

## Memories and Mechanisms of Resistance to the Atlantic slave trade: the Ekang Saga in West Central Africa's epic tale the *Mvet*

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### ABSTRACT

The exploration of African oral literature has cast new light on the history of the Atlantic slave trade. Working on diverse regions and from various sources, scholars have used folk materials for a new understanding of slave trade mechanisms. Building on the *Mvet* epic tale of West Central Africa, the present paper investigates the techniques of encryption of slave trade-related memories. It looks into the philosophical and moral tenets of the *Mvet* to argue that the tale was not only a strategy of resistance to the alienating ethics of Western capitalism, it also reads as a humanist discourse through which the Fang-Beti-Bulu people asserted their agency against the commodification of the black body. This paradigm reverberates across postcolonial societies of Gabon, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea with the appropriation of the *Mvet* art by a new generation of artists who have recalibrated the ancient epic to serve as instrument of resistance to Western cultural hegemony, and as a regenerative site for postcolonial identities. With its legendary superheroes and sophisticated weaponry, the mythic territory of the *Mvet* anticipates the Afro-futuristic universe of Wakanda in the American Marvel film *Black Panther*.

### KEYWORDS

*Mvet*; epic; slave trade; slavery; oral literature; agency; afro-futurism; postcolonial identities

Over the past decades, the use of African oral tradition has cast new light on the history of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade (Bellagamba, Green, and Klein 2013). Working on diverse regions and from various sources – songs, fables, legends, allegorical tales, epic stories – historians have shown that oral literature is particularly rife with invaluable historical information helping to revise and, at times, supplement the written records mainly derived from European archives.

Due to the mechanisms of their encryption and transmission, folk materials cannot be understood in terms of incontrovertible historical evidence. The exploration of these oral documents proves mainly instructive on the techniques African populations had devised to record past events, some of which have been turned into myths. Epic tales generally encapsulate these patterns of recollection. They read as 'alternative, metaphorized forms' of history (Murphy 2012, 4) and provide a different register for remembering in which lay buried 'complex condensations of cultural and historical meanings' (Shaw 2002, 22; see also Argenti 2010).

Building on this theoretical framework, I will examine the *Mvet* epic tale as the epitome of African oral literature wherein historical events are codified through myths and legends. The

*Mvet* is a verbal and mnemonic art found among the Fang-Beti-Bulu people, a Bantu-speaking population of southern Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.<sup>1</sup> The term refers to both a musical instrument and heroic stories narrated by a bard officially known as *mbóm Mvet* (literally *Mvet* player). The first known documentation of the *Mvet* was carried out by Günther Tessmann in his work *Die Pangwe* (1913) and provides a rather cursory description of the musical instrument. But the recording and comprehensive historical approach to the *Mvet* will appear in written form with the publication of *Un Mvet de Zwè Nguéma*. Collected in 1960 in the village of Anguia (north Gabon), it was translated from Fang into French in 1961 by Elie Nkoga and Mme Draget with the help of Philippe Ndong Ntoutoume who will release his first *Mvet* volume a decade later. For the Fang people, the *Mvet* tale is invested with such a strong philosophical meaning that it remains the locus of identity structuring. In that connection, James Fernandez (1982, 58) has compared the *Mvet* with the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* whereas Pierre Alexandre thinks the *Mvet* is 'the most original expression not only of Cameroonian and Gabonese, but indeed of African culture' (1974, 3). This view is reiterated by Pascal Boyer who ranks the *Mvet* among 'the most brilliant genres of African traditional literature' (1988, 15).

The *Mvet* is generally organized during the ceremony marking the end of the mourning period of a man's death. Transmitted through the process of esoteric initiation,<sup>2</sup> the *Mvet* forms the linchpin of Fang culture. Steeped in a hyperbolic language, the tale does not provide a linear narrativization of the past. For that reason, scholars have not been able to trace accurately its origin. From Pierre Alexandre's early deposition, we know that the *Mvet* consists of a diversity of genres (1974). The most popular one is called *Mvet Ekang* because it narrates the saga of the Ekang, the descendants of the patriarch Ekang Nna, the founder of the legendary territory of Engong. *Mvet Ekang* is divided into heroic cycles with a narrative pattern that centres on the endless conflicts between the 'immortal' warriors of Engong and their rivals of Okü. While Engong seems to be an allegory of military power exalting the triumph of iron – the name literally means iron – Okü refers instead to a region with no clear-cut configuration. Engong is located south of Okü, supposedly the north-eastern part from which the Fang migrated fleeing the attacks of 'red giants' (Alexandre and Binet 1958, 15–16), the Mvele or the Bassa (Ndong Ndoutoume 1970, 16) and cannibal chthonian monsters memorialized in the legends of Ngourangourane (Trilles 2011, 60–73; Mvé Ondo 2013, 99–118) and Mulumumu-Mba (Laburthe-Tolra 2009, 54). The *Mvet* does not say much about the Ekang way of life, except for the account of their genealogy that shows Engong to be a Nation. Paramount in this Nation is the military organization consisting of a pyramidal distribution of powers (Ndong Ndoutoume 1993, 69–80). On top of the hierarchy, Akoma Mba, 'The Supreme Commander', wields absolute power whereas Engouang Ondo, the 'Chief of Army' embodies eminent masculine qualities required of an individual responsible for an army of superheroes raised from the thirteen villages of Engong. Ekang warriors are men of exceptional physical and mental strength whose invulnerability ensures the domination of Engong over Okü. This supremacy is enhanced by a 'smart weaponry' and by the great magician, Engoung Bere, gifted with a transcendent vision. His eyes compared to 'high-tech' devices used to preclude and pre-empt any evil

plan against Engong. Added to this defensive strategy is the erection of guard huts (called *aba*) at the gateways of every Ekang village to prevent surprise attacks. A highly symbolic place in Fang social organization, *aba* was not only the favourite stage for the narration of Ekang feats, it also served as both a courtroom and a war room where men gathered to strategize military expeditions. With its abundance of fantastic creatures, sophisticated technology and its army of superheroes, Engong's imaginary world anticipates the Afro-futuristic universe of Wakanda in the American Marvel film *Black Panther*. Indeed the vibranium, a sound-absorbing metal derived from a meteorite, ensures the Wakandans' military supremacy over rival armies the same way the Ekang dominate other nations due to their expertise in iron metallurgy that has bestowed them the status of immortality.

If the myths of superheroes 'provide us with ways of understanding the emergent present' (Coetzee 2016, 241) and mediate ideas and ideologies (Wolk 2009, 723; Dem 2010, 121), the questions I will attempt to address in this paper concern the underlying dynamics and historical circumstances out of which the *Mvet* originated. How much does the *microhistory* of the Fang, hyperbolically staged in the *Mvet*, tell us about the *macrohistory* of West Central Africa?<sup>3</sup> Is this fantastic tale an outlet for sublimation of a major traumatic event lost in history? I will address these issues by tapping into *Un Mvet de Zwè Nguéma*, Philippe Ndong Ndoutoume's two volumes *Le Mvett : épopée fang* (1970) and *Le Mvett : l'homme, la mort et l'immortalité* (1993).<sup>4</sup> Recorded in 1960, *Un Mvet* is the most ancient and complete text available in a bilingual edition (Fang-French) allowing for full appreciation of the artistic and linguistic complexity of the Fang epic. I essentially rely on Zwè Nguéma's and Ndong Ndoutoume's stories because they provide indirect comments on historical memories probably dating back to the nineteenth century. As such, they bear *traces* of the slave trading mechanisms (raids, kidnappings, captives of wars, sudden attacks on villages) which had disappeared in twentieth-century West Central Africa and were replaced by forced labour during the period of colonization.

### The slave trade, the *Jihad* and the genesis of the *Mvet*

Mbala Nkanga has observed that 'despite *Mvett*'s prominence in the social and cultural life of the Fang people, dating its appearance is problematic, and its direct connection with Fang history remains a mystery.' (2010, 95). Actually, this 'mystery' can partially be solved if the ideal of immortality and the obsessive staging of a war-torn society in the *Mvet* are examined against the historical backdrop of West Central Africa, a vast region demographically reshaped in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by two major events: the religious war or the *Jihad* launched by Usman Dan Fodio following the foundation of the Sokoto caliphate in northern Nigeria and the Atlantic slave trade. By the 1810s, Dan Fodio established a centralized politico-religious system ruled in accordance with the strict tenets of the Sharia, Hadith and Sunna (Smaldone 1977; Lovejoy 1978, 2016). Islam then spread across West Central Africa (especially Nigeria and Cameroon) through the Fulani armed groups formed with the purpose of eradicating paganism. This religious expansion was accompanied by political re-organization of conquered territories, divided into *lamidats* (Muslim polities) and headed by *lamidos*. It was in this period that Modibbo Adama created the Emirate of Adamawa in northern Cameroon. The political and economic management of Adamawa epitomizes the way Dan Fodio's lieutenants 'used military means to stake fiefs for themselves and to capture and reduce local

populations to slavery.’ Ahmadou Sehou goes on to contend that ‘Difference of religion and economic interests were crucial in the subjection and exploitation of native people by an Islamic aristocracy’ (Bellagamba, Green, and Klein 2013, 88, 182). Likewise, Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson explore the mechanisms of the internal slave markets in the states of West Africa to show that ‘the Muslim caliphates that emerged in the *jihads* of the period, were not only suppliers of slaves to external markets but also employed large numbers of slaves domestically’ (1995, 263). Religion was then a determining agent in the development of the slave trade (Lovejoy 1983, 2016; Cooper 1979).

The *Jihad* proved fundamentally disruptive for African societies, resulting in the dismemberment of formally unified communities and the subsequent ‘domino effect’ of inter- and intra-ethnic warfare (Thornton 1999). This means that ethnic groups fleeing the attacks of the Fulani or their auxiliaries waged wars on other communities, compelled to run away before launching similar operations against the populations they met on their migrating route. The Fulani *Jihad* exacerbated conflicts in West Central Africa, generating waves of population movements that recall the costly human impact of Boko Haram in Nigeria, northern Cameroon and Niger today.

The *Jihad* coupled with slave trading warfare might have forced the Fang to migrate southward into their present location. The Fang could not escape the disruptive impact of the Fulani expansion for two main reasons: firstly, in the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, they were supposed to be located in the northeastern regions of present-day Cameroon where the Fulani were extending their domination. Secondly, their nomadic way of life combined with a relatively liberal social and political organization made them vulnerable, so that their chaotic displacements underlie a collective effort to escape subjugation figuratively depicted in oral literature through tyrannical rulers or cruel monsters.

### The *Mvet* tale: the quest for ‘immortality’ as metaphor of resistance

The language, the *Mvet* art and the cult of the ancestors *Byeri* were the essential markers of the Fang cultural identity. While *Byeri*, which has virtually disappeared, was the repository of Fang spirituality, the *Mvet* still exists as the locus of philosophical knowledge and ancient values transmitted through the performative power of the spoken word and the spectacular narration of heroic feats. Susan Wadley is then right in asserting that epics ‘stand apart from other songs and stories because of community identification with them’ (1991, 220–221). As such, they serve an ‘identity-structuring function’ (Honko 1996, 22; see also Ondo 2010; Biyogo 2002), and represent a ‘saga of identity’ (Connelly 1986, 225) formed over time from crystallized historical layers. This is the case with the *Mvet* whose cultural significance evolved throughout the migration of the Fang people. Tracing its origin, Daniel Assoumou Ndoutoume contends that a man named Nna Otse was the first Fang to have played the harp-zither called *mvét*. It was a very rustic instrument he would play in the guard hut while telling stories much to the joy of children who surrounded him and were listening (1986, 43). While Assoumou Ndoutoume elaborates on the existence of ‘proto-Mvet’, Philippe Ndong Ntoutoume provides clues on the genesis of the *Mvet Ekang*. The transition occurred with the rising of a legendary warrior Oyono Ada Ngone who will become the putative inventor of the martial version of the *Mvet*. Based on an exegesis that conflates myth and reality, Oyono Ada Ngone is depicted as a man of superheroic qualities he constantly displayed on the battlefield.

[He] was also a man of faith. Before embarking on a war expedition, he would disappear in a hut, retreat in prayer on the mountaintop or withdraw into the deep forest. [...] One day, Oyono Ada Ngone unexpectedly lost consciousness before falling into a coma. Everyone attributed the incident to a war injury he might have kept secret. Being on the run, the villagers had to carry his lifeless body for several days, ministering to his needs while others thought him dead. A miracle then occurred when Oyono Ada Ngone suddenly regained consciousness and announced he had traveled in the confines of "Nothingness" where he had come face to face with some divine or transcendental force called Eyö. From this metaphysical entity, Oyono Ada Ngone had received cosmological knowledge (the story of the creation of the universe) as well as a harp-zither he would play while telling the saga of Ekang warriors. (Ndong Ndoutoume 1993, 15–16)

It is likely that the mutation of the *Mvet* was the result of a traumatic event symbolized by the Christ-like 'death-resurrection' of Oyono Ada Ngone. The initial Ekang cycle might then have been invented to record a special historical episode comparable to what Paul Ricœur has defined by the terms 'tremendum horrendum' in his theorizing of the principal motivation in the appropriation and fictionalization of particular historical events. Drawing on Otto Rank's concept of 'epoch-making' phenomena, Ricœur argues that the transposition of history into fiction is determined by two main factors he calls 'tremendum fascinosum' and 'tremendum horrendum' (1985, 340). The notion of 'tremendum' remains consubstantial with history. It forms the 'emotional nucleus' of every epoch-making event of which the inscription into fiction aims at fighting forgetfulness. Such events crystallize both the sense of horror and sacredness, and are reimagined so that they will not be forgotten. Ricœur's conception of memory and history echoes Hannah Arendt's observation that storytelling and artistic work can 'immortalize' certain experiences and events by affixing them definitively to 'the public realm' (1958, 50–58). It also intersects with Paul Gilroy's analysis of the disruptive experience of slavery which is re-enacted in the cultures of the black Atlantic to 'serve a mnemonic function [by] directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory' (1993, 197–198). A similar politics of memory explains why the *Mvet* became an essential cultural component whereby the Fang were to reclaim a rejuvenated collective identity.

In performance, the *Mvet* recital is based on the virtuosity of oral delivery and the intricate, twisted narrative mechanism usually woven with multi-layered stories. The recital can last whole days, making vocal delivery a real challenge. To keep the attention of the audience and build up emotional intensity, the bard's declamation needs strong and colourful dramaturgy, achieved through a complex gamut of vocal expressions. The narrative itself is generally interspersed with choruses, interludes, call-and-responses carried out in a 'fractal rhythmicity,' that is a rhythm commingling performative language such as screams, onomatopoeia, whistling and chanting, speaking, chanting-speaking style (Mvé Bekale 2015, 137–152). The oral performance of heroic deeds and the emotional intensity create a dialogic interplay with the audience, enabling both the visualization of scenes and the subsequent experience of moral and psychological potentiation.

### *Mvet Ekang*: moral potentiation and resistance to the capitalistic reification of man

It is now a well-established historical fact that most tribal and ethnic wars in nineteenth-century West Central Africa were related to the expansion of Islam and the Atlantic slave

trade. Although the *Jihad* was launched for religious conversion of pagan populations, it ended up creating a system of internal slavery which also fed the Atlantic slave trade. Both the *Jihad* and the slave trade brought about a precarious environment in which African populations displayed great ingenuity in reinventing themselves. They imagined diverse 'magical' tricks and strategies to keep at bay the daily threats surrounding them. This existential struggle forms the nexus and the fabric of the *Mvet* tale. It accounts for heroic deeds, the moral standards and the psychology of characters. It is pervasive in the heroes' social world, starting from the military organization of the mythic territory of Engong. Literally meaning iron, the name conveys the sense of vitality and will-power that will define Fang culture (Fernandez 1966). The will-power ideology is instantiated in every *Mvet* through the depiction of the Engong surrealistic environment. In most tales, we discover houses covered with iron sheet, equipped with 'stairways' and 'escalators' made up of iron chains. When Engong's inhabitants get angry, their screams produce rainbows, clouds, and thunderstorms. Their weapons consist of flying bells, large two-edged swords, heavy hammers, long knives, spinning balls, guns and rifles using explosive bullets that conjure up e-bombs. Here the imaginary weaponry calls to mind the postmodern technology as the spectator is taken in a fantastic world where machine-gun bullets are programmed to pursue their victims. At times *Mvet* warriors are seen chasing their enemies on the back of flying elephants armed with iron wings.

Zwè Nguéma's story, recorded in 1960, is a voyage into this Afro-futuristic Wakanda-like universe. The first meaningful scene of this twelve-chant tale stages a rite of passage. At the outset of the narrative, Akoma Mba, the aspiring supreme commander of Engong and his friend Medza M'Otoughe transition from the status of young adults into individuals with superpowers. Eager to accomplish their destinies, the two men take a trip to the village of Nnang Ndong, Medza M'Otoughe's uncle. In search of wealth, glory and power, they embark on a physical and metaphysical journey in a typical Fang ritual of initiation. The uncle, an oracle, starts with his nephew, presents him with 'magic food' supposed to make Medza invulnerable as well as the wealthiest man on earth. Nnang Ndong also offers Medza an elephant tusk, a heavy hammer and a big iron chain. As for Akoma Mba, he receives a big assegai, a dowry of iron bars and a purse made of wild cat skin. Then the oracle tells him that he will know all 'tricks and all the secrets of the ghosts. From now on, you will know what Angoung Bere [the greatest magician on earth] conceals in his magic bags' (De Wolf and De Wolf 1972, 32). Both the big assegai and the dowry are symbols of military power and economic success whereas the ability to break through the secret of the 'ghosts' endows Akoma Mba with an extraordinary faculty he will need to outwit his enemies and stave off any threat and danger from the rivals of Okü.

Once back home, Akoma Mba starts to misuse his superpowers as illustrated by the brutal killing of his brother-in-law:

Akoma Mba plunged his big toe into the ground and a magic bell burst in him ... . He pulled out a large and long double-edged knife and dealt a severe blow on his brother-in-law who was standing in front of the guard hut. The latter fell into separate pieces. (37)

This first wanton murder is carried out to test and assert Akoma Mba's limitless might. It enhances his newfound status though the misuse of his superpower raises questions about his moral standards.

The technology of iron ensures military superiority, a competitive advantage Engong people are bent on keeping for themselves and using to subdue rival armies. Here legend is not completely disconnected from history. Since the 'Iron Age' and throughout history iron has exerted fascination on human beings. Along with copper, it was a currency much in demand during the Atlantic slave trade and was the principal cause of wars. The transformation of iron into weapons has always threatened the world with annihilation. It is the source of power, advanced technology, absolute domination conveyed by the idea of immortality. For the survival of mankind it is necessary to remove iron from the earth. This political project informs Ndong Ndoutoume's *Le Mvett*. It is conceived to prevent war and promote peace throughout the rival territories of Engong and Okü. The plot is set in the land of Okü where the village Nkobam is expecting a son named Oveng Ndoumou Obame. Once the baby is born, Obame Ndong, the grand-father, summons all the 'Initiated' of the region. They arrive flying like giant bats, transforming the Nkobam sky into the setting of a spectacular air show. The baby is handed to the grand-father who orders the assembly to prepare him for a 'great destiny': 'He must be a giant, a Chief, a man of strong personality' (1970, 28). The boy is transported to the mountaintop and submitted to something of a surgical operation. His body is pried open, all his organs, except the skin (the 'Initiated' want to preserve the boy's human appearance) are replaced with iron.

This transmutation has a strong cultural meaning. It is simultaneously a political and 'scientific' meeting to which everyone with specialized knowledge will contribute. It is a technological cooperation whereby all the 'great minds' (*beyem*) must conceive a sophisticated weapon in the form of a superhero. During the magical/technological operation, the body of the new-born is transformed into an alloy of steel and flesh. With this mutant body, he will be able to face and overcome any challenge. He has become a military weapon. Viewed from the angle of Fang culture, this metamorphosis is consistent with the idea of masculinity as a shield for the community. Changing a baby boy into a humanoid then pinpoints the ideal of super-masculinity paramount in Fang patriarchal society. The invention of an Iron-Man, entrusted with a military and political mission, presupposes the existence of strong enemies against whom the Fang conceived an unstoppable weapon.

To preserve his status as the unique 'Iron-Man' of Okü, Oveng Ndoume Obame ordered the destruction of every metallic object. From now on, his people will make a living from pastoral and artistic activities. He assigns Ela Minko M'Obiang with the epic mission, and gives his lieutenant a whistle made of copper whose sound has the mystic power to melt any metallic object. Ela then embarks on a messianic crusade for the extinction of iron and the expansion of peace across Okü. At some point, Ela's voyage is reminiscent of Homer's *The Odyssey* with its hardships, ordeals and challenges. The hero must fight fierce battles in the bush, in villages, in the air against rebellious tribes.

Writing about the metaphorical narrativization of history in African fiction, Laura Murphy points out the inconspicuousness of the memories of the slave trade, often evoked as shadows, threatening spirits, *traces* that sit in the interstices of storytelling (2007, 144). This is what Ela Minko discovers at a climactic moment of his voyage upon reaching the banks of a mysterious river Mveng-Metué. Until now, he has won all the battles helped by his magic whistle and has vanquished without any bloodshed. The encounter with the Mveng-Metué definitely transforms Ela Minko. He acquires a new

insight about the moral and political meaning of his mission consisting in the extinction of iron on earth. He is confronted with an apocalyptic landscape showing the damage caused by the use of iron ore. The ravages of war are visible in the description of the river, 'a red streak flowing into a mangrove forest' (Ndong Ndoutoume 1970, 37). Ela Minko soon realizes that the river bears the memories of tribal wars:

He knew that this river was draining torrents of blood! He knew the tribes who lived on the banks of this river spent their lives fighting each other. He also knew that their fabulous proliferation made it impossible to completely exterminate them. He knew the names of these tribes. They are called tribe of Thunderstorm, tribe of Lightning, tribe of Army Ants, and tribe of Fighters. The first two were opposed to the last two in endless, ruthless and violent wars. Death was raging and the river, swollen with blood, flooded the region with its reddish water. The river flowed deep into a country where the sky and the earth seemed to intersect. This country was known as the country of mysteries. The boldest of individuals who, since man first appeared on earth, has attempted to venture in this country of night-mares has no chance to come back. Even the most courageous men were paralyzed with fear at the mere evocation of its name. (37)

A few geographical details suggest that this deadly setting is apparently a coastline. Mveng-Metuè 'roared', ended up in a vast region where 'the earth and the sky seemed to intersect.' For anyone accustomed to the geography of Equatorial Africa, this passage describes a spatial perspective difficult to envision in the deep, inextricable rain forest of Gabon or Cameroon. Instead, the image of 'gigantic red waves [that] rose and rolled brutally to hit the shore' is reminiscent of the Atlantic coast. Although the hyperbolic language pertains to the epic register, it also accentuates the tragedy of the populations living in this region. Their misfortune is pervasive in the violence of Mveng-Metuè. Its physical space is associated with death rendered through the accumulation of apocalyptic images: its bed was 'swollen with blood', and 'flooded the whole region with its reddish water.' The narrative also centres on an invisible creature that terrifies and swallows human beings at the river mouth, making it 'a land of mysteries' and 'nightmares' which frightens even the boldest of heroes. Mveng-Metuè may be either the representation of the Atlantic ocean or one of those large rivers that served as inland waterways for slaving activities. Put together, the stories of Ngourangourane, Emumulumu-Mba and Mveng-Metuè form an allegorical canvass where history is figuratively recorded. They point to the way the slave trade in oral literature 'is forgotten as history but remembered as spirits, as menacing landscape' (Shaw 2002, 9).

The *Mvet* provides a fantastic script of what Amos Tutuola has referred to as 'slave-wars' in *My Life in the Forest of Ghosts*. Just as *Le Mvett* conflates history, memory with fiction, Tutuola's picaresque novel draws on the Yoruba oral tradition to illustrate the precariousness of life caused by the rampant African 'slave-wars'. The story starts with the narrator and his brother desperately running away from slave raiders. Later when his brother is captured, the young protagonist is filled with the sense of loss and finds himself in existential loneliness in the bush with 'no brother, mother, father or other defender [who] could save me or direct me if and whenever any danger is imminent' (Tutuola 1954, 21). The opening episode of *My Life* portrays the harrowing conditions the slave trade had imposed on African populations, forced to abandon their ransacked villages and to find refuge in the bush where the ghosts of enslavement continue haunting them (Murphy 2007, 145). Amos Tutuola's story draws attention to the process of capturing slaves of which the Africans were active participants.



If historians unanimously admit the Fang did not have a slave society, still questions arise about the captives made during the wars the Fang waged on other tribes or ethnic groups. Although slavery is different from the fact of selling captives, it is worth underscoring the existence of human trafficking in the *Mvet* as exemplified in Chant 9 of *Un Mvet de Zwè Nguéma*.

Zong Midzi Mi Obame is one of the protagonists of this tale. A powerful chief of Okü, he wakes up one day to declare war on Engong because a new wind is blowing telling that he has a rival. The rising of a new great warrior threatens to overshadow Zong Midzi's authority and stature, which explains why he undertakes a pre-emptive action against Angone Endong who has the reputation of crushing entire villages and enslaving vanquished populations. Zong Midzi may also fear a sudden expedition against his own village. Throughout the narrative wars between Okü and Engong bring about a lot of damage and sufferings for the common people as illustrated by the great number of refugees Nsouré Nfane, having escaped death penalty in Engong, finds in his village. These people had fled because their villages were raided and ransacked by Zong Midzi on his way to Engong. While Asouré Nfane is preparing to fight Zong Midzi to avenge the refugees, we simultaneously witness another scene reminiscent of the mechanism of slave trading. Coming from a military expedition, Medza M'Otougang Mba, a young reputed warrior, is herding a caravan of prisoners to Engong: 'At a distance came songs of a caravan of prisoners which was approaching. It was a glorious moment: noisy songs being heard closer ... Line up! Line up! Line up! Everyone must stay on line!' The moment is 'glorious' for Engong because every inhabitant is expected to receive his share of captives:

— Hello, Angone

— Hello, well! Hahahahahahaha! You captured a lot. What a lot of people! What were they doing?

Medza M'Otougang Mba started to count: "one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine males! One, two three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine ten, one, two, three, four, five, six, sixteen females. I killed a lot of them. I kept those ones for you, Nkome. If you want to kill or keep them, it is your choice". (De Wolf and De Wolf 1972, 271)

We see here the process of reification of captives who have lost their names and their human identity. Reduced to mere figures, they have become commodities on a market place. They are possessions at the mercy of Nkome; possessions any inhabitant of Engong can 'kill or keep'. One of Medza's brothers selects free women as wives and divides the rest into two separate groups, one with women the other with men. This scene raises an essential question: what happened to the prisoners not allowed to join the conquerors' community? The narrative does not provide any clear-cut answer. Viewed in the context of African 'slave-wars', one can infer that some of Medza's captives had ended up in the long network of slave trading. Since the *Mvet* warriors never hesitated to kill their enemies in cold blood, what moral law would have kept them from selling their enemies? Christopher Chamberlin answers this question when he claims that the Fang 'were universally acknowledged not to be domestic slave users, but they indeed did trade war captives, criminals and debtors to slave traders' (48).

In other instances, we find direct testimonies from the prisoners themselves about their enslavement:

1st prisoner: My friend, we will no longer die. We had a narrow escape. This young man who brought us here, we did not know he will take us that far. Now he has handed us to his brothers. We are the booty he kept for them. We will only work for them. Between death and toil, the latter is much better.

2nd prisoner: What kind of works will they force us to do? Will we clear bushes for plantations or lay "fence traps"? Will we carry out the same tasks we used to do at home?

1st prisoner: When you work for someone, he is obliged to give you cassava every day. Cassava or banana, still it is life. (De Wolf and De Wolf 1972, 271)

Other scenes conjure up raids and kidnappings, tactics that often fed slave trading. In the village of Meka-Mezok, the population is gathered for an annual ceremony when it is brutally assailed by unidentified intruders. The village was set on fire: 'the commotion was like hell. Fire was eating the huts; guard houses, toms-toms, drums, balafons and all those who had not been able to run away or flee into the bush' (Ndong Ndoutoume 1970, 60). Though the identity of Meka-Mezok's attackers is not revealed, the passage clearly points to a slave catching expedition.

During their long migration that ended in Central Africa, the Fang turned out to be both prey and predators. They were often subject to brutal aggressions before they became themselves vengeful assailants. Their invention of dominant technology – consisting of flying animals or machines, magic tools capable of working miracles and preventing dangers, steel armours for military use – symbolizes a universe soaked in violence. Building resilience against such an environment became an imperative for survival. The elasticity and ductility the Ekgang warriors display in the use of their bodies on the battlefield underlie the Fang existential resourcefulness. The Ekgang are capable of any physical feats. They can fly, fight in the air, and with the sole power of their fists make deep holes in the earth leading to the 'underworld' where they receive metaphysical protection from the ancestors or the ghosts. In the *Mvet*, man is often left to fend for himself. Except for the support from the 'underworld', there is no Demiurge to protect him against the vagaries of the human condition. The tale then nurtures the ethics of self-reliance in the sense that the Fang very existence depended exclusively on their own ingenuity, expounded in the belief that reality could be 'augmented' and by manipulating it man could acquire biological and mental superpowers.

Looking at the *Mvet* fantastic world, we should always bear in mind what historians have stated about the Fang sense of helplessness during the conflicts with the Fulani, the Bassa or the Mvele (Ki-Zerbo 1972, 319; Chamberlin 1978, 451; Alexandre 1965, 434). Fang warriors were courageous but ill-equipped compared to their opponents who owned cavalry brigades and fought with sabers. The invention of superheroes was then a compensatory strategy aimed at reversing the power imbalance. The psychodynamics of self-aggrandizement, overvaluation of masculinity and magic weaponry was somewhat aimed at reversing the Fang vulnerability. This dialectics is symbolically illustrated when Zong Midzi, nearly vanquished, flees to his dead ancestors. This voyage to the 'underworld' entails symbolic death prior to resurrection. The *Mvet* hero emerges from the dead endowed with superior powers necessary to overcome adversity. A similar transformation first occurred with Oyono Ada Ngone following his 'coma' and is repeated with Oveng Ndoumou Obame when he became a 'humanoid creature' whereas Zong Midzi received a 'smart gun' capable of shooting 'bullets' that ruthlessly

chase their victims anywhere. Clearly enough, the *Mvet* bears witness to the Fang's awareness of their military weakness. They invented an alternative universe in which flying elephants became substitutes for the cavalries and the artillery they needed to defeat their enemies. By retreating in a fantastic world, the Fang show the way man, living under extreme circumstances, always reinvents his destiny and engages in audacious experiences or experiments. The imagination of an unbreakable people then appears as the very illustration of the spiritual concept of 'the audacity of hope' popularized by Barack Obama in his eponymous book where he expounds his political thoughts. Initially, 'Audacity of Hope' is the title of Jeremiah A. Wright's sermonic 'meditation on a fallen world'. It was inspired by George Frederic Watts's 1886 painting 'Hope' that portrays a bruised young woman sitting alone on the mountaintop and playing a one-string harp. Despite her predicament, Obama transcribes emotionally Wright's sermon, 'She dares to hope ... She has the audacity ... to make music ... and praise God ... on the one string ... she has left' (1995, 293). The Fang did not confide to God for hope but like Watts's harpist, they took to art as a way of transcending their present condition, and affixing in their culture the ethics of self-reliance, resistance, resilience, and resourcefulness.

Conceptually, the *Mvet* fits in the canon of 'fantasy epics' (Austen 2004, 12). It was a safety valve for the community's frustrations, fears and anxieties although it will turn out to be a determining factor in the formation of the saga of the Fang identity. This saga reverberates across postcolonial Central Africa through the appropriation of the *Mvet* art by a new generation of artists who have recalibrated the ancient epic to serve as instrument of resistance to Western cultural hegemony, and as a regenerative site for postcolonial identities.<sup>5</sup> They have reshaped *Mvet* aesthetics in accordance with the logic of postmodern or *Afropolitan*<sup>6</sup> intersectionality where the subversive gesture creates a new script asserting the inventiveness of the Fang's mind. With the abundance of fantastic and sophisticated technology recalling the Afro-futuristic universe of Wakanda in the American Marvel film *Black Panther*, the *Mvet* tale, though purely fictitious, contradicts the technological backwardness of Africa. It goes beyond the notion of 'magic thinking' and conveys something of a 'thought experiment' about virtually advanced technologies and unexplored human potentialities. With its resourceful imaginary world, the *Mvet* substantiates Harry Garuba's deconstructive view concerning the 'animist unconscious' whose deployment

destabilizes the hierarchy of science over magic, subverts the authority of Western science by reinscribing the authority of magic within the interstices of the rational/secular/modern. Animist culture thus opens up a whole new world of poaching possibilities, *prepossessing the future* [...] by laying claim to what in the present is yet to be invented. It is on account of this ability to prepossess the future that continual reenchantment becomes possible. (Garuba 2003, 270–271)

### Conclusion: the *Mvet* or the tale of the Fang's assertion of their agency

Although the *Mvet* articulates the idea of 'prepossessing the future', it was not originally created out of mere 'animist unconscious' impulse to enchant the world. This paper has instead tried to historicize the invention of the Ekang saga by arguing that this epic may have emerged as a response to the sense of existential annihilation caused among West Central Africa's populations by the Fulani *Jihad* and slaving wars. The *Mvet* tale

has then been approached as an archeological site out of which I have unearthed *traces* illustrating the predatory practices (raids, kidnappings, sudden attacks or invasions) that fed the Atlantic slave trade (Lovejoy 1989; Law 1991). Like Amos Tutuola's *My Life*, the *Mvet* is a voyage into a fantastic world hyperbolically transposing the challenges the Fang had faced during their migration. The imagination of an epic enabled the Fang to build for themselves a 'narrative identity', that is an identity forged by the individual and the community from absorbing a corpus of stories that will become their 'effective history' (Ricoeur 1985, 444). Indeed the *Mvet* was conceived to keep alive the mythology of the Fang's ethnic self through a superhuman phenotype whose transcendent physical and metaphysical powers are re-enacted in every recital. The reiteration of these legendary stories have made the *Mvet* an ontological trope.

With their great warriors, the Fang invented the equivalents of the American Superman, the embodiment of the ideal of Good and human perfectibility, although Superman, in his effort to address America's hopes and fears, will become the secret weapon of the military hegemony of his country (Wolk 2009, 719–724). Viewed in hindsight, the ideal of the American Superman seems to be coterminous with the emergence of the metallic, even bionic, superhero in Fang culture and, in some way, this ideal replicates the redemptive mission of the Christ who came on earth with a sword destined to crush evil. If we agree that the *Mvet* had ushered in a new historical regime for the Fang, then the quest for immortality is no less than a military myth that was imagined to ward off the sense of nothingness generated throughout West Central Africa by the *Jihad* and the escalation of the Atlantic slave trade.

In ideology and aesthetic performance, the ritualization of resistance through the *Mvet* was a response to the alienating ethics of Western capitalism. This ethics had been and is still so morally destructive that it had transformed human beings into mere cargoes. The Fang's creation of individual warriors larger than humanity was then an attempt at repossessing themselves and asserting their agency against the commodification or cannibalization of the Africans. This idea takes the *Mvet* from mere folk tradition to the realm of universal humanist discourse. Paramount in this discourse is the notion of agency which is consubstantial with freedom, moral authority, and the right of every individual or community to self-determination. The assertion of one's agency means 'an understanding that each person is one who has an obligation to take themselves up as a knowable, recognizable identity, who 'speaks for themselves' and who accepts responsibility for their actions. Such responsibility is understood as resting on a moral base and entailing personal commitment to the moral position implied in their choices' (Davies 1991, 42). The *Mvet* tale exemplifies such a moral commitment against the reification of man. It is the tale of heroic resistance to the capitalistic vision of the black body as a commodity, a vision that gave rise to the evil ideology of racism and the genocidal machines of the modern world.

## Notes

1. This paper focuses on the Fang group of northern Gabon, a region considered the stronghold of the *Mvet*. I use the spelling *Mvet* rather than *Mvett*, adopted by some writers, in regard to Régis Ollomo Ella's persuasive observation that Fang being a tonal language, the doubling of letters in a word is relevant only if it generates a different meaning, which is not the case here (2011, 25–26).

2. 'To become a fully fledged master mbomo mvét has first to undergo a symbolic death, with burial for nine days in a solitary grave at a secret place in the forest.' (Alexandre 1974, 2).
3. On *microhistory* and *macrohistory*, see Leroy Ladurie (1978); Carlos Ginzberg (1989).
4. A *Mvét* player himself, Ndong Ntoutoume was Zwè Nguéma's disciple before he became the major historiographer of the *Mvét* although his stories exist exclusively in French.
5. Some Gabonese artists of Fang ethnicity – Pierre-Claver Zeng, Prospère Nze, Alexis Abessole, Lord Ekomy Ndong – have literally or indirectly integrated in their music the rhythmic and narrative patterns of the *Mvét*. On the other hand, Jean-Juste Ngomo and Privat Ngomo released a comic based on Emmanuel Mvome Eko's epic cycle – *Alum Ndong Minko, acte 1: l'affront*. Editions Dagan, 2012. Analyzing African jazz-inspired writings, Daniel Larange (2015) demonstrates that novelists such as Grégoire Biyogo, Joël-Eric Bekale and Marc Mvé Bekale derive unconsciously or not their narrative procedures from the *Mvét* (see also Aterianus-Owanga 2009, 2015).
6. *Afropéan* is a riff on the neologism *Afropolitan*. See the articles grouped under the heading 'Afropolitanism: Reboot' in *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2016).

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