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# CHAPTER 3. A Political-Institutional History of southern Gabon and the Ndougou Lagoon

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize today's local political systems and traditions in Ndougou lagoon using secondary historical accounts, which are supplemented by and cross-referenced with archival research. The focus is the development of southern Gabon's political institutions as they have negotiated and withstood both internal and external shocks and catalysts for change. The goal is to arrive at an appropriable conception of a political interpretive model in the present-day communities where fieldwork has been conducted. In other words, what is the pre-oil baseline from which changes in interpretive models should be observed, and what factors and events have conventionally shaped these institutions over time? What have been the modal effects of state-level and international circumstances which might differentiate these communities in Gabon and distinguish them from their counterparts elsewhere?

Historical narrative is typically chronological and facilitates the understanding of causal chains of events. Therefore, the chapter is organized chronologically and divided into eras which demarcate cataclysmic events in Gabonese history and which have more often than not been cited as major catalysts of change in the political development and norms of the country as a whole. Reconstructing the history of *local* politics, as opposed to state politics, however, presents its complications, which in turn derive from poor written documentation in the pre-colonial era as well as the administrative biases of colonial agents. In part, fieldwork and onsite archival research serve to fill in these blanks. After all, part of this thesis' objective is to advance or extend theoretical literature which recognizes the paucity of precise historical and descriptive data at the local level—divorced to the fullest possible extent from mere cognitive realities—which may have misinformed theory and even our understanding of effective developmental policy. The final section synthesizes the likeliest factors of local political change and anomie in and around the Ndougou lagoon.

The Département of Ndougou is located in southern Gabon, straddling the coast and protruding into the interior by several hundred kilometeres. Before colonial territorialization, the Ndougou was neither a state nor acephalous, occupying the once-northern outer boundaries of the Loango Kingdom, a loose confederation of matriclans led by the Maloango in present-day Point

Noire. The Ndougou's current boundaries were no doubt influenced not only by common socio-historical characteristics shared by its people but also by the substantial lagoon from which the Département takes its name, with its extremities demarcated by important regional tributary systems, not least of which is the Nyanga river to the east. Nor were the Département's boundaries created with geographical homogeneity in mind, as it boasts dense tropical rainforests, littoral ecosystems, and coastal plains. The Département's climate is common to most of littoral Gabon. There is one long dry season during the summer and one long rainy season in winter, with intermittent and shorter dry and rainy seasons.

Climate and geography have to a considerable extent structured lifestyles and means of subsistence within the Ndougou, with most non-market labor devoted to the sowing and harvesting of seasonal crops, including manioc and tubercle, practices which have persisted for centuries. Fishing also features as an ancient and prominent market activity, with most non-salaried workers harvesting several species of fish from the rivers and the lagoon. Fish is therefore the most significant source of protein for the Ndougou's residents. Although bovine meat, bushmeat, and other fauna are almost unanimously desired and sought after by the local inhabitants, the Ndougou is sandwiched by two national parks and several *aires protégées* where killing and slaughtering wild animals, most significantly elephants, are heavily regulated and enforced by local authorities.

The rapid growth of Gamba since the arrival of the Compagnie Shell de Recherche et d'Exploitation au Gabon (COSREG) in the late 1950s has structured not only the socio-economic context of the Département but also the local government. Gamba, with roughly 12,000 of the Ndougou's roughly 14,000 estimated residents,[167] seats the sous-préfet as well as the Conseil Départementale. In addition, the city of Gamba, chartered as late as 1997, had already replaced Sette-Cama, formerly the seat of the sous-préfet and largest city on the lagoon as the region's political and economic capital. The existence of Shell's onshore oil terminal—the convergence of all oil pipelines descending from the interior—as well as its offices and housing for Shell upper- and lower-management had ensured by the 1980s that Gamba would overtake Sette Cama in regional importance. Both the City Hall of Gamba as well as the Conseil Départemental are dependent on Shell International and Shell Gabon for the vast majority of their revenue. It is worth

[167] Population statistics vary widely, but it is commonly understood that roughly 2,000 people inhabit the Department at any given time.

mentioning as well that a significant plurality of the Ndougou's elected and appointed officials were once employees for Shell.

Gamba together with the Ndougou offers a highly apt case study of local political dynamics in African oil states. The Ndougou has been producing onshore oil as long as Gabon has been hyper-dependent on oil, with the region's crude contributing to roughly thirty percent of the national government's revenue, which itself is as yet highly dependent on oil receipts. For this reason, incentives remain high for the Gabonese state to impose restrictions and controls facilitating the production and distribution of crude oil, beginning with the prominent onshore fields and other spaces implicated in the onshore downstream sector. The well-documented ethos of patronage which permeates the upper echelons of the Gabonese state is made possible with unaccounted-for oil rents. It follows logically that the political lifespan of the Gabonese elite necessitates the continued stream of oil rents, and therefore the stabilizing of regions most heavily exploited. The co-optation of well-endowed oil companies and importing states, often backed by host states, also becomes a necessity. Oil has no value unless it is extracted from underground sedimentary basins and sold as an export (Gabon consumes roughly one percent of its crude).[168]

A state may exist without either acquiescence or legitimacy, but not forever. Two propositions applied to African states are therefore irreconcilable—that a dual system exists in African states whereby the center and periphery may co-exist without mutual engagement, and that African states are in part superstructure wholes of their former constituent parts. While the latter can be more easily defended, it has not been shown in what manner a "periphery" does, in fact, engage and transform the state. Investigating oil-bearing communities in rentier states allows us to test the limits, because their superstructures, their state-elite apparatuses, have more incentive than ever to confine peripheries and disenfranchise them. If it can be shown that those least likely to display contestation or engagement (the inhabitants of oil-bearing communities in oil rentier states who are most "tempted" by patronage politics and the negative consequences of rapid monetization) in fact do so through one of several means, the state-centered approach to characterizing African political dynamics must be reconsidered and qualified. How did local communities in the Ndougou, the depository of Gabon's onshore oil wealth, adapt to a rentier

[168] "Gabon." US Energy Information Administration (https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/country.php?iso=GAB), Accessed December 27, 2018.

environment, and by what means and in what manner did they engage the state, if at all? How did they manage the dual impacts of state control and the promise of a richer, more modern life?

## 3.1 Southern Gabon prior to the European slave trade (circa 2000 B.C. to 1472 A.D.)

Prior to the arrival of Portuguese traders in 1472 A.D., the expanse of dense equatorial forest, savannah, river systems, and littoral regions that is today known as "Gabon" was not an ahistorical backwater devoid of linear development and intergroup exchanges. This conception has its roots in colonial ideology and is meant to justify outside intervention in the name of civilization and commerce. It is also more innocently the result of scant information as to who and what existed within Gabon's modern territorial borders, doubtless because of the lack of written documents and the difficulty of tracing oral traditions among Western Bantu speakers. Most of the knowledge surrounding this relatively unknown yet critical era in Gabon's history is pieced together through archeological findings and sophisticated linguistics analytics, making it a rough sketch what had most likely occurred without resorting to loose conjecture and risking anachronism.

Jan Vansina was pioneering in piecing together the pre-European history of the Equatorial forest through the systematic application of comparative historical linguistics, while Kairn Klieman has provided important revisions with the help of both glottochronological methods and newly discovered archaeological evidence. Glottochronology works by creating a genetic classification of languages. At some point a "mother" language splits into "daughter" languages, and the daughters will show common cognates, or genetic traits, with the mother. The percentage of cognates that each daughter has in common with the mother allows researchers to give an estimate as to dates of divergence, which are then transposed to geographic spaces to more aptly describe migration patterns. The rate of technological progress is not only determined through archeological findings but also through the appearance of "innovations" or loan words found in a daughter language's lexicon.[169] It is thus possible to reconstruct Gabon's pre-European history

[169] Kairn Klieman, "Towards A History of Pre-colonial Gabon: Farmers and Forest Specialists along the Ogooue', c. 500 B.C.-100 A.D." in Michael C. Reed and James F. Barnes (eds.) *Culture, Ecology, and Politics in Gabon's Rainforest* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 99-104.

despite the shortcomings inherent in oral traditions for the purposes of historicity. In turn, the understanding of pre-European political institutions gleaned from these methods can be compared to Gabon's contemporary institutions and allow us to deduce factors of change.

Pygmies are the oldest known inhabitants of southern Gabon and Gabon in general, perhaps predating the arrival of the Western Bantu circa 2000 B.C. on the order of thousands of years. Once the Bantu arrived, a process of intermingling and adaptation ensued as Western Bantu learned a great deal about forest living from pygmy populations. To this day, Western Bantu societies descending from Gabon's original forest-clearers and agrarians largely valorize the pygmies for their noble tradition and mystical knowledge of the forest. While many pygmies became absorbed into Western Bantu groups and especially influenced Bantu traditions in rainforest areas, others were, however, shunned by the same groups, thus explaining both the loss of ancestral pygmy languages as well as their persistence as forest cultures.

Relatively new glottochronological and archaeological evidence extrapolated by Kairn Klieman suggests that, in a slight departure from Vansina who argues for a direct "Myene-Tsogo" split from Western Bantu via coastal waters around 1450 B.C., Bantu-speaking peoples might have begun arriving in northern coastal Gabon as early as 4000 B.C. This "proto-coastlands" community would have its modern-day linguistic heirs in Myene-speaking groups such as the Mpongwe, Orungu, Nkomi, Galwa, and Adjumba. The interior and southern regions of Gabon would be populated by groups which had split from the proto-coastlands community in Cameroon, known to Klieman as the "proto-Nyong-Lomani" community.[170] These groups would eventually segment in a long process of environmentally-induced specialization, giving birth to contemporary groups such as the Fang, Vili, Punu after a process of "filling-in" and another split by the "Southwestern sub-family" in 1120 B.C. identified by Vansina. This was likely followed by successive splits within the Southwestern sub-family in 950 B.C. and the emergence of the Congo and the Gabon-Congo linguistic sub-families.[171] The last migratory thrusts of the Western Bantu in Equatorial Africa were achieved after the importation of the banana from Asia and culminated in the exploration of all lands for arability and the banana's cultivation.

[170] Kairn Klieman, *The Pygmies Were Our Compass: Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900 CE.* (Greenwood Pub Group, 2003), 43-44 ; Klieman, *Towards a History*, 107.
[171] Vansina, *Paths*, 56.

The process previously referred to as "filling-in" likely occurred from 500-1000 A.D. and allowed peoples to move away from rivers into interior lands. This spawned more speech communities adapting to new environmental needs. For Gabon this was notably what Klieman calls the proto-Nzebi-Vili speech community which in turn diverged to form the proto-Igana-Vili in the southwest, the proto-Irimba-Punu in central areas, and the proto-Nzebi-Ibeembe between the Congo river and the Massif du Chaillu. The latter group, for instance, are ancestral to modern-day Nzebi, Ibongo-Nzebi, and Teke dialects.[172]

The seeds of political legitimacy among many Bantu-speaking peoples were purportedly sown during these times, when creeping Bantu-speaking agriculturalists encountered autochtonous "Batwa," a regional name for forest specialists (i.e. "pygmies" in Western nomenclature or "Baka" in the equatorial region), a term justified by Klieman's demonstration that these autochtones were not only hunters-gatherers but specialists in forest products with regional and long-distance trade contacts. They were in fact *active participants* within the societies around them.[173] According to Koptyoff's "first-comer" paradigm,[174] migrant experiences on the frontier modified Bantu traditions in legitimizing and indeed highly regarding those who could master the land. The Batwa (forest specialists), prior to the introduction of the banana and ironworking which allowed for more efficient cultivation, were hunter-gatherers and possessed intimate knowledge of how to procure forest products. This knowledge being of critical importance to newly arriving Bantu, the Batwa first-comers became highly revered by colonists and were believed to be endowed with magical powers by the latter (even as they became feared and loathed for much the same reason). As Klieman reports in his study, "from very early times the Bantu societies of west-central Africa held a common set of beliefs about Batwa supernatural powers. Furthermore, their beliefs about these supernatural powers *played an integral role in the development of central African notions of politico-religious leadership*."[175]

As pre-ironworking and pre-banana subsistence practices gave way to higher-yield banana cultivation and technological progress, Bantu began specializing in agriculture as the benefits of surplus allowed trade and limited political development. The Bantu were thus gradually diverging

[172] Klieman *The Pygmies*, 103.
[173] Klieman, *Towards a History*, 129-130.
[174] Igor Kopytoff eds., *The African Frontier: the Reproduction of Traditional African societies*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[175] Klieman, *The Pygmies*, 133. italics added

from the subsistence practices of forest specialists, whose reliance on and proximity to nature were still considered admirable. Evidence supports the proposition that the Batwa during this process retained economic autonomy and contacts between them and the Bantu decreased gradually over time.[176] Aspiring big men and chiefs, therefore, increasingly sought to legitimize their increasing authority by placing the primordial figure of Batwa, evermore absent from the day-to-day experiences of agriculturalists, at the origins of a lineage or even clan. The institution of chiefship having effectively usurped the politico-religious power of first-comers, this demonstration of lineage was necessary in order to secure loyal followers through both respect and fear.[177] The legacy of first-comer legitimacy, it is argued, still lives on today through secret societies such as Bwiti.

After 1000 A.D., the cyclical drift of farmers in search of fertile land marked the end of all but perhaps few migrations. Relative stability and waning opportunities for new acculturation ensued, reaffirming that this time marks the beginning of a dual process of sedimentation and condensation of cultures through matrimony and trade.[178]

The political traditions in existence from 1000 A.D. to 1472 A.D. were the product of ancestral Bantu traditions, autochthons, infrequent contacts with the eastern Bantu, and internal adaptations to new, mostly forest habitats. Thanks to convergence it is indeed possible to speak of political traditions in Gabon indigenous to this area, even as subgroups continued to form and adapt themselves to more local environments and contacts with other peoples. Though Gabon had been primarily forest before intensive clearing for farming, other habitats did exist, suggesting subtle differences in political tradition throughout the country. Nevertheless, to speak of a unitary tradition makes much sense when one considers the amount of forest coverage in Gabon relative to other regions in West Africa, for example. The Gabonese forest lifestyle, after ancestral traditions, was perhaps most causative of the development of political institutions owing in part to the labor-intensive nature of forest-clearing and the relative freedom from external threats. While sparse populations meeting with labour-intensive farming practices meant that child-bearing was a priority, the security buffer provided by forests and distanced groups of people led to a lack of centralized authority and a relative fluidity of cultures and group identities. While ethnic identities

[176] Klieman, *Towards a History*, 125.
[177] Klieman, *The Pygmies*, 161-162.
[178] ibid., 68-69.

did in fact exist before European penetration of Gabon's interiors, they were therefore not as strictly self-defined as they might be today.

The basic units of social organization common to all equatorial African groups had traditionally been the house, the village, and the district.[179] This has been shown both by the endurance of ancient loanwords from ancestors sharing similar social structures and the continuity of these traditions through the 19th century, especially with respect to the village and district, the latter of which would form the bases of clan identity and even early statehood. The house of 10-40 people was established by a "big man" who was recognized for his achievements in clearing forest and gathering followers, especially young men and wives. Membership was based on the ideology of kinship, even though kin of the big man was not unilinear and often included members with no matrilineal or patrilineal relation to the "father" whatsoever. Thus the big man could increase his power not only through marriage, as women were the key to production, but through attracting clients, friends, and other dependents to the house.

The village, composed of several houses with an estimated mean population of 100 persons, has been cited by Vansina as the "very foundation" of Bantu society.[180] An aggregate of houses, the village was led by a big man who was advised by a council of big men from their respective houses. The big man of the village was respected and received tribute in the form of hunting spoils from subordinate big men, presumably in exchange for his territorial protection. The village's raison d'etre was common defense and security. It could engage in both restrictive and unlimited warfare with other villages, the latter usually fighting alongside other villages as part of a district. This principal political function served to underlie a common esprit de corps and reinforced the village big man's status as "father" and head of the village "family." The solidarity of villages and their centrality to traditional political life meant that even though villages were impermanent and often resettled following warfare or exploitation of arable land, villages were kept intact even as the big man himself might give way to another. Thanks to security and perhaps the optimal population of villages for maintaining an equatorial forest habitat, villages still largely exist in their ancestral forms.

Before the emergence of states, many of which rose and fell with the Atlantic slave trade, districts were the largest units of social and political organization, and though subject to a relative

[179] Vansina, *Paths*, 71-83.
[180] ibid., 78.

degree of fluidity in composition and self-identification, they were the main sources of group identity. Districts formed when villages came to unite for purposes of common defense, trade and intermarriage. However, the district might more correctly be described as not an alliance of villages but rather of founding houses, as houses were free to move from village to village. In extending lineage ideology, the formalized clans-to-be "were seen as unalterable and permanent, given by nature, because all of a clan's members were thought to be the progeny of a single person. All the founding ancestors, one for each affiliated House, were held to be equal siblings issued from a common parent."[181] The permanence of these organizations, represented only in cognitive reality, contributed to the robustness of districts and clans as larger units of common defense and, over time, as bastions of cultural development as common customs emerged as well as important networks of matrimonial alliances and trade.

The structures and ideologies above, derived from archaeological and linguistic evidence, conform to European observations upon the Portuguese arrival at the Gabon Estuary in 1472. Nevertheless, societies did change and vary from the norm after 1000 A.D. and even before, and the reasons for this are central to the questions posed for this chapter. Once migration was more or less complete, the linguistic subgroups began segmenting and varying their institutions due to both internal and external influences. While external influences included interactions with different environments and peoples, internal technological innovations and changing population densities served to upset regional balances and power.

It makes sense to divide precolonial Gabon into two geographical parts, thanks to differing institutional histories experienced by each. North of Gabon's main waterway, the Ogooué river, the language families hitherto known as the Myene (in the region surrounding the Estuary and Cape Lopez), "Southwestern", and "Cameroon" (around the present-day region of Woleu-Ntem) predominated. South of the Ogooué, the "Southwestern" and "Gabon-Congo" groups were most prevalent. As time wore on in the early second millennium A.D., each set of peoples experienced similar patterns of segmentation and, to varying degrees, centralization. Once large-scale migrations of language groups were complete, internal innovations in agriculture and higher yields began supporting higher population densities. Higher densities in turn meant increased insecurity, competition, and warfare. Those villages which successfully achieved internal cohesion, either

[181] ibid., 82.

through the recognition of dominant houses or modified lineage ideologies and lines of succession, prevailed. Those which did not quickly adapted. As villages became more and more the extended "lineages" of dominant households, districts in turn became the loose alliances of houses. Ancestral traditions of lineage were then applied to the districts as legitimation of power, whereby the district steadily became extended "families" and hierarchy was determined by generation, whether the system adopted be matrilineal or patrilineal. In some instances many houses even began to dominate others, creating not just loose confederacies but kingdoms. After a sufficient amount of time and sedimentation lapsed, districts coalesced into clans. Intra-district trade, commerce, shared ideological convictions, and matrimonial ties all served to create common identities. In most instances, the need to acquire manpower for labor diminished as densities increased, thus subtly transforming one ancestral tradition, matrimony and the acquisition of several wives, into a means to both procure bridewealth and indebt its recipients. Since bridewealth and other prestige objects, such as leopard's skin, had come to reflect the power of a house, bridewealth become more valuable than the bride herself. As a consequence, those who gave brides became creditors. In this way, ancestral traditions morphed to reflect changing realities, where the need for manpower acquiesced to the need to acquire objects attesting to the prestige of a house. Trade, common defense, and matrimony therefore were both cause and consequence of a clan's development.[182]

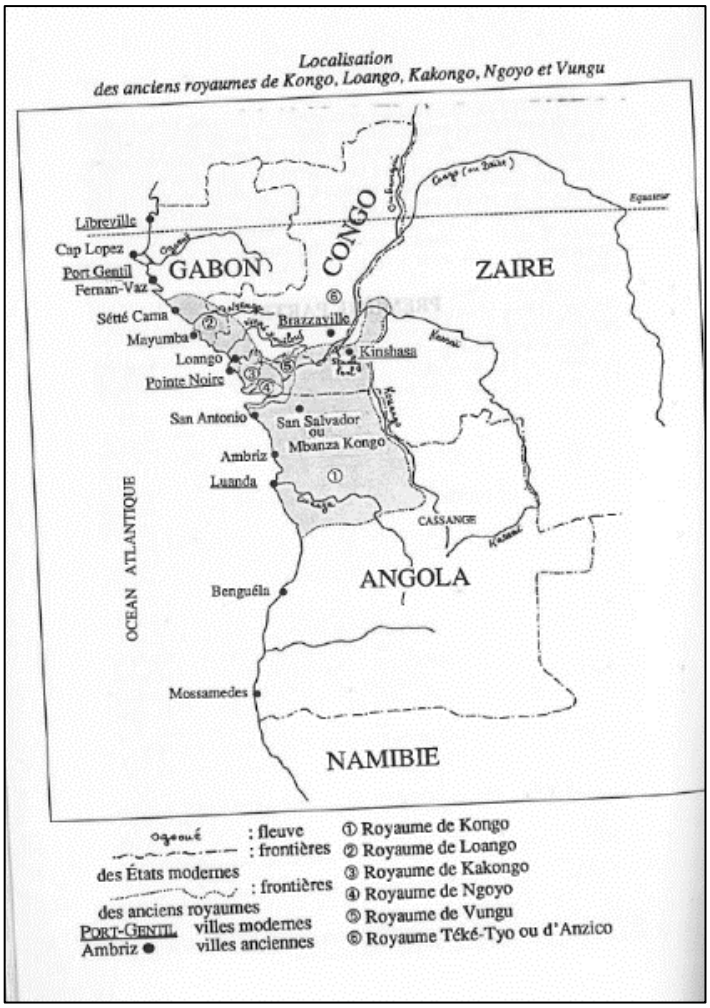
In contrast to the political trajectory of northern Gabon in the first half of the second millennium, the southern half experienced a much higher degree of centralization.[183] Houses, villages, and districts gave way to chiefdoms, principalities, and even kingdoms, levels of hierarchical organization unseen in most regions north of the Estuary. After the sixth century A.D., the coastal region straddled by the Congo river to the south and the Ngounie and upper Ogooué rivers to the north experienced increasing agricultural yields, as well as higher endowments of natural resources such as copper. As a result, the Southwestern and Gabon-Congo speakers, among them the burgeoning Kongo and Teke groups, benefited from trade, specialization, and consequently higher wealth and population density. Whereas houses within districts generally enjoyed a stable balance of power, those better-positioned to exploit trade grew in power and

[182] ibid., 101-127.

[183] Unlike their counterparts to the south, the peoples settling northern Gabon retained the village and house as their primary social and political units and were much more autonomous vis-à-vis larger clan interests and politics than their equals in the south. (Vansina, Paths, 129-137)

prestige, engendering more formalized principles of succession and legitimacy and triggering power struggles. When districts morphed into chiefdoms, neighboring districts followed suit in order to head off the potential threats. Principles of legitimation were also absorbed and reproduced, as the linguistic evidence demonstrates. Both Kongo and Teke referred to chiefs as the "master of the land" and "founder" who had a special relationship with nature and thus merited the right to the vestiges of noble animals such as leopards, eagles, and pythons.

When one chiefdom conquered or subordinated another, a "principality" was formed. The singularity and prestige of the institution is affirmed by the appearance of clapperless bells throughout the southwest equatorial region, which date back to before 1200 A.D. In Teke the prince was initiated in a public ceremony replete with rituals and a celebration of his link to the nature spirit. A ruler over vassals, the prince served as the court of last resort and sustained himself




*Map 2: Loango (north) at its height, c. 1700. (Merlet, Autour du Loango, 17)*

through tribute, fines, and loot. The presence of a court engendered social stratification, with the leaders of Houses comprising the artistocracy.

Sometime between the creation of chiefdoms and the emergence of principalities, matrilinearity emerged as a legitimate principle of succession among the Kongo.[184] The chief significance of this development was its enablement of both royal territorial expansion and the diffusion of ideological norms. Its reach extended from the bank of the Congo to the Gabon Estuary and as far east as the upper Ogooué, an expanse encompassing most of southern Gabon. The relative success of matrilinearity vis-à-vis its counterpart where succession is concerned (patrilinearity as practiced among the groups north of the Ogooué) lies in its dynamics. Unlike in patrilinearity where prominent houses resided in one village or house, the exchange of wives for goods led to the multiplication of royal and chiefly lineages through broad swaths of territory. In this way, villages slowly ceased to be the domains of a single lineage, as several matrilineages could occupy a single hamlet. Chieftaincy in a village was therefore contested, and the legitimate chief had to lay claim to the land itself, arguing that he founded the settlement and thus owned the land on which several lineages happened to be residing. This state of affairs arrived logically at the creation of the matriclan as well as the head of a clan, since most members could trace their lineage to the mother of a prominent house. Such was the ideology, at least, accompanying and justifying the rise of the Loango and Kongo kingdoms as early as the thirteenth century A.D. Vansina is quick to point out that, in practice, these kingdoms arose through the conquest of competing clans. In fact, the Kongo kingdom predated the matriclan, which became expedient as a means to both oppose growing centralization and secure one's place within it.[185]

Just as upsets in the balance of power triggered power structures within districts and between chiefdoms, war, military innovations and trade set principalities against one another, leading eventually to the creation of kingdoms. Kingdoms such as the Loango state, the Kongo state, and the Tio kingdom within the Teke territory grew further in trade and specialization, a process which supported higher populations, marketplaces, and demand for luxury products by notables. Laws were enacted and common currencies were developed. By the end of the

[184] Expansion of the Kongo kingdom towards the southern Gabonese coast would eventually give birth to the Loango confederacy/kingdom.

[185] Vansina, *Paths.*

fourteenth century, all three kingdoms in the southwest equatorial region possessed the requisite—even quasi-Weberian—state-like qualities, well before contact with Europeans and the Atlantic slave trade.

All three kingdoms were similar in that they had a king, the head of a clan who was seen as a big man and arbiter of last resort. They all came about through both conquest and peaceful submission of smaller kingdoms and principalities, and all promulgated specific religious histories and ideologies of state formation and lineage. Finally, each realm consisted of two groups of title-holders: one operating at court in the capital and the other consisting of territorial officials. The major differences between the kingdoms were in the relative degrees of centralization. While the Kongo kingdom centralized tribute, justice, the military and currency, Loango exhibited only some centralization of justice and tribute. The Tio, on the other hand, centralized few if any of these things, as territorial officials were not accountable at court as in Loango and Kongo, and the king himself ruled not because of ancestry as in the two latter kingdoms but because he held the shrine of the national nature spirit. In Loango, the structure was based on matriclans with a precise and formalized line of succession, whereas in both Tio and Kongo prominent houses comprised the higher levels.

The influence of these kingdoms on the peoples of Gabon was often profound. Loango's territorial reach extended from south of Loango to the coastal regions latitudinal to the upper Ngounie and beyond. Strongly decentralized, the peoples occupying the coastal southwest of Gabon were grouped into villages with associations of boys and men. In the twelfth century A.D. and before the kingdom arose, matriclans appeared from the south and the institution was adapted to local characteristics. Clans were viewed as equals and a "network of regional alliances" was invented. Mayumba, less than 100km south of the Sette Cama and closer to the core territory, had become incorporated into the Loango kingdom after principality status around 1500 A.D.[186]

In contrast to Tio, Loango was dominated by merchants and therefore its governance structure was more secular than otherwise. As Merlet asserts, the evolution of political institutions centered around conflicts between the Fumu-si (merchant chiefs), the clan chiefs, and the Fumu/Maloango, the royal political power based near Pointe Noire. 27 Vili clans in the 14th century inhabited southwestern Gabon through force and iron, because strict matrilinearity and

[186] ibid., 146-152.

exogamy forbade marriage of a daughter to the chiefs of autochtonal clans and caused a coastal expansion. Because the Vili were mostly ruled by Fumu-si merchants, the 27 Vili clans known together as the Buvandji, they could only exercise a secular power over their subjects. This was evidenced by the interdiction of Buvandji rulers to enter the Nkisi-si, the sanctuaries where protective and potent charms were kept. They therefore had to devise other means of legitimation, such as the famous iron bell. At the end of the 15th century, there was a succession crisis thanks to strict matrilinearity, and the fumu-si would capitalize to extract real power, claiming that the interreign of a minister was not legitimate and didn't have the same legitimacy and sacral powers as the Maloango, the king of Loango.

The ethnic portrait of the Ndougou lagoon was completed when the Loumbou arrived in the geographic confines of the Ndougou in the 15th century, where they encountered the autochtonal Varama, slowly displacing them up the Rembo Bongo. Not long after, the Vili and the "rois forgerons," identifiable by their continued use of iron clochettes to mark status and political legitimacy, conquered the region, pushing further north until being rebuffed by the Nkomi at Cap Lopez. Thenceforth the Buvandji clan of the Vili would come to demographically dominate the political structure of the region through the contemporary era, along with the Varama and the Loumbou.[187]

Between roughly 500 A.D. and 1500 A.D. when the Europeans arrived, political institutions in southern Gabon evolved from one common Western Bantu tradition into several and variegated clans, chiefdoms, and groups with different ideologies and political organizations. As Klieman demonstrates, however, most Western Bantu-speaking peoples did adopt the common ideology of the "first-comer" paradigm, and legitimacy was rarely granted unless the heads of these political organizations—even the Fumu-si among the Vili—could demonstrate an ancestral link to those first-comers. The ancestral system depended on stable population densities and limited trade, and when both grew for myriad reasons, technological and socio-political innovations ruptured inter-group equilibria and triggered domino-effects of centralization and innovative adaptation. The conditions for higher population density and increased trade depended on access to resource endowments and its filtration through particular cultural schemes—what Vansina calls "acceptance in the cognitive realm"[188]—such that "centralizing societies began in

[187] Annie Merlet, *Autour du Loango: XIVe-XIXe siècle.* (Centre culturel français Saint-Exupéry-Sépia, 1991).
[188] Vansina, *Paths,* 195.

areas of rich resources"[189] while not all richly endowed societies inhabiting a diverse ecotone developed centralizing innovations. In general, population growth typically followed access to resources leading to internal cohesion for defensive measures. Internal cohesion facilitated trade, which further enriched some houses vis-à-vis others, an unstable situation which produced innovations as both a means to consolidate wealth and prestige (patrimony) and a means to defend (further centralization). The patchwork of institutions comprising southern Gabon around 1500 A.D. was the result of unequal access to resources and differing dynamics of cognitive absorption, or different ideas of "what was perceivable and imaginable as change."[190] When critical resources for empowerment eventually shifted from material goods to people as slaves, it is not difficult to imagine how transformational the Atlantic slave trade would soon become.

## 3.2 Southern Gabon during the Atlantic Slave Trade (1472-c.1880)

The Atlantic slave trade, followed by a more voluminous and profitable trade in commodities towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, had devastating effects on not only southern Gabon's peoples but on the entire region. The slave trade succeeded in depopulating entire villages after scores of men and women were kidnapped, sold, brutalized and starved. The demographic toll on the broader region is undeniable, as roughly 1,000,000 people would be exported to the Americas and nearly as many would perish before ever seeing a port of call. Though the volume of slave commerce subsided after the British banned it in 1807, it was not adequately enforced until 1830. Even then, Brazilian and Spanish slavers continued to rely on hinterland caravans to carry out the dirty work, while nothing prevented coastal Africans themselves from acquiring and exploiting slaves. Aside from the enormous shock to human sensibility, a regional burst of trade during this time reconfigured populations as many groups, houses, kingdoms, and clans sought to increase wealth by either inserting themselves advantageously in the trade supply chains or by migrating themselves to popular trade routes. The diffuse nature of the trade sapped the central power of kings and propped up merchants looking to create their own following. In all, insertion into a European world market system enriched,

[189] Ibid., 194.
[190] ibid., 195.

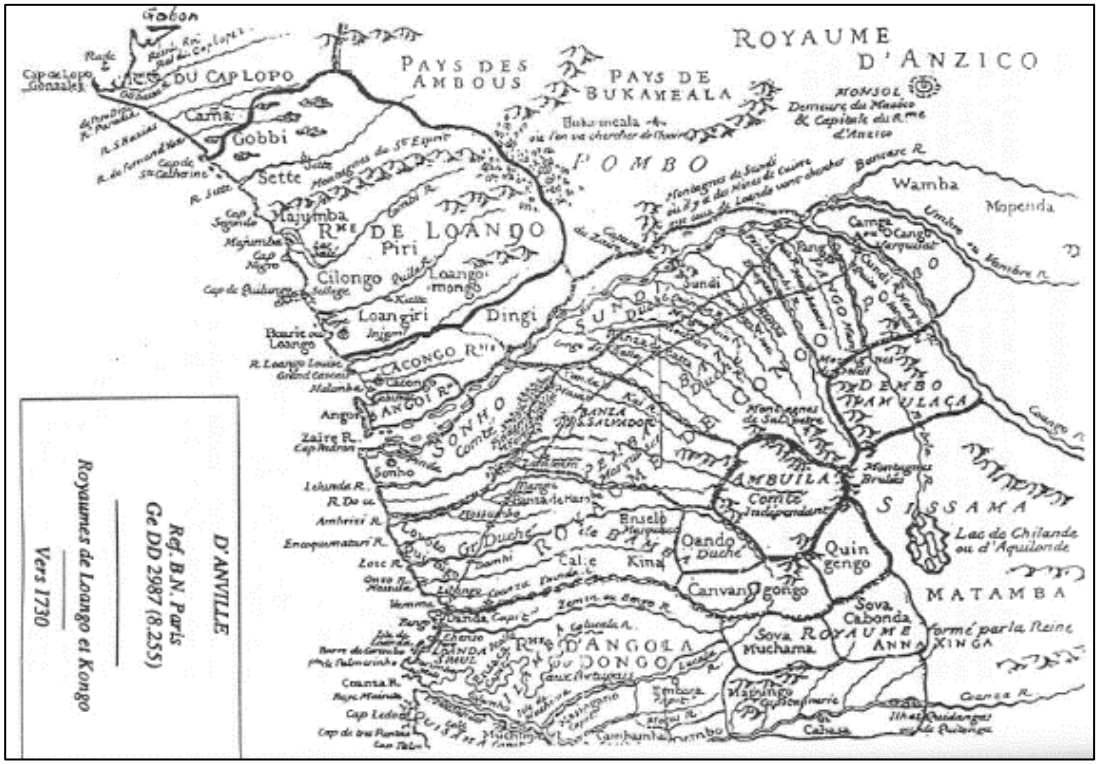
depossessed, shifted and integrated. It did not, however, fundamentally change the way equatorial Africans ruled themselves. The riches soon became a means to old ends, i.e. the acquisition of a larger and larger following in an effort to create for oneself the conditions for power and prestige. The trade was ultimately absorbed into existing institutions, a testament to their perennial durability.[191]

When the Portuguese first arrived at the Gabon Estuary in 1472, they saw little reason to establish a trading outpost and port of call. The Myene-speaking Mpongwe were decentralized, thanks in part to their patrilineal lineages, and sparsely populated the landscape. Instead, the Portuguese proceeded to the Kongo kingdom near the Congo estuary where in 1483 they found a standard national currency, centralized government, and adequate commercial differentiation. From this time until the 1570s Kongo was the primary point of trade along the equatorial coast, exporting 7,000 slaves a year to the Americas from the 1520s to the 1560s. Foreshadowing chronic regional destabilization as a result of the trade, however, the kingdom was forced to defend its advantaged position from the inland Tio kings in 1567 as well as from the Jaga in 1568. Only the Portuguese succeeded in repelling the latter attackers keen on cutting out middlemen in the slave trade. After the invasion, the Portuguese transferred their base of operations north along the coast to Loango, the new port of call for slaving ships.[192]

Loango, whose systems and matriclans were highly influential in southern coastal Gabon, served as a successful point of call for several reasons. Firstly, a common currency in the raffia cloth and centralization of the interior facilitated transactions. Secondly, Europeans rarely if ever needed to penetrate the Loango hinterland themselves thanks to a sprawling system of caravans to sites mining for copper and iron. The sites and routes, operated by "Vili" traders—a name soon ascribed to many southern coastal peoples—could be appropriated towards the transport of slaves as well. The caravaneers extended deep into southern Gabon and as far northeast as the upper Ogooué. Formerly fishermen, the Vili soon transitioned almost entirely to trading in slaves and commodities. For these reasons as well the Dutch made Loango their regional trading base in 1593, first buying ivory and then Gabon's renowned *okoume*. Incidentally, the first systematic and detailed descriptions of Gabonese peoples began when Dutchman Barent Erikszoon first

[191] Merlet, *Autour du Loango.*
[192] ibid.

bought ivory in Gabon in 1594, as the Dutch kept more thorough records than the Portuguese.[193] Despite these developments, only 300 slaves a year were exported from Loango between 1630 and 1650, and only 1000 a year by 1660. The Dutch at Cape Lopez, for instance, had not become interested in the slave trade until the 1630 conquest of northeast Brazil, disallowing coastal Gabon from ever becoming a "significant source of supply."[194] Nevertheless, in 1650 Loango caved to pressure from the Dutch and permitted the trade. The volume of trade in slaves depended on demand in the Americas, which would not reach peak heights until the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.




*Map 3: Loango and Kongo, c. 1730 (in Merlet, Autour du Loango, 44)*

Trade in other commodities, however, was beginning to have integrating effects, speeding the effects of centralization and feeding pre-existing matrimonial alliance networks. By the late seventeenth century, for instance, the Adyumba monarchy at Cape Lopez had grown more

[193] Patterson, David, *The Northern Gabon Coast to 1875*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 9.
[194] ibid., 13.

powerful than those smaller groupings in the Estuary, even if they too spoke Myene. Owing to the decentralizing effects of patrilineal systems as well as intergroup competition and its residual effects on the inability of kings to tax or demand tribute, the forming of ever-larger political agglomerations had been forestalled, if not prevented. The Adyumba king, by contrast, reigned over a population influenced by the matrilineal Loango kingdom to the south, and thus was able to exploit lineage to extract tribute.

Though slave exports remained low in Loango, trade volumes began to empower the merchant Fumu-si even more. Around 1660, something akin to a bourgeois revolution led Fumu-si during a succession crisis to place severe limitations on the Maloango, including the interdiction to go outside during the day, talk to foreigners, see the sea, and to distribute land without the agreement of the Fumu-si.[195] The Maloango would now be elected and subject to humiliating initiations to prove his worth, one of which was to symbolically stop at the threshold of an nkisi-si, through which he was forbidden to pass. It is reasonable to conclude that the Fumu-si never quite accepted the legitimacy of the Maloango, who was not an autotochtone, and whose authoritarian disposition before the fumu-si revolutions was reportedly universally despised. Of course, the Maloango did not merely rely on invented sacralizations, but also on prestige from the Kongo kingdom.[196]

From 1660 to 1830, the demand for slaves in the Americas rose significantly as the French and English in turn began participating in the trade, multiplying the social and economic effects of higher trade volumes in the region. 6,000 slaves a year were now being exported from Loango between 1685 and 1705 and as many as 13,500 a year from 1755 to 1793. These reports, however, should be measured against evidence submitted before the British parliament in 1789 suggesting that the slave trade in Gabon was still in its "infancy" during the 1760s,[197] attesting to Gabon's relative backwater status as a port of entry for slave ships. During this relative peak in Gabon's slaving system, however, the trade finally reached limited parts of Gabon hitherto left relatively untouched. The Dutch had built warehouses along the coast as part of land cessions by local chiefs, and Vili traders became more and more professionalized and began using arms, extending deeper and deeper into Gabonese territory.[198]

[195] ibid., 20.
[196] Merlet, *Autour du Loango.*
[197] Patterson, *Northern Gabon*, 33.
[198] ibid., 35.

By the 18th century, a state resembling that of Loango had been built, and only decades later the seeds of its demise were sown. Despite strict exogamy and deference to hereditary lineage structures which, earlier on, significantly advantaged the Fumu and the Maloango, the slave trade engendered a second, loosely termed "bourgeois" revolution by the fumu-si and the mafouques (tax collectors and agents of the finance minister in Diosso-Bwali, the capital of Loango). Loango survived and thrived off the slave trade, and by the mid-18th century, the height of both, clan hierarchies were somewhat re-established along geographical proximity to the coast, notably the environs of Sette-Cama, in lieu of traditional lineage ties and first-comer oral history. This meant in practice that the Vili, inhabiting most coastal areas where Europeans, notably Portuguese, had set up "factories" to house and distribute slaves, benefited most, with the Loumbou, Varama, and then Punu—the latter intermediaries set up in the region of the upper Nyanga river who had violently invaded in the mid-17th century in order to benefit from the slave trade—in turn establishing themselves along the most frequented commercial routes. As Merlet and others argue, despite the geographical determinance of hierarchy developed during this time, political institutions among Loango's peoples scarcely changed, and even encouraged the assimilation of an economy based on the slave trade. The Vili-Loumbou-Varama-Punu all disallowed the capturing and enslavement of members of their own clans, except when enslavement was doled out as punishment for certain crimes against the community. To facilitate the trade and avoid conflict between the several ethnicities along commercial routes, therefore, a system of alliances was created which respected to the fullest possible extent the exigencies of oral tradition. Whether contrived or plausible, myths of common origin were invoked to establish alliances. Attesting to the persistence of strict exogamy, while these alliances were based on myths of common origin, intermarriage between clans from different ethnicities was still banned.[199]

Chiefs sought to sell slaves so as to acquire goods which could then be used to acquire dependents, wives, and ammunition. Pricing mechanisms were also becoming standardized, as a slave typically sold for a packet of textiles, guns, powder, brass and other items considered precious. After the integrating effects of standardized currencies set in (the iron rod became the standard reference among the Fang, e.g.), many institutions did change to accommodate higher demand for slaves. Death sentences were commuted to slavery, criminal codes carried slavery as

[199] Merlet, *Autour du Loango.*

a sentence for the most minor of crimes, many leaders developed the practice of hoarding currency and contributing to capital formation, and finally there appeared a system of social stratification among the slaves themselves. By 1830, these practices and alterations had enveloped all of present-day Gabon.[200]

If 1660-1830 marked the peak of the slave trade in Gabon, the industrial age in Europe from 1830-1880 and the de jure abolition of the slave trade ushered in a volume of exchange that would dwarf slaving, which managed to persist as a black market nonetheless. When the British slave trade ended in law and in fact in 1808, island merchants filled the demand gap by purchasing their own slaves.[201] Also in spite of the unilateral ban, the Orungu and Mpongwe succeeded themselves in exploiting new opportunities through domestic slave trading, even as interregional and international trade in redwood and ivory increased several-fold.[202] In "legitimate commerce," from Cameroon to the Congo river, ports of entry multiplied. But in general, the methods of trade did not change as much as the sheer volume and social impact of increased commerce. Although nominal colonial occupation began in Gabon as soon as 1839 when the French attempted to conclude treaties with chiefs at the Gabon Estuary, it would nevertheless not be until the 1880s and the Act of Berlin when colonial powers sought to penetrate the interior themselves and monopolize the extraction of resources. Until that happened, the economic and social impacts of the trade would be profound, yet not so destabilizing as to overturn ancestral traditions.

The socio-economic impact of the slave and Atlantic trades on Gabonese societies was marked but limited in comparison with both West Africa and the Congo. In the economic realm, the most noteworthy change as the volume of trade increased was in food production and agricultural practices. As the number of slaves and their dealers rose, so did the calories demanded to maintain them. Higher-yielding crops such as cassava, groundnuts, and tobacco gradually replaced the banana along the Ogooué, in southern Gabon, and among the Masango people in southern Gabon respectively. Women were increasingly relied upon to pick up the slack in labor. An effect of higher-yield cultivation was the regional specialization in crop production and access to wider markets as a result of integration and common currencies. Small communities gradually lost some skills while acquiring others as other regions might produce something more cheaply

[200] Patterson, *Northern Gabon.*
[201] ibid., 41.
[202] ibid., 46.

and efficiently. All the attendant changes, however, were invariably met with local innovations informed by cultural knowledge and experience.

Another major effect with consequences for modern identity politics was the inadvertent creation of a fledgling inter-clan class system. The main beneficiaries of this system were the Mpongwe of the Gabon Estuary, who were ideally placed to conclude final sales with Europeans of goods procured from the hinterland. Like a supply chain reaching its point of sale, value in goods like slaves, ivory, dyewood, ebony, and rubber increased as they travelled towards the coast. Each group of people from the source of the good to its final destination before export jealously guarded their link in the chain. The Fang most inland on the Como river sold ivory downstream to the Bakalai, who in turn passed the ivory downstream to the Shekiani, before finally arriving in the hands of Mpongwe merchants who monopolized contact with the Europeans. Whereas often the trade relied on an intricate system of trust and credit—the bundles or *pacquets* acquired at the point of sale would be parceled out as they made their way upstream—it could also lead to localized wars. Skilled in extracting the highest possible profits from Europeans, the Mpongwe naturally became wealthier and consolidated their self-image as superior hinterland barbarians. The same Mpongwe, fast adopting European tastes, would be the source of the *métis*, a privileged status both envied and detested by modern and nineteenth century populations.[203]

Another consequence of social stratification thanks to economic specialization and the gradual penetration of the economic frontier towards the interior was the *mise-en-dépendance* of forest specialists. Although their products were still in demand during this time, they were heavily dependent on neighboring agricultural communities for European trade items which were fast becoming a common currency. This is in turn contributed to their diminishing position in the developing Gabonese socio-economic class system.[204]

The third major socio-economic effect of the Atlantic trade was depopulation. As mentioned above, some 982,000 people were exported as slaves from equatorial coasts between 1660-1793, and another estimated 240,000 between 1810 and 1843. Roughly half this total lost their lives before departure to the Americas, and only a third of all exports were women, contributing to their employment in crop cultivation. In Gabon, 36.08 percent of slave exports were from Mayumba (Loango) in southern Gabon and from the upper Ogooué, and 19.42 percent

[203] ibid., 57-67.
[204] Klieman, *Towards a History*, 132-33.

were from Teke and other related groups farther east. Despite the wanton capture, kidnapping, starving, and brutalizing of so many peoples, however, experts suggest that population growth merely stagnated, thanks to a coincidental growth in agricultural output which offset heavy losses and supported higher population densities. As the losses amounted to roughly 0.4 percent of the total population a year, it is inconceivable to many that growth did not eclipse this figure.

Political institutions were challenged but largely remained intact. While the trade realigned power brokers, shifted populations, and created new optimal levels of centralization, it was absorbed into older traditions of matrilineal and patrilineal succession while the structural integrity of houses, villages, and clans was preserved. While many kingdoms such as the Orungu centralized, many gradually disintegrated as merchant princes overtook royal princes and aristocracy in wealth and prestige. When a kingdom's subunits became more and more autonomous vis-à-vis the capital and their overlords, there was little else holding these kingdoms together. As early as 1698, for example, accounts by European sailors in the northern coast attest to the relative absence of kingdoms, however small, which once dotted the littoral regions.[205] This process of disintegration also led to the breakup of the Kongo kingdom as early as the seventeeth century. A similar fate befell the Loango kingdom throughout the eighteenth century, even as merchant princes continued to wield the legitimacy of matrilineal descent and matriclans. The region remained relatively decentralized thereafter and governed by alliances of big men. Though the Maloango retained elements of his spiritual powers, political force fully gave way to the fumu-si who, through their connections to slavers and their ability to tax, broke the ancient bonds of dependence linking them not only to the maloango but the fumu as well. In one account published by a French official during the mid-17$^{th}$ century, a mafouque was referred to by locals near Mayumba as the "chief of Loango," even though that same mafouque referred to the maloango as his "father." At the same time, a report by a European slaver, while characterizing the living standards during the peak of Loango as "prosperous," even surpassing the underclasses of Europe, he said that some communities still paid a symbolic tribute to the Loango. Though the tribute had always been reportedly symbolic, its continued remittance suggests the durability of spiritual institutions.[206]

[205] Patterson, *Northern Gabon*, 24.
[206] Merlet, *Autour du Loango.*

The post-1830 trade rush also resulted in the migration of many other groups of clans towards the Atlantic and river confluences, resulting in the rough mosaic of clan regions that persist today. Most notable among these migrations were the Fang, who in 1840 descended from the Woleu and Ntem rivers towards the coast, middle Ogooué, and the confluence of the Ogooué and the Ngounie rivers. Two decades earlier the Bakele traveled inland from the estuary towards the coast, while the Bishiwa moved down the Ivindo towards the confluence of the Ogooué. In eastern Gabon, the Nzabi and Tsangi moved south and west in search of better trade routes. In northeastern Gabon, peoples moved south and westward to take advantage of the overland trade to Loango. During this time, the Okande on the banks of the Ogooué between the Ngounie and the Ivindo had created a kingdom, which only imploded thanks to the same centrifugal forces created by trade that inflicted other kingdoms. In the Estuary, Mpongwe society had throughout the 19th century transformed into firms, marking status with dress and ostentatious displays of wealth. Despite this last instance, little else changed for the peoples of Gabon with the minor exception in the swelling of patrilineal ranks.[207]

Throughout this tumultuous era of increasing trade, the peoples of southern Gabon continually adapted changing environmental circumstances to previously held traditions. Goods were acquired as a means not only to wealth but power and prestige. Matrimonial compensation was needed to acquire dependents, followers, wives, power, and prestige. Trade simply sped up this process, but did not subvert it. Kingdoms were still formed and legitimized through lineage ideologies. Houses and villages were still the most common units of socio-political construction outside the kingdoms. What the experience of the Atlantic trade from 1492-1880 imparts on us is how strong and enduring cognitive perceptions of power are, and what it actually takes to erode them. If any concerted, external force was to overturn the local autonomy and self-determination of the pre-colonial Gabonese, it would be the onslaught of French bureaucracy, administration, and outright conquest.

[207] Vansina, *Paths*, 197-237.

## 3.3 Southern Gabon during Colonial Occupation

No other political development or external force would have such a devastating impact on Gabonese—and southern Gabonese—political institutions than colonial penetration and administration by bureaucrats, soldiers, and corporations all wielding power through the end of a barrel. As France ratcheted up its control of the Gabonese region towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, brute force, together with the realignment of indigenous political preferences and aspirations through the administration of territory and people, would nearly eviscerate the core of traditional elements in Gabonese society and politics. This section tells this tale—from 1839 to independence in 1960—primarily through the eyes of French colonial protagonists and their indigenous respondents, neither of which should be confused as the sole agents in the colony's institutional development. Rather, such a traditionalist history is meant to paint a broad brush of important developments which helped set the backdrop for multifaceted engagement and development of the Ndougou's institutional future. The following history therefore divides the colonial era into three sub-eras based on the depth of administrative and military penetration. From 1839 to 1885, France's engagement with Gabon was mostly limited to littoral regions, while the period from 1885 to 1910 saw interior penetration and the ravages of the concessionary system. Finally, the institution of Afrique Equatoriale Française (AEF) in 1910 saw a more direct challenge to ancestral Western Bantu traditions through the imposition of *indigénat*, chief appointments, and the intensification of conflicts between the French military and rebellious elements among local populations. Two elements critical to resolving colonialism's impact on traditional institutions concern the extent of differentiation of French practices across the territory and what accounted for this differentiation. The experiences of the Ndougou are periodically presented as both similar and in contrast to colony-wide trends.

From 1839 to 1885, the year of the Congress of Berlin and when France had roughly completed its systematic exploration of Gabon's interior, French control of Gabon was limited to coastal regions where successive treaties with traditional leaders had been signed. A convergence of interests ranging from France's commitment to suppressing the slave trade to providing protection for maritime commerce brought the French Navy to Gabon's shores in 1837. In that year, the young officer Edouard Bouet-Williaumez set out on the *Malouine* to accomplish the larger objective of establishing *points d'appui*, commercial and military stations along the coast

meant to secure trade and rein in slavers. By 1839, Bouet had signed a treaty with the Myene-speaking Mpongwe chief known as "King Denis" to the French, who in reality was better described as a big man ruling over a district within the myene-speaking Estuary peoples. In 1842, another Estuary big man, "King Louis," signed a treaty ceding external sovereignty to France. Once the Navy established its port at Fort d'Aumale in the Estuary, not far from what would soon become Libreville, naval officers were able to make longer overland and sea routes up and down Gabon's coastal region, signing treaties as they advanced. By 1846, France had claimed virtually all of the Estuary deemed appropriate for military and agricultural activities. Similar treaties were then signed in 1852 with the Benga clan heads at Cape Esterias, north of Libreville, in 1862 with the Orungu chiefs at Cape Lopez to the south, and in 1868 with the Nkomi chiefs at Fernan Vaz, even further south. By this time, the French authorities can be said to have extended their loose dominance, mostly concerned with resource extraction, over the entirety of Gabon's coastal region.

Even so, France's territorial control during the period from 1839-1875 was limited compared to the scramble that would ensue. Economic activity increased as littoral regions were integrated, a process explained in more detailed in the preceding section, and the French were content to allow open trade. This was partly the result of a mutual understanding with France's European rivals as well as the perception that Gabon was not as precious as other French holdings, such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. French Foreign Minister François Pierre Guillaume Guizot therefore stated in 1844 that France would do no more than exercise external sovereignty over the region, a policy meant to avoid antagonizing the British while also holding out for a brighter, resource-rich future. As a result, firms were more established than military and administrative outposts, and each were content to rely on intermediaries to bring goods to ports and supply depots. Reluctance to penetrate the interior was exemplified by the circumstances which led to the founding of Libreville. Throughout the 1840s, the Mpongwe had steadily become the chief intermediaries between Europeans and the interior, where ivory, rubber, and slaves were to be found. As they became more involved, the Mpongwe further enriched themselves and began acquiring certain European customs while refusing employment as agricultural laborers, traits the French would soon despise. In 1849, Bouet took a group of "liberated" Vili traders from Loango to found a settlement called Libreville, a crowd-pleasing way to both circumvent Mpongwe in the region and hopefully win hearts and minds.

As mentioned above, France, with pressure from Great Britain, nominally banned the slave trade in 1818 in territories above the equator, leaving Loango south of the equator to persist unencumbered to benefit from its primary real source of wealth. Sette Cama, in the present-day department of Ndougou, was a critical supply post where slaves were held and sold to Portuguese sailors destined for Brazil. It is no surprise then that after 1836, with the ban on the slave trade extending southward below the equator and thus implicating and affecting the Loango kingdom, the real power of the Loango kingdom rapidly disintegrated even further. Between 1836 and approximately 1865, the trade went underground to an extent as British and French patrols scoured coastal Gabon, intercepting ships whenever possible and arresting interlopers. On one occasion mentioned above, a French patrol was said to have captured a ship of Vili slaves. Though it cannot be confirmed, the possibility that Vili sold their own—those who had not even been justly tried and convicted by customary law—suggests a deterioriation of political cultures wrought by the trade. In 1845, explorer Bouet-Williaumez drafted a report claiming that 500-600 slaves were kept at all times in Mayumba. By this time, Merlet tells us that the chefs de terre in the region under question, the fumu-si, as well as the mafouques, had become "parasites," contributing to the "atomization" of lineage. In contradiction with what has been suggested regarding the rest of Gabon, traditional leaders became much more interested in personal gains, either as a means to self-enrichment or to buttress their power, despite the collective good and stability promoted by ancient lineages spanning larger regions and distances. They had become dependent on the trade, selling Western products and liaising with Western merchants.[208]

When the trade was more firmly halted in 1865, a prelude to encroaching French administration, and the depleted kingdom of Loango left without its revenue, the matrilineal links and oral traditions which bonded people across hundreds of kilometers were severed. This is not to say that matrilineal traditions had ceased within tighter atoms; indeed, an account by Le Testu as late as 1907 confirms the preponderance in southwestern Gabon of strict matrilinearity and devotion to ancestors. It merely suggests that the means by which larger political organizations—such as Loango—had historically been held together were, perhaps irrevocably, destroyed. The medium of power was now material goods, even if circumscribed by traditional structures, habits, and bestowing of legitimacy. This conflict between political legitimacy derived from traditions

[208] Merlet, *Autour du Loango.*

and that derived from Western material goods was the basis of a violent conflict which broke out shortly after the abolition of "*la traite*," between coastal factions of traditional leaders and those coastal usurpers deemed upstarts by the fumu-si, the former of whom were increasingly influential in politics and public management thanks to their newly acquired wealth. It is plausible that neither side won a clear victory, but that in any case successive leaders sought the need to justify their statuses through traditional means.[209]

Institutional change among the autochtons during this era would therefore not come from force and administration as much as from trade (discussed earlier) and missionary activity. Treaties were merely an instrument to exclude European rivals, and were drawn and signed so hastily and so vaguely that their enforceability still remains in doubt. Many accounts report chiefs having scribbled an "X" after being presented with a host of goods. The practice of gift-giving was soon institutionalized in agreements in the form of annual contributions, and as part of French efforts to create networks of big men loyal to them. The British and the Germans also practiced this, as their firms had large holdings and a commercial presence in Gabon. Although the French firms Lecour of Nantes and Dubarry Frères of Le Havre made significant gains, it was firms like Hatton and Cookson, John Holt, and Woermann that took the lion's share of the profits. No doubt a reason for deeper French *emprise* towards the end of the nineteenth century, this highly competitive environment was among the reasons for why French authorities had also given *carte blanche* to Catholic missionaries, another being the need to groom a local elite. In 1844 religious leader Bessieux and his order, the Fathers of the Holy Ghost, established a seminary near Fort d'Aumale, partly in an effort to counter the omnipresent American protestant missionaries and their expanding influence. Soon thereafter a decree obliging that all school instruction be done in French effectively removed the American menace and cemented French Catholic control of missionary activity. Thus, by 1875, commerce and Christianity (and not yet "civilization") planted seeds of social change which would steadily germinate in the years to come. Porters now worked for outsiders, creating wage employment, a heretofore unknown concept, and many ethnic groups would be alarmed by the evolving monopolistic practices of firms. Christianity in turn introduced a cosmology that, although not entirely incompatible with Western Bantu conceptions of the universe, had begun to endear autochtones to their colonial masters. But when Bessieux began

[209] ibid.

expanding his missionary activity over broader areas throughout the 1870s, more sinister developments with more serious consequences were beginning to unfold.[210]

The 1870s witnessed a sea change in French public support for colonial ventures, with public backing for interior penetration rising precipitously. The root causes were intensified nationalism, competition for territory (overseas and otherwise), and augmented military capabilities (not until the 1890s would industrialization and the demand for primary commodities become a factor). When the French were defeated by Germany at the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, itself partly a consequence of industrialization, the public's will to restore national pride, the demand for primary commodities in France's factories, and international competition aligned to thrust the nation into Gabon's interior. After interior explorations by Paul du Chaillu who traced the Fang passage from the north, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza captured French imaginations by tracing a route from the Gabonese coast to the Congo basin from 1874 to 1882. After de Brazza's first two expeditions along the Ogooué and the ratification of the Makoko treaties which recognized a French protectorate over the right bank of the river, de Brazza was entrusted with taking control and preparing the local populations for long-distance trade. In the middle-to-upper Ogooué regions, the Kande, Duma, and especially the Teke had long since abandoned self-sufficient economies thanks to the legitimate trade, making them ripe for a new scheme of more intense regional integration.[211] By the 1880s, other explorers had together succeeded in mapping nearly all of Gabon's territory. In 1883, French encroachment in Gabon's southern regions allowed treaties to be signed with the Vili chiefs at Loango and beyond.

By 1883, a French expedition aimed at surveying commerce on the Loango coast found that four companies were operating in Sette Cama, all of which variously engaged in the rubber, ivory and palm trades: Edwards Brothers and John Holt, both British firms, Woermann, German, and Hatton and Cookson, another British firm which according to the expedition exercised, along with Woermann, "the most influence on the indigenous peoples." The local executive for Hatton and Cookson is now buried, along with other European officials including ex-colonial governor Leremercier, on the beach outside Sette Cama.[212] Another adjacent cemetery would become the final resting place of Sette Cama's local population.

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[210] ibid.

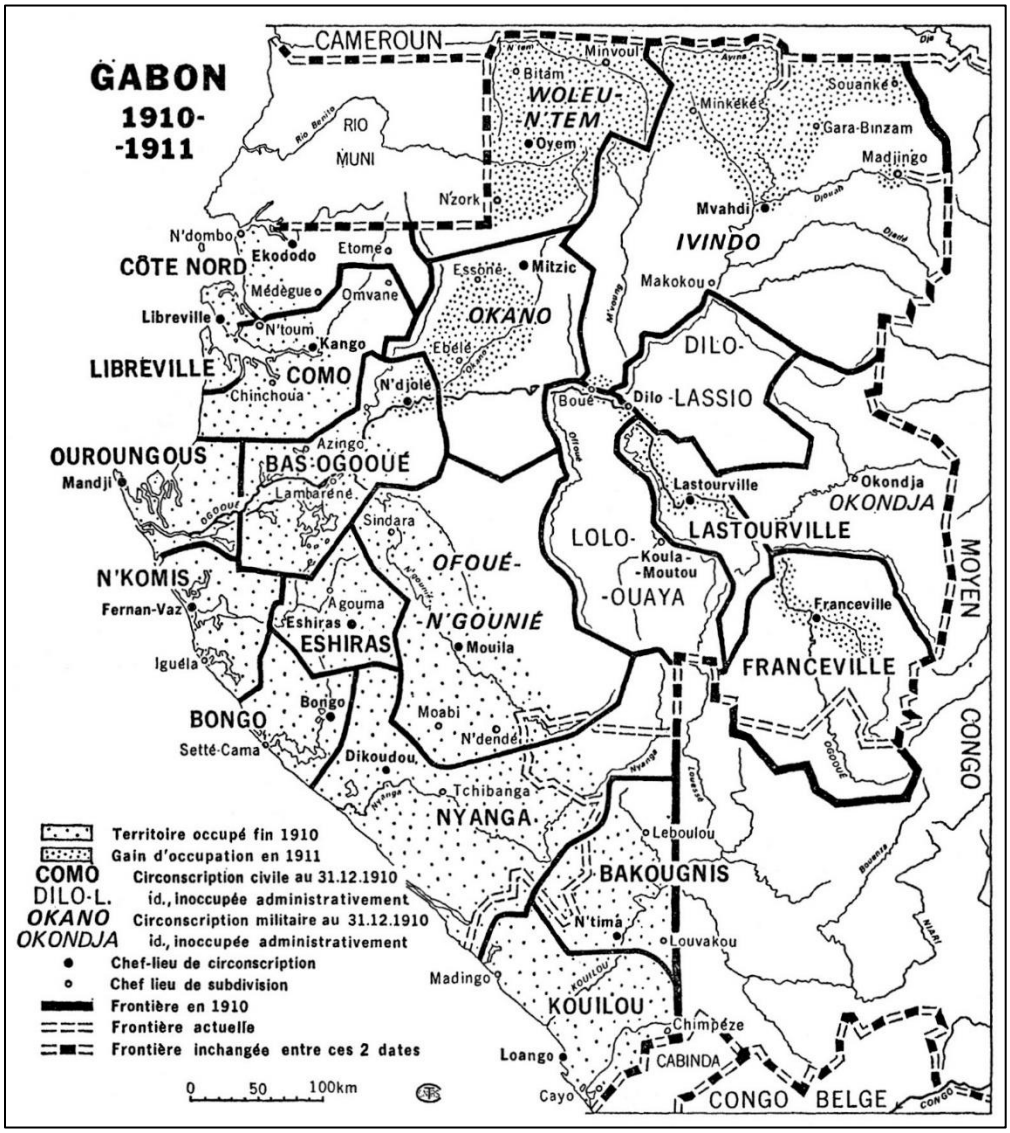
[211] Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "French Congo and Gabon, 1886-1905." *The Cambridge History of Africa 6* (1985) : 298-315. 298.

[212] Merlet, *Autour du Loango.*

Territoriality and administration went hand in hand with exploration as authorities sought to protect their gains and provide safe havens for French industry. One indicator that the French were becoming more serious about governing Gabon was in 1881 when control over "Middle Congo" was transferred from the Navy to the Ministry of Trade and Colonies, and then in 1894 when an autonomous Ministry of the Colonies was established at the cabinet level. By this time, the Congress of Berlin in 1885 had confirmed Gabon as a French domain, and the French began taking steps to wield their sovereign advantage in the purpose of squeezing out its foreign missionary and commercial competitors. It was during this time that the American evangelists and their schools were forced to transfer their activities to the French Société des missions évangeliques de Paris (SME), thus ending their prominence and setting the stage for the inception of the Evangelical Church of Gabon later on. At the same time, Catholic missionaries made extensive advances. In 1899, André Raponda Walker became the first Gabonese to be ordained a priest, and in 1900 the Brothers of Saint Gabriel opened their well-regarded school in Montfort in Libreville. Christian values had begun to encroach upon, but not supplant, spirit-based religions as the universal cosmology and understanding of the supernatural world.

Through missions, the would-be colonial authorities presumably saw an opportunity to lay the groundwork for African menial labor and the facilitation of extractive industries. Perhaps in better faith, Father Carrie, departing from present-day Congo in 1887, arrived in present-day Gabon just a year later to establish with the help of other priests missions which would educate village children and create a future "elite" in the service of primarily French interests. In an exploratory mission to Loango years earlier, in 1864, Father Carrie would write of his disappointment upon seeing the dilapidated state of the Loango capital (one Dutch explorer in the 18$^{th}$ century had compared it to Amsterdam with an estimated population of 15,000), which to the

Father had looked no grander than a larger village. His disappointment may have compounded when he later encountered a culture intrinsically resistant to the mores of Christianity.[213]




*Map 4: Gabon at the onset of the AEF, 1910. (Bernault, Ambigues)*

In 1888 the region's first mission was built in Mayumba, the former slaving port and as yet the region's largest city and economic capital; Mayumba sold primarily rubber, and a chief there had recently fought a company for granting refuge to his runaway slave. Violence and disputes soon arose when the "Boyo" affair forced clergymen to become less rigid and more tolerant of the local context and indigenous belief systems. Boyo was a ritual similar to Mwiri, which still exists

[213] ibid.

today. Its purpose was to maintain order and achieve the obeisance of women. *Ngangas*, witchdoctors whose participation in the ceremonies was critical, launched an offensive, poisoning African catechists and threatening others. Displaying of the cross was not permitted. Not until priests learned to demonstrate to *ngangas* and chiefs that they too could achieve the obseisance of women did chiefs in 17 separate villages of the region begin renouncing Boyo and even burning down its prayer houses.[214]

In 1889, Father Carrie, or an associate, arrived in Sette Cama for the first time with a letter signed by two local chiefs and the colonial governor permitting the construction of a mission. A site was soon chosen on a small Ndougou lagoon island known as "Ngaley" (or "Ngale"), and by 1891 classrooms became functional, instructing the children of chiefs and former slaves—the latter were typically freed by French authorities. Indigenous populations did not feel comfortable entrusting their children to "*les blancs*" and their belief systems until the 1920s, just when enrolment at the mission began to stagnate. But from 1893 to 1934, the total numbers of boys and schools vacillated between 50 and 110. Crosses were eventually built in many of the lagunar villages, but large-scale adherence to the Catholic faith would not persist as intended. In any case, factors like the cultural practice of polygamy demanded calls for adaptation to Catholicism which would have fallen flat when confronted with its strictest European proselytizers.[215]

In commerce, French authorities began to put in place a concessionary policy modeled on the Belgian Congo—*the régime concessionaire*—a convenient way to exclude British, German, and American firms trading in ivory, rubber, and then okoume, but nevertheless a terrible omen for the territory's autochtones. Once the Ogooué was effectively opened up by de Brazza, the Ministry of the Colonies and private concerns turned towards exploiting inland resources. Obstacles to efficient exploitation abounded, however. First, the French administration's manpower during these years was very limited, with the future AEF's white community totalling no more than 800, most of which were stationed in Libreville, Brazzaville, and Pointe Noire. Second, France's public bourse and the authorities therein were unable and unwilling to finance the effective state administration of all of Gabon. Third, local populations preferred British and German products. In order to make Gabon profitable, then, private concerns would have to assume the cost of development, taxation, and policing in exchange for a monopoly of trade in a

[214] ibid.

[215] Jean Silvio Koumba, "Esquisse de l'Histoire de Sette Cama." (Tourist-Art Consulting: Libreville, 2015).

predesignated zone. Thus, in 1894, the Société de Haute Ogooué (SHO) received 11 million hectares in eastern Gabon. In 1896, André Lebon, Minister for the Colonies, formalized the process of handing over territory and administration by decree. Lebon's successors ended up granting forty concessions by 1900, each given a thirty-year monopoly on "products of the soil," such as ivory and rubber, in return for a fixed annual payment to the state as well as fifteen percent of all profits.[216]

Despite the presumed advantages granted to them, the *entreprises de colonisation* were, on the whole, a colossal failure from the perspectives of business, development, and human rights. Firstly, despite all their efforts and retention of property rights, most of the forty concessionaires filed for bankruptcy by 1904-5, when only a total of seven survived. The latter seven, including the SHO, reportedly "owed their success to the extreme severity of their methods."[217] The SHO's zone covered roughly half of Gabon and virtually all the territory in the east, an area rich in timber. The company serves as a representative example of the practices of concessionaires until roughly 1910, which was marked by underdevelopment, conflict, and instability. When authorities realized as early as 1884 that Africans would not readily sell their labor, a poll tax was administered which not only contributed to state and private liquidity but which also had the intended effect of pushing Africans into labor markets in order to acquire currency.[218] Development, of course, was of secondary, even tertiary, importance. Companies had no incentives to invest or develop infrastructure when extracting wood and rubber. They had only to pay porters for collection, not even according to the value of the product. For the African, there was little distinction between the merchant or the soldier, who each regarded him or her as a possession to be exploited, and, when necessary, beaten. Abuses were aggravated by the shortage of labor expected from a forested and underpopulated land.[219] When groups organized and either refused to work or obstructed the flow of goods, companies could call on colonial forces (e.g. *les tirailleurs sénéglais*) and mercenaries to put down riots and labor skirmishes. What's more, the notoriously monopolistic practice of setting low supplier prices (when suppliers were by and large local populations) and charging extortionist prices for their own manufactured products did nothing to rectify the situation. Lastly, payments for SHO products were made in company currencies.

[216] Coquery-Vidrovitch, *French Congo*, 303-307.
[217] ibid., 309.
[218] ibid., 310.
[219] ibid., 308-315.

Until 1907, the Circonscription de Bongo, with the subdivisions of Bongo (up the Rembo Bongo) and Sette Cama, was dominated by Hatton and Cookson which was maintaining cocoa and coconut plantations. Such was the dominance of the English competitors that the *concessionaires* of the French Société Agricole et Commerciale de Sette Cama (SACSC) routinely petitioned the Ministry of Colonies to enforce their concession, either with colonial forces, personnel, or favorable taxation. The difficulties of SACSC in capitalizing on their concessions were made evident through the frequent strikes by locals who objected to physical abuse by the SACSC-employed *traitants*. The year 1902, for instance, witnessed the killing of six *indigènes* during a skirmish with armed *traitants*. In defending their actions, the SACSC merely wrote to the Ministry that competition from the English and local "rebellion" necessitated their rough treatment, and that only more personnel could overturn the dire state of affairs.[220]

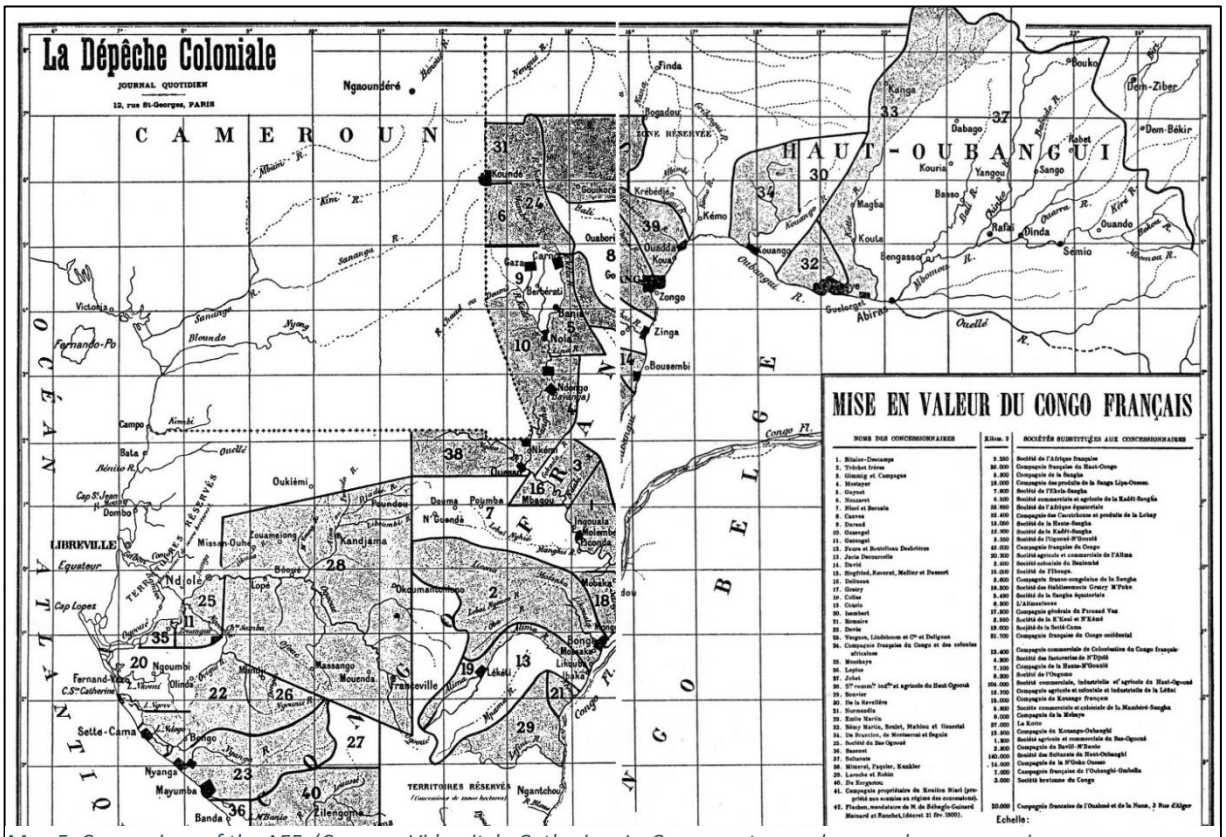
The extent of economic and physical abuse wrought by the concessionary era was further documented de Brazza himself, who in a mission in 1910 confirmed reports of brutality by the companies. The report helped lead to a return to open competition and the abandonment of concessions. For all intents and purposes, however, the damage done to traditional institutions must have been severe. No longer were autochtones operating as middlemen and setting their own "wages." From the concession-era onwards, facilitated by colonial penetration of the interior, regional economies were directly re-oriented to the international market, and wage labor became the norm. Property, human capital, and Christianity, however, were mere antecedents to the cultural shock that would follow with the establishment of the confederation Afrique Equatoriale Française (AEF) in 1910.

The AEF era extended from 1910 to 1958, and its defining characteristics, the execution of direct administration and social engineering, would doubtless transform indigenous political systems in profound ways. This required "capturing" the rural peasantry by either introducing modernity when feasible or by the use of force and various legal sanctions. The push for liberalization in the post-World War II years leading to independence, in addition to the obvious benefits derived from the low-scale distribution of modern medicine and public schooling, served much of this modernizing purpose, the goal of which was to transform peasants into market

[220] Letters written by Director of SACSC to the Ministry of Colonies, 29 December, 1902, 11 February, 1903, 17 February, 1903, Société Agricole et Commerciale du Sette Cama, Dossier Commun aux Sociétés du Fernan Vaz et du Sette Cama, 1899/1930, Carton 62 COL 33, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

economy laborers. In 1913, for instance, the humanitarian and ethnographer Albert Schweitzer began his medical mission in Lambarene, a city straddling the upper Ogooué. After the AEF had been inaugurated with Brazzaville as its capital, however, the gradual demise of concessions meant new arrangements were needed to "pacify" the indigenous Gabonese when the draw of modernization was not expedient.

This was done twofold by creating a new administrative hierarchy and grooming a local elite dependent on French interests. *Canton* chiefs would be appointed by colonial officers to administer justice and resolve disputes, severely curtailing the power of traditional chiefs (*chefs de terre* and *chefs de famille/clan*) who either matched or fell short of the power retained by administrative chiefs, which was still limited in the grand scheme. Administrative chiefs were expected to gather the necessary labor for industrial projects as well as apply customary law, a means to subvert traditional dispute settlement mechanisms by integrating "custom," as administrators defined it, within the administrative court hierarchy.[221]




*Map 5: Concessions of the AEF. (Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine. Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires 1898–1930. Vol. 37 (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2017 [1972])*

[221] For a similar argument, see C.C. Mojekwu, "Law in African Culture and Society." (*African Society, Culture and Politics: an Introduction to African Studies*, 1978).

Prior to 1906, the area around Sette Cama was administered by the colony of Moyen-Congo, while the colony of Gabon's territory began not far north of the Ndougou lagoon. During this time, the area was directly administered by the Chef de Poste de Sette Cama, whose mandate was to protect French nationals, regulate conflicts between indigenous peoples and the companies operating in the area, enforce fixed prices, facilitate commerce, and, last but not least, recruit labor as part of France's infamous "forced labor" regime. The same general hierarchy/dynamic was in place after the region around Sette Cama was definitively placed within the now-fixed colony of Gabon in 1908. Although only 4 persons were recruited to work in Sette Cama's postal and telegraph services in 1903, the number of those recruited for "*prestations*" would rise to 150 in 1926, many of whom would be consigned to menial labor extracting palm products. To give a sense of scale, the population of the Ndougou lagoon was estimated in 1899 at 8,000 with approximately 230 villages, Sette Cama being but among the largest.[222] In 1918, it was estimated that 23,800 person-days of free labor was exacted. The toll of forced labor came with moderate resistance, especially from chefs de terre who saw real power give way to administrative conduits and chiefs working for the Chef de Poste de Sette Cama. In one instance, authorities of the Circonscription de Bongo reported that disputes between *chefs de terre* and administrative chiefs were intensifying, as one *chef de village* routinely sought to reaffirm his authority over a nearby *chef de terre* by encouraging plantation workers to stop maintaining his land.[223] Additionally, a local tribunal was established in 1926 which usurped many traditional powers by placing local "notables" on the bench. While many abandoned the region to avoid head taxes by France and its auxiliaries, some chefs de terre like the activist in N'Gamba (present-day Gamba) violently resisted French colonialism. The latter was eventually imprisoned in Libreville for one year.[224]

In addition to local administration, the second means of subjecting the Gabonese was accomplished through the infamous institution of *indigénat*, the upshot of the French *mission civiliatrice* which created a hierarchy of indigenous social classes based on the extent of assimilation to French culture. Whereas the interbred *métis* among the Church-educated Mpongwe/Estuary elite would acquire many of the rights of the French *colons* and serve among

[222] Koumba, *Esquisse.*

[223] "Rapport Mensuel, January, 1922," Rapports Mensuels, Circonscription de Bongo, 1922, Carton D 21, 51MIOM/44(1-2), Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

[224] Koumba, *Esquisse.*

the corps of French Congo's bureaucrats, the rest of the population subject to *indigénat* became second-rate citizens subject to penalties and taxation without adequate legal recourse. The French policy of assimilation, according to Edward Mortimer, was in fact a perversion of Lord Lugard's indirect rule as it was first applied in Nigeria. Instead of governing on the cheap and readying colonies for eventual self-governance, assimilation sought "the largest amount of administrative, economic and financial independence that is compatible with the greatest possible political dependence."[225] The largely Anglo-Saxon idea of self-determination, as Mortimer states, was more readily accepted in an international context, such as was the case with the inauguration of the League of Nations. Whereas the British largely ruled over territories with borders that more closely fitted pre-colonial "boundaries" and peoples more accustomed to centralization, French territories like Gabon had no such advantages, thus applying a pure scheme of indirect rule proved less adequate to the terminal goal of extraction.[226]

This piece of social engineering ended up introducing a class element to inter-clan relations, and the visible heights to which Mpongwe *métis* rose must have had an effect on the aspirations of autochtones throughout the country. Even though interclan relations prior to indigénat were often conflictual and indeed garrulous, the relative lack of material disparities between clans, with the minor exception of the Mpongwe, in part meant that ethics of mutual toleration and egalitarianism had persisted. As soon as it was clear that territoriality and money were the new currencies of power, however, society fractured along new lines. The socio-political equilibrium which had thus far survived the onslaught of intensive trade was beginning to give way to a disjointed system where power was becoming disembedded from its former legitimacy. This was a recipe for contestation and conflict.

Ironically, much of the resistance and opposition to indigénat and forced labor would come from the ranks of *métis* themselves, although inequitable clan relations somewhat intensified. From 1924-1945, *indigénat,* together with the savvy placement of administrative chiefs, helped build the Congo-Océan railroad, one example of concessionary exactions that caused a great deal of hardship, transformed standards of living, and fueled resistance movements. In 1925, the Haut-Ogooué region consisting of present-day Bongoville (formerly Lewai) was transferred to the

[225] Jules Harmand (1910) in Edward Mortimer, *France and the Africans, 1940–60: a Political History* (London: Faber, 1969), 33.

[226] Mortimer, *France and the Africans,* 32-37.

Middle Congo for the sole purpose of providing more labor for the construction of the Congo-Ocean railroad. The practice of granting concessions did come to an end shortly after the public outry following the publication of André Gide's *Voyage au Congo* in 1927, but this did not stop the practice of forced labor by private enterprise.[227] In addition, those Mpongwe Estuary elite—the *métis*—educated in France or in colonial French schools became a formidable voice for reform. In 1918, for instance, Tchikaya and Mapako-Gnali were sent to the Ponty school in Senegal, and in the same year the Libreville branch of the *Ligue de droits de l'homme* was founded, a resistance movement aimed at curbing colonial abuses. Expat Gabonese and World War I veterans Bigmann and Antchouey then published L'Echo Gabonais and then La Voix Coloniale in Nice, publications with close ties to the *Ligue* as well as the *Jeunesse Gabonaise*, all of which were composed primarily of Mpongwe elite.

Elites, or *évolués,* were likewise groomed for local politics in the Ndougou lagoon, but the success in doing so by the Mission Ngale would wane over time. From 1893 to 1934, the total numbers of boys and schoolchildren vacillated between 50 and 110. In 1933, the mission's congregation peaked at approximately 1,705 members and since then fell. The mission's students typically became something of a local elite class, speaking French, reciting Bible verses, and being able to perform basic maths. Evangelized and trained, many would either join the clergy and make up the first group of indigenous priests in 1934 (6 in total) or go to work for European companies like Woermann, Hatton and Cookson, or, later on, primarily French companies. It is no wonder, then, that it was primarily chiefs whose contact with French administration was most frequent that wished their children to be sent to missionary schools, despite earlier objections and mistrust. In 1918, local chiefs banded together to save the church from insolvency and closing.[228]

The decline, stagnation, and perception of failure among the clergy with respect to its impact on and recruitment of the local population has its roots in several factors given by Jean Silvio Koumba, a jurist in Libreville with knowledge of the Ndougou's history. Not only did Vili and Loumbou groups in the area remain suspicious of the strict monotheism of Catholicism, but difficulties in recruitment were also owed to a lack of finances within the Church itself, which could scarcely afford to pay decent salaries. Koumba also cites the encroaching presence of companies in and around the lagoon, which paid better salaries and whose effects on local

[227] ibid., 38.
[228] Koumba, *Esquisse.*

populations were at once physical, temporal, and psychological. As a result, for these reasons and for others which have yet to be elucidated, Catholicism failed to hold sway, but that does not mean we should discount its presence during these years as influential on the cosmology of local populations. If the population of the region was estimated in the thousands near 1933 when missionary membership reached 1,705, it is safe to assume many were now aware of an alternative belief system and began adhering to technological hierarchies. In any case, high winds would destroy the mission building, and consequently lay to rest whatever impact the Ngale mission might have had on the local population.[229]

Returning to events in Libreville, calls for reform of *indigénat* were not enough to counter the resentment that the more populous Fang had begun to develop of the *métis*. Becoming ever more dominant in the Estuary region, the Fang migration from the Woleu-Ntem had resulted in a widespread decline of traditional chiefly powers. Leadership hence passed to the most westernized elements capable of defending Fang interests—wage earners and educated elite.[230] In 1922, one such Fang was Léon Mba, a critic of Mpongwe dominance in the colonial administration who was appointed canton chief in a large district of Libreville, a position which he used to mount diatribes against the colonial administration and henceforth build his career. In 1926, Francois-de-Paul Vane created the Mutuelle Gabonaise, a group of Mpongwe militating against the privileged Mpongwe *métis*, and soon thereafter the *métis*, in turn, formed the Amicale des Métis to protect their own interests. In response, the Fang, still encroaching upon traditional Mpongwe territory and elite privileges, created the Comite des Interests Pahouins. This formalization of inter-ethnic tensions would form the basis of electoral compositions in the colonial and post-colonial eras.

In the years leading up to World War II, after which Gabon would begin to take on its post-colonial characteristics, world depression would have a destabilizing effect on the region and prompt evermore extreme measures by French authorities to quell dissent and unrest. In 1929, an Awandji revolt against administrative and concessionary abuses was put down by colonial authorities, and in 1933 Mba was exiled for his surreptitious activities and increasing popularity among Estuary Fang. In 1937, Vane won a victory for the anti-*métis* voices through his election to the Governor-General's Council of Administration, a precursor to the type of power cessions granted to indigenous Gabonese after World War II. Reports to Libreville from administrators in

[229] ibid.
[230] Mortimer, *France and the Africans*, 39-40.

in Bongo (north of the Ndougou lagoon), however, fail to mention any such agitation. By all accounts, much of southern Gabon remained relatively peaceful.

The post-World War II era is in itself distinctive, for this granted to indigenous Gabonese a level of political and economic autonomy that would help shape post-colonial politics. The war's devastation of metropolitan French infrastructure and the abuses of occupation left the nation severely weakened, and the war itself provided an opportunity for Gabonese nationalists to act on their grievances with decided leverage. Most educated Gabonese therefore supported the Vichy regime, leading to the swift reconquest of the AEF by Leclerc and the Free French forces in 1940. Management of the recaptured AEF was handed to Felix Eboué, born in Guyana. A loyal Gaullist, Eboué nevertheless worked to win over indigenous populations through the establishment of Gabon's first public secondary schools, the abolition of the indigénat after WWII, and the increased participatory role of local elites in the political process. Prior to the liberation of Paris, facilitating Eboué's push for reforms was a general colonial policy shift to the left following adhesion to Free France

At the Brazzaville Conference of 1944, called by de Gaulle to liberalize the empire and grant more political rights to colonies within the French imperial realm, Eboué's ideas were somewhat well received despite de Gaulle's failure to reference self-determination at the conference, and it was generally agreed that smoother governance required local elite participation. In 1946, these principles were put into practice with the inauguration of the Fourth French Republic, in which the newly formed Gabon with its attendant boundaries became an Overseas Territory of France. Forced labor and indigénat were effectively abolished, black Africans became French citizens, an advisory Territorial Assembly was established, and Gabon was even given representation in the French National Assembly.

In the decades preceding Gabon's independence in 1960, liberalized (and relatively localized) French colonial administration in the Ndougou would seem to have impacted the local population in two significant ways: market labour, whether forced or salaried, and formal education. As briefly mentioned above, it would be difficult to argue that the structure of politics and power at the local level faced significant changes in southern Gabon throughout colonial administration, as prior subjects of the Loango kingdom were by no means acephalous and were indeed habituated to centralized rule. Administrative chiefs—chefs de canton, chefs de regroupement, and chefs de village—by many accounts, seem to have by and large possessed

legitimacy through lineage and personal qualities. This is no accident, because French administrators deftly sought out legitimate auxiliaries whenever possible, a pragmatic strategy still carried out by the current regime. More difficult to determine, however, is when and how chiefs in this region ceased gradually to occupy spiritual-defensive roles within their communities, to which we will turn further on. For now, it suffices to say that the chiefly occupation is likely to have not changed much in southwestern Gabon since the 1920s, especially compared to the more acephalous Fang of the Woleu-Ntem.

Although forced labor throughout French Africa was nominally abolished in 1946, it would be incorrect to state that the practice in Gabon of workers opting to sell their labor engendered a transformative process. Taxes were still collected, requiring people to seek salaried work in one of the very few companies operating in the Ndougou. Now that the means of subsistence had been sufficiently monetized, and those participating in agriculture, fishing, and hunting retrained for salaried work, one might argue that forced labor ceased to be necessary. According to a report published by the local government in Gamba, foresting activities stagnated and declined from 1935-1937, but Sette Cama remained an export hub for several species of lumber from the interior,[231] and it was clear to chiefs that salaried employment conferred prestige and elite status. Also, the continued trade and presence of several companies encouraged regional migration to the lagoon on a moderate scale. In any case, it does not seem as though the region was vitally important for lumber, as interior lands such as the Woleu Ntem in the north or outskirts of Lascoursville to the east were favored foresting sites by the concessionnaires.

Perhaps more important for the changing customs of villagers around the lagoon was the construction of the first secular school in Sette Cama in 1947, which began its instruction to children in 1948. We can only assume that the compulsory schooling of locals was effective, as many interviewed chiefs often recalled having to travel several days to arrive at school in Sette Cama, intermittently the seat of districts during the colonial era depending on the importance of the region for trade and extraction. There they learned French and French history, as well as other remedial subjects (e.g. maths) before possibly graduating to secondary school elsewhere. Many older chiefs today seem divided on their impressions of France. While some recall their fathers

[231] "Plan de développement local du département de Ndougou et de la Commune de Gamba : 2013-2017" (Comité de réflexion sur l'après-pétrole, UNDP, Conseil du Commune de Gamba, Conseil départemental de Ndougou. Released in 2012).

having occupied important positions during the colonial era with pride, others betray a marked antagonism towards the symbolism of colonial subjugation, with one chief bitterly recalling that village people were routinely made to carry on their shoulders colonial administrators through densely wooded areas.[232] Rather than creating French people, formal schooling in the colonial era seemed to have created Francophones at most.

Far removed from the relative backwater of the Ndougou, party lines in Libreville began to reflect class and ethnic interests which much of the time intersected and fractured along regional lines as well. Jean-Hilaire Aubaume, a representative of the more traditional Fang in the northern Woleu-Ntem region from where their migration first began, was the first Gabonese elected to the French National Assembly. Aubaume headed the more conciliatory UDSG, whose passive stance towards colonial ventures endeared him to French authorities, as well as helped to create a bitter rivalry with the more "Marxist-liberationist" Mba, who self-aligned with Houphouet Boigny and even some regional Marxist elements. After returning from exile in 1936, Mba spent 10 years as a civil servant in Brazzaville and, upon return to Libreville in 1946, helped create the Comité Mixte Gabonais, largely composed of Estuary Fang and influenced by Boigny's RDA. In this period Mba made a calculated move to moderate his Marxist stance by drawing various groups which could potentially help him unseat Aubaume in elections to the National Assembly. Many feared an impending Fang dominance of national politics, and Mba successfully exploited groups sharing these fears. In 1954, Gondjout, who represented the Estuary's non-Fang elite, agreed to enter into an alliance with Mba which, having vastly expanded Mba's political base, contributed to his election as mayor of Libreville in 1956. Other factors in Mba's favor included the RDA's break with French Communists, tempering Mba's image as a radical Marxist. The Bloc Démocratique Gabonais (BDG) was also supported by local French industries and the wealthy Mpongwe elite, thanks to Gondjout's own constituency. Despite the demise of the concessionary era and forced labor, many companies had stayed on and diverted their attention towards other profitable extractive resources, such as manganese in Franceville, timber, iron in Mekambo, and uranium in the Haut-Ogooué. In 1956, ironically the year the *loi cadre* was passed in the French National Assembly, petroleum was first produced near Port-Gentil at the mouth of the Ogooué river. The

[232] Interview with Chef de village of Mougagara (Mougagara, Gabon, August 5, 2015).

managers of exploitative companies such as COMILOG and SOMIFER formed a critical base of support for the BDG.

In 1956, the *loi cadre* enforced all the terms of agreement reached at the 1944 Brazzaville Conference, and in that year the French National Assembly passed enabling legislation. In effect, the law re-organized the AEF along the lines of the British Commonwealth, where territories would elect true representative assemblies under the external sovereignty of the French executive. The BDG succeeded in electing a large contingent to the new assembly with the help of gerrymandered districts. Mba became the Vice President of the Government Council and the BDG held majorities in the legislature and cabinet. Though Mba had his sights on the monopolization of power and marginalization of Aubame, the rivals united over the anti-colonial push leading up to 1960.

In 1958, the return of de Gaulle and the subsequent dissolution of the Fourth Republic was to upend France's longstanding legal relationship to its Overseas Territories. De Gaulle therefore proposed a referendum to all its territories on whether or not to become independent or join the French Community modelled on the Commonwealth. An overwhelming majority of Gabonese, 190,334 to 15,244, voted in favor of remaining in the Community. Mba and Aubame at this time sided with continued association with France, while Gabon's non-Fang and non-Mpongwe groups feared an independent state dominated by the two powerful contingents. At the end, Gabon, avoiding the threat of a subordinated status in another federation like the AEF, joined the continent-wide push for independence and became an independent republic in 1960 with Mba as Prime Minister.[233]

## 3.4 Factors of Change and Anomie in Southern Gabon

The colonial era witnessed the most profound shocks to indigenous and traditional political systems, and thus perhaps the most intense rapidity of change and instances of resistance. The factors most responsible for this change were first trade, then territoriality, the relations of economic production (including the creation of a proletariat and its mistreatment by colonial and

[233] James Franklin Barnes, *Gabon: Beyond the Colonial Legacy* (Westview Press, 1992) ; Gardinier, David E., and Douglas A. Yates. *Historical Dictionary of Gabon*. (Scarecrow Press, 1981).

company authorities), religious and cultural education (including language), and changes to individual aspirations given the opportunity cost of withdrawing from the state and its administrative apparatuses, among other potential factors of anomie. Each will be briefly considered in the following section, followed by a synopsis of what in fact remained of pre-colonial political systems after the scourge of colonialism.

Trade, territoriality, and relations of economic production in Gabon were interrelated and positively so. For the French, the procurement of wood and minerals needed to be maximized with the use of mercantilism, which meant capitalizing on labor surpluses through the integration of traditional, subsistence cultures into wage-earning collectives, henceforth creating a class structure based on the control of production rather than familial ties. Chiefs, whose legitimacy stemmed from birthright and the distribution of riches in both northern patrilineal and southern matrilineal societies, became slowly deprived of that legitimacy as they became less and less capable of channeling gifts and prestige objects. To make things worse, wage earners were migrating *en masse* to cities and concessionaires to earn their own keep, hollowing villages of the chiefs' means of acquiring riches and labor. In the Ndougou, by contrast, instances of exodus and flight from concessionaires appear consistently on monthly administrative reports throughout the 1920s.[234] Eventually, villagers, recognizing the emasculation of chiefs, began petitioning the local *sous-prefecture* and appointed canton chiefs (representatives of the new, omnipotent state; Ambouroue-Avaro) rather than the traditional chief himself for their grievances and for their needs. The traditional political structure grew up around subsistence agriculture above all else (as in most Western Bantu tradition),[235] and though it may have managed to survive before the demarcation of territorial borders, the conscription of wage-earners and the externalization of force and law sounded the final death knell of these systems. The slow disintegration of subsistence sharing economies, which occurred faster in coastal regions where all factors of change were more present, gradually gave way to economies based on the legal enforcement of personal property and capital exchange.

When the imposition of territoriality became more widespread after the inauguration of AEF in 1910, traditional matriclans of coastal southern Gabon, where most of today's onshore oil

[234] Rapports Mensuels, Circonscription de Bongo, 1922, Carton D 21, 51MIOM/44(1-2), Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

[235] See Bernardin Minko Mve, *Gabon entre Tradition et Post-modernité: Dynamique des Structures d'Accueil Fang*. (Editions L'Harmattan, 2003).

drilling occurs, proved unable to withstand the profound disruptions as a result of direct administration through canton chiefs. As already pointed out, chiefs were appointed mainly to collect taxes, adjudicate customary law, and ensure the supply of manpower—through indigénat—to concessionaires and other colonial projects. Earlier on, this was the domain of traditional authorities. The chiefs were also appointed to administer geographical boundaries which had never existed; power was never demarcated geographically but was exercised through marital exchange, and the composition and location of villages remained somewhat fluid into the early twentieth century. As the French had not taken proper heed of precolonial districts, chiefs were appointed for Orungu, Nkomi, and Ngowe "tribes," and subdivisions such as the Mitsogo, Apindji, Bapunu, and Gisira were further created. Where resistance did not occur, and where traditional chiefs and leaders were less and less solicited for re-distribution, new ethnic identities began to emerge, signifying a shift in the cognitive realities of some Gabonese and thus near-complete institutional change. People began to see themselves in relation to a broader colonial structure. As some clans became absorbed into others within this new structure, evidence suggests notables like Sousatte claimed new ethnic identities, in this case Gisir, in order to advance certain political and economic interests. With the establishment of the *Conseil des notables* in 1937, representatives of designated "ethnicities" met and hashed out their differences, contributing to the sedimentation of new identities. Furthermore, this grouping of Western-educated elite who met to allocate resources for the construction of roads, schools, hospitals, etc. helped create a new class-ethnicity structure which would put in place the fault lines of political conflict for years to come. Thus, territoriality helped crystallize new identities divorced from the old, and the appointment of chiefs dependent on French administration also helped to personalize power in individuals seen as representative of a distant, powerful force.[236]

In the Ndougou lagoon, oral tradition and records taken by Europeans in the 15th century assuredly indicate a relatively centralized kingdom of Loango, first a vassal of Kongo and then relatively independent as the slave trade proceeded, with symbolic tributes continued to be paid to the Maloango. The trade itself caused a flurry of population displacements in the Ndougou and set up a hierarchy between clans, and, although it was strictly determined by proximity to the coast, lineage chiefs felt obliged to justify both alliances and hierarchical roles with references to the

[236] Gray, *Colonial Rule.*

past, even as the influence of the Maloango waned. Matrilinearity became "atomized" but not obliterated. It would seem that the very strict exogamy and respect for authority present in the southwestern populations of Gabon often facilitated colonial exploits in lumber, palm oil, and rubber. Unlike the acephalous, patrilinear Fang, whose obedience and subjugation the French administrators had a great deal of difficulty achieving, the Loumbou/Vili/Punu chiefs, once co-opted by the French administration, seemed to have been respected among the local population, despite the refusals to regroup into larger villages and the instances of exodus. The record demonstrates that physically violent conflicts in the region as a result of forced labor were few and far between.

Most traditional authorities in southern matriclans did not simply acquiesce to the usurpation of their traditional powers through chiefs and market labor, and their resistance proved the extent of the challenges. Resistance—in both its overt and covert forms—also signalled anomie, the ill-adaptation to new structures and the consequences thereof for individuals and groups. Nicolas Metegue N'nah (1981) details the steady acts of resistance by traditional elements through the 1920s, when the northern Fang of the Woleu-Ntem region perpetrated their last desperate attempts to conserve political traditions. As social conditions for most Gabonese deteriorated under the concessions—many porters and *pagayeurs* who formerly benefited as intermediaries suffered abominable wages and high mortality rates during voyages that could last over a month—and as traditional chiefs lost manpower to forced labor, armed conflicts sprung up which drew French military intervention. In 1879, for instance, the Nkomi of the Fernan-Vaz with their Rengondo, resentful of the imposition of customs on "their" territory and the usurious practices of Western companies, restricted commerce throughout the region. In 1881, Nkomi militants arrested the merchant Mac Kissac for not respecting the interdiction, which required the colonial authorities to negotiate his release. In the north, Fang and Kele united to set their own customs prices, which led to the destruction of several villages by colonial armed forces in retaliation. Perhaps no rebellion was more threatening than that organized by Emane Tole, a Fang born near Ndjole around 1845. Tole, a respected leader in the region, sought to preserve his local monopoly on commerce against larcenous colonial taxation and expropriation through desperate

acts of aggression such as the abduction of an SHO agent, the physical obstruction of European commerce, and the engagement of French forces and indigenous mercenaries.[237]

In regards to chief appointments, districts (clans) reacted in different ways, betraying the varying of political traditions among the southern Gabonese. While some such as the Tsogo-speaking clan retained traditional autonomy thanks to the memory of rebel leader Mbombe by exercising passive resistance, and while others reacted by burning down offices of appointed chiefs, others in more traditionally centralized districts and clans absorbed the new organization more easily. Here, for example, one can see the successful appointment of canton chiefs among the Gisir ethnic group, already accustomed to centralized authority thanks to Loango's influence.[238] Nonetheless, when the abovementioned sporadic bouts of conflict abated around 1920, real resistance would have to take non-physical forms.

After the successful implantation of French colonialism following the marginalization of armed resistors and otherwise, acts of resistance manifested in the cognitive realm where territoriality could not penetrate, and these vestiges of ancestral power among Gabon's peoples largely remain to this day. Here we can also see the limits of missionary and Western secular education, which indeed served to acculturate indigenous leaders and perpetuate the new class structure, clearly illegitimate to those clinging to former ways. The first sign of cognitive resistance was reported in 1880 in the form of Bwiti, a secret society which began as syncretic rites among the Fang combining elements of Christian and ancestral Mwriti rites, which declined because they were a means of controlling people, objects, and phenomena in physical space. Gray (2002), for instance, cites the demise of leopard men, men disguised as leopards who enforced edits of Mwiri. Murderous attacks by leopard men were suppressed especially in the southern Punu-speaking areas, where colonial administrators punished the practice by death. In the Ndougou region, *hommes-tigres* were reported by administrators in Bongo and apprehended for acts of cannibalism. The administration even had difficulties recruiting the efforts of local chiefs in apprehending the *hommes-tigres*, as one *chef de terre* refused to investigate the alleged killing of a "slave" by an administrative chief due to his confessed incompetence in vampirism.[239] Gray

[237] Nicolas Métégué N'Nah, *Histoire du Gabon: des Origines à l'Aube du XXIe siècle*. (Editions L'Harmattan, 2006).

[238] Gray, *Colonial Rule.*

[239] Rapports Trimestriels, Circonscription de Bongo, 1922, Carton D 24, 51MIOM/47(1-2). Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

also sees an increased incidence of leopard attacks in the early twentieth century as a result of constraints applied to movements of dependents between clans, a consequence of the colonial imposition of territoriality. One example is the closing of the salt trade on the coast in the early 20th century because of its link with trade in dependents. Formerly a way to rid clans of undesirable members, the use of leopard men became a crime and subsequently vanished. This might explain the growing Bwiti initiation society throughout the 1920s, which, though assuming some older functions of Mwiri, "promised esoteric insights into the workings of the universe through an hallucinatory initiation experience and the performance of spectacular miracles."[240]

Bwiti has varied in different forms since its first appearance in 1880, and it differs based on local circumstances. Through contemporary times it has proliferated most in Gabon's interior, while it has largely been either vulgarized or modified on the coast where European and outside influences have been strongest. Exorcism rites, however, have hardly varied since the times of de Chaillu (Raponda-Walker and Sillans, 1983). Despite the differences, Bwiti in all its forms serves to allow its participants to "see" dangers and threats that await them, including witchcraft. It functions *to protect villages*, where the sources of traditional authority have long since disappeared. Perhaps that explains why Myene-speaking peoples, thanks to their historical roles as trading intermediaries between Europeans and the interior, are most drawn to the cult.[241]

With the departure of traditional ways of life, women also took to secret societies to safeguard what little power remained after the degradation of the matrilineal system. As men moved to urban centers looking to sell their labor, women were largely over-represented in villages. Furthermore, Christianity introduced the concept of individuality and the concept of divorce, rupturing what was once an eternal bond in marriage and limiting the control over dependents. In responding to the perceived and growing division between men and women in the colonial order, women (and men) flocked to ritual societies known ancestrally as Njembe and Njomi, where the symbolic role of women could be maintained in a traditional setting.[242]

In the Ndougou, and in addition to exodus and refusals to work or regroup, most conflict seemed to have come in the form of resistance to missionary education of the Catholic variety, and

[240] Gray, *Colonial Rule*, 203.

[241] François Gaulme, "Le Bwiti chez les Nkomi: Association Culturelle et Evolution Historique sur le Littoral Gabonais." (*Journal des Africanistes* 49.2 (1979): 37-87) ; Gaulme, François. *Le Pays de Cama: un Ancien État Côtier du Gabon et ses Origines. Vol. 2.* (KARTHALA Editions, 1981).

[242] Gray, *Colonial Rule.*

this despite chiefs largely trumpeting its cause for want of legitimacy among the French administrators. Ngangas, or witchdoctors, were still present during the turbulent concessionary era and later, a fact confirmed by testimony from interviewees, including a hospital practitioner who claimed that, in the past few decades, it had become easier and easier to treat patients with Western medicine due to the disappearance of traditional ngangas.[243] On the wane but not yet disappeared, one might conclude that at the time of independence and the discovery of oil, the Ndougou region was clearly no longer a self-sovereign system of powerful lineages and clans descending from the maloango. It was, however, clearly beholden to its traditional beliefs, the oral traditions which shape people's cosmologies and teach them to respect authorities who possess both noble blood and sufficient personal qualities to guarantee the smooth functioning of village life.

In conclusion, the march of trade, administration, territoriality and education clearly upended all precolonial traditions, emasculating traditional authorities of their sources of legitimacy and placing it in the hands of individuals answerable only to French administrators. Monopolistic practices during the concessionary era oriented populations not towards local communities and the preservation of life as it always was but towards riches and commodification of nearly everything. The end product was a "schizophrenia" (Vansina) which would permeate Gabonese societies through the present era: Traditional and administrative authorities would co-exist, and peoples escaped "modern" life by initiation to secret societies which modified ancestral traditions by co-opting new ones. In confirming the thesis of Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, it seems the process of sedimentation has yet to be completed, and the *empilement* of posititions of authority is still very much in effect. What extra layers of sedimentation would the large-scale exploitation of oilfields bring? To what extent would further instances of anomie be owed to similar factors of change seen in colonial and pre-oil experiences?

[243] Interview with Dr. Sisso, Hospital in Gamba, July 28, 2015