

# The Fang-Bulu-Beti (1665-1850): origin and migrations in Central Africa

## Summary

This research seeks to determine the starting point of the Fang-Bulu-Beti migrations of Central Africa, from the savannah to the forest. Using new African historiography, it analyzes the three main theories of common savannah origin known about this people. The first theory refers to the area around Lake Chad while another refers to the Upper Sanaga area. Cross-reading of the relevant sources, spanning the period from 1819 to 2018 reveal that the starting point of common dispersal of the Fang-Bulu-Beti in the forest was neither in the savannahs around Lake Chad, nor in the Upper Sanaga, but in the southern Adamawa region of Cameroon. Within the period of 1665, the Fang separated from the Bulu-Beti and left that place for the forest of South-Cameroon and Gabon through the current East-region. At that same moment, certain Beti people (the Enoa, Benë and Emburi) decided to live the southern Adamawa and passed through the Mbam area to reach the forest of the current Centre region of Cameroon. The other Beti-Bulu later left that savannah environment for Upper Sanaga and for the Centre and South regions of Cameroon. Several reasons could explain this abandonment: Invasion of newly arrived people (Baare-Tchamba and Baya), some inner quarrels and the quest for enrichment towards the Atlantic coast of Kribi in the South Cameroon during 1840-1850 decade

**Keywords:** Fang-Bulu-Beti, migration, settlement, new African historiography, origin

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## Introduction

In 1901, a French administrator named Vincent Largeau hypothesized the first theory on the Fang-Bulu-Beti origin from the savannah to the forest. He said that the group was living on the outskirts of Lake Chad, when the Fulani drove them back into the deep Central African forest.<sup>1</sup> After him, the German Bernhard Struck affirmed that, the Fang-Bulu-Beti once formed a compact and uninterrupted population in Upper Sanaga, which was pushed into the forest by the Fulani and all of them left their former savannah environment to conquer that of the *Maka* and *Baseke* in the forest.<sup>2</sup> The last hypothesis is that of Eldridge Mohammadou. For him, it is due to the invasion of the Baare-Tchamba that: "(...) the new ethnic groups Fang, Bulu, Beti passed through the forest in the south of the Sanaga River (...)"<sup>3</sup>. The three hypotheses therefore agree in situating the starting point of the Fang-Bulu-Beti migrations in the Cameroonian savannah. The Islamic jihad, led by the Fulani, or the invasions of the Baare-Tchamba pushed them from the Savannah into the forest. However, the idea of contact with the Fulani does not tally with the migrations of the Fang, because they were located in 1842 in Central Gabon<sup>4</sup> but the Islamic jihad began to affect the people currently living in South Adamawa in 1875.<sup>5</sup> The same type of anachronism concerns the new ethnic formation of the Fang-Bulu-Beti due to the Baare-Tchamba who reached the South of Adamawa: "(...) from the first half of the 19th century".<sup>6</sup> How was it possible in the 19th century if glottochronology

indicates that the Fang language was separated from the Bulu and Beti variants around 1665?<sup>7</sup> This means that the Fang would have started walking alone in the 17th century. This type of anachronism poses the problem of the determination of the common Savannah origin of the Fang-Bulu-Beti and the indication of their migration's routes from the savannah to the Central African forest. So from which place of the savannah did this group divide into three parts? For what reasons, and how did each fraction settle in the forest? In order to answer these questions, we have used written sources. They are subdivided into three chronological sequences. First, the documents of European explorers having been in direct contact with the Fang-Bulu-Beti and their neighborhood. These documents are talking about the experience (what Westerners saw, touched and heard). They were published between 1819 (Bowdich) and 1912 (Trilles). From 1943 (Cournarie) to 1984 (Mveng), numerous monographs were devoted to the Fang-Bulu-Beti and their direct and indirect neighbors. In 1954 (Ondoua Engutu), oral sources took over the scientific authority. They constitute the main part of recent studies on the Bantu A70 (the linguistic code of the Fang-Bulu-Beti).<sup>8</sup> Concerning the methodology, made use of the new African historiography, which proposes a method for studying African migrations<sup>9</sup> and specific techniques for African history study.<sup>10</sup> It can be summed up to the use of multidisciplinary and the critical comparative approach.<sup>1-10</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Largeau V. *Pahouine Encyclopedia*. Paris: Ernest Leroux; 1901. 404 p.

<sup>2</sup>Dugast I. *Ethnic inventory of South Cameroon*. Dakar: IFAN; 1948. 96 p.

<sup>3</sup>Mohammadou E. *Traditions of origin of the peoples of Central and Western Cameroon*. Yaounde: Federal Linguistic and Cultural Center. 1971; 84 p.

<sup>4</sup>Leighton Wilson J. "Mr. Wilson's description of the country near the mouth of Gabon". *Missionary Herald*. 1843; 238 p.

<sup>5</sup>Bah TM. *War, power and society in pre-colonial Africa [between Lake Chad and the coast of Cameroon]*, Doctoral Thesis of Literature. University of Paris I. Pantheon-Sorbonne. 1985. 133 p.

<sup>6</sup>Mohammadou E. "The conquering pony of the savannahs of central

Cameroon (c. 1750-1850)". In Baroin C, Boutrais J, editors. *Man and animal in the lake basin Chad*. Paris: Research Institute for Development; 1999; 90p.

<sup>7</sup>Alexander P. "Protohistory of the beti-Bulu-fan group: attempt at a provisional synthesis". *Journal of African Studies*. 1965;5(4):527-529.

<sup>8</sup>Guthrie M. *The Bantu languages of Western equatorial Africa*. London: Oxford university press for the International African Institute; 1953.

<sup>9</sup>Diop CA. "For a methodology for the study of the migrations of the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa", *General History of Africa: studies and documents*, UNESCO, 1984;97-121.

<sup>10</sup>Obenga T. "Specific sources and techniques of African history. Overview". *General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory*. 1980. 98 p.

## Presentation of theories

The three theories presented in the introduction relate to two places: the grasslands around Lake Chad and Upper Sanaga.

### The savannah around Lake Chad

In the early 20th century, a theory was developed by the French administrator called Vincent Largeau and later taken up by Rev. Father Henri Trilles. According to the very first oral traditions collected from the Bantu A70, all their ancestors once lived in a place of mountains and grassland, near a large lake. An ethnic group called: “the Reds” dislodged them there. Fleeing this cruel and merciless people, the Bantu A70 split into three: the Beti on the right, the Bulu in the middle and the Fang on the left.<sup>11</sup> Vincent Largeau and Henri Trilles interpreted these stories. For them, the Fulani represent the invading people while the grassland indicates the Northern Adamawa of Cameroon and the large expanse of water is none other than Lake Chad.<sup>12</sup> Many other authors approved these deductions, including Balandier.<sup>13</sup> However, it is important to note that the description of the Fang of Gabon also corresponds to a space in Southern Adamawa. This is the Ngaoundal-Tibati sector in the current department of Djerem in Cameroon. This area has hills (the most famous is Mount Ngaoundal). It is also a savannah where there are several lakes: Mbella Assom in Ngaoundal, Panyere in Tibati and the great lake Mbakaou between the two cities.<sup>14</sup> One of the elements that makes this even more interesting is the existence of the Meng River in the district of Tibati, which flows into the Sanaga, the River from which the Bulu-Beti invested the forest, according to their oral traditions.

### Upper Sanaga

According to the German Bernhard Struck, Upper Sanaga represents the starting point of the Bantu A70 migration from the savannah to the forest. He relates that their ancestors once formed a compact and uninterrupted settlement there. Pushed by the Fulani, they left the place to conquer the area of the *Maka* and *Baseke* people.<sup>15</sup> Researchers adopted and popularized his hypothesis due to numerous proofs coming from several disciplines.<sup>16</sup>

When the Fulani are not accused, the research indicates the Baare-Tchamba. They left the lower Mayo-Kebbi to the plains of Faro on their ponies because of a great drought. From 1750 to 1850, they caused a phenomenon of disruption on the settlement of Adamawa.<sup>17</sup> This is how they conquered the peoples of the savannah: “(...) provoking new shapes of settlement even on the western highlands via the Adamawa”.<sup>18</sup> Among the recomposed people, there was one, which was slatted into three entities: the Fang, the Bulu and the Beti.<sup>12-17</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Largeau V. Pahouine Encyclopedia. *By the Fang or fifteen years of stay in the French Congo*. 1901. 104 p.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Balandier G. “Economy, society and power among the ancient Duala”, *Journal of African Studies*. 1975;5(3):361–380.

<sup>14</sup>Ministry of Public Health. *Health Sector Strategy 2016-2027*. 2015. 5 p.

<sup>15</sup>Dugast I. Ethnic inventory of South Cameroon, Dakar:IFAN; 1948. 96 p.

<sup>16</sup>Alexander P. “Protohistory of the beti-Bulu-fan group: attempt at a provisional synthesis”. *Journal of African Studies*. 1965;5(4).

<sup>17</sup>Mohammadou E. “The conquering pony of the savannahs of central Cameroon (c. 1750-1850)”. In Baroin C, Boutrais J, editors. *Man and animal in the lake basin Chad*. Paris: Research Institute for Development. 1999;81–106.

<sup>18</sup>ibid. 84 p.

The first evidence of the origin of the Fang-Bulu-Beti in this place comes from archeology. This discipline has exhumed vestiges spreading from Upper Sanaga to South Cameroon. According to the excavations carried out by Joseph-Marie Essomba, the Bantu who currently live in the forest of Central Africa mainly inhabited the Upper Sanaga. From the 16th century, frequent traces in the sites of Saaka and Awae, Zoetele Village, Zoetele Bush, Oteteck and Koumou confirm their presence in the current Center and South regions of Cameroon.<sup>19</sup>

Beside archaeology, most of ethnic groups, neighbors of the Fang-Bulu-Beti, indicate Upper Sanaga as the original place of their penetration into the forest. First, the Duala-Batanga and relatives,<sup>20</sup> then the Basaa and Bakoko. The mythical ancestor of these two last branches would be a certain Ngué Nanga. Anthroponomy that is closed to the mythical ancestor of the Beti: Beti Be Nanga.<sup>21</sup>

### Limits of these theories

The theories presented above have some incongruities.

### Anachronisms

The theory of Northern Adamawa origin of the Fang-Bulu-Beti migrations, from the savannah to the forest due to the Islamic jihad led by the Fulani, hardly seems to be possible in time. Indeed, the Fulani experienced two types of periods around Lake Chad, the time before Islam or *Zaman Kitaku* and the time of Islam or *Zaman Djina*. Between 1600 and 1800, during the *Zaman Kitaku* period, the Fulani were in peace with their neighbors in the North of Fombina, which is the territory located between the right bank of the Benue River and Lake Chad. They lived in peace in that place until 1805, when Ousman Dan Fodio designated Adama to lead the holy war. The period (1805-1829) of the so-called war named *Zaman Djina*. Nevertheless, from 1805 to 1829 the Fang-Bulu-Beti group of population was not among the direct neighbors of the Fulani.<sup>18-24</sup>

The Fulani of Wollarbe group, living in the confluence zone between the Faro and the Mayo Deo had the Baha, Jiraï and Kilba people as neighbors. The Yillaga group, living in the space between Mayo-Luwe, Benue and Mayo Kebbi had the Giziga, Dama, Mundang and Niam-Niam for neighbors. Finally, in the Gangola valley, the Fulani of the Kiri'en groups and the Ngara of the Mandara lived alongside the Tchamba.<sup>22</sup> In a few words, the Fang-Bulu-Beti were not among the people whom the Fulani led the holy war between 1805 and 1829 on the shores of Lake Chad. Consequently, Fulani would not have invaded them in the Northern Adamawa at that time.

Some researchers agreed with the theory of a defeat of all the Bantu A70 in Upper Sanaga before the Fulani warriors,<sup>23</sup> but Holy War did not reach the south of Adamawa until 1875 when the Fulani encountered the Baya. However, the presence of the Fang in the deep forest of Gabon was attested with certainty in 1842.<sup>24</sup> If the Fulani

<sup>19</sup>Essomba JM. Civilization of iron and society in Central Africa: the case of southern Cameroon (Ancient history and archaeology). Paris: L'Hamattan; 1992;433–434.

<sup>20</sup>Balandier G. “Economy, society and power among the ancient Duala”, *Journal of African Studies*. 1975;5(3)141–142.

<sup>21</sup>Ndougou De VP. The Beti people of Cameroon. Paris: L'Harmattan; 2018.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Abomo-Maurin MR. The peregrinations of the descendants of Afri Kara. Paris: L'Harmattan; 2012. 66 p.

<sup>24</sup>Leighton Wilson J. “Mr. Wilson's description of the country near the mouth of Gabon”. 1843. 238 p.

carried out the Islamic jihad in the South of Adamawa after 1875, they did not encounter the Fang who lived in the deep forest of Gabon in 1842.<sup>25-28</sup>

### The same anachronism concerns the Baare-Tchamba

According to our hypothesis, the formation of the Beti, Bulu and Fang ethnic groups and their migration to the south of the Sanaga would be the direct consequence of the Baare-Tchamba invasion. A first wave north of the river destroyed the local Bantu ethnic formations and set up new formations, capped by elements from the ranks of the invaders. A following wave attacks these second formations, forcing them to cross the river at several points, in successive groups and at different periods.<sup>25</sup>

This is to say clearly that the Baare-Tchamba caused the ethno genesis of the Fang-Bulu-Beti by invading their lands in the north of the Sanaga right bank.

Such a conclusion can be envisaged for the Bulu and certain Beti (Eton, Manguisa, Ewondo, Yebekolo, Mvele and Mbida Mbani etc.) who would have abandoned the savannah for the forest in the 19th century. However, it does not concern the Fang, the Benë and the Enoa. Indeed, the Bulu would have abandoned the Cameroonian savannah for the forest in the middle of the 19th century, a period that corresponds to the invasions of the Baare-Tchamba south of Adamawa. Led by their leader Nsim Biyo'o, they forcibly invaded the area formerly occupied by the Mbvumbo (Ngumba), some Nzime and the Fang-Okak, between Sangmelima, Ebolowa, Akom II and Kribi around 1866-1883.<sup>26</sup> Like the Bulu, the majority of the Beti people entered the forest late in the 19th century.<sup>27</sup> So they could also have suffered from the invasions of the Baare-Tchamba.<sup>29-32</sup>

It is important to know that another reason could explain the Beti and Bulu desertion of the savannah for the forest around the middle of the 19th century. It is the trade between Western firms and Cameroonian populations on the Atlantic coast of Kribi in the current region of South Cameroon. The supposed trade started around 1840 -1842<sup>28</sup> and would have led to the displacement of the Bulu and certain Beti people towards the Atlantic coast. A pre-colonial route, so-called *ivory route*, discovered by Morgen in 1890 connected the Southern Adamawa to the Kribi coast.<sup>29</sup>

As for the Fang, glottochronology indicates that their language was separated from the Bulu and Beti variants around 1665.<sup>30</sup> This means that the Fang would have started walking alone in the 17th

century. The Fang for instance are the only branch of the Bantu A70 linguistic continuum that intervened in the famous *Pupu war*. This is series of incessant clashes, which took place from the 17th to the 19th century between the Bakota, Bakwele, Kwasio, Fang, Bakele and Ndjem peoples in Upper-Ivindo in Gabon.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the contact between the Fang and the Baare-Tchamba therefore seems anachronistic. The first inhabited the Central African forest before the invasion of the second in the Southern Adamawa.<sup>33-36</sup>

Laburthe-Tolra made it clear that, unlike the Bulu and Beti, the Fang would have no indication of a northern origin beyond Sanaga in the savannah zone. Their vocabulary does not have words relating to savannah ecology such as lion, sorghum and sesame,<sup>32</sup> but the tools of the Bulu-Beti are very close to that of the savannah people. The Ewondo and Benë blast furnaces, for example have the same characteristics as those of the Matakam in northern Cameroon. Men placed on saddles operate their bellows above the hearth and the air is transmitted to the bottom of the oven by the same clay pipes two meters long.

Among the Fang, on the other hand, the stoves are operated from below. In addition to the stoves, the Beti would have various kinds of flutes which played an important social role in the people of the savannah of northern Cameroon. However, this instrument seems unknown among the Fang. There would not be the slightest Fang flute in the Libreville museum. At the level of oral traditions, while the Bulu-Beti have kept memories of a northern origin in the savannah zone, the Fang on their side hardly evoke the Sanaga as a river which they would have crossed to enter the forest. They speak of the Dja or the Nyong when it is a question of a very old origin and of the Ntem for the migrations located from the beginning to the first half of the 19th century.<sup>33</sup>

As far as the Beti are concerned, the Benë and Enoa in particular would have occupied the current regions of Center and South Cameroon in the 17th century. Indeed, on the basis of serious and relevant work, Laburthe-Tolra has proposed dates obtained from genealogical calculations and the collective memory of the Benë. According to him, the Enoa are the first Beti to move from the savannah to the forest. They were the first to settle in the centre region when the Benë, who were the second Beti people to cross the Sanaga, lived in Nkometu, 25 km to the north. According to his calculations, the Benë crossed the Sanaga, from the right bank to the left bank around 1680-1685, under the leadership of a certain Matsege or Owono Kode who took the nickname of Nnë Bodo, that is to say, the guide or "Ferryman of Men".<sup>34</sup> So, according to genealogical calculations, the Benë would have not been driven back from the savannah to the forest by the Baare-Tchamba. If neither the Fulani, even less the Baare-Tchamba, can explain the abandonment of Adamawa by all the Fang-Bulu-Beti, what explanation would be plausible?<sup>37-40</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Mohammadou E. "The conquering pony of the savannahs of central Cameroon (c. 1750-1850)". In Baroin C, Boutrais J, editors. *Man and animal in the lake basin Chad*. Paris: Research Institute for Development. 1999. 92 p.

<sup>26</sup>Alexander P. "Protohistory of the beti-Bulu-fan group: attempt at a provisional synthesis". *Journal of African Studies*. The University of Yaounde I. 1965. 89 p.

<sup>27</sup>Ngoa H. "Attempt to reconstruct the history of the Ewondo". In Tardits C, editor. *International Colloquium of CNRS, n°551-Contribution of ethnological research to the history of the civilizations of Cameroon*. Paris: CNRS; 1973;547-561.

<sup>28</sup>Bouchaud J. *The coast of Cameroon, in history and cartography*. Yaounde: Memoirs of IFAN. 1952. 138 p.

<sup>29</sup>Morgen Von C. *Through Cameroon from South to North*, Leipzig, FA Brockhaus, 1893, Translation, presentation, comments and bibliography by Laburthe-Tolra. P., for the History and Sociology Archives of the Federal University of Cameroon. Yaounde: 1972. 97 p.

<sup>30</sup>Alexander P. "Protohistory of the beti-Bulu-fan group: attempt at a provisional synthesis". *Journal of African Studies*. 1979;5(4):27-529.

<sup>31</sup>Cheucle M. Towards a description of the Bekwel language (A85) of Gabon: synchronic approach, diachronic approach, Master's thesis 2, Lumière University of Lyon2. 2008;15-18.

<sup>32</sup>Laburthe-Tolra P. The lords of the forest: an essay on the historical past, the social organization and the ethical standards of the former Beti of Cameroon. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne; 1981. 95 p.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Laburthe-Tolra P. "Synthetic essay on the so-called Beti populations of Minlaba (South of Nyong)". In Tardits C, editor. *International Colloquium of CNRS, n°551-contribution of ethnological research to the history of the civilizations of Cameroon*. Paris: CNRS; 1981. 536 p.

## Causes of Bantu A70 bursting in the savannah

Christian Seignobos, Director of Research at the Institute of Research for Development has particularly criticized this tendency of Cameroonian research to attribute the displacements of the peoples of the savannah for the forest to a single cause. For him, many factors could well explain this phenomenon.<sup>35</sup> Already, we have seen that the departure of the Bulu and certain Beti from the savannah could be explained both by the invasions of the Baare-Tchamba and by trade on the Kribi coast from 1840-1842. Other ancient sources speak of a fight between the two ethnic entities.

Finally, it remains the question of the very reason for migration and its immediate origin. Von Hagen, as we have seen, collected a tradition locating the Bulu Yekômbô on the Sanaga in 1840, and making them [sic, by making them] leaving the following conflict with the Beti; in the same work (Von Hagen: 1914), he reports other details suggesting that the penetration of the Bulu into the forest is relatively recent.<sup>36</sup>

The Bantu A70, particularly the Fang, indicates another cause of the break-up: the invasions of a people called “the Reds”.<sup>37</sup> Who could they be?

In Central Africa, the first people to be identified under the name: “the Reds” would have been the Fang of Gabon, shortly after 1840.<sup>38</sup> After abandoning this track, the research accused the Fulani, then the Basaa and the Mvele of Akonolinga.<sup>39</sup> However, a source from 1896 directed us to another hypothesis.

It is perhaps good to note, in their language, Baya means Red, and if they received this name from themselves or from their neighbors “Reds”, one could suppose that at a more or less distant date of their migration, the country was occupied by tribes of a color less clear than theirs.<sup>40</sup>

Some evidences make possible the theory of the Fang pushed from the Southern savannah of Cameroon’s Adamawa into the forest by the Baya people. First, the use of the term *Baya* to indicate other realities of red color. In forestry, for example, there is a tree called *Baya* or *Bahia*, whose scientific name is *Mitragyne macrophylla*. This tree is red inside<sup>41</sup> and often used to make drums.<sup>42</sup> *Mitragyne macrophylla* is from the *Rubiaceae* family. This type of plant also used as a cosmetic in traditional Africa.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, according to their oral traditions, the Baya ancestors recognized that they drove the *Mfang*

(Maka-Koozime-Kwasio) and the Bakota back from the savannah to the forest.<sup>44</sup> Peter Alexander, who studied the Fang’s migration, situated their origin at Meiganga,<sup>45</sup> a savannah place inhabited by the Baya people.

Some linguistic facts confirmed the above oral tradition of the Baya. Their language would have borrowed words from twenty-one dialects spanning from “Zaire” (current Democratic Republic of Congo) to Cameroon. *Ngumba* (classified, Bantu A81 by linguists) exist among these dialects and, surprisingly, the Baya borrowed words are from the lexical field of confrontation like *mbando*. This term seems to be a direct borrowing by the Baya of the word *mbandi* that indicate the *crossbow* in *ngumba*.<sup>46</sup> It is important to note that currently, the Baya and the Mbvumbo are geographically distant from each other. While the Mbvumbo live in the southwest of the Cameroonian forest, the Baya inhabit the Southeast of the Cameroonian savannah. If the two had been in touch, it is also possible that the Ngumba neighbors and best friends (the Fang) would have been in touch with the same Baya.<sup>41-43</sup>

Finally, a research, based on genetic data, studied the origins of some Cameroonian people. Its aim was to determine their places of demographic expansion from their biological molecules. The people concerned, presented ancient genetic similarities while their recent origins is different. Thus, the *Bamileke* have a Sudanese Bantu origin, the Bakoko and Basaa a Western Bantu origin and finally, a provenance from the southern part of Cameroon’s Adamawa for the Ewondo.<sup>47</sup> Genetics therefore confirms a southern Adamawa origin of the Beti people. However, this place is currently partly occupied by the Baya. It is consequently conceivable that by pushing the *Mfang* and Bakota back into the forest, the Baya also, either directly or indirectly, pushed the Fang back into the forest and the Bulu-Beti into Upper Sanaga. In order to know whether this hypothesis is possible or anachronistic, the period of the Baya invasion on the Mfang, the Bakota and the Fang-Bulu-Beti remains to determine. How did these last people enter the Central African forest?

## The directions of migrations

The Bantu A70 myths, languages and stools have so far determined the direction of their migrations. The Beti, through their myth called *Ngan medzaa*, recount the crossing of the Yom or Sanaga River by their ancestors, on the back of a giant snake, from the right bank to the left bank.<sup>48</sup> Toponyms like Nditam and Bokaga, appearing in these epics, are still distinguishable today in the current department of Mbam, in the savannah zone.<sup>49</sup> Among the Beti, the Enoa followed by the Benë would have been the first to cross the Sanaga River for the

<sup>35</sup>Seignobos C. “Ancient migrations in the Lake Chad basin: times and codes”. In Tourneux H, Woin N, editors. *Migrations and mobility in the Lake Chad basin, Proceedings of the XIIIth international conference of the Mega-Chad Network*. Maroua: 2009;135–162.

<sup>36</sup>Alexander P. “Protohistory of the beti-Bulu-fan group: attempt at a provisional synthesis”, *Journal of African Studies*. 1965;5(4):532.

<sup>37</sup>Largeau V. *Pahouine Encyclopedia*. 1901. 96 p.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid. 503 p & 536 p.

<sup>39</sup>Chamberlin C. “The migration of the Fang into Central Gabon during the nineteenth century: a new interpretation”. *The International Journal of African Studies*. 1978;XI(3):451 p.

<sup>40</sup>Clozel FZ. *The Bayas. Ethnographic and linguistic notes*. Paris: African and Colonial Bookshop. 1896. 7 p.

<sup>41</sup>Bertin A. *The wood of Gabon*. Paris: Emile Larose; 1918. 122 p.

<sup>42</sup>Lemb P, Gastines De F. *Basaà-French Dictionary*. Douala: Liebermann College. , 1973. 25 p.

<sup>43</sup>Nabede KJP. ‘Plants for dermato-cosmetic use in the Kara region of Togo’. *Revue Agrobiologia*. 2018;8(2):1012, 1013 & 1017 p.

<sup>44</sup>Clozel FJ. *The Bayas. Ethnographic and linguistic notes*. Paris: African and Colonial Bookshop. 1896. 17 p.

<sup>45</sup>Alexander P. ‘Protohistory of the beti-Bulu-fan group: attempt at a provisional synthesis’. *Journal of African Studies*. 1965;5(4):527–529.

<sup>46</sup>Burnham P. *Gbaya and Mkako, ethno linguistic contribution to the history of Eastern Cameroon*. Wiesbaden: 1986. 111, 121 & 124 p.

<sup>47</sup>Berniell-Lee G. “Genetic and demographic implications of the Bantu expansion: insights from human paternal lineages”. *Molecular Biology and Evolution*. 2009;26(7):1581–1589.

<sup>48</sup>Ngoa H. “Attempt to reconstruct the history of the Ewondo”. In Tardits C, editor. *International Colloquium of CNRS, n°551-Contribution of ethnological research to the history of the civilizations of Cameroon*. Paris:CNRS; 1973;547–561.

<sup>49</sup>Laburthe-Tolra P. *The lords of the forest: an essay on the historical past, the social organization and the ethical standards of the former Beti of Cameroon*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne; 1981. 59 p.

forest around 1680-1685.<sup>50</sup> Their ancient migrations would therefore follow this orientation: southern Adamawa-Mbam-Upper Sanaga-forest of the Center region of Cameroon-forest of Southern Cameroon.

Among the Bulu, the myth of crossing the Sanaga is that of *Afri Kara*. By waging war with the *Bivele Bibot* or the Reds, the Bulu, in a situation of vulnerability, would have abandoned the *Yom* (Sanaga River) to enter the forest.<sup>51</sup> If they said myth presents the Sanaga as the river, crossed by the Bulu to enter the forest its description would rather indicate the Nyong River.<sup>52</sup> The myths collected by Alexander preferably grant credit to an entry into the forest between Upper Sanaga and Upper Nyong.<sup>53</sup> It is therefore possible that the Bulu abandoned southern Adamawa for their current habitat while passing, at the same time between Upper Sanaga and Upper Nyong.<sup>54</sup>

Among the Fang, Westerners noted the first myths, but they did not popularize them.<sup>54</sup> It took until 1965 for the *Mvet* to reveal the *Eakang* legend to us.<sup>55</sup> However, contradictions related to migrations remain to be resolved. While Thierno-Mouctar Bah makes the Fang come from the right bank of the Sanaga, precisely between Ngambe and Bambimbi localities, west of the Beti,<sup>56</sup> Laburthe-Tolra firmly rejects this type of conclusion: “None of their ancient traditions, in fact, refers to the crossing of this last river Sanaga”.<sup>57</sup> The myths collected speak of the sources of Ntem,<sup>58</sup> Dja or Nyong.<sup>59</sup> Laburthe-Tolra goes further by making them to come from the area between Batouri in East Cameroon and Carnot in the Central African Republic.<sup>60</sup> For him, unlike the Bulu-Beti, the Fang would have no indication of a northern origin beyond Sanaga in the savannah zone. This means that the presence of the Fang in the Central African forest would be much older than that of the Bulu-Beti. They would have followed a migratory path from southern Adamawa-eastern region-Cameroon-southern region-Cameroon.

## Methodology

Most theoreticians of a Savannah origin of the Fang-Bulu-Beti are built on recent sources like the myths *Afri Kara*, *Eakang* and *Ngan*

<sup>50</sup>Laburthe-Tolra P. ‘Synthetic essay on the so-called Beti populations of Minlaba (South of Nyong)’. In Tardits C, editor. *International Colloquium of CNRS, n°551-contribution of ethnological research to the history of the civilizations of Cameroon*. Paris: NRS; 1981. 566 p.

<sup>51</sup>Ondoua Engutu. *Dulu bon be Afri Kara*, Ebolowa, Halsey Memorial Press. 1954;6-7.

<sup>52</sup>Abomo-Maurin MR. “The descendants of Afri Kara in search of the promised land: the founding myth fang-Bulu-beti”. *African Literary Studies*. 2013;(36):61-73.

<sup>53</sup>Alexander P. “Protohistory of the beti-Bulu-fan group: attempt at a provisional synthesis”. *Journal of African Studies*. Paris: 1965;46-547.

<sup>54</sup>Largeau V. *Pahouine Encyclopedia*. Paris: Ernest Leroux; 1901. 404 p.

<sup>55</sup>Pepper H. A film by Nzwe Nguema. Epic story of Gabon. Paris: ORSTOM; 1965;5-10.

<sup>56</sup>Bah TM. War, power and society in pre-colonial Africa[between Lake Chad and the coast of Cameroon], Doctoral Thesis of Literature. University of Paris I. 1985;122 p.

<sup>57</sup>Laburthe-Tolra P. The lords of the forest: an essay on the historical past, the social organization and the ethical standards of the former Beti of Cameroon. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne; 1981. 93 p.

<sup>58</sup>Balandier G. “The Fans, Conquerors on availability”. *Tropics*. Paris: 1949;23-26.

<sup>59</sup>Laburthe-Tolra P. The lords of the forest: an essay on the historical past, the social organization and the ethical standards of the former Beti of Cameroon. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne; 198;60-61.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid. 58-59.

*Medzaa* respectively dated 1954, 1965 and 1973. These myths are based on genealogies of tribes and ethnic groups to explain origins, settlement and migrations. Does this approach not automatically discredit them because of the phenomenon of fission and fusion which marks Bantu societies?<sup>61</sup> The Bantu clans have a trans-ethnic character. They can be found in several tribes, ethnicities and linguistic continuums. In the South for example, the Yekombo clan among the Bulu still bears the name Yemvam and Esengoa among the Fang and then Eben among the Ewondo. This same clan bears the name Binambung among the Bisio of Equatorial Guinea and Binzugo among the Mbvumbo of Cameroon. The same situation concerns the Ndong, the Yendjouk, the Essakoï and the Yezum. They belong to at least two linguistic continuums.<sup>62</sup> With this trans-ethnic character of clans, can we really make the genealogy of a linguistic continuum, an ethnic group or a tribe?

The clan is understood as a group of lineages descending from a common ancestor.<sup>63</sup> Its exogamic character prohibits any sexual relationship and any marriage between its members.<sup>64</sup> Some troubles due to exogamy are often the cause of escapes from couples, precisely when a nephew seduces the young wife of an uncle. To escape reprisals, finding a wife being difficult, the lovebirds often settled elsewhere, in a distant village where they adopted the language and customs of the new place. Added to this phenomenon is inter-ethnic war from which certain people were subjugated and assimilated by others.

The case of the So people of Akonolinga is a good example. Indigenous to the place, the Yebekolo, the Mvele and the Mbida Mbani subjugated and swallowed them. Could any researcher, who study the history of these people as a common stock through genealogies, really take into account the specificity of the So? If so, what did “Maka” do in the lineage of Nanga when the Maka-Koozime-Kwasio people did not come from Haute-Sanaga but from Mambere-Sangha? Using the genealogical approach is a real danger to reconstruct the history of tribes and ethnic groups, because of changing the facts. The so-called approach is good for clans, which have the same ancestors, but not for tribes and ethnic groups where people can be mixed because of the fission and the fusion phenomenon. In the study of people, it is better to let the peculiarities give the color of the generality and not the opposite.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

We have exploited the new African historiography to deal with the Savannah origin of the Fang-Bulu-Beti people. Our aim was to determine their initial migration point in the savannah and to indicate their mechanisms of occupation of the forest. After a cross reading of data from genetics, archaeology, linguistics, ethnology, sociology and history, it appears that the Fang-Bulu-Beti were not dispersed in the savannahs around Lake Chad. If the Beti came from the Upper Sanaga with the Bulu, the Fang have entered the forest longtime ago through

<sup>61</sup>Geschiere PL. Remarks on the history of the Maka”. In Tardits C, editor. *International Colloquia of the CNRS, n°551-contribution of ethnological research to the history of the civilizations of Cameroon*. Paris: 1981;519-520.

<sup>62</sup>Bouh Ma Sitna AK. The Kwasio [Bantu A81] of Central Africa: ethnic identity and migrations from 1568 to 1906. Ph.D in History. The University of Yaounde I. 2017;339-340.

<sup>63</sup>Larousse. The Small compact Larousse. Paris: Maury SA; 1999. 3531 p.

<sup>64</sup>Coumarie P. Ethnological sketch to serve in the study of the main tribes of French Cameroon, according to the archives of the Office of Political Affairs (1935-1937). Bulletin of the Society of Cameroonian Studies. Yaounde: 1943(3).

the savannah of eastern Cameroon. The place in which all these people lastly formed a single ethnic unit in the savannah seems to be in the southern Adamawa of Cameroon. Several reasons could explain why they left the savannah for the forest. Firstly, the invasions of the Baya people, who pushed the Fang, the Mfang and the Bakota inside forest, in the East region during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and drove out the Bulu-Beti in the Upper Sanaga. Secondly, the incursions of the Baare-Tchamba on the Bulu and Beti in Upper Sanaga around the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and finally the quest for enrichment towards the coast of Kribi in the decade 1840-1850 for the Bulu. The reasons of the Benë, Enoa and Emburi's migrations, who left the Mbam region in the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, need to be elucidated. Further and multidisciplinary researches could bring more clarifications, particularly the genetics on the Fang and the Bulu.<sup>46</sup>

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## Conflicts of interest

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