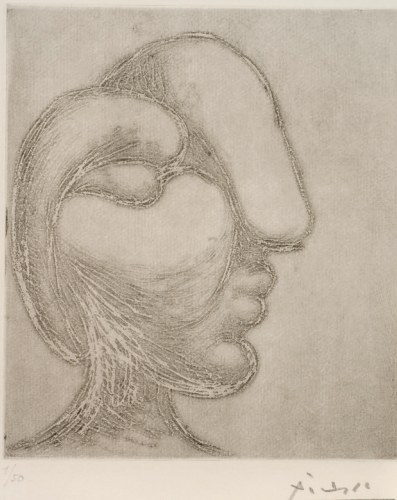


Nimba

Baga Art and the Great Mother

The Great Mother

The great *Nimba* mask at the heart of this exhibition represents the most important form of Baga art. The largest masks produced in Western Africa, they are among African art's most renowned ritual objects. Symbolizing peace and benevolence, the *Nimba* mask's spiritual powers bring the Baga people together in celebration. French colonialists collected these colossal masks, bringing them back to France for display. The carved *Nimba* masks with their exaggerated forms, unusual proportions, and stylized decoration served both to inspire and influence modernist artists such as Picasso, Matisse, and Giacometti. The *Nimba* is credited with bringing Western attention to the remote Baga culture and its prolific artistic tradition.



Pablo Picasso | Head, 1933 | Etching and crayon, 76 x 155 mm
Gift of Georges Bloch, Zurich, to The Israel Museum, Jerusalem
B72.0178

Who are the Baga?

The name “Baga” is derived from a term in the language of the dominant Susu culture meaning “people of the seaside.” Residing in what is today the Republic of Guinea, the Baga number about 34,000 and are believed to have originated from the Fouta Djallon, Guinea's interior highlands. The Baga were persistently driven from their land by neighboring cultures and Islamic oppression until the fourteenth century, when they finally settled in the coastal swamplands of western Guinea. Throughout the centuries they resolutely maintained their traditional ways, even after the arrival of nineteenth-century French Roman Catholic colonialists who discouraged indigenous ritual. Despite oppression, Baga practices continued to flourish.

Modifications in ceremonial art reflect the incorporation of new religious ideologies and political change. After gaining independence from the French in 1958, Guinea was taken over by an Islamic-Marxist government. Surviving icons of the Baga's animistic religion were destroyed, practices were outlawed as part of a “demystification” program, and Guinean nationalism replaced

what was left of the Baga traditions. The ensuing three decades of iconoclasm – lasting until 1984 – resulted in the destruction of secret initiation societies and their sacred objects. However, ritual art and its secrets never entirely disappeared from Baga life, thanks to Baga women, whose cults were not targeted for destruction during this period. It was they who secretly maintained tribal wisdom and ritual carvings. Baga ceremonial masquerades resurfaced, and were resumed legally as an affirmation of tribal identity, with the rise to power of a more democratic government. Today the Baga are predominantly Muslim.

This exhibition focuses on Baga art, reflected through masks, carvings, and sculptures, some kept hidden and preserved in the sacred forest for decades, while others were created in the mid- to late-twentieth century for secular village gatherings, celebrating personal or communal events. The main body of the works exhibited here are on loan from the Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African



The Katakò Hoard

This exhibition marks the first time that the eleven Katakò masterworks seen here have been revealed to the world. Brought out of the sacred Katakò forest after being hidden for over sixty years, they survived both iconoclasm and Jihad. While masquerades, dances, and rituals are maintained today as symbols of Baga unity, the practices in the sacred wood have ended. The Baga community has aged, with the young generation seeking its fortune elsewhere. The last of the remaining Baga elders have decided that after performing a final act of generosity for the community, the old spirits can be set free to seek new audiences.

The Baga distinguished between ceremonial objects, called *tolom* – meaning “secret” – which were used by the initiated elders, and those called *powolsene* – meaning “toy” – used by youths. Those used for entertainment were painted in symbolic colors and danced according to a strict code. The *Nimba* and *sibondel* masks, for example, are considered *powolsene* and are meant to appear in public, while objects such as those discovered in the Katakò hoard were most likely considered *tolom* and meant to be seen only by the initiated.



Atekan women's society maternity figure with child | Baga people, Katakò, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1950 | Wood, 96 x 32 x 37 cm
Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 57351

Nimba Shoulder Masks and Headdresses

The best-known of the Baga masks are the *Nimba*, after the female entity of the same name. The mask depicts a woman at the height of her power – fertile, intelligent, and pure of heart. Her posture suggests confidence and fearlessness. Her breasts are full but pendulant; she is a mother who has nursed her children who are now grown. On her face are scarifications representing grains of rice – the main Baga crop – and symbols of fecundity and abundance. Carefully positioned crescent shapes, symbolic of lunar cycles and bodies of water, represent the power of her femininity.



Nimba shoulder mask (pefet) | Baga people, Katakò, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1940 | Wood, 74 x 34 x 34 cm
Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 57353



Shoulder mask/headress, possibly of the zigurin-wonde (“young bride”) type | Baga people, Katakò, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1940 | Wood, 96 x 32 x 34 cm
Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 57352

Zigurin-wonde (“young bride”) headdresses of this kind are owned by young men and used solely for entertainment in performances, particularly at weddings. The performer wears it on top of his head, grasping the leg-like projections at the base of the mask and leaving the figure's breasts exposed. The costume is completed with the addition of a skirt made from palm fiber. The smaller-scale *pefet Nimba* mask is used in dances and performances during the funerary rites of community elders.

Masks and Headdresses

The *tiyambo* mask represents a young girl approaching puberty, about to undergo initiation in preparation for marriage. She is wearing the typical bracelets on her forearm and belts of beads around her waist. Her body is painted red in accordance



Hand-held dance figure (tiyambo/Yombofissa) | Baga people, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1940 | Wood, 72 x 24 x 25 cm | Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 57373

with the Baga idealized representation of light skin. *Yombofissa* means “beautiful hair,” and she indeed has elaborately plaited hair from which horns emerge, hinting at the spiritual essence of this carving. The young girl's arms support her breasts as a sign both of worship and seduction.

Named after the *Bansonyi* men's secret association, this mask is brought out from the sacred forest during male coming-of-age rites, immediately preceding the circumcision ceremony. The *bansonyi* mask/headress houses the *a-Mantsho-na-Tshol* – “master of medicine” – the supreme spiritual entity



Male initiation snake mask (bansonyi) | Baga people, the Republic of Guinea, 1963 | Wood and paint, 170 x 24 cm | Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 57361

of Baga society, and is therefore believed to be the strongest adversary of evil forces and sorcery which threaten a community's well-being. It also appears at funeral ceremonies for important members of the community. The snake headdress was often identified as a rainbow, which the Baga associate with essential themes such as life and death, and the perpetuation of lineages.



Family shrine figure (elek/tshol) | Baga people, the Republic of Guinea, late 19th – early 20th century | Wood, 40 x 80.5 x 22 cm
Gift of Ernst Anspach, New York, to American Friends of the Israel Museum B870133

Elekel (sing. *elek*) figures combine bird and human features, and were created for the worship of the supreme deities *Kanu* and his wife *Somtup*, together with lineage ancestors. They are housed in the family homes of villagers in an effort to appease the ancestors and as a center for sacrificial offerings in exchange for protection against evil spirits and witchcraft. The dry harvest season heralds ceremonies, community festivities, and male initiations during which *elek* heads are taken out and danced. *Elek* heads are also used during funerals of lineage elders and



other important community leaders.

A-tshol is a long-beaked bird, most likely a pelican that is the manifestation of a spirit. According to Baga myth, a fisherman encountered this bird a number of times, and asked the spirit to accompany him back to his village to reside there. Eventually the spirit-bird agreed, and thus every Baga home has an *A-tshol*, a symbol of the life-giving spirit of the water.

Long-beaked birds such as the pelican encountered by fishermen were considered a spiritual manifestation of the power of the water. As such, pelicans or fish-eagles feature prominently in the masks and headdresses used by the Baga. The fish-eagle was believed to embody a spirit whose presence bodes imminent death or disaster.

The realistically designed bird-shaped *a-bamp* mask/headress typically depicts groupings of



A-bamp bird head-crest | Baga people, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1930 | Wood and paint, 85 x 35 cm
Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 57359

figures on its back, usually two smaller birds and two female figures. It is used on festive occasions and celebrations marking the end of initiation rites. Once exclusively featured in sacred rituals, these masks gradually



Double-pelican headdress | Baga people, the Republic of Guinea, mid-20th century | Wood, paint, metal, 48 x 19 cm | Gift of the Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art B71824

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sibondel is an example of masks created in a period of modernity. It incorporates what appears to be a hare's head with long ears, whose stylized tail emerges from the back. The figures carried within the box are four Muslim dignitaries in typical white caps and two female Baga figures painted red to indicate light skin. Danced principally at marriages, the *sibondel* symbolized Baga ingenuity and survival instincts at a time when the Islamic Malinke political and religious threat was beginning to take effect.



Male initiation drum (timba) | Baga people, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1944. Wood, animal skin, paint, 102 x 36 x 36 cm | Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 169365



Headdress or box mask (sibondel) | Baga people, the Republic of Guinea, early 20th century. Wood, paint, cotton textile, 117 x 63 x 59 cm | Gift of the Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | B14.1948

uncircumcised male organ with the head and face of the *Nimba* – the Great Mother – renders him neither male nor female. Although *Nimba* depicts the quintessential woman, and has been described by scholar Fredric Lamp as the idea of “beauty, comportment, righteousness, dignity, and social duty,” the existence of both female and male *Nimba* figures implies that the ideals represented by the *Nimba* cross genders.

Drum/Timba

In Baga society, drums such as this were used by adult males fulfilling important roles in male initiation rituals. Made from a single piece of wood, it is supported by an elegantly carved equine figure. In West Africa, the horse is a prestige symbol. During the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the Baga were introduced to the horse by the French colonial administrators for whom it was a means of transportation. Associated with power, the horse became a symbol of strength and control, and therefore horse figures are used to decorate the property of community heads and elders.

Sibondel

The *sibondel* box mask was created for Baga ceremonies in the 1930s. Reflecting a period of social and religious change, the



Pre-initiation male child figure | Baga people, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1900. Wood, 79 x 32 x 34 cm | Gift of the Faith-dorian and Martin Wright Family, New York, to American Friends of the Israel Museum, in memory of their son, Jordan M. Wright | 1008.1058



Pre-initiation female child figure | Baga people, Katakò, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1935. Wood, 85 x 24 x 37 cm | Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 157370

Women's Secret Societies

Women's societies gained strength and importance during periods of iconoclasm, as they were never targeted for destruction. The *A-tekan* is an exclusive cult for mothers, actively initiating girls into womanhood. The main requirement for admission to the *A-tekan* societies is motherhood, which was viewed as a woman's main objective in life.

A woman who has never given birth cannot be considered an adult female, and thus will not be granted the rights and status of an initiated member. *A-tekan* remains active today, whereas men's cults have disappeared; thus women are credited with maintaining Baga traditions.



A-tekan women's society female figure | Baga people, Katakò, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1935. Wood, 88 x 25 x 34 cm | Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 157369

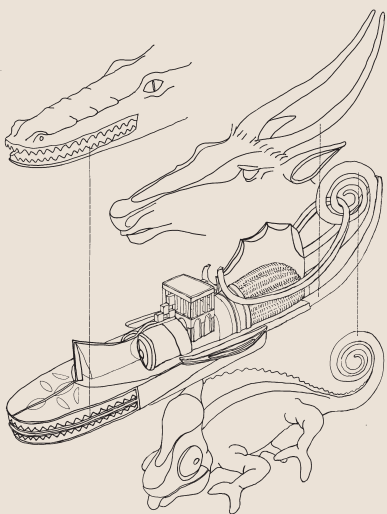


Young female initiate figure | Baga people, Katakò, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1950. Wood, 102 x 35 x 33 cm | Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 157371

became objects used for entertainment.

Banda masks are worn horizontally on the head and represent a supernatural being that has the power to protect the community. The wood and raffia mask incorporates an elongated human face, the jaws of a crocodile, the horns of an antelope, the body of a serpent, and the tail of a chameleon; the positive attributes of each animal enhance the power of the mask, and a masked dancer performs a complicated dance imitating the characteristics of these animals. *Banda* masks appear in fertility rituals, after the rice harvests, during the dry season, and at funerals, invoking the spirits of nature.

The Baga masquerader manipulates the *banda* mask with awe-inspiring dexterity invoking the movements of different animals, including undulating serpents, soaring birds, and foot-stamping bulls. In the main spectacle of the



Banda mask | Baga/Nalu people, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1955 | Wood and paint, 172 x 47 x 41 cm | Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 157375



Nimba (The Great Mother) shoulder mask | Baga people, the Republic of Guinea, ca. 1935. Wood, 111 x 43 x 35 cm | Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art | 157356

Nimba: Baga Art and the Great Mother

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