among elders in the two northernmost Baga dialect regions, because it enables them to participate in the market system controlled by the Susu, and in the greater national dialogue. Baga villages today have no markets of their own, and all markets in the region are organized by the Susu, by which Susu has become the *lingua franca* of the entire coast. I have described this process as the “Susuization” of the Baga. More recently, however, since the 1980s, one continuing result of what seemed to be a renaissance among the Baga tshi-Tem is that the tshi-Tem youth speak almost exclusively Baga tshi-Tem among themselves in the villages, and it is a point of pride. Today, only the tshi-Tem and M’ndor speak Baga regularly, and the Koba mostly know their Baga dialect but generally speak Susu, while the central and southernmost groups (Kakissa and Kalum) have been almost completely assimilated to the Susu for more than a century in every way. Nevertheless, it seems that every report from the southernmost groups repeatedly contains the hopeful note that “one old woman was found to still speak the language.” And when I returned to search for what was the village of Kaporo in 2008, now almost overwhelmed amongst the clutter of expanding Conakry, I discovered the existence of a pre-Islamic shrine so sacred and so secret that no one would permit even an interview on the subject. Never say “die” and never say “the last of...”

The Baga, Temne, and Kokoli trace their origin, through numerous oral traditions, to the highlands of the Fouta Djallon in the interior of Guinea.²⁶ At some point (Baga traditions suggest the eighteenth century, but written history suggests sometime before the fifteenth century) the Fulbe entered from the north and spread throughout the Fouta Djallon.²⁷ At this point, an Islamic Fulbe aristocracy developed with contact there with the already Islamic Djalonke and Malinke. The Baga say they were driven out because of their refusal to convert to Islam, because of the superior weaponry of the Fulbe, and the

²⁶ Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, 49–57. First reported by Claudius Madrolle, *En Guinée* (Paris: H. le Saudier, 1895), 216, 264–266, and elaborated upon in detail by Esu Biyi, “The Temne People and How They Make their Kings,” *Journal of the African Society* 12–46 (January 1913), 192; and Eldred F. Sayers, “Notes on the Clan or Family Names Common in the Area Inhabited by Temne-Speaking People,” *Sierra Leone Studies*, o.s., 10 (1927), 20. All Temne traditional initiation ritual begins with a (mystical) “return to Fouta,” a spiritual journey made by the officials. Hundreds of place names found on the government maps of the Fouta bear the distinct Baga/Temne locative prefixes ro- (at), si-/tshi- (language of), ma- (people of), and ka- (of).

²⁷ Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, Chapter 3; Claude Rivière, *Guinea: The Mobilization of a People*, V. Thompson & R. Adloff, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1977), 37. Fouta (or Futa) signifies, roughly, the idea of “homeland” in Pular. Djallon refers to the people who lived there prior to the coming of the Fulbe, now referred to as Djalonke (“the people of Djallo[n]”).

incompatibility of their settled farming life with the itinerant and destructive cattle herding of the Fulbe (a conflict that continues to this day).²⁸

The earliest sources speak of the Baga and Kokoli in the context of a larger group, called Sapi, consisting also of the Temne and Bullom. These were said to have been united into a loose cultural confederation, according to André Donelha, “in the same way that in Spain various nations are called ‘Spaniards,’” although it is unlikely that they formed a solid political entity.²⁹ The earliest record of the name, Sapi, appears on the *Cantino* Planisphere of 1502.³⁰ A similar designation, Sapi (sing. Tyapi), is used by the Fulbe and others of the Fouta Djallon to designate the Kokoli, especially in the region of Gaoual in northern Guinea, into the twenty-first century (see [Map 1](#)).³¹ By 1506, the name Temne was specified by both Fernandes and Pacheco Pereira.³² Subsequent reports included also linguistically unrelated peoples in the same area such as the Limba, Djalonke, Susu, and Loko. Several other groups, unknown today, appear also in these early ethnic inventories, such as

²⁸ This ethnohistory is contested by historians. The Baga were documented on the coast by the beginning of the sixteenth century as “Sapi” (Lamp, “The Sapi and the Mani”). Pre-Muslim Fulbe ancestors began reaching the Fouta Djallon region as pastoralists in small numbers by the end of the seventh century, pushed by the Arab-Berber expansion across the Sahara, and a large group of Islamized Fulbe had already arrived by 1105, but a non-Muslim band of “Pullo buruure” (“bush” Pular in the Pular language) entered in military force in the sixteenth century led by Tengella Jaaje (or Koli Tangella), whereas the Islamized Fulbe arrived in the late 17th-early 18th centuries, establishing the Alimamiate in 1727 (Rivière, *Guinea*, 37). So there is probably some conflation of events in the Baga oral narrative. The Fouta Djallon, pre-sixteenth century, was likely where the Baga abutted the quite hegemonic Manding, who were Islamic from the thirteenth century, before the arrival of the Fulbe. But groups of Baga may have migrated from the Fouta through the seventeenth century, and their close relatives, the Tyapi, still reside there. Significantly, there are almost no loan words from Pular in the Baga or Temne languages, but there are many Maninka words.

²⁹ André Donelha, *An Account of Sierra Leone and the Rivers of Guinea of Cape Verde* (1625), A. Teixeira da Mota and P. E. H. Hair (eds. & trans.) (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações Científicas do Ultramar, 1977), 105.

³⁰ Armando Z. Cortesão and Avelino Teixeira da Mota, *Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica* I (Lisbon, 1960), 7 & 10. It reads on the map as “cape,” no doubt miscopied without the cedilla from an original registration in Lisbon.

³¹ Voeltz, *Les Langues de la Guinée*, 28. The Pular language is responsible for the mutation from plural “S” to “Ty” in the singular. Voeltz found the term Sapi in current use.

³² Valentim Fernandes, *Description de la Côte Occidentale d’Afrique (Sénégal au Cap de Monte, Archipels)* (1506–10), T. Monod, A. Teixeira da Mota, and R. Mauny (eds. and trans.) (Bissau), 80–82, 100, 167, 171; Duarte Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* (1506–1508), George H. T. Kimble, trans., (1937) (Bruges: Nendeln, Liechtenstein, Kraus, 1967), 96–97.

the Itale, Peli Coya, Taguncho, and Putaze.³³ It was said by Andre d'Almada, in 1594, that all of these groups understood each other, but perhaps this referred to multilingualism, as we see today. The territory of the Sapi was given variously at different times, but in the first half of the sixteenth century they were known to extend along the coast from the Rio Nunez in northern Guinea to Cape Verga in central Guinea, to present day Vai territory in the south of Sierra Leone, and inland approximately one hundred kilometers.³⁴

The final waves of Baga and Temne migration from the Fouta Djallon must have come by 1725 when the last remnants were defeated at Mamou, together with the remaining non-Muslim Fulbe, by the Islamic Fulbe elite.

³³ The Putaze were probably a division of the Susu (Lamp, *Art of the Baga*). Itale are probably the Thali (Bangura) clan who, according to legends of the court of Masimera Chiefdom, arrived from Kuranko country probably four hundred years ago (Wylie, Kenneth C., *The Political Kingdoms of the Temne: Temne Government in Sierra Leone 1825–1910* [New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1977], 175, 186, 222). The Calu most likely gave their name to the Kalum Peninsula at present-day Conakry. The Taguncho were also probably a group of the Baga, most likely the Koba subdivision. The Peli Coya probably are the Temne of Koya Chiefdom. See Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, 94; Fernandes, *Description de la Côte Occidentale*, 74–76, 167; E. J. Payne, *Voyages of the Elizabethan Seamen to America* (London: Thomas de la Rue & Co., 1880), 16; d'Almada, *Tratado Breve*, 66, 68–70, 73, 76–77, Paul E. H. Hair, “An Ethnolinguistic Inventory of the Upper Guinea Coast before 1700,” *African Language Review* 6 (1967), 50, 66–67, 69; Hair, “Sources on Early Sierra Leone 5),” 87–89, 92; Hair, “Sources on Early Sierra Leone (9), 62. Álvares, in 1615, had mentioned the “Cabata” (folio 53v), which may be a misreading of his later-mentioned “Cabala” (folio 139v) by the eighteenth-century copist, or vice versa (Manuel Álvares, “Ethiopia Minor and a Geographical Account of the Province of Sierra Leone” [1615], Paul E. H. Hair, transl., Department of History, University of Liverpool [Liverpool, unpublished manuscript, 1990]). These people, he said, had recently migrated immediately north of the Calu (which would place them precisely at modern-day Koba) from the area south of the Mitombo River (Port Loko Creek), which is in central Temneland then and now. The Calu also migrated, he said, from “the Serra” (Sierra Leone) and the land of “Ferabure,” which is probably Faran Bure (the kingdom of Bure) north of Port Loko and again firmly in Temne territory (see also Hair, “Sources on Early Sierra Leone 5),” 112 on Barreira’s visit to Bure). Both Álvares and Sandoval listed the Calu/Cobale separately from the Baga (Paul E. H. Hair, “Sources on Early Sierra Leone 3): Sandoval (1627),” *Africana Research Bulletin*, 5–2 (1975), 88). This would support the opinion of Voeltz (“Les langues de la Guinée,” 5–6) that the single Baga Koba and Kalum dialect is closer to Temne than to the northern Baga dialects. If Álvares is correct in his spelling, Kaba would mean “the place taken (or seized).”

³⁴ Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, 98; André Álvares d'Almada, *Tratado Breve dos Rios de Guine do Cabo Verde desde o rio do Sanaga até aos baixos de Sant' Anna* (1594) (1733) (Lisbon: Editorial L. I. A. M., 1964), 73; Paul E. H. Hair, “Sources on Early Sierra Leone (9): Barreira’s Account of the Coast of Guinee, 1606,” *Africana Research Bulletin*, 7–1 (1976), 62; Paul E. H. Hair, “Sources on Early Sierra Leone 5): Barreira,” *Africana Research Bulletin*, 5–4 (1975), 87–89.

The Baga who fled at this time seem to have joined communities of Baga already in place on the coast, and this has led to a complex structure of migration ethnohistory and a resulting political stratification based upon claims of priority.

European contact that began in the fifteenth century with the Portuguese (whose vocabulary appears prominently in the Baga and Temne languages today) continued to one extent or another through the twentieth century, bringing the French, English, Belgians, Germans, and Americans (especially African Americans) at various points and times. The French transformed the Baga political system.³⁵ Baga society had always been quite thoroughly decentralized and acephalous throughout its recorded history. There has never been a recognized leader of all Baga peoples, or even a pre-eminent regional chief.³⁶ Chieftaincy itself is a foreign institution, at least for the Baga tshi-Tem. Under French colonial rule, chiefs were selected to reign over villages, and districts were set up under the control of particular chiefs who were cooperative with the colonial government. But these district chiefs were generally non-Baga (usually Nalu) and received only grudging allegiance from the Baga. Village chiefs derived their power only from the French government at Conakry and not from the people, who, until the crushing repression of the independent government since the 1950's, continued to rely principally upon the governance of the society of male clan elders. At independence there was a movement to eradicate the system of village chiefs, but the system continues today as a convenience to the national chain of command, and the title is now *Président du District*.

The Origin of the Ethnonym and the Place of the Younger Brother

To understand who the Baga are and why they are so intensely in love with their unique masquerades, it is important to know something of their origins, which have been vastly misconstrued by writers throughout the colonial period right up to the present. The ethnonym, Baga is of huge importance. The first step in understanding the significance of the ethnonym is to pronounce it correctly: the five Baga dialects do not pronounce their name as "Baga," but rather "Baka," with a guttural "k."³⁷

³⁵ Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, Chapter 9.

³⁶ The term "Chief" implies the kind of local hereditary or council-selected head of a "chiefdom," which is structured like a "kingdom," but does not have the same expansive regional power. Despite objections that it may be a pejorative colonialism, I use the term because it represents current usage in Sierra Leone and Guinea (*chef*), so it would be confusing to coin another term, and it is currently used throughout the contemporary world (e.g., CEO, Chief of Staff).

³⁷ The "g" sound of European languages does not really exist in Baga, but the "k" sound is a guttural sound somewhere in between a "k" and a "g", closer to "k", which is

Many different sources have been suggested for the term Baga, but they have been mired in not only the persistent filtering of information through the neighboring Susu observers, but also by a lack of understanding of the nature of etymology, and by a lack of depth in the larger Temne language cluster, to which Baga belongs. The etymology of the term Baga is extremely complex, but too often, facile answers have been offered. Because I spoke Temne for eighteen years prior to going to Guinea to work with the Baga, I was very much aware of not only how the Temne see their relatives, the Baga, but also how they have named them. Ethnic names throughout the world historically have generally been given to a group not by themselves but by their neighbors, and this is certainly true of the Baga.

Throughout the Temne language group, there are certain appellations that appear in slightly different forms depending upon context and are spelled differently by different writers, either because writers hear the word differently or because it is spoken differently by different speakers. One of these key words is the term *tem*, pronounced as *them*.³⁸ This signifies “elder man,” or “gentleman,” used also as a term of address somewhat equivalent to “Sir.” *Thembra* is “elder woman.”

The Temne and Baga share a concept of social construction found throughout this region of West Africa, especially studied intensely among the Mande groups, consisting of the binary of “older brother–younger brother.”³⁹ The term “older brother” signifies deeper ethnohistory of origins, earlier arrival, prior domain, higher political status, and prerogatives of inheritance, while “younger brother” signifies more recent arrival in the oral narratives, lower political status, and lesser claims to inheritance. In the Temne language cluster, this is reflected in the ethnonym Temne (properly pronounced “Themne”).⁴⁰ In Baga tshi-Tem, *themne* means simply “to be old” (as in *ɔn themne* = “He’s old”), and it likely that

sometimes rendered as “*ch*” in the spelling of African languages, similar to the “*ch*” in the Yiddish “*chutzpa*.”

³⁸ The “*t*” sound, as we know it in European languages, has several variations in Temne and Baga, including *ts*, *tsh*, and *th*. Some speakers pronounce it more crisply, approximating the European “*t*,” and others veer more closely to the variants. Older speakers (with lost teeth, for example) tend to pronounce “*tsh*,” whereas younger speakers may tend more toward a “*ts*” or a “*t*.” Likewise, some speakers pronounce a strong “*th*” (somewhat as a “*dth*” as in “width,” but often at the beginning of a word), and others tend more toward a straightforward “*t*.”

³⁹ Lamp, “Dancing the Hare,” 1996. There does not seem to be the parallel concept of “older sister–younger sister,” probably because inheritance and governance are the province of men, so it would be moot. Baga and Temne societies are patriarchal and patrilineal. There are no women chiefs among the Temne (as there are among the Mende), and elder women are not part of the Baga council of elders. Women do have powerful ritual institutions, which govern women and can be quite independent, but they are separate from the general temporal governance.

⁴⁰ More properly “*Dthemne*.”

the Temne were called this by their Baga relatives, who regarded them as the “elder” faction (and largest group) of the Temne-Baga group. The missionary Christian Schlenker came close when he tentatively translated “Temne” as “the elders themselves.”⁴¹ Elder/younger, of course, is situational (I am younger than my older brother, but older than my younger brother), and other ethnonyms among the Baga reinforce the meaning of *them*: Katema (“that of the elders” or “the area belonging to the elders”), the territory of the Baga Koba subgroup; and tshi-Tem (Sitem), signifying “the language of the elders,” a northern dialect group of the Baga.⁴²

Recent anthropologists, historians, and even linguists have resurrected an old amateur etymology for the term Baga.⁴³ It was first raised by Georges Paroisse, the French *Chargé de mission en Guinée* just prior to the establishment of the colony, who suggested a Susu derivation meaning “people (*ka*) of the sea (*ba*).”⁴⁴ This has been perpetuated throughout the literature ever since, and seems never to end (thus the present essay). It is simply too facile. Here is an excellent example of why one cannot simply go to a dictionary in a foreign language, especially in a language that one does not speak, and pick out words that sound like the syllables in the term in question.

There are several reasons why this etymology is faulty. First, the Baga were already noted on the coast in 1594 by Almada, and their presence was implied even earlier, in 1506–1508, under the term Sapi. Meanwhile, the Susu were still quite far inland until the sixteenth century, as documented by the Portuguese.⁴⁵ It is unlikely that the earliest Portuguese visitors had much contact with the Susu of the interior or that the Baga themselves would have been using a Susu appellation at that early date. Second, the Baga oral

⁴¹ Christian Frederick Schlenker, *A Collection of Temne Traditions, Fables, and Proverbs* (London: Christian Missionary Society, 1861), iii.

⁴² It should be noted that *tem*, in Baga and Temne, denotes the elder man, the mature man, as opposed to the young man (*ɔ-langba* in Temne, *wu-tshemp* in Baga tshi-Tem). The very old man, old enough to be in the council of elders, takes a different term: *wu-bəki* in Temne, *wu-biki* in Baga tshi-Tem.

⁴³ Ramon Sarró, *Iconoclasm Done and Undone: The Politics of Religious Change on the Upper Guinea Coast* (Edinburgh: International African Institute, International African Library series by the Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 24; Berliner, *Nous sommes les derniers buloNic*, 40; Bruce L. Mouser, “Who and Where Were the Baga? European Perceptions from 1793 to 1821,” *History in Africa* 29 (2002), 337; Voeltz, “Les langues de la Guinée,” 8 (although Voeltz doesn’t seem aware of its prior use).

⁴⁴ Georges Paroisse, “Notes sur les Peuplades autochtones de la Guinée Française (Rivières du Sud),” *L’Anthropologie* (Paris) 7 (1896), 432.

⁴⁵ d’Almada, *Tratado Breve*, 66, 73; Fernandes, *Description de la Côte Occidentale*, 80; Francisco de Lemos Coelho, *Duas Descrições Sescentistas da Guiné*, (1669 & 1684), Damito Peres (ed.) (Lisbon: Academia Portuguesa da Historia, 1953), 63, 68, 216, 219; Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, 91–92, 95–96; Paul E. H. Hair, “Ethnolinguistic Continuity on the Guinea Coast,” *Journal of African History* 8 (1967), 255; Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, 35.

narratives trace their origins to the highlands of the Fouta Djallon, and therefore they think of themselves not as a people of the sea but a people of the highlands. Third, the Baga are not a people of the sea even today – they rarely even venture to the seaside either to swim or to fish, even where it is only a short walk across the rice fields. They distrust the sea, and call the shore *ku-lum*, “wasteland.”⁴⁶ They are a people of the swamplands, of the rice fields, a fact the Susu well know, because it is largely the Susu who fish on the sea off the Baga coast.⁴⁷ In Susu or any other language, “people of the sea” would mean people actually living on or in the water, not those living on the coastal mainland. *Ba* in Susu refers to the sea, not the seaside, which is *dε*.

But the fourth and most compelling reason this etymology is erroneous is that *ba ka* is not a Susu construction and would not make sense to a Susu speaker. Rather they would say *mikhie nakhee kelikhi ba kote ma*, literally “people who come from the coast” – or “beside the sea,” according to Grant H. Moore, who studied the Susu language from 1952 to 1960 and did Susu translation in Guinea for the Federation of Missions (e-mail communication, 2009). “Perhaps one could extrapolate ‘ba’ meaning sea and ‘ka’ as inhabitant – but it seems to me to be a bit of a stretch,” he adds. Literally, “people of the sea” in Susu would be *ba ma mikhie*, although this would be an ambiguous term with little meaning (Does it mean “people living on the sea,” “people living at the

⁴⁶ I learned this through a land transaction. When I lived in 1992 in the village of Tolkotsh, the sole village on Taigbe Island, with 5 km of sandy beach on the Atlantic, I often went out to swim, although no one else did. The chief frequently told me, “That is your beach.” When I returned in 2008, he said again, “That’s your beach, and I want you to build a house on it.” So I negotiated with the village council for title. Some wanted to charge me a high price for it, but one man said, “Why would we not just give it to him? It’s just *ku-lum*, ‘wasteland.’” Everyone agreed, but still thought the opportunity to make some money should not be passed up.

⁴⁷ Sarró (*Iconoclasm Done and Undone*, 38) writes that, “All Baga Sitem villages lie along the Rio Kapatchez, which could be considered the spinal cord of the Baga Sitem land,” but this probably reflects the myopic view of his consultants at B’kor. First, none of the Baga villages are actually on the river, but rather, some kilometers from it on either side; it is the rice fields that back up to the river. Second, most of the Baga villages cannot remotely be said to be connected by the Kapatchez – sand bars block navigation on the river, noted since 1886, and upstream, near Katongoro and Kalkentsh in the north, it is only a little stream, barely navigable even by a small canoe – Tolkotsh, K’fen, Mnar, and M’born are two rivers over to the west, on islands facing the Atlantic Ocean with beautiful sandy beaches; Kamsar is at the mouth of the Nunez River at the Atlantic Ocean, and Tshalbonto is completely on the other side of the broad mouth of the Nunez, on part of the islands of the Nalu, again facing Atlantic beaches. I would say, rather, that the Baga villages lie along the swamplands of the Atlantic coast, with just a few back up the muddy Kapatchez. But the whole question is moot today, as the entire Kapatchez River from Kamsar southward down to the sea at Yongosal has recently been diverted by a canal to the Marigot de Kassane to flow westward to the sea at Taigbe Island, off the village of Tolkotsh.

sea/by the sea?”). So the etymology that seems most obvious is simply too easy, and cannot be supported by in-depth linguistic study.

Moore continues, “The Temne people of Sierra Leone have the same root language; their similarities with Baga are most striking not only with respect to vocabulary but the tonality is almost identical. They might be able to shed some light on the true meaning or origin of Baga or Baka.” In fact, to the Temne, during my stays among them from 1967 to 1980, the origin of the word Baga was explicitly clear, although it is very complex and not easy to explain to the outsider. Bear with me while I navigate the maze of linguistic roots/routes that resemble the *marigots* zig-zagging and crisscrossing Baga and Temne coastal territory.

Both Baga and Temne are terms within the larger Temne language cluster, in which the two languages are not inter-intelligible, but even the distant Baga dialect, Baga tshi-Tem, shares 85 of Swadesh’s 100 key words of language with Temne, with varying pronunciations.⁴⁸ The southernmost Baga dialects, Koba and Kalum, are said by Voeltz to be closer to the Temne than they are to the Baga tshi-Tem.⁴⁹ The names by which they are known can be seen as sharing binary positions that define each other in a hermeneutic way. The Baga and Temne have named each other.

At the beginning of the twentieth century it was reported that in the tradition of the Kokoli (also of the Temne language cluster, and neighbors of the Baga), the Temne were referred to as the “elder brother.”⁵⁰ The Temne are the largest group within the Temne language cluster, numbering almost three million today, as compared to fewer than 40,000 Baga throughout the five dialect groups. In the centuries before the colonial period, they were known for their military strength, as a highly centralized and well-established people with powerful kings. They fit the pattern of the “elder brother,” and their relatives, the Baga and Kokoli, would certainly have seen the Temne kingdoms as the metropole.

Outlying areas of the Temne, and those who inhabited them, were frequently labeled *Baka* by the Temne. The word has a sense of a “settlement,” and, by extension, the “settlers” – literally it translates as “to have of (*ba ka*)” or, by extension, “to seize” or “to occupy.”⁵¹ Wilderness that has been reclaimed and settled with villages is *baka*, and the people who settle

⁴⁸ Morris Swadesh, *The Origin and Diversification of Language* (ed. *post mortem* by Joel Sherzer) (Chicago: Aldine, 1971). The percentage of true cognates may be higher, as they depend upon transformations, and do not always resemble each other. All names for parts of the body, bodily use of the five senses, and basic bodily functions are the same.

⁴⁹ Voeltz, *Les Langues de la Guinée*, 5–6.

⁵⁰ Biyi, “The Temne People,” 192; Sayers, “Notes on the Clan or Family Names,” 19; Westermann, *Handbook of African Languages*, 14.

⁵¹ I have dropped the infinitive prefix for simplification. The full infinitive verb would be *kə-baka*.

them are the am-Baka, “those who have seized (the land).” Thus, the Temne to the far north in Kambia District, in a narrow stretch somewhat isolated from the Temne heartland, call themselves the Baga Temne. There are at least six Temne villages located on the colonial maps of Sierra Leone bearing the name Baga or Baka, and I received my information on the meaning of the term in one of these villages. Both the Baga and the Temne would prefix the term to indicate the Baga village or the Baga land (*da-Baka* or *ro-Baka* – “the place of the Baga”), the Baga people (*a-Baka* or *am-Baka*), Baga territory (*ka-Baka* – “that of the Baga” – in both languages), or the language of the Baga (*kā-Baka* or *tshā-Baka*). Sometimes these villages and territories were “seized” from the wilderness; in other cases they were “seized” from previous occupants, sometimes for payment of a debt. In 1913, the Aku (Freetown Yoruba) writer Esu Biyi said that the Baga (probably referring to the Kalum) were known as the “fugitive Têmnés” who had been expelled by a sixteenth-century Bai Fārəm, or Temne king, from an inland territory across the border of present-day Sierra Leone (where they had, in fact, been located by the Jesuit priest, Baltazar Barreira, in 1606).⁵² Henry Usher Hall was told continually by his Southern Bullom consultants about “Baga” settlers in their territory who appear to have been Temne in fact, judging by the descriptions of the ritual they introduced to the Bullom.⁵³ So the word Baga – pronounced “Baka” (with a guttural “k”) – can be translated as “the settlers” or “the pioneers.” The etymology becomes a little more complicated as an indication of status, as it can refer to lower-status, remote members of the same culture (in the same sense as the Geechee living on the southern swamp islands off South Carolina and Georgia were denigrated by other African Americans). The Baga, especially the Kakissa, were particularly singled out in a (self-servingly ethnocentric) report by the French Catholic missionaries in 1898 as *toute primitive*.⁵⁴ And the term can refer to an enslaved person (*wuni baka*, “seized person”). Robert Clarke, in 1843, referred rather unkindly to the “Baga people, a bastard kind of Temne,” in the sense of a kind of illegitimacy – in contrast to the established Temne people – “often brought here [to Freetown] as slaves.”⁵⁵ Thus, the term Baga functions in the social dialectic as a reference to the disenfranchised “younger brother.”

These power relationships are rarely discussed by the Baga, and one does not mention the foreign origins of some of the clans, nor any of the status

⁵² Hair, “Sources on Early Sierra Leone (9),” 62; Biyi, “The Temne People,” 192–193.

⁵³ Hall, Henry Usher, “Field Notes on the Sherbro Expedition” (unpublished manuscript, University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1937), Notes A.

⁵⁴ *Bulletin de la Congrégation* (Paris: les Pères du Saint-Esprit), n.s. 10 (1898–1899), 324.

⁵⁵ Robert Clarke, *Sierra Leone: A Description of the Manners and Customs of the Liberated Africans; With Observations Upon the Natural History of the Colony, and A Notice of the Native Tribes* (1843) (London: African Publication Society, 1969), 168.

relationships, in public. Obviously, the implications of the name Baga are not always something that the Baga themselves would want to accept. The Baga are extremely reluctant to discuss kinship and social structure, which is often based upon historical inequities and condescension, as well as rejection and acceptance with reservation. These factors may be what was behind the conversation that Ramon Sarró had in 1993 with a knowledgeable consultant on Baga history. Sarró saw the exchange perhaps as a rebuff, but more as an “example of the interactive nature of secrecy” and “part of a strategy to create a mystique”:

‘Ah, you are the anthropologist, I’ve heard about you. I feel sorry for you. You came here to obtain information, but Baga are very secretive and you will not get away with it. For instance: have you already learnt what the word *baga* means?’

‘No,’ I answered, stung by the realization that I had never given any thought to the etymology or meaning of *baga*.

‘Well, you will never do,’ he said, and walked away.⁵⁶

But as is always the case with binary categories, their attributes are situationally adjustable, as mentioned above. “Younger brother” often has powers of his own, and this is often true of societies that are politically of lower status.⁵⁷ In my experience with the Temne, their common view of the Baga positions the Baga as powerful spiritually, even feared for their access to supernatural forces. The Temne may have been seen by the Baga and Kokoli as landed gentry in the material world, but they saw the Baga as the magical masters of the otherworld. Indeed, the Baga are much better known than the Temne in the realm of the arts of mystical representation.

Conclusions

It has been my attempt here to elucidate the complexity of “ethnic,” linguistic, and cultural identities, in which the members of any group identify in a great number of ways that may seem contradictory and confusing to the outsider. European obsessions with taxonomy have obscured this complexity and made it simple, if misleading. Several linguistically unrelated groups identify as “Baga,” and they do so not only because of cultural ties, but because of their history fleeing oppression and their current status as “maroons.” Ironically, they have forged these relationships despite considerable physical isolation from each other. In a sense, they are all truly “Baga.”

Because they are most often given by others, ethnic names are frequently not flattering. Indeed, they are often meant to self-aggrandize or to demean

⁵⁶ Sarró, *Iconoclasm Done and Undone*, 9.

⁵⁷ Lamp, “Dancing the Hare.”

others. In the case of the Temne, if they were given this name by the Baga and Kokoli, it was apparently a token of esteem and an acknowledgement of the established order of hierarchy and rights. It is also quite apparent that the Baga enjoy and celebrate their own status as the owners of the mystical domain, with their wealth of ritual art representing the spiritual world.

The differentiation in status assumed by the Temne and the Baga through their names is reflected in cultural conventions. The Baga own the ancestral spirits and spirits of the forest, with their towering masquerades manifesting the original guiding avian spirit, a-Mantsho-ŋo-Pɔn, who led them from the Fouta to the coast; their giant serpent headdress, a-Mantsho-ŋa-Tshol, who may relate to Manding “founding python” narratives; the very representation of the creator God and creative powers, a-Tshol, perhaps unique in Africa; female spirits of enticement for the old men and the young men called Yombofissa, Signal, and Tiyambo; and Sibondel, the devious hare who undercuts political authority.⁵⁸ The Temne, on the other hand, are better known for their royal brass masks (ε-Rɔŋ-ra-Bai), and the masks of Keita ruling families (ε-Rɔŋ-ε-Thoma) from Manding.⁵⁹ They have very few masks representing common ancestors or spirits of the forest, and of those, the majority are borrowed from the Mende or Bullom, such as a-Nɔwo of the women’s Bondo association, Pa Kashi of the men’s Pɔrɔ association, and Gɔngoli, the antisocial mask.⁶⁰ Others are imported from the Krio of Freetown.

In the initiation of boys into adulthood, the Temne initiates in *ra-bai-da-themne* (“that of the Temne king”) returned to the village for their coming-out ceremonies at the end of three or four months in the sacred forest grove as “princes,” dressed in their fine embroidered indigo gowns, turbans wrapped around their heads, holding elaborately carved staffs as they marched in procession into the village.⁶¹ Baga male initiates, on the other

⁵⁸ Lamp, *Art of the Baga*; Frederick John Lamp, “Air and Water, the Vertical and Horizontal, Tradition Versus Transition: a Baga Headdress (a-Bil-ŋa-Tshol),” in Lamp, Frederick John (ed.), *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at The Baltimore Museum of Art* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2004), 164–167; Frederick John Lamp, “How the Young Men Stole the Old Men’s Dream: the Origin of the Tiyambo Headdress of the Baga,” in *Imaging and Identity: African Art from the Lowe Art Museum and South Florida Collections* (Miami: Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, 2005).

⁵⁹ William A. Hart, “Aron Arabai: The Temne Mask of Chieftaincy,” *African Arts*, 11–2 (1986), 41–45, 91; Frederick John Lamp, “The Royal Horned Hippopotamus of the Keita of Temne: a-Rɔŋ-a-Thoma,” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin 2005* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 2005), 36–53.

⁶⁰ Lamp, “Cosmos, Cosmetics”; Lamp, “Manuel Álvares,” note 1; Frederick John Lamp, “Frogs into Princes: the Temne Rabai Initiation,” *African Arts*, 11–2 (1978), 34–49, 94; Major Alexander Gordon Laing, *Travels in the Timannee, Kooranko, and Soolima Countries, in Western Africa* (London: John Murray, 1825), opp. p. 50: left.

⁶¹ Lamp, “Frogs into Princes.”

hand, in the final ceremonies of *ka-kəntsh*, were mercilessly beaten while running the gauntlet to greet the terrifying highest male spirit (a-Mantsho-ŋo-Pən), and entered the village with their heads covered in a simulated conical fish trap (*kə-mbakəla*), and wearing only a short skirt made of stripped date-palm leaves (*ɔma*).⁶²

I do not mean to suggest that the dyads of younger brother–older brother were entirely fixed and immutable, with a one-to-one correspondence permeating all areas of Baga-Temne life, as one could point to many noble characteristics of the Baga, some of whom have reached high social status (the first lady of Guinea, 1984–2008, for example), and less-noble aspects of the Temne, most of whom live very ordinary, if not financially insecure lives as subsistence farmers and fishermen. But there remain some elements that seem to correspond to the historical significance of their names.

To be “younger brother” or “older brother” carries wide implications and deep responsibilities. One cannot know the one without knowing the other. One term does not exist without the other. One cannot know the Baga or the Temne people without understanding the words.⁶³ This is why it is so important for the researcher to know the language of their people of study, and, as much as possible, to interview in the indigenous language, to write a transcription of the interviews in that language, and then to translate into the researcher’s own language. Errors come when the interviews are conducted in a *lingua franca*, such as Susu, or in the national language, such as French or English, as each language is embedded in its own cultural context. When I speak in French, I think in French; when I speak in Susu, I think in Susu.

The errors of the past occurred because of an ignorance of the history and ethnohistory of Baga and Temne origins, their interaction, and their linguistic relationship. Without my knowledge of the Temne, their history, and their language, I would not have known the significance of the Baga ethnonym.⁶⁴

⁶² Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, 111–114.

⁶³ No Baga dictionary existed when I did my research. There is only one made publicly available: Frederick John Lamp, “Baga Tshi-Tem Dictionary” (2016), online at: <https://catalogingafricana.wordpress.com/2016/07/10/dictionary-in-baga-tshi-tem/>.

⁶⁴ No other researcher of the Baga had worked also with the Temne. It was because of the Temne perception of Baga intrigue that I first gained a persistent desire to work with the Baga. Somewhere outside my Temne town of Mambolo, Sierra Leone, in 1967, a group of “Baga” lived, according to my Temne friends, although I never saw this hamlet, and am not sure it actually existed. To the Temne, they were mysterious, and my friends particularly remarked that they “mushed up” their words, imitating how the Temne “t” becomes “tsh” in Baga, as in aŋ-tol/a-tshol (medicine). Guinea became a communist dictatorship after independence in 1957, and was closed to Western Europeans and Americans from 1964 to 1984, because of Guinean

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animosity to the colonial French, its post-colonial alignment with the Soviet Union, and because of an incident with Pan American Airlines. As soon as the dictator Sekou Touré died in 1984, I immediately submitted a grant proposal to the Smithsonian Institution for a feasibility study of six weeks in Guinea, and went in 1985 to study the Baga.

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