The Holy Spirit of *Iboga* and a Contemporary Perspective on Africa's Spiritual Renaissance: Focus on Gabonese Bwiti Tradition

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Abstract

This paper explores the Gabonese Bwiti way of life. The related religious beliefs and practices were pioneered by the Babongo Pygmies and further formalised by the Mitsogo people of the Southern region of Gabon. Foremost, we consecutively cover what the term "Bwiti" refers to and the unique representations making up for its much celebrated richness and authenticity, conceding the primitive character of the religion and the shrub commonly used in Bwiti religious ceremonies. In the prospect of the highly anticipated African renaissance, returning to the primitive belief system is understood as a mainspring of authentic economic development across African nations. Then, in restoring Africa's religious identity, the Bwiti tends to be regarded by a large number as the first religion practised by humanity. The stake is in reinstating the lost respect for African spirituality, including the observance of related ideologies and primitive codes of beliefs. Our humanity under mutation would most certainly benefit from a shift in religious paradigm whereby kinship becomes exalted among all human beings, tolerance among religious societies prevails, and in which developmental credos ideally embrace more environmentally friendly paths. Notwithstanding, the controversies around Bwiti still sustain Africa's representation as both "the cradle and the tomb of humanity."

Keywords: Iboga; Bwiti; Alkaloids; African Spirituality; Indigenous Religion.

1 Introduction

Waves of Afro-centric movements have inflexibly echoed, both inside and outside Africa, supporting the continent's generalised search for its unique identity and culture. It is widely held that the African identity and culture are still preserved in the continent's traditional religions. Such movements have thus unreservedly pleaded for a renewed interest in Afro-spirituality, the need to restore their essence and meaning, and the importance of reclaiming their loss vitality at the dawn of Africa's renaissance. A renaissance in African spirituality constitutes, in this sense, the foremost determining medium to be instrumentalised in the African renaissance (Nweke, 2019). So far, and unfortunately, traditional African religious practices and observances are typified as pagan and pure "magic" by dominant Westernised ideologies, although they idealistically express and borrow extensively from indigenous religions. Trending "Westernism" in religion, in the advent of the three Abrahamic religions (i.e., Christianity, Islam and Judaism) since their highly criticised conquests for domination over the world, continue to feed this pessimistic bias that downgrades African traditional religions to mere superstitious magic or works of the devil. Notwithstanding, these ancestral religions have long qualified to embody the earliest forms of belief systems on Earth, of which some of the spiritual practices remain to date (see Bernault & Tonda, 2000; Dávila, 2018; Mangany & Buitendag, 2013; Medine & Aderibigbe, 2015; Nweke, 2019; Platvoet, 1993).

For one thing, various agencies concerned with promoting sustainable development have endorsed the need for closer collaboration between economic and other religious/cultural life of society and their role in promoting the "integral development" of the World beyond the mere economic globalisation notion. The World's cultural diversity is understood as a mainspring of authentic economic devel-

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opment across nations, including in its baseline economic terms of reference, attainable only if the countries' development dimensions accommodate the necessary spiritual, cultural, political, social, and environmental corners of human life. Safeguarding Africa's traditional cultural heritage thus preserves the desirable cultural diversity, turning into an uplifting course of action to achieve authentic and sustainable development in African countries (Kipsigei, 2015; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1989).

Scholars acclaim the revival of Africa's ancestral beliefs, describing it as one significant ingredient to the much-anticipated African renaissance (Dávila, 2018; Mandela, 1998; Mangany & Buitendag, 2013; Medine & Aderibigbe, 2015; Nweke, 2019). Alternative motives for the upsurge in awareness of African culture, identity, and traditional spirituality emphasise a deep sense of racial grievance among Africans, mostly tinged with anti-religion, anti-colonialism, and other anti-neocolonialism connotations [1]. Adherents to this intellectual apprehension against foreign religions mainly express a swelling existential crisis across the broad spectrum of people of African origins, which has escalated in their resolute search for meaning and their enduring quest to assert their cultural identity (Dávila, 2018; Nweke, 2019).

For this continent and its people, including those of African origins outside Africa, the idea of a revival of indigenous spiritualties becomes rife, producing a new sense of religious consciousness among them. A renaissance in African spirituality, hence the unwinding of the disastrous consequences of the rise of imported religiosities in the aftermath of slavery, colonialism and their resulting cultural alienation, is expected to provide an anchor to a renaissance in Africa (Mandela, 1998; Nweke, 2019). Western religions and ideologies are accused of creating a severe cultural vacuum against traditional African religions (ATR), depriving them of their vitality, usefulness, and functionality in Africans' daily lives. In this light, the world's central monotheistic religions [2], which now share the continental space with African religions, emerge to aggravate the identity problems that most African societies have struggled with to date (Aderibigbe, 2015; Kipsigei, 2015; Mangany & Buitendag, 2013; Medine & Aderibigbe, 2015; Platvoet, 1993; Sanni, 2016).

Like all of Africa's traditional beliefs and practices, Gabon's Bwiti religion suffers enormously from foreign cultural invasion, which, similar to the Catholic missionaries, teaches people to be ashamed of their culture, leading to the destruction of the instruments of their beliefs, including religious relics and masks. The frequency of Bwiti rituals has even decreased. There are fears for what is being lost and questions about whether there is a future for authentic masks (meaning masks created for religious as opposed to artistic purposes). Despite all, many also defended that all subsequent variants of Bwiti are impregnated with the fundamental primitive religious elements. Accordingly, the various ramifications of the primitive Bwiti religion are still held to express a relatively deep anchorage onto the religious tradition of ancient Africa, integrating the related music, dance and speeches in their routines (Bonhomme, De Ruyter & Moussavou, 2012; Chabloz, 2009; De Heusch, 2007; Mifune, 2014; Świderski, 1965). Growing recognition of the Bwiti and pride vis-à-vis their traditions are similarly manifested among young Gabonese, even if all do not feel like participating in Bwiti ceremonies. This home-grown interest is paralleled outside Gabon, given the steady trickle of foreigners who come to Gabon to be initiated into Bwiti (Connolly, 2014).

Hence, meaningful voices continue to rise against the cultural distortions resulting from the omnipresence of non-African religious forms (e.g., Christianity, Islamisation, etc.). Such borrowed belief systems emerge to remarkably alter the perception Africans have towards their traditional societies, sometimes triggering their distrust, contempt and aversion towards the primordial beliefs, relics and cults of their ancestors i.e., vis-à-vis their past. The resentful protest and hostility towards what is casually called "Westernism" in religion rest on this representation of foreign theologies imposed on Africans under the yoke of colonial enterprises and other quasi-armed religious contacts with the continent. The search for meaning and African identity, therefore, becomes a dominant existential issue for the survival of Africa's cultural life and traditions, reinforcing the need for Africans to explore and express their traditional religious worldviews so that they can identify again with their roots (Chabloz, 2009; Nweke, 2019).

Binet and Valbert (1986) cautioned the rejection exhibited by some Africans against their own

culture and the practice of African cults resembling the Gabonese Bwiti is crucifying and somewhat excessive. It now becomes incumbent on Africans to better understand their ancestors' culture and rediscover African mysticism. Moving on, it is up to them to reconcile with the very past that makes them uniquely themselves.

Along these lines, this article focuses on the Gabonese Bwiti, a religion widely practised around this western region of equatorial Africa, of which the central initiation rite relies on the famous "Iboga" plant. The "Bwiti" of today essentially appears as an African religion that takes the form of both a cult of ancestors and a traditional ritual aimed at healing the sick. Despite varied transformations through centuries, the religion still obeys a relatively extensive set of commonalities specific to its fundamental rites, regulations, and worship methods, coupling secret and public sessions. The Bwiti is not the only traditional religion found in Africa. This tradition coexists alongside other African religious traditions, which continue to compete with churches and mosques from the main "converting religions" (i.e., Christianity and Islam) for adherents and positions (Aderibigbe, 2015; Canalblog, 2011; Gladstone, 1997; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018; Nweke, 2019). For the most part, the African spiritualties predate, adapted and survived the colonial occupation, Westernisation and cultural interference in Africa's interactions with the outside world (Bonhomme, 2006; Medine & Aderibigbe, 2015; Nweke, 2019; Samorini, 1998).

With the campaigning for the recovery of Africa's millennial cultural traditions and spirituality, the religious anthropology research community's attention has conspicuously converged towards the Bwiti and the primitive features of its initiation rite. Likewise, the Bwiti is the object of what seems a quasi-universal passion among the Gabonese themselves, and some precepts thereof have eventually spread to the West. A broadcasted activism among many African theologians envisions the world's return to such primordial African traditions and primitive spiritual heritage (Chabloz, 2009; Kipsigei, 2015; Nweke, 2019). This representation, as Chabloz (2009) further put it, is based on the evolutionary idea according to which the primitive belief system employed by the earliest humans, in their capacity as the social ancestors of the so-called "civilised", makes more evolved development proposals for humanity and the planet. Notably, it is on the African land and forest, the long-established "cradle of humankind," and mainly in the depth of the Gabonese forest where the Iboga plant grows on this Earth, that thinkers who subscribe to Chabloz's (2009) interpretation laid the origins of humanity.

Its reliance on the so-called "Iboga" shrub makes the initiation into the Bwiti faith unique.The ingestion/consumption of the root of this plant forms the very foundation of the religion. The plant, which grows in Africa, more abundantly deep in the "primary" equatorial forest of Gabon, has hallucinogenic virtues on which primitive religious practices rely. The shrub has appealed to the scientific community's curiosity for a long time. Specifically, Chabloz (2009) referenced Gabon's dense equatorial forest, where the Iboga was first discovered as the forest "of origin" and the place of birth of the first man. The status of "original" religious tradition among the world's so-called shamanic religions is also granted to the Bwiti on these premises tinged with Afro-centrism that is, from a similar representation of a "primordial" tradition from Africa, the world's most "archaic" continent, "cradle of humanity", and the land of "animism." The Bwiti is described as the "primordial tradition" inherited by the so-called Pygmies of Gabon from civilisations that existed several centuries before the very first contact of Christianity's with the continent in the first century; a tradition which, so far, has indeed largely escaped the external influences inflicted onto the continent (Aderibigbe, 2015; Chabloz, 2009; Nweke, 2019). Gladstone (1997) strengthened that "Gabon is to Africa what Tibet is to Asia, the spiritual centre of religious initiations." The Gabonese land and forest are particularly renowned as being the site of an invisible and fantastic world of spirits with irresistible effects on Man. Going to Gabon to be initiated into the Bwiti faith thus tends to be regarded as returning to humanity's origins (Chabloz, 2009). Again, Chabloz (2009) expressed how vital and paramount the rediscovery of such a perpetuating tradition of the "archaic" beliefs of "the origin" is beyond accomplishing in-depth developmental prospects in Gabon, particularly, and the African continent at large. After all, hasn't it been said that Africa's multifaceted developmental aspirations must remain firmly rooted in a deep understanding and experience of how far the continent has come (i.e., its origins) and where it wishes to go next in the years and centuries ahead?

2 What is the "Bwiti"?

The term *"Bwiti"* has been increasingly used as a generic appellation for a burgeoning yet pervasive initiation religion from the West-Central African region, particularly Gabon. The religion, which is also known as the *"Religion/Mysteries of the Iboga or Eboka"* in the Fang language is a by-product of a process of regional ritual synthesis of an antediluvian African creed, which today still incorporates its primitive worship elements (Bonhomme et al., 2012; Chabloz, 2009; Samorini, 1998).

In the eyes of the uninitiated, the ritual's origins are controversial since two closely related tribes from the southern half of Gabon, the Apidji and Mistogo, specialise in the so-called *Bwiti Disumba*, and boast of having created the underlying ancestor cult. The origins of the religion have sometimes also been attributed to the Akoa Pygmies (Bonhomme et al., 2012). Yet, a more plausible hypothesis grants the conception of the Bwiti and the discovery of the secret of the Iboga to the realm of "Babongo" Pygmies. They are forest-dwelling Pygmies, among others referred to as "forest people" due to their profound knowledge of forest products, plants, and trees. Pigmies are indeed the first inhabitants of this part of the African continent. They have populated the deep equatorial forest of Gabon for thousands of years. Notably, the Babongo, who live alongside many cousin tribes of the same ethnolinguistic cluster as the Mitsogo, including the Apindji, are seen as the first and "real" holders of knowledge referring to the psychoactive properties of the Iboga plant: the famous shrub that forms the very foundation of any Bwiti rituals. For these forest-specialists who are commonly feared as sorcerers, the earliest form of Bwiti involved the idea of the invisible and divinity, yet most certainly in a non-ritualised tradition (Laval-Jeantet, 2004).

Anyhow, the key role that Babongo and their Mitsogo neighbours jointly held into the national dynamics of this ritual circulation, innovation, and eventually its expansion is irrefutable. Of the various ritual ramifications derived from the original Bwiti, the Bwiti Misoko helped popularised the religion across the country as the by-product of a process of regional ritual synthesis incorporating a sharp Babongo's imprints. Indeed the mythical Pygmies further contributed to the ritual dynamics that led to Misoko's emergence out of the fundamental branch of Disumba: the central Bwiti factions that incarnate the respective catalysts for the success and the very roots of modern Bwiti. They are renowned for their role in the evoked healing Bwiti, in which they mainly specialise, rather than the ritualised *Bwiti Disumba* [3] cult (Bonhomme et al., 2012; Chabloz, 2009; Griffins, 2016; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Parry, 2014; Samorini, 1998).

Together, the Bwiti religion, its choreographies, singing characters, and reliance on the Iboga (*Tabernanthe Iboga*) all root far back in history. The Babongo have known and cultivated the Iboga tree for ceremonial purposes since time immemorial. They have perpetuated an initiation tradition marked by the transition of a young man to adulthood, of which they transferred their knowledge of Iboga to migrating people of the Bantu tribes thousands of years ago: first to their closest neighbours, the Apindji and Mitsogo. After that, the Bwiti underwent extensive geographical dispersal, both increasingly formalising and syncretising, branching out into various initiation communities to form more and more community-specific chapels. Various elements of the Babongo's cult remained embedded in the rituals practised by the non-Babongo groups that compose Gabon's linguistic heterogeneity (Bonhomme, 2018; Bonhomme et al., 2012; De Heusch, 2007; Griffins, 2016; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Parry, 2014; Świderski, 1965).

While existing reports argued the propagation of the precepts of *Bwiti* both across Gabon and towards European and American lands as a result of the deportation of Pygmy slaves (Świderski, 1965), the Babongo truly opened their knowledge of the Iboga to neighbouring tribes in the middle of the 19th century. Starting with the advent of the *"Bwiti Disumba"* (the principal branch of Bwiti involving a coming-of-age rite and religious initiation defining an ancestor cult), massive conversions to the Bwiti faith took place in large forest worksites subsequent to the emancipation from slavery, as the black workforce left behind converged from various horizons to seek work in these logging camps. Various Bwiti alternatives and religious factions were formed after that [4]. Among these, the *"Bwiti Misoko"* [5] emerged as a prominent hybrid "Disumba"-based initiation ritual for which the Babongo, as earlier noted, yet again helped fashioned the ritual dynamics. The Bwiti Misoko thus translated into a ritual of affliction, a therapeutic initiation and healing cult, shying away from the Disumba's original

religious connotation. Thereby, the neophytes could join the cult to identify the witch at the root of the unexplained misfortune they may face. The bulk of legendary evidence to date corroborates that all modern Bwiti factions have structurally drawn from the first formalised religious contents of the Mitsogo's Bwiti Disumba, hence being sourced straight out of this primitive . For instance, veneration chants across different Bwitist chapels are often in the Mitsogo language, which is to the Bwiti what Latin is to the Catholic Church (Bonhomme et al., 2012; De Heusch, 2007; Gaulme, 1979; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 1998; Świderski, 1965).

The *Bwiti Disumba* – or *Bwete Disumba* like it was formerly called — entailed "a male secret society," which young men joined by taking an oath and swearing *"Na Bwiti a Besu"* (i.e., by our Bwiti) before receiving an initiation with the sacred plant, Iboga (Gladstone, 1997). The whole new therapeutic direction taken by the original *"Bwete"* in the aftermath of the shift from *Disumba* to *Misoko* in the 1970s, coupled with the full-scale success of the *Bwiti Misoko* in Gabon after that, weakened the political dominance of elder men once ascribed to the ancestor cult by the Disumba. At the same time, the *Bwiti Misoko* progressively allowed for the emancipation of junior men, women and even Babongo Pygmies [6], once seen as subordinate social actors in the original Disumba's initiation scene. They could now participate in the initiatory sphere, bypass conventional men's leadership and initiatory authority, and forge careers as cult leaders or *"Nganga Misoko"* (Canalblog, 2011; Bonhomme et al., 2012).

The Fang people in northernmost Gabon adopted the primitive *Bwiti* practices from the Mitsogo around the first decade of the 1900s. They made it into an actual cocktail of ideas, embracing rites from their own culture, memories and traditions, Catholic philosophies, and a great amount of concurrently rising healing *Bwiti* practices (Bonhomme et al., 2012; Gladstone, 1997). As the religion turned proliferative among the Pahouin conquerors, the ancient *"Bwete"* appellation translated into *"Bwiti,"* whereas men and women came to be initiated and co-opted into the religion to enjoy full-fledged identical membership privileges (De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997).

Note that the cult of the Fang emerged in a deep forerunner crisis context to the era of colonial and other missionary persecutions to establish Catholicism; hence the transformation of the religion in a profound syncretic way, with a fusion between the original *"Bwete"* and Christianity. Although highly syncretised, the religion remained well-ascribed to the same fundamental concern known to Mitsogo's *Disumba* cult from which it was derived — that is, *"to maintain harmonious communication with the ancestors."* Knowing that Bwitist communities thrived on interethnic relations and exchanges among some forty different ethnic groups, it becomes a stylised fact that all such *Dissumba*-based religious currents have, at least partially, reliably incorporated and preserve the fundamentals of the primitive Mitsogo's Bwiti branch and also the basic Babongo's cultural influence and heritage thereof (Binet & Valbert, 1986; Bonhomme, 2008; De Heusch, 2007; Gaulme, 1979; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Le Bomin & Mbot, 2012; Świderski, 1965).

As alluded to, the original cult of ancestors entailed a rite of passage that young men undergo at the threshold of puberty, during an initiation retreat that led to their circumcision. Unlike most rites of passage in Africa, the puberty ritual borrowed from the Babongo already transported the novices to the land of ancestors, teaching and allowing the young people to communicate directly with their ancestors through visions created by the consumption of the Iboga root (Bonhomme, 2018; De Heusch, 2007; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Mifune, 2014; Parry, 2014). Nowadays, the Bwiti is a renowned inter-tribal religious institution that spreads countrywide, including in urban areas. The religion mainly serves to organise and coordinate the spiritual and social lives across different worship communities, thus creating a link between members of the relevant tribes or clans. Because certain ethnic groups (e.g., Fang, Punu, Nzebi and Teke) especially stretches beyond Gabon's borders to neighbouring Central African countries, the Bwiti was also adopted in Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Southern Cameroon (Bonhomme, 2006, 2018; Bonhomme et al., 2012; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Świderski, 1965).

Like the classic *"Bwete"* on the brink of disappearing (De Heusch, 2007), the contemporary Bwiti, while moving further away from the pre-existing practice of puberty rituals, can still be understood as a major social and religious phenomenon of the Equatorial West-Central African region. The underlying cults of ancestors of local tribes continue to be perpetuated, although tinged with greater Christianity,

forcefully implanted through colonisation, principally. The flourishing religious branches tend to have increasingly specialised in the management of misfortune and evils attributed to witchcraft, making such motives an inextricably dominant pursuit of the Bwiti nowadays. The fundamental cult of ancestors of the religion entailed a secret initiation society that organised and coordinated religious and social life. The term "Bwiti" was similarly a generic name for night dance sessions. The resembling connotations somewhat apply to the more modern "Bwiti" philosophy, even though, now, the rites further embrace a form of healing cult. There still is no all-encompassing Bwiti's clergy, and hence no supreme chief: each chapel, community and village practices the Bwiti independently of the others, under the authority of a local chief (Bonhomme, 2018; Bonhomme et al., 2012; Canalblog, 2011; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Mifune, 2014; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018)

3 Initiation rituals and celebration masses in the Bwitist religious tradition

The term Bwiti refers to a religion of initiation, in which a candidate becomes a member of the religious community – that is, a secret society — after undergoing the related stepwise initiation. Besides the intermittent initiation ceremonies, the religion further relies on the Bwiti masses involving the ordinary celebratory rites, which tend to be held more frequently. Following the proliferation of Bwiti factions in Gabon, the two types of Bwiti ceremonies, and even the broader symbology of the Bwitist canon, quickly turned into a forum for heterogeneity, which translates the remarkable elasticity of the interpretation of religious symbols in the absence of a rigid theology for both types of Bwiti ceremonies. The ceremonies' defining rituals and religious symbolism do not correspond to a specific structural organisation. They usually differ across Bwitist chapels or communities and from one ethnic group to another (Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Maghoumbou, 2019; Samorini, 1998).

Regardless, from the Mitsogo's primitive tradition to the syncretic conducts among the Fang in Gabon, the different branches of Bwiti still respond to a fair amount of shared codes and specifications, like the mentioned two-part ceremonial structure involving day-time and night-time initiatory proceedings, as well as a typical religious liturgy which alternates public sequences of songs and dances allowing secular spectators and secret sequences which take place outside the temple, in someplace(s) reserved for initiates only (Bonhomme, 2018; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 1998).

However, the actual Bwiti ceremonies, also called "veillées"— translating as "vigils" from French – mostly occur at night: the time of fertility, of the moon and the Earth, but above all, especially the time of secrecy when all things become inconspicuous. One usually says "Maganga assi meye omanda": "the medicine does not like the day", which means that Bwiti is not done during the day (Bonhomme, 2018; Gladstone, 1997; Maghoumbou, 2019). For 12 straight hours, from sunset to sunrise – that is, for 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., without interruption [7] – the endlessly diversified concatenation of chanted choreographies and rites performed by individuals perfectly familiar with the symbolic actions leaves an impression of impenetrability. Because the effects of the doses of substance use in these ceremonies are exceptionally long-lasting, ceremonies tend to extend throughout the night, where members pray, dance and sing, calling spirits and consuming "Iboga" (Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Maghoumbou, 2019; Samorini, 1998).

The ceremonies are organised according to the circumstances of life: passage to adulthood, death of an initiated person, healing of sick persons, repelling of harmful spirits, blessings, offerings and sacrifice, rejoicing events, etc. (Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Maghoumbou, 2019; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018). All proceedings, rituals and liturgy are turned into some uninterrupted musical sequences, where all the actions (movements, liturgical actions, choreography, prayers) are generally sung to the sound of a special traditional musical arc called "Mongongo" and the sacred eight-string harp, a cithara also known as "Ngombi or Ngoma." Both instruments are central to the rites (De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Mifune, 2014; Samorini, 1998). [8]

3.1 *Initiation to Bwiti*

The admittance cult, known as "initiation," is considered the most important of both types of ceremonies. It is held each time someone decides to join the Bwiti religion by taking the Iboga for the first time. According to De Heusch (2007), Laval-Jeantet (2004) and Samorini (1998), both the conser-

vative and syncretic Bwiti versions refer to a "mystery religion" characterised by profound initiation revelations and the secrecy surrounding the initiation rite. It is indeed prohibited to communicate any details regarding the rite outside the Bwitist communities.

The rites of admittance to the Bwiti's religious society are also heterogeneous. Whereas certain factions would follow a four-stage initiation involving an admission, theory, exercises and practice proceedings, many contemporary chapels have instead retained a conventional three-stage initiation process mimicking the relevant phases of separation, liminality and reintegration of the original rite of passage. Respectively, the Mitsogo and Fang refer to the initiation rituals as *"Disumba"* and *"Tobe si"* [9] events, whereby the traditional rite pioneered and practised among south Gabon tribes as part of their *"Bwiti Disumba"* entails the non-syncretic cult of ancestors and a rite of passage to adulthood dedicated to men only. The secrecy[10] about both the ways of Iboga consumption and the mystery of the visual knowledge of the afterlife provided by the so-called *"miraculous tree"* is sported in this tradition since the primitive Bwiti (Canalblog, 2011; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

The initiation of the traditional *Disumba* was perceived as one of the cornerstones of ethnic identity. It played a vital role in the reproduction of local social organisations, securing membership to the secret society (Bonhomme et al., 2012; Connolly, 2014). In the advent of the therapeutic turn taken by the *Misoko* branch, which is detailed in Bonhomme (2005), the Bwiti became more concerned with individual existence, in the absence of the singular shared communion and collective worldview credited to most alternative Bwiti branches. Hence, the *Misoko's* initiation is circumstantial, essentially directed towards handling one's misfortune, curing witchcraft, and defeating the sorcerer responsible for the initiate's hardship [11]. For the majority of alternative Bwiti branches, though, the initiation has been shaped to combine the original collective worship edge known to the ancient *Disumba* its double-duty intertwining religious and political functions. Notwithstanding, they also incorporate the therapeutic and divinatory practices inherent to the *Misoko* (Bonhomme, 2005, 2008; De Heusch, 2007).

In the Mitsogo's tradition, the initiation to the *Bwiti Disumba* then gave a kick-start to young men's adulthood, reinforcing and legitimising male elders' domination of junior initiates, women and their dependents, and even the Babongo. Beforehand, the initiates were to acquire the knowledge, discipline and strength indispensable for life. At the same time, they were taught to respect the powers of nature and spirits, to value the forest and, importantly, to communicate with ancestors. In this tradition, the particular initiates would become "real men" after their initiation, which granted them their eligibility to enter the men's house and participate in collective decision-making, unlike the inexperienced man. In fact, the whole Gabonese initiation sphere was historically structured by an opposition between male religious visions and female therapeutic possession (Bonhomme et al., 2012; Connolly, 2014; De Heusch, 2007).

In this *Bwiti Disumba* tradition, the mystical journey allowed by Iboga was taken once in a lifetime. It was only to be retaken on the ultimate day marking one's actual death. The sacred plant was sparingly consumed with recreational drives, though, to "warm the heart" such as to help it "in physical efforts or discussions" (Canalblog, 2011). After the switch from the original rite of passage, admittance to the Bwiti society became linked to a multifaceted process, stretching beyond the first initiation by Iboga ingestion. Some degrees of initiation were shaped, creating a hierarchical Bwitist structure. The original initiation rite whereby an uninitiated candidate ("etema," like the Fang call them) simply underwent the consumption of Iboga translated as a first degree in the conquest of superior levels of ritual mastery, and ultimately the title *"Nganga-Misoko"* — or simply "Nganga", in the factions alternative to the Bwiti Misoko — which empowers some individuals to occupy the functions of soothsayers-therapists (De Heusch, 2007; Samorini, 1998).

The Misoko-based principles of hierarchical nomenclature fragmented the Bwiti's initiation rite into different degrees, such as *"Bandzi"* (the neophyte), *"Nima"* (initiated), and *"Nima Na Kombo"* (adept) [12]. These degrees of Bwiti initiation essentially correspond to the respective levels of human maturity like childhood, adulthood and old age (Canalblog, 2011; Gladstone, 1997; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018). Through this long and fragmented initiation process, some devotees, but not all, are

thus led to the ultimate status of *"Nganga:"* only a small number of initiates acquire this title (De Heusch, 2007).

With the *"tobe si"* ceremonies of the Fang, the Bwiti became a universal religion approachable by women, white people and anyone who earnestly intended to join it. The religion preserved a fair degree of secrecy and mystery vis-à-vis the *"Mysteries of Iboga"* and the particular way of taking Iboga. Young people under the related Bwiti factions could then be co-opted into the Bwiti's society from the age of 10 to 12: the age of discretion (Gladstone, 1997; Samorini, 1998).

Eating a sufficient quantity (i.e., a massive dose) of the grated root of so-called *"sacred wood"*— or "Bois Sacré" in the French appellation — trigger what the Fang have labelled as the "great vision" (yen): the vision of the beyond, the invisible world where the spirits of the dead live on. Sometimes, an Iboga-based drink made of water in which the bitter gourd of Iboga roots has been macerated is instead given several times to those who show a certain reluctance to chewing the root. The psychophysical reactions caused by Iboga, including hallucinations, and the associated state of unconsciousness and hypnotic trance,[13] have mainly been achieved in the same way for probably thousands of years. The elders preside over the cult, and the particular devotee's soul is taken on the "journey to the other world" during the light coma following the ingestion of Iboga under their watchful eye. The threshold for activating the desired initiatory vision can amount to quantities equivalent to hundreds of doses similar to those eaten during the ordinary night vigils (Bonhomme, 2008; Canalblog, 2011; De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

The initiation must be received as a great honour by the Bwitists. Collectively, they shoulder the role of custodians to the secrets concerning the mysteries of Iboga and the visual knowledge of the afterlife. *"The Bwiti is not transmissible"*, *"one must see it oneself."* Usually, the aspirant to the initiation is presented to the initiation master, a *"Nganga"* (diviner and healer) or the *Kombo* i.e., the organiser of the ceremony by an intermediary person, often an insider, someone who has himself already undergone the initiation, might be designated as the "parent" of the initiation, and gave the novice as little information as possible. The little the candidate needs to be aware of is that the initiation leads us to symbolically "face our own death" and that "what we see will guide us for our entire lives." Therefore, the big Bwitist family has built up around the perpetual exchanges involving the constant experience of the Iboga (Canalblog, 2011; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

3.1.1 *Set and Setting*

The indigenous people knew that the initiate's physical and mental health conditions were crucial to the effective functioning of Iboga. People with underlying mental instabilities, chronic conditions and generally not in a disciplined state of mind are not fit for initiation; therefore, it is inadvisable to take Iboga. A person's initiation is always an important event inside the religious community, emotionally experienced by all members. The novice may undergo a long period of psychological and "technical" preparations (frequently for at least twenty days) ahead to the ceremony, under the stewardship of the community while abiding by several preparatory dispositions (e.g., isolation and silence to achieve the "great vision" as tranquil as possible), including food abstinence [14] for a day prior to the ceremony (Canalblog, 2011; Samorini, 1998).

Given the toxicity of certain substances when combined with Iboga, other therapeutic contraindications include sexual intercourse, alcohol (beer and wine), tobacco, certain nuts (e.g., cola nut), exciting drugs (from coffee to hard drugs), spirits, or any other products that may contain a toxic component for the liver's metabolism (e.g., fat) or stomach (e.g., acidic fruits like lemon), etc. (Canalblog, 2011; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 1998). Such prohibitions are particularly prominent in the Misoko branch, where they tend to embody a deep metaphysical meaning mostly coinciding with the fundamental sexual prohibitions [15]. Otherwise, they tend to be linked to mythical tales about a person who was saved from abstaining from their consumption. It is not unusual for the initiation-related laws to differ from one group to another, though. Each "master initiator" or "Nganga" is eligible to establish his/her own list of prohibitions, to which a particular Bandzi is subject both before and after taking Iboga, or both [16]. Naturally, the duration for the set of post-initiation prohibitions may also

vary from one Nganga to another, after which the Bandzi must return for a prohibitions-exit ceremony: "it's the price for having seen;" so they say (Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 1998). Generally, the Bwitist priest – the chief of the community, either the Nganga or the Kombo of a particular chapel — would consent to initiate a particular candidate in consultation with the entire community. In doing so, the candidate undergoes preamble public consultation, detailing his/her personal motivations for seeking the initiation. Subsequently, the priest would interrogate the invisible about "modus operandi" on how to act with the candidate, using divination seeds named "nzingu" in the Mitsogo language. Then, the Nganga agrees on the necessary offerings to be made in exchange in consultation with the community as he exhorts the members to a collective effort and sacrifices towards the ceremony (Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Ndoua Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

Moving on, a form of Bwitist "catechisms" which mainly occurs orally begins, during which the priest transfers the "secrets of the Bwiti" and the knowledge about the "Mysteries of Iboga" to the candidate. This knowledge transmission is of therapeutic importance, too, since "being healed through the Bwiti" means above all to be aware of one's own place in the world and thus being able to conceive this world according to the Bwiti. The preparations before the ceremony are multiform, including the purchases and gathering of all necessary products to be used as offerings and for sacrifice purposes, organising the meeting of the Bwitist group, consultations by the Nganga, confession of faults by the candidate, purifying care and baths [17], blessings and invocations of geniuses in the forest by the Nganga (Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 1998). Eventually, before all Bwiti ceremonies, white kaolin is applied on the candidate on the day of ritual and worship as protection from evil and a channel to communicate with ancestors (Connolly, 2014).

The whole initiation retreat in the traditional "Bwiti Disumba," which all subsequent Bwiti factions tend to replicate, occurred in two phases and two distinct locations. Despite the healing phase added to the fundamental initiation actions through the Bwiti Misoko [18], the processes at work in the modern initiation rites leverage the Disumba's purification and confession of one's faults in a river and, of course, the mastication of Iboga and its effects on the human body. Together, the purifying care, confession, vomiting, physical trials, presence of the group, and injunctive character bestowed to the leader of ceremonies also remain essential to modern Bwiti cults. The wholeness of these processes yet again makes the invaluable therapeutic turn credited to the Bwiti nowadays, even more so than the simple consumption of the Iboga (De Heusch, 2007; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua and Vaghar, 2018).

So, the daytime phase of the Mitsogo's initiation tradition ideally occurs in the forest, by a river, and reasonably far from the village. The place for these daytime proceedings, the "Ndjimba or Ndzimba," is often overlooked by a very tall, mysterious and sacred tree with a red trunk of the "Copaifera religiosa" species (Olumi or Andzem). The resin of this tree is usually utilised in the preparation of torches and lustrous water to wash the Bwiti statuettes, which also serve in purification baths (De Heusch, 2007; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018). The so-called "Ndjimba" is a site for secret sessions where various preparatory rites with great symbolic value are performed. Alternatively, it may be symbolically represented on the outskirts of the village by a carefully swept space on the edge of a forest where initiates meet before the ceremonies, at a short distance, just across a courtyard facing the village's temple. There again, the place is often dominated by a tree of an impressive size. This huge tree and the impossibility of climbing it are evocative of how difficult it is for a man to rise to the divine level by the power of his own will (Binet 1983; Canalblog, 2011; Gladstone, 1997; De Heusch, 2007; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

Approximately around noon on the initiation day, typically on a Thursday of the initiation week, the ceremony often begins with the cleansing bath in the forest stream at the Ndjimba. As the cithara is heard, the candidate receives the very first doses of the long phase of gradual ingestion of Iboga. Symbolically, the various scenes stage the fundamental cycle of human life, repeatedly representing the journey of the neophyte's spirit from deincarceration (or death) to birth (or resurrection)[19] (Canalblog, 2011; Gladstone, 1997; De Heusch, 2007; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

In the Bwiti Misoko, particularly, the very place for all essential private sessions, including secret ritual sequences and manipulations, yet again exclusively reserved to the only attendance of "male"

initiates, is referred to as "Bwenze" (Bonhomme, 2005). Some alternative Bwiti factions devote another place in the forest, represented by a tree, and located between the "Ndjimba" and the village, to the so-called "Otunga" rituals [20]. This very tree, also named "Otunga," can similarly be represented not so far from the temple for the less conservative Bwiti chapels. The "Otunga" symbolises the placenta of the novice' foetus [21]. The sacrifice to be paid for the spiritual birth of the latter is often performed there. Similarly, most of the ritual complications, tests, and trials inflicted on the novice are mobilised at this very place in an enclosure strictly reserved for insiders. While in the past the candidates had to offer a year of their life against initiation, nowadays one can agree on a sum of money and the purchase of "bisièmu"— i.e., list of products necessary for initiation – as an offering [22] (De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 1998).

The night session is held in the village's temple ("Mbandja"— depending on ethnic groups and vernaculars, one also say "mulebi," "abeii," "corps de garde," etc.), a consecrated place where the neophytes are taken for the initiatory vigils whereby they merely undergo the ingestion of more substantial doses of Iboga. The so-called night of the "Sacred Wood" begins at soon as the night falls. All Bwiti vigils normally take in this very place (Bonhomme, 2005; Bonhomme et al., 2012; Connolly, 2014; De Heusch, 2007; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 1998).

Insight the temple, the novice is first placed on the left side of the hut, symbolising femininity, darkness, the moon, and death. This side of the temple is regarded as the women's chamber. The candidate would remain there, absorbing the Iboga until the normative perception of visions occurs. Only after seeing "the Bwiti with his own eyes" would (s)he be invited to take his place on the right side of the temple — the side of life, the sun and "man" or, as they say, the men's chamber. (S)he would then have become an insider for having discovered the "Bwiti" through a reality only accessible through both physical and initiating death (Canalblog, 2011; De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018).

The night-time ceremonies commence after purifying the temple by fire. The traditional torch made of bark and tree sap usually burns during the ceremonies, and it is used in this intent. The chorus leader brandishes it while circulating in all directions within the hut. With a mirror placed before, the candidate sits on a mat facing and staring fixedly into the mirror to see. (S)he holds a fly-hunt at hand, ready to ward off unwelcome spirits. Then, the phases of repeated vomiting, possession, visions and predictions begin. The ingestion of Iboga continues regardless, up until the threshold of initiation is reached where the candidate's visions become fluid enough such that the latter may effortlessly identify his/her Kombo, referring to his/her true identity within the group (De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018).

The candidate's prolonged lethargy and trance during the Iboga ingestion only account for a poor portrayal of wide-ranging side-effects attributed to the high dose of Iboga taken during the initiation. However, this phase of lethargy and trance runs over several days in a row, most often three days (Binet, 1983; Canalblog., 2011; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998). It is thus no surprise that the initiation process among the Fang [23], as portrayed in Gladstone (1997), is systematically standardised into a threefold structure, encompassing three ngonzes: rituals nights, of which the first night is congruently named "Efun" (i.e., the genesis); the second night, "Mesoso" (i.e., bath); and the third night, "Otunga" (the dues, night of offerings). In some cases of great concern, the novice may not awake at the expected moment, with a delay of a few hours or a day or more as the state lethargy may extend over five days depending on the dose of Iboga ingested. In such cases of a delay in the novice's awakening, the "ngombi" or "mongongo [24]," depending on the chapels, is played continuously near the novice ears so that his/her soul lost in the "other world" can find the way back following the sonorous message backwards (Samorini, 1998).

All participants in the temple's ceremony are invited to consume the Iboga, although in a much smaller quantity, often a pinch of about a teaspoon. Sometimes, a symbolic quantity of Iboga can be given to children, including babies, among the Fang. According to beliefs, this is the most suitable way to "accompany" the "big journey" of the novice. Preferably, they take it at night until the last day of the initiating rites since it helps them stay awake. Many people, notably those actively partaking in the ceremony, do not sleep intentionally during the entire initiation period (Binet & Valbert, 1986;

Nyongo Ndoua Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

The secret to an antidote to massive Iboga intakes, the "edika," is commonly held by the different masters of ceremony. The antidote draws on the active properties from three to five species of wood which it uses as crushed ingredients, and that are selected according to the Bandzi's physiological weaknesses. Suppose for any reason the absorption of Iboga raises fears for the neophyte's life; in that case, it can be deployed to interrupt the effects of Iboga, including the unfolding of visions, thus withdrawing candidates from the initiation process (Canalblog, 2011). Moreover, it mostly turns handy in the last stage of ceremonial outing, also called "edika." Only after undergoing this ceremony's closing would the neophyte be presented to the assembly as a newly consecrated member for the customary sequences of benedictions. The assembly would then pledge its spiritual (sorcerer's) protection upon the "Bandzi," marking his/her membership to the Bwitist group. The errors of combinations not to be committed with the Iboga consumption, especially, tend to weaken the performance of the edika (Bonhomme 2005; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018). Bonhomme (2005:69-75) provided an in-depth description of the preparation of the "edika" in the context of the Bwiti Misoko, which pioneered this practice.

The group of elders surrounding the candidate during the initiation night, including the acting Bwitist "priest" and "parent(s)," among those most highly regarded, lend a helping hand to establish the connection with the invisible using songs and music as the future initiate swallows the Sacred Wood. Working as a "team" on the novice, they similarly shoulder the responsibility of protecting the candidate from the malicious intervention of evil spirits and terrifying ghosts while still under the effects of Iboga. These spirits could lead the candidate on the wrong path, to the road of death. Therefore, the whole assembly takes turns to accompany the novice with skill and care through his (her) "death-rebirth." Each with a specific role, all members stand ready to intervene in case of unwelcome reactions during the Iboga ingestion. They would collectively judge the initiating value of the vision described by the novice as the effect of Iboga becomes more and more significant (Canalblog, 2011; De Heusch; Gladstone, 1997; Samorini, 1998).

Deciding what subjective quantity of Iboga to feed the candidate is incumbent to the Bwiti priest — the Kombo or the Nganga, the real experts of Iboga. Apart from progressively feeding the novice Iboga to cause the visions, they must decide on the last dose when the neophyte reaches the sought point of unconsciousness, leading to a total loss of contact with reality. In parallel, the designated "parent(s)" of initiation provide the novice with the necessary psychological support, encouraging and comforting him/her in difficult and frightful moments he/she may experience while under the influence of the Iboga (Canalblog, 2011; De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Samorini, 1998). Indeed, the role of a parent is all the more prominent, given a dreadfully large amount of Iboga consumed by the novice to visit the dead and join the group of the "Bandzi" who have seen and known the "Bwiti" (Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018). A parent would be liable for monitoring the candidate's physiological reactions in the process (e.g. pulse, heartbeat, eyes and pupils, temperature, the consistency and quality of the vomit to understand how the Iboga acts on his/her stomach, the sensitivity of the body, etc.); ensuring that the ceremony runs smoothly and according to rules; checking the dosage and deciding on the increase or decrease of the quantity of substance intake of the candidate; etc. An old man tasked to supervise the ritual. Among the Fang, instead, the novice has two insiders as "father" (tare) and "mother" (nana), a man and a woman who the particular novice could freely pick to stand as "parents" during one of the regular masses (i.e., ngozé) celebrated in the weeks preceding the initiation (Canalblog, 2011; De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

The spiritual filiations and other bounds established through the Bwiti initiation have profoundly influenced the relationships, the due respect and hierarchy that govern the members within a particular Bwiti community (Samorini, 1998). As they finally awake after several hours, the candidates would return from their comatose states with the greatest discoveries of their life, with the feeling of having approached the once-so-distant myth of death. They would stand spiritually upright from all the teachings and knowledge of the afterlife and "roots of life" they acquired from the spirits and divine entities, becoming better equipped and able to understand the ways of the "things of the Earth

(Bonhomme, 2008; Canalblog, 2011; De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

The narrative of what a particular neophyte saw in the home of the dead and God is normally used to validate the initiation and final enthronisation (Binet, 1983; Canalblog, 2011). The stepwise initiation process stages the death and rebirth of the neophyte in several ways, from the opening to the closing rituals. Symbolically, the candidate's death is evoked as an opening ritual to the ceremony whereby he is invited to undress and empty himself to get rid of the "old life" (or "old man"). Likewise, the resurrection and resurgence of the candidate would be re-enacted in the morning following the last night of the initiation. In between, the novice's body would be dressed with a white cloth tied on the hips as a swaddling band as he is prepared to "be born" in a new life and become a "new being." The novice is also to be taken into the forest by different species of trees chosen by the spirits as their fixed abode. Solemnly, the candidate would be presented to the spirits of the forest under each tree, addressing them in a confession of his/her sins. The confession concerns the whole life of the novice. There also, withdrawn with a community member, further ceremonials accompanied with prayers and benedictions occur. The end-of-session blessings from the community members, the confession, and the ensuing cathartic action re-deeming the novice from the personal sense of guilt, are very important. The Bwitists consider that a good "vision" could not be achieved without a good confession. Even more, voluntarily hiding some sins is seen as extremely dangerous and, in some cases, fatal (Nyongo Ndoua Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

Unlike the Sunday mass among Catholics or the Friday prayer among Muslims, which are organised once a week (Laval-Jeantet, 2004), the Bwitist celebrations last for several ritual days in a row, mainly over three nights, from Thursdays to Saturdays (Maghoumbou, 2019; Mifune, 2014; Samorini, 1998). Certain chapels among the Fang may hold a particular ceremony ahead of initiation rites at midnight on Wednesdays, during which the novice is to be presented to the assembly by his "parents". The candidate might be questioned vis-à-vis his/her reasons for seeking out the initiation at this moment and must reply publicly. As previously suggested, (s)he would be left at the community's disposal to start the initiation only if these reasons are deemed sufficient and must do all he/she is directed to. A parrot feather (ase kôs) brought among the offering products ("bisièmu") is put on his/her forehead to facilitate loquacity as well as his communication with the divine entities he/she will meet during the vision (Gladstone, 1997; Samorini, 1998).

3.2 *The Bwitist night masses*

The "Bwitist night masses" or "nights of the Sacred Wood" are famed as "Mvengue" and "Ngozé" rituals among the Mitsogo and Fang, respectively. They constitute a large number of the Bwiti ceremonies and are scheduled long ahead of time. The ceremonial masses are held many times through the year, on special occasions, making up for a prematurely deceased relative, finding out the cause of a disease and its cure, getting good harvests, fish, children, etc. (Bonhomme, 2005; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua and Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998). Among the Fang, one such ngozé celebration is commonly held following the initiation rites too. Vigils and masses are more recurrent in these communities on account of their twinning syncretism. The Bwitist masses then take on a structural organisation and festive agenda following the Catholic Church's liturgical calendar for the Fang people. There is a calendar of holy days patterned on that of the Catholic Church, among which Christmas and Easter are major celebrations (Gladstone, 1997).

The typical nights of prayer would take place on weekends, Fridays and Saturday evenings. During the transition to "Ndjimba," where everyone confesses their sins and apply the traditional make-up, the master of ceremonies exposes the purpose of the ceremony of the day beforehand. After that, the proceedings would continue at the temple, where various dances accompany the songs, and musical rhythms ultimately take place until dawn. At each ngozé ceremony, a small dose (i.e., a pinch) of powdered Iboga root is distributed to all the assistants with gestures and an atmosphere that evokes the Catholic communion (Binet 1983; Binet Valbert, 1986; Samorini, 1998). The "masses" are public events since anyone may attend the celebrations (Gladstone, 1997). Two main objectives are ascribed to these, such as communicating with the spiritual world and representing the parallel Universe of

Bwiti through diverse performances, for the three nights they often last (Mifune, 2014).

The primitive Bwiti tradition of South Gabon deifies two "Fantastic Beings": "Nzambe-Kana," the father of the human race, the first man on Earth, and the "Disumba," wife of "Nzambe-Kana," the mother of the human race and the first woman on Earth, one who always stands to Nzambe-Kana's left. "Kombé" (the sun), the supreme deity, usually appears to initiates in the form of a sparkly fireball of increasing intensity. "Kombé" is the "Leader of the world" and reigns upon the Universe with His wife, "Ngon" (the moon). At some point, upon meeting them, they would transmute into a beautiful boy and a beautiful girl in a blink of an eye and, without warning again, return to their original form before disappearing. Their many children are named "Minanga" (the stars). Further, "Ngadi" (the thunder) is heard following the ultimate dialogue with the Sun and the Moon in the other world, and then calm is re-established everywhere. Having seen the Sun and Moon "with his own eyes" during the initiation, a particular novice would then return from the "Village of Death" after witnessing the Bwiti under its very dazzling splendour (Canalblog, 2011). In the Bwiti Disumba, the repeated representation of the candidate's death evokes the original sacrifice of the mythical wife of the "Sun Genius" who, driven from heaven, transformed on Earth into a tree (De Heusch, 2007).

Likewise, the Fang celebrates the "Sun" and "Moon" duet. Notwithstanding, they worship "Nzame-Mebeghe," the God-creator, above two other divinities, all born from Mebeghe, a supreme divinity without mother, father, or spouse. Mebeghe engendered all three deities by bursting the divine egg. The female principle of the Universe, sister of God, is referred to as "Nyingone-Mebeghe." She is the mother of humanity, goddess of both fertility and the night. At the same time, she symbolises a sinful Eve who subsequently took on the appearance of Mary, the mother of Jesus. As punishment for the incest she committed with the third divinity called "None-Mebeghe," Nyingone must carry the Earth on her head. This was the Original Sin ("Nsem"), from which Nyingone bore twins, Evus and Ekurana. Evus later became the tempter and the architect of all sins (Nsem), and the righteous Ekurana who possesses thunder made order reign. On Nzame's orders, Evus was punished with a thunderclap (Binet, 1983; Binet & Valbert, 1986; Gladstone, 1997).

4 The Iboga

Iboga, a small shrub of the family "Apocynaceae," is found in Africa's equatorial forest. Of the various species of Iboga growing in Africa's forest, "Tabernanthe Iboga" is particularly popular and often consumed. The name of this "miraculous tree", also known under the appellation of "Bois Sacré" (meaning "sacred wood"), tends to be shortened as "Iboga."

The perennial rainforest shrub has small green leaves, white flowers with pink spots, ellipsoid orange fruits with sweet flesh and globular seeds containing a cocktail of alkaloids (See Plate 1). In the central African region, Gabon's dense forest is full of it. The little shrub is at the very heart of Gabon's spiritual traditions, where it has been used and cultivated for hundreds of years. Its secrets continue to be passed down from generation to generation through the Bwiti. The Iboga grows to a height of 1.5 to 2 meters on average, although it could eventually turn into a small tree reaching 10 meters, given the right conditions (Canalblog, 2011; Chabloz, 2009; Gladstone, 1997; Griffins, 2016; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

The plant has psychoactive properties attributed to the cocktail of alkaloids it contains (e.g., Ibogaine, Ibogaline, Tabernanthine, etc.), of which the "Ibogaine", notably, has been famed through heightened scientific interest. This particular alkaloid, which constitutes its main active ingredient, has psychotropic and hallucinogenic properties. It can be found in high concentration in all parts of the plant, except for the flesh and seeds of the fruits. Ibogaine is contained in the highest concentration in the bark of the yellow-coloured, twisted-shaped, and intensely bitter Iboga root, which causes an anaesthetic sensation to the palate a few minutes after chewing it (Connolly, 2014; Gladstone, 1997; Samorini, 1998).

The mysterious tree from West Africa is the centrepiece of the cult of ancestors practised by Bwitists, the foundation of the Bwiti spiritual and worship practices, the basis of visions of the next world. In the Bwiti, it constitutes a sort of visionary sacrament that "breaks open" the heads of initiates and the specific vehicle that facilitates the interaction of man with the spirits of ancestors,

Figure 1. The Miraculous Iboga

divine entities and eventually allows to reach God (Binet Valbert, 1986; Canalblog, 2011; Gladstone, 1997; Samorini, 1998). The initiation rites of the religion mostly build on absorbing sufficiently high doses of the Iboga. Fresh extracts of the shrub's rootbark are consumed in "sub-toxic" doses either in the form of thin slats, grated scraps or more rarely as a tea-like infusion of root material. The high-doses of this visionary sacrament induce complex hallucinations, spiritual death, enlightenment and knowledge of the beyond, and a deep understanding of oneself and the World. Otherwise, the rootbark of Iboga is consumed for its low-dose stimulating properties for rituals and tribal dances involving the so-called Bwitist night masses. Thereby, it would produce an increase in sensorial perception and wakefulness; allows resistance to hunger and fatigue; activates circulation, respiration, secretions and diuresis, altogether, among other changes that are imperceptible to visible awareness. When consumed in excessive quantities, though, the Ibogaine in the "Sacred Wood" may turn deadly, causing bulbar dysfunctions and respiratory arrests (Binet, 1983; Binet & Valbert, 1986; Bonhomme, 2018; Canalblog, 2011; Chabloz, 2009; Connolly, 2014; Gladstone, 1997; De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Nyongo Ndoua, & Vaghar, 2018).

The Iboga has supplanted all other hallucinogenic plant products everywhere in Gabon, becoming an integral part of the country's religious tradition. In the so-called "religion of Iboga," the shrub is chiefly seen as a tree of knowledge from God, capable of forcing the frontier to the "village of Ancestors" who are essentially responsible for liaising between man and God. The plant then provides visual, tactile and auditory evidence of the afterlife. Yet another of its acclaimed virtues is that it teaches tolerance about the fundamental plurality and variety of human modes of existence (Binet Valbert, 1986; Canalblog, 2011; Parry, 2014). Shortly after commencing the long process of Iboga ingestion, about 30-60 minutes after the first dose, the psychic effects occur and progressively intensify. The heartbeat of the novice slows down as his body's temperature decreases, starting from the limbs. The Iboga progressively takes the novice into several hours of a modified state of consciousness, leading to a "psychedelic trip" characterised by multisensory (i.e., visual, sound and tactile) hallucinations, true moments of "revelation", and "illuminations" (Samorini, 1998).

The journey to the other side of earthly things, leading to the world of spirits, implies the preeminent and illuminating passage via one's own present, past and future. It is responsible for instilling a deep awareness of one's own human being. Many want to visit the land of their ancestors to seek remedies to the ailments of the body or soul and solutions to daily life problems (Binet & Valbert, 1986; Canalblog, 2011; Samorini, 1998).

The realm of the Pygmies had empirical access to the Bwiti via the mastication of Iboga root slats and sticks, of which the effects are generally felt to varying degrees. By chewing a slat of the size of the surface of a finger, these hunters could better apprehend and sense the forest environment, for instance (Laval-Jeantet, 2004). For their neighbours, though, be it Mitsogo or Fang, the Iboga consumed by the assembly of initiates is to be prepared beforehand using freshly dug Iboga roots. First, the roots are cleaned, cut into manageable pieces, and then the skin is removed. After that, the bark of the root is scraped off. The resulting yellowish/whitish pulp is collected and put in a container.

All fragments of roots are minced and made into dust. The final powder can either be eaten directly, diluted in water to drink, or dried and preserved. When mixed with other plants, the effects of Iboga can be decupled (Canalblog, 2011; Samorini, 1998). The "Ibogaine" found in the rootbark of Iboga is just one extract of the complex compound of alkaloids contained in the plant. More than twenty others have been distinguished so far. Jointly, they have exceptional properties, although they are yet to deliver their singular mysteries (Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018).

The way of giving the "first sacrament" during the initiation night is highly ritualised. The novice is kept in a particular position, which cannot be modified for the whole time of the Iboga ingestion. For a handful of chapels, (s)he may be sited on a stool with round shoulders, forearms rested on his legs, hands hanging down, and eyes kept fixed on a point on the ground. The "standard" position, though, places the novice on the ground, on which he sits directly, with stretched legs, the back kept in the vertical position, forearms and hands rested on the tighs, staring at a point or an object placed before her/him. When taking the Iboga, one is only permitted to turn one's head upwards at fairly regular intervals, open one's mouth to let the initiator introduce a dose of Iboga, close one's mouth, swallow the Iboga, and move one's head back to the original position (Samorini, 1998).

The novice is fed the Iboga until the moment (s)he becomes unconscious, corresponding to a "leaving the body," a typical OBE (Out of Body Experience) which marks the beginning of a mystical journey. The "great journey" occurs as the novice undergoes the implied NDE (Near Death Experiences). Soon after its commencement, the novice's body is laid on the ground, onto a mat. The team of ancient members must watch over the unconscious body of the novice for the whole duration of the journey. They must ensure it stays in the suitable position, moving it as it stiffens, bending the joints of the limbs and making the fingers, hands, wrists and neck's articulations creak. From time to time, during the day, the body may also be taken outside and left under the sun to avoid excessive cooling (Samorini, 1998).

By itself, the Iboga is seen as a fully-fledged miraculous entity with a will of its own; a therapeutic object with spiritual teleportation virtues; an infuser of knowledge capable of digging both "the collective and individual memory of mankind" and confronting man to the very foundations of humanity and the Universe. It gives access to its own Universe and projects towards the invisible world, shaping man to comprehend the universal meaning and foundations of the things of this world. The rebirth of the aspiring initiate call for the traumatic awareness of his (her) past life, mistakes and misdeeds. The Iboga is thus a vehicle to this rebirth from which a given recipient grows in wisdom, leading the particular initiate to behave better in the future (Chabloz, 2009; Griffins, 2016; Laval-Jeantet, 2004).

The Iboga is believed to perform more in-depth therapeutic work than competing hallucinogenic plant products and even the so-called "ayahuasca." It goes beyond the superficial subconscious, reaching the very core of the initiate, "dissecting" him (her) "cell by cell", thereby making him (her) visualise up to the contents of his (her) own DNA (Chabloz, 2009; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004). The bitter taste of rootbark has won the shrub the appellation of "God's gall" (Samorini, 1998). In the Bwiti, the primitivism attributed to Africa's land is easily transposed to the Iboga, the visions derived from it, and that of "man". The founding precepts of the religion exult the kinship among all human beings: the indigenous are regarded as "brothers" among themselves and as ancestors to Westerners (Chabloz, 2009).

The Iboga must be carefully measured, and its ingestion supervised, given its dangerousness for the candidate's life (De Heusch 2007). The process of Iboga ingestion is generally interrupted just an "instant" before reaching the subjectively specific lethal dose for a particular novice. Notably, the progressive loss of sensitivity and consciousness is checked by pricking different areas of the novice's body with the needle at intervals. When the novice no longer reacts, the priest will stop the feeding process (Samorini, 1998).

5 The temple

In the village, Bwiti ceremonies are held inside a "Mbandja," the Bwiti "temple," also called "Corps de Garde" in French spoken in Gabon. Special ceremonies occur there, like the night-time initiation

phase, in which initiates seek to contact their ancestors' spirits to acquire spiritual enlightenment and understand themselves and the world. This is also a place of meditations and celebrations on feasts, funeral dances, etc. The temple may also serve as a meeting room, courthouse, or guardhouse (Bonhomme, 2018; Connolly, 2014; Gladstone, 1997). At first sight, Bwiti temples present a standardised architecture, symbolising the human body, as explained later on. They are built as a large open-plan room: a vast rectangular hut usually sheltered by a canopy, with a wide-opened front, yet closed in the back, with sidewalls that are either wholly or partially closed, and a roof covered with either ordinary matting, raphia leaves or, preferably, with leaves of sclerosperma, a sort of dwarf palm. This rectangular construction is yet another essential element of the Bwiti religion. On average, the hut measures twenty meters in length and ten meters in width. However, its dimensions may vary according to different factors: the size of a particular village, the number of followers, the reputation of the chiefs, their wealth, etc. (Binet, 1983; Bonhomme, 2018; Connolly, 2014; Gladstone, 1997). The ground of the temple is consecrated. The main altar of the sanctuary is located in the closed-back part. The musicians and those members who preside over Bwiti ceremonies commonly take place at this very location. A small carved statuette symbolising the Bwiti is also placed there. Sometimes, a closed room at the back of the hut serves as a sacristy, a place for secret meditations, accessible from the main hall through doors that directly overlook the different stands designed to accommodate the "Ngombi" harp, clergymen and the orchestra. Slightly down below, there is a place where the central fire burns (Binet, 1983; Bonhomme, 2018; Connolly, 2014; Gladstone, 1997).

Different columns support the framework of the hut, of which the central one usually presents a highly sculpted base. The central pole, an essential artefact for any place of worship, is burden with symbolism. A large number of Bwiti ceremonials are built around it. The traditional torch made of extracts from the sacred trees usually burns at its foot. Because this column usually rests on ancestors' remains (i.e., "fetishes," including a human skull, teeth and bone fragments such as tibias), it is strictly treated with respect. One cannot lean against it out of respect for the ancestors. This post represents the axis Mundi of the temple, a symbol of the protective power of the ancestors. When in a deteriorated condition and no longer used, the column is carefully laid down in one of the corners of the temple or against the sacred tree (Bonhomme, 2018; Connolly, 2014; Gladstone, 1997).

The sidewalls of the temple are often left bare. Sometimes, they may be adorned with wooden painting boards, painted with cheerful colours, or maybe hung with emblems: snake skins, trophies, musical instruments. The Fang may also represent various deities they worship (Gladstone, 1997; Samorini, 1998). According to Gladstone (1997), the decorative art of the temple is directly linked to the colourful visions that the Iboga caused. Despite its sacred character, the temple is opened to outsiders. Travellers or strangers may stop there to rest, and elders often sit there for leisure and relaxation.

The Mbandja is generally decorated with greenery by morning on the day of worship: various garlands, leaves from palms and creeping club mosses (lycopodia) or ferns of the Platycerium stemaria type roam the different walls (Gladstone, 1997).

6 The visions

In the Bwiti religion, the initiation virtually takes place in the visible and the invisible dimensions, giving rise to a complex mediumistic experience, mystical possession and visions (Laval-Jeantet, 2004). The heavenly journey caused by Iboga ingestion tends to subject the novice to a paranormal phenomenon characterised by a series of "hallucinations" and visions, as (s)he loses touch with reality and enters the point of near-death experience during the initiation. Four stages of vision are often described, which the novice must undergo during the initiation (Canalblog, 2011; Samorini, 1998).

First, from the moment of the novice's loss of consciousness, the candidate is prey to complete-field visions (360°). Vague, incoherent and disordered images, often devoid of religious significance and whose neophytes often question the authenticity, occur. The candidate sees his body set on the ground from above, observing the scene from a greater distance, farther and farther. The next stage of imagery, characterised by a series of threatening appearances, confronts the candidate with fierce animal species that separate and subsequently merge rapidly. Then, the mythical dreamlike

vision begins in the third stage, where more and more pleasant and soothing images dissipate the neophyte's doubts about the objectivity and positivity of the perceived image, slowly leading him to calmness. At a certain point, the neophyte feels "swallowed up" by a vortex of light which transports him in the blink of an eye, and to the sound of the Ngombi, into the "Village of Bwiti," village of the dead. The "hallucinations" then stop, turning into the pure "vision"— or "great vision," as Bwitists call it. According to pre-established conventions, the memory of this particular vision remains well engraved in the novice's mind for the rest of his life (Canalblog, 2011; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 1998). On the other side, amid the daydream caused by Iboga, the voices of ancestors are heard, take human forms, and ask series of questions in chorus to which the traveller is held to respond. At the same time, the candidate confronts the emotional and mental torments resulting from the present, past, and future responsible for making him understand his own human condition, spiritual essence and place in the Bwiti, all legitimised by the good of his (her) past or future acts. One of the many ancestors' voices would end up giving the candidate his "Kombo." This will become the candidate's insider name, the initiation name (s)he would be referred to in the community afterwards. The particular "Kombo" refers to an entity that accompanies the novice throughout the initiation and manifests at this ceremony stage. Hence, it becomes the new identity of the new initiate in the eyes of the entire group. Indeed, the voiced ancestors heard by the novice form part of the Bwiti that the traveller is looking for in that specific place (Canalblog, 2011; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 998).

The vision turns more and more normative as the neophyte sinks in this village without beginning or end, leading to the ultimate phase of vision. Guided by outer voices, the novice is constantly summoned to keep on going until the particular candidate finally sees the Bwiti and converses with the sought after Divinities. Following the dialogue with the ancestors, the candidate must encounter the two highest male and female spiritual entities. So, as the neophyte suddenly stands in front of these two extraordinary Beings, they would then welcome the particular candidate to the "Village of Bwiti," introducing themselves by their respective names after the neophyte has indicated, on Their request, the reason for his (her) trip (Canalblog, 2011). The temporary state of communication with Deities in the afterlife is key to resolving various psychological snags. Meeting and communicating with these Deities allows the neophytes who would undergo the initiation to relativise and withstand their fate at hand. Therefore, the visions must be lived by the only neophytes who, incidentally, must conduct the initiation, in total neutrality, without any external influence of their contents. If a cultural interpretation occurs, it is done well after the initiation, in a summary attempt of analysis that the group sometimes engages in during the festive release ceremony (i.e., edika) that follows the night of initiation (Laval-Jeantet, 2004).

After an initiation into the Bwiti, one becomes more aware of rights and wrongs. Hence, one does what is supposed to be done. A mistake is paid twice as much. Dreams and intuitions take on surprising importance. Strange occurrences become frequent, including flashes and echoes of voices. One sees signs everywhere, sleep differently, and decisions taken are punctuated by curious physical sensations, goosebumps and feeling of intense thrill," etc. (Laval-Jeantet, 2004).

7 The Nganga (or Traditional practitioners)

Depending on chapels, the "Kombo," but most often the Nganga, may officiate Bwiti ceremonies. They are eligible to give the Iboga to the other persons and, during the initiation, to the aspiring Bandzi and perform this priesthood under a very rigid hierarchical framework. Of these Bwiti priests, the religion institutes those designated as "shamans" by Westerners, notably the "Nganga," as traditional (spiritual) healers/practitioners/therapists, diviners, soothsayers, and holders of the "Mysteries of Iboga" referring to a knowledge somewhat unknown to the simple Bandzi. As noted, though, in certain chapels, this knowledge may be vested in the "Kombo" (Bonhomme et al., 2012; Connolly, 2014; Samorini, 1998).

The knowledge related to the "Mysteries of Iboga" is conveyed to Bwitist priests through long apprenticeships ending with higher-level initiation moments. The apprentice-priest thus learns the mythological, liturgical and theological contents of the Bwiti religion, among other things (Samorini, 1998). With the rise of the Bwiti Disumba and its branching out into Misoko, the Bwiti afforded

further room for specialisation to pre-existing Nganga. In addition to healing, they became eligible to manage fortune and misfortune, creating new corporations of healers more prone to dealing with witchcraft (Bonhomme et al., 2012; De Heusch, 2007). Moreover, given the therapeutic turn of "new-age" Bwiti cults, a part of the apprenticeship also focuses on studying the human body, the reactions caused by Iboga, and the appropriate interventions for each case. Because of the dangerousness of Iboga, including the complexity of the initiation itself, Bwiti priests must be prepared to handle any undesired reaction, "bad rip," or physiological obstacles. Samorini (1998) observed that this key aspect of the so-called "mysteries of Iboga" confers a high degree of "scientificity" to the particular knowledge, well-informed by methods specific to Bwitists like the examination of the colour of urine and its frequency, of the extent of mydriasis of the eyes, of vomits through tasting them, etc.

In the collective memory of Gabonese, the Nganga or "Nganga-Misoko," as they later became in the Bwiti Misoko, possess many occult powers acquired in the course of their long quest for knowledge through the years and their successive initiatory journeys. Hence, they can fight on equal terms against sorcerers, the number one enemies of the social structure (Canalblog, 2011; Connolly, 2014; De Heusch, 2007). Like everywhere in Africa, the mythical sorcerer/anti-sorcerer duo has always dominated the religious scene of Gabon. Consequently, the theme of witchcraft is also omnipresent in Bwiti cults, such that the religion now embodies a form of permanent struggle against it. The Nganga are seen as anti-sorcerers, guardians of traditions par excellence, given their extensive knowledge about the changing states of consciousness caused by Iboga, the mysteries of healing with plant products, hexes and spells (Chabloz, 2009; De Heusch, 2007). This very knowledge of Africa's primitive healing practices and rites, including the Nganga's exploits as soothsayers-witch-healers, their capacity in creating and coping with the link between the visible and invisible world to consult the dead, and the secrecy and obscurantism surrounding their function, spur suspicions against them. They tend to be seen as being very close to sorcerers and "holders of sorcerer powers" themselves, suggesting that they plunge into the witchcraft they ought to fight. These accusations also burden the whole Bwiti religion (Chabloz, 2009; De Heusch, 2007).

As Bwiti-priests, the Nganga are more competent in avoiding imperfect route closures between the visible and invisible or any remaining breaches and porosity afterwards. Irrespective of their mastery of the mysteries of Iboga and the therapeutic virtues of this plant, they may also administer other forest remedies. They can feel a person's illness and often prepare remedies using other forest products (Connolly, 2014; Chabloz, 2009; Laval-Jeantet, 2004). The Babongo are especially famed in Gabon as excellent Nganga-Misoko. In Central Africa, the Pygmies' knowledge of the healing properties of plants is well-known. They often specialise in Nganga healer-diviner activities, treating their neighbours, from whom they learnt all their Nganga rituals in the first place. In Gabon, people, including westerners, come from afar to meet the Babongo, seeking to "bulletproof" their body and soul against their rivals, be treated or initiated by them (Bonhomme et al., 2012).

8 Symbology of the Bwiti

Everything in the Bwiti is a symbol, from the temple's architecture, its layout, specific places outside like the Ndjmba to its embellishment with artefacts and greenery upon celebration days, the music art accompanying the ceremonies, etc. Even the bulk of animations at stake in the different rituals carry significant symbolic meaning (Binet, 1983; Canalblog, 2011; De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997; Maghoumbou, 2019).

The entire temple is conceived to the image of the human body. Its rectangular plan is deemed to depict a man stretched out on his back. Correspondingly, the small piece of ground covered by the curved canopy made of sclerosperma leaves that extends the hut's edifice represents the legs. The sanctuary accommodated at the back of the hut — where Nganga or Kombo, chief and father of a given community, holds office alongside the harp player, other orchestra members, and prominent insiders — is the head. The side doors, if any, are the arms. A wood fire burns indoors at the very position of the heart, right in front of the part reserved for the orchestra. This fire was supposedly shaped out of God's own blood as He sought to forge His creation by His divine blow: it is the heart. Generally, fire symbolises the light of knowledge and the warmth of God. The navel is often depicted

by a round basketwork or a bicycle wheel suspended from the roof, symbolising the place where all of the world's creatures are connected in very complex metaphysical ways to the divinity (Binet, 1983; De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997).

Many columns shape the structure of the temple. The pillars are often carved, engraved or painted, some of them showcasing feminine figures. Others may be shaped here and there into half-cleared cubes, of which the four faces symbolise the four directions of space or the various moral categories. The Fang also tend to represent various symbols with sacred connotations on some of these posts (e.g., cross, four-pointed star, key, etc.). Notably, the famous "central pole," the most flamboyant of all, supporting the roof's crest by the temple's entrance, receives most of the believers' attention and devotion. It is distinguishable by its boastful base stacked with assorted ornaments (e.g., mirrors, cowrie shells, etc.). Before its inauguration, like the temple, this central column is the object of various rites of protection and liberation to drive away sorcerers, the jealous and evil from its surroundings. The believers often bow deeply before it during worship sessions. When in poor condition and no longer used in the temple, it would be preserved after being replaced and sometimes erected in one corner or even left leaning against a tree of sacred character (Binet, 1983; Bonhomme, 2018).

By its way of standing erected, the "central pole" essentially symbolises the external sexual organ of the man lying on his back and embodied by the temple. It is then deemed to form "a link between the sky and the earth," further representing the vehicle par excellence through which the spirits descend on earth. The crest of the roof above it, and its rafters, are understood to be the spine. Perhaps as a depiction of the complementarity of the sexes, the pole is generally pierced, in the axis of the temple, to symbolise the female external sex organ by a hole of about 10 to 20 centimetres in diameter which is far higher than it is wide. Some observers (Binet, 1983; Bonhomme, 2018) have alternatively witnessed images of a female breast and sex from which menstrual blood flow being portrayed on this post as an embodiment of such a female figure in certain Bwitist chapels governed by the traditional religious principles from southern Gabon. Accordingly, the orifice depicting the female sexual organ represents, altogether, the door that all men go through to be begotten to the life of this world and through which they go when they die. The particular orifice equally represents an opening towards the future hoped for and a window leading to the beyond, permitting communication from one world to the next. Other orifices are sometimes featured upon the post. In the syncretic ways of the Fang, for instance, a second smaller hole above the first one often symbolises the gate to heaven through which one must pass to join God. Another one may also be pierced perpendicular to the first, by which the sorcerers allegedly pass to come into the world (Binet, 1983; Gladstone, 1997).

With the ultra-syncretic approach promoted by the Fang, the taking of Iboga became assimilated to the communion. Adam and Eve also took possession of the adorned "central pole" once exclusively dedicated to communication with the ancestors in the Disumba (De Heusch, 2007). Commonly, though, another function known to the heavily carved column is to divide the temple into different parts, left and right and front and back, to symbolise binary realities. At the forefront of the temple, the first half right-hand side is thus the male side, and the opposite is the female side, which both endure the respective influence of None and Nyingone under deeply syncretise theology of the Fang. The convention among Bwitists requires that one always enters the temple on the right side, "left foot" first, and exit on the left side. The deepest part of the temple located past the fire – i.e., where the clergy members must stand — bears a ternary symbolism. The action of God from the sky are perceptible and may be observed from there. It is also the exact place by which God's breath passes. On another pillar supposedly symbolising the location of the neck, the second most important to the Fang, Nyingone is usually represented. She is often depicted in a state of expiation for the incest (i.e., the Nsem) she committed with None under the influence of Evus. Showcased with Her hands raised to hold both the diadem and another burden disposed on Her head, representing the earth that She is doomed to lift above Her head, the knot further featured on top symbolises the bond between earthly existence and divine existence of the beyond (Gladstone, 1997).

Music and dance are just as crucial in the Bwiti as in any Black African tradition (Binet Valbert, 1986). They also contribute to the activation of the sacred trance, as the Bwitists also call it. Combined, the effects of Iboga, the lack of sleep of the candidate, the resin smoke from the traditional

torch, the movement of flames and the traditional music and dancing intervene to help transport even the assistances to a state close to hypnosis at all ceremonies, and hence near the state of sacred trance (Binet, 1983; Binet Valbert, 1986). The sacred art of the numerous musical instruments accompanies the neophyte to the "Village of Bwiti," the "Village of Death," during the initiation. Their musical art embodies the road to life and death (Canalblog, 2011; Connolly, 2014; Gladstone, 1997).

The different instruments are also symbolic. The eight-stringed harp (i.e., the Ngombi or Ngoma) is often made of the wood of a sacred tree: the "Andzem." The sacred cithara is reputed to be the host of a celestial spirit, the name of whom it symbolically carries and bears engraved on a wooden plaque thereon. This harp is considered a living being that, akin to the central pole, becomes the object of venerations. It undergoes the regular initiation as a regular person would, is often bathed and sometimes clothed. It speaks. Some hear its language at times. "Benzogho," a Pygmy woman, was supposedly sacrificed after taking the Iboga. She paid with her life for divulging the secret of the hap to men and teaching them the ways of Iboga, a knowledge acquired through an initiation that enabled her to see her deceased husband, "Bunenge," again. She is attributed the most founding foundations of the Bwiti by the Fang. To them, the instrument recalls her memory. Hence, a particular novice would undergo the initiation holding a rattle in the right hand and a fly-whisk in the other, symbolising the genital organs of "Bunenge" and "Benzogho," respectively. The cithara is believed to be issued from the Benzogho's body, which it incarnates, each of its strings being a part thereof (Binet, 1983; Gladstone, 1997).

A typical eight-strings Harp has the shape of a crescent moon recalling that of a woman. Based on the theology promoted by the Fang peoples, it embodies "the Holly Virgin, sister of God, who holds us by the hand and guide us on our way to see God." Moreover, it represents "a canoe that transports us from one world to another, from the earthly world to the sacred world materialising the beyond, from the world of the living to that of the dead," as prescribed by conventions dating from the Middle Ages. The Cithara is a veritable family organisation chart further symbolising maternal and paternal relationships. Its eight strings are split into two groups of four representing the four cardinal points and the choir from the sky (i.e., Heaven): an invitation to the unshakeable realisation of its embodiment of the mythical sister of God who conceived the world. Sometimes, Her voice is heard when the harp plays. Most often, though, it is "Benzogho," known to date as the first victim of the "Sacred Wood," who cries (Binet, 1983; De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997).

The art and mastery of the musical arc still belong to the Mitsogo to date. The instrument was introduced into the temple among the Fang to symbolise "Nzame," The God. Its wooden part then represents His spinal column. Also, the sound of the clear-toned rod, the so-called "Obaka," punctuates all events, including the initiatory birth marked by the final dance routine of the new initiate while re-entering the temple's arena. The unique sound of the Obaka symbolises the deafening din of thunder. The sound of an antelope horn announces the great moments of the cult. Also, a handbell serves to set the rhythm of prayers, notify the arrival of new participants, and govern the deposit of offerings at the foot of the second column. This bell symbolises the heartbeat of God. The audience performs the chants to the rhythm of tom-toms, and a sort of artisanal cattle bells merely rise these songs to the sky (De Heusch, 2007; Gladstone, 1997). Because the cosmic cycle of life and death fundamentally operates in all Bwiti branches, the texts of songs that narrate Bwiti rituals repeatedly evoked the three stages of the path of life, including birth, death and rebirth, although from different registers (Connolly, 2014; Mifune, 2014). The scenes of the other world integral to visions are symbolically re-enacted. The entities (i.e., man and woman) and other forms of mythical animals (e.g., snake, crocodile, gorilla or elephant) one encounters there are physically represented by masks, which the only male dancers were initially eligible to wear (Connolly, 2014). Certain initiates, indeed, hold a specific place in the temple and have costumes, ritual objects and specific roles in the image of the spiritual and mythical entity they embody (Mifune, 2014). The masks have different expressions indicating whether they refer to the physical manifestation of good or evil mythical ancestors or spirits of the forest. These masks, too, constitute a tool for establishing contact between the spiritual and earthly worlds (Connolly, 2014).

There are also traces of the personification of the Iboga plant analogous to the symbolism bestowed to Jesus through Christianity: the plant is reputed to host a "Holy Spirit" of its own. The syncretic movement from which such beliefs originated concedes to the plant a role in the creation of the world, just like that of "Christ," "the way to get to God." The Iboga, so they say, was born straight from God's (Nzambe's or Nzame's) rib bone and the body of Christ in the tomb. Many antique elements still apply in the rich interpretations of the Bwiti symbols and the universe of this religion, even in the implied wisdom vis-à-vis the "Sacred Plant" among the Fang (Agence Gabonaise de Presse, 2015; Binet & Valbert, 1986; Gladstone, 1997).

For the décor, the traditional religious beliefs in Gabon, and the Bwiti itself, maintains an inextricable link between the natural and the supernatural, advocating that powerful forces from both these elements come into play in a person's life (Connolly, 2014; Platvoet, 1993). For this reason, the Bwiti was danced initially in a natural environment, the forest. Nowadays, the ceremonies occur in a decorative sort of greenery made of stalks and leaves (Maghoumbou, 2019). Drawings, frescoes and sculptures representing spirits or divinities, and the wooden planks draped in colours may scatter the temple. As alluded to, sacred objects like the mythical Cithara may be decorated too. The Bwiti's art is very colourful. This flamboyant ecosystem has a significant role in portraying elements from the beyond, symbols for things that ultimately acquire a life of their own (Gladstone, 1997).

Colours have a homogenous symbolic meaning through the existing cults (De Heusch, 2007). The initiates cover their faces with white powder during the ceremonies to signify that they have penetrated the beyond. This is because the spirits in the next world are described as being white. The colour of the "roads" on which a particular neophyte find himself (herself) on the mystical journey to the prodigious "Village of Bwiti" can, for instance, inform the parent(s) of the initiation whether (s)he is on the right path (Gladstone, 1997). In this symbolism of colours, the white colour represents the masculine principle, also meaning life. Instead, red embodies the feminine principle and death at the same time. Black and blue are considered the marks of sorcerers, whereas the rainbow is deemed to form a bridge built between God and men. As in many African mythologies, the latter represents a godly messenger (Binet, 1983). In the Bwiti, initiates are often clothed in the white robe embellished with a red cord symbolising the path of birth and death and the multi-web umbilical cords that connect humanity, via the ancestors, to the sister of God (De Heusch, 2007).

All the actions (displacements, liturgical moves, choreographies, prayers), the different musical instruments (e.g., Ngombi or Ngoma and Mongongo), the ritual components (insiders, objects, ritual spaces, etc.) participate in the narration of the Bwiti universe (Mifune, 2014). The objects, artworks and atmosphere of Bwiti are all symbolic yet subject to varied interpretations. The religion, as a whole, evokes both with insistence and under changing figures, the union of the two sexes in the sexual act, the notions of life and death, and the opposition between beneficial ancestors and evil sorcerers. It mainly acknowledges their essential character and importance in the existence of humans. De Heusch (2007) noted that the very same themes, given in complementary oppositions, virtually represent those that tend to be visualised while on the mystical journey caused by the Iboga.

9 Evolution of Bwiti

The Bwiti is in continuous evolution and fragmentation. Despite timid attempts of formal or written transmission of the Bwitist knowledge, the "Mysteries of Iboga" is still mostly held among Bwitists and transmitted orally. Akin to the large majority of African traditional religions, the "authentic" source of information about the Bwiti remains embedded mainly in oral traditions found in myths, rituals, folktales, proverbs, etc., and other sources, including archaeological findings, arts of paintings, sculptures, music, and dance (Aderibigbe, 2015; Platvoet, 1993; Samorini, 1998). This religious curse is discernible all over Africa, weighting on the cultural heritage of all Africans. The transfer of the most profound secret about the actual "Religion of Iboga" to the only Bwitist priests, yet again, continues to occur through pieces of training reminiscent of some forms of sectarian catechisms. The religion then suffers from the worldview bias somewhat maintained by its inaccuracy, diversity and vagueness. The curse is all the more present, provided the absence of organised and institutionalised systems and sacred scriptures/books or documents clearly defining guidelines that support the related

African belief notions. This unique feature of African religions also contributes to Africa's cultural heritage's embellishment, even though many of its elements have been lost along the way. As Africans and Gabonese, particularly, increasingly form some religiously conscious communities, many become devotees of the traditional religion or followers of the "converting religions" – the main two being Christianity and Islam (Aderibigbe, 2015; Platvoet, 1993; Samorini, 1998). The evolving context of Gabon's modern-day Bwiti, as recently described by the Gabonese press, has by far stirred remarkable actions around a local push towards the acceptance of the importance and role credited to women in the religion, among other matters poised to trigger the restorations of the work of God's creation (Agence Gabonaise de Presse, 2015). Over the recent decades, a concurrent rise in religious tourism around the Bwiti has attracted profound alterations of Bwiti practices incentivised by the "New age" Bwiti, which essentially strives to meet the specific needs of ritual authenticity of Westerners. Gabonese are fast westernising at the same time, losing a substantial part of their traditional knowledge. Some of them even become opposed to their traditional initiatory rites, including the Bwiti. Thus, the opening of certain secret rites of the Bwiti to Westerners may secure the survival of this tradition. Reasonably enough, though, the purely therapeutic use which Westerners have made of Iboga outside its original religious context has somewhat benefited an increased awareness towards the Bwitit beyond both Gabonese and African borders (Chabloz, 2009).

A new Bwitist ideal of the third millennium articulates the mission of both Iboga and Bwiti around the opening up of the religion to the world. The revelations of Iboga are believed to hold the key to restoring the respectability of women, blacks, and the entire human species to their original state, as God created them. In this logic, women are urged to oversee the Bwiti religion because men have not been up to the task (Agence Gabonaise de Presse, 2015). Besides Babongo pygmies, the Bwiti religion places women at the origin-point of the ritual and its power. This double mythical origin has consistently been enacted through their actual participation in rites that are traced to the primitive Bwiti Disumba rites. Notwithstanding, their presence erstwhile remained confined to subaltern roles and subordinate to the mythical representations controlled by cult leaders. For instance, the Babongo took part in Bwiti Disumba ceremonies as a mere representation of the "Pygmy" at the cult's origin. In the same fashion, women were showcased in ritual sequences just as pure embodiments of a "mythical woman." Both Babongo and women were represented in rituals that respectively linked them to neighbouring populations and men; from the perspective of male elders. Sometimes, initiates in disguises could even replace them. Neither women nor the Babongo had any scope for innovation (Bonhomme et al., 2012).

On a different note, blacks and Africans are urged to rely on the "Holy Spirit of Iboga" to reclaim, reshape and develop their tradition, from which they will stand straight again according to God's will. More generally, the reinstatement of the lost respect and devotion towards the sacred character of things is deemed central to the rebirth and the new vision of Africa and the rest of the world. This means freeing humankind from the deculturation, blockages, and other forms of spiritual imprisonment caused by the energetic fight against the Bwiti and the resembling African cults, as well as their derogatory classification as "secret societies." In this Bwitist vision, the whole of humanity must contribute to "bring God back to One" through concrete daily actions. A collective effort must thus be consented towards eradicating evil, freeing the planet from the jails of the great Purgatory of Hell, and ultimately repairing the Clock of God supposedly disarticulated since the spike and proliferation of sinful behaviours, encompassing selfishness and jealousy. The central role of the Iboga in God's creation and subsequently in its rehabilitation obligates humans to pray, manoeuvre and sacrifice themselves such as not to irritate the "Holy Spirit of Iboga," feared as merciless in the sense that it could kill the body, mind and soul (Agence Gabonaise de Presse, 2015).

Judging by the ever-increasing tourism around the Bwiti, the religion and its defining initiatory process no longer exclude Westerners. As alluded to, the cult's survival is for Bwitists a major stake in the development of the new healing tourism forming around the Bwiti in the past few decades (Laval-Jeantet, 2004). People from around the world, all social strata and ages, are welcome to undertake their Bwiti initiation in Gabon. Nganga from the Babongo community are especially in demand. Considered to be closer to the original states of humankind or as the "first people" to ever

exist, the Babongo are seen as the "true" holders of knowledge related to Iboga and the practitioners of a more authentic form of Bwiti. Some Babongo villages have specialised in a proper trade in the Bwiti Misoko, evenly developing their trade in the religion of healing around new technologies (i.e. phones and sometimes internet) that enables them to get in touch with their potential clients directly. Westerners undertake the initiatory journey to seek "spiritual and psychological healing," satisfy their desire for historical primitivism, or curb addictions to tobacco, alcohol, hashish, drugs, etc. The search for roots and ancestors and the pursuit for "one's place in the world" constitute other common motivations, especially among people of African descent. This also contributes to the "root tourism" developing all over the continent (Bonhomme et al., 2012; Chabloz, 2009).

What is to be said about the detoxification protocols involving the multiple alkaloids of the Iboga? The West describes Iboga's ability to interrupt addiction to drugs and chemical dependence on several addictive substances (morphine, cocaine, alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, heroin, caffeine, amphetamine, desoxyephredine or methadone, or any combination of these, etc.) as drawing exclusively on the active principle of the so-called Ibogaine. Paradoxically, the related process of dependence alleviation appears subject to higher risks of dangerous overdoses (Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018). Used intelligently and under proper guidance, this mystical initiatory plant has no harmful effect on its consumers and religious adherents. Abuse in the name of commercialisation of indigenous knowledge and products has brought deadly effects on the use of Iboga in treatments, as shown by the number of deaths recorded in some healing centres. For instance, Koenig and Hilber (2015) showed that about 19 fatalities associated with the ingestion of ibogaine were reported between 1990 and 2008, of which six subjects died of acute heart failure or cardiopulmonary arrest. The total number of subjects who have used it without significant side effects during this period is unclear, though. The main caution is to adhere strictly to the set and setting of the mystical plant.

Among many constituents of Iboga, the West uses a capsule containing a synthesised concentrate of Ibogaine that hardly cause the invaluable safeguarding vomiting mechanism related to the absorption of a bowl of grated Iboga root from which the metabolism would have absorbed only part of the Ibogaine. An assortment of active alkaloids, individually in low concentrations in grated Iboga root, reduce the risk of metabolising lethal doses during initiations by Iboga. Moreover, Iboga's phenomenon of saturation vis-à-vis toxic substances has also been long known to Bwiti priests, who have always structured it in the form of initiation-related prohibitions (Laval-Jeantet, 2004).

In the face of the proven fascination that initiatory knowledge operates in the West (Laval-Jeantet, 2004), the new Bwiti, that is said of the third millennium", harnesses new technology tools (smartphones, the Internet, etc.). The modern Bwiti is a consensus Bwiti, characterised by transparency, new initiation techniques, shorter preparatory processes, the absence of certain rites (like the sacrifice of animals), no symbolic "accessories and limited to certain accessories (more necessary to the cult)," nor a mention of "stories related to witchcraft." This is a Bwiti without prohibitions or obligations. It follows neither the Disumba path nor that of the Misoko, but the road of the sacred wood (Chabloz, 2009). At this junction of the human walk, the traditional practitioners and forest people increasingly understand the need to lessen the burden of fellow human creatures by making their knowledge available to modern society through the different modes of expression that have been developed and perfected over the years. It will thus not be surprising to see Iboga and other sacred plants taking to the streets to heal and deliver humans. Responsible shamanism will create a new avenue for the sacred plants to find a place in the modern medical system as a complementary antidote to the plight of the ignorant man. The traditional healers and medicine people such as the Nganga have a significant role in these critical times to illuminate the world's darkness with the Hot fire and bright light of the Holy Spirit of Iboga.

The Nganga are increasingly required to formulate solutions and methods adapted to their new patients from the West, their motivations, and specific problems, with somewhat diverging and competing morals and philosophical views, and somehow resembling those of an increasingly westernising Gabonese urban society (Laval-Jeantet, 2004).

10 Bwiti and social life

The Bwiti's secret society, made of a cohort of notables, was dedicated to solving social problems relating to particular clans, villages, and ethnic groups (Gladstone, 1997). Basically, the Bwiti emerged as an educational institution (Maghoumbou, 2019), whereby the initiation was mainly sought for social promotion (Canalblog, 2011). The religion was organised into small local communities individually run by an "initiating father," grouping relatives and friends into some sort of family affairs. Spiritual kinship and seniority govern relations between members, including the Nganga, experienced elders, and new initiates (Bonhomme, 2018). Within particular chapels, it permitted the heads of households to reunite their families, affording them the necessary religious authority and sacred character (Gladstone, 1997).

The Bwiti is both an inducer of spiritual enlightenment and a coordinator of the social structures. It entails a major political ingredient for social order, whereby the elders shoulder the role of protecting younger people under a strict hierarchical organisational structure (Gladstone, 1997; Maghoumbou, 2019). The secret society opposed the Bandzi, supposedly guardians of the "hidden" knowledge and "secret," to both women and profanes, and further the elders to neophytes. These oppositions were noticeable in social life. The liturgical rites (i.e., chants and dances) at play in the Bwiti appear similarly rooted in the social relationships and hierarchy dictated by the cult (De Heusch, 2007). Dances follow a particular order: the younger initiate must precede the elders. The Bwiti's prescribed rules for political decency extended to the living together, defining limits, duties and rights for younger people, also coding the conduct and relations within a particular Bwitist family, a clan, vis-à-vis the ancestors and the Bwiti itself. Experienced initiates are conventionally tasked to train the young people for an extended period (i.e., six months to one year) before the initiation, providing guidance and instructions on ethical principles, the religion, and the discipline of the community (Maghoumbou, 2019).

The Bwiti is dynamic and gradually adapting to modern social life. It does not discriminate, neither is it anti-Christian (i.e. anti-religion), anti-Westernism, nor even racist. Many see the cult as a complement to other religions. Bwitists often claim to belong to alternative systems of faith. The religion's universalist tendency further blurs the distinctions between races and sexes, welcoming westerners and further moving away from the traditional Bwiti Disumba exclusion practices. The original Mitsogo's manoeuvred to reproduce male elders' domination in the village community, which has since been reversed (Binet, 1983; Bonhomme et al., 2012; Gladstone, 1997). The so-called religion of Iboga is now structured as being simultaneously individualistic, feminist and preserves the community spirit. It is simultaneously favourable to individual accomplishments and the integration of mankind. Like men, women now eat the "sacred wood" and take the spiritual journey to the other world. They no longer participate in ceremonies as controlled puppets, with roles specially intended for them, but as full-fledge initiates. A great tolerance is at play in the Bwiti's religious society. The multitude of chapels incessantly hatching and disappearing according to affinities have often occurred irrespective of tribal barriers and divisions of Gabon. The spiritual filiation created between the initiates under these chapels unites them together. This mystical bond eclipses blood ties. Even if one changes chapel or rite, one remains bound by these ties and must maintain a certain respect for one's father and the hierarchy of the previous assembly. In Gabon, the Bwiti is seen as a veritable State religion, a national cult. Thereby, its regulations often extended beyond the closed circle of a particular chapel, under the "living together" ideals of a religion held to maintain a great harmony with nature (Binet, 1983; Gladstone, 1997).

Contrasting with all the beautiful side of things primarily broadcasted as part of the promotion of Bwiti's initiation by Iboga, unwelcome lights have been shed on the religion by various authors highlighting the flipsides and many risks attributed to the related practices. Therefore, the enchanted representation of a Bwiti, supposedly symbolising "one of the gates of the salvation of humankind," is often questioned. Various incidents, accidental deaths, suicides and disappearances following the initiation plague the discourses about the Bwiti. The initiation into the Bwiti faith, indeed, is far from being without risks. The death toll credited to the misuse of Iboga has principally contributed to a ban on Iboga in many countries, including France, where it was classified as a narcotic in 2006

(Binet, 1983; Chabloz 2009; Samorini, 1998).

The absorption of Iboga shall be prohibited to people with pathologies highly inviting to tragedies: cardiac and kidney complications, stomach ulcers and psychiatric problems (Chabloz, 2009). From a religious perspective, though, the risk of initiatory deaths is, according to Bwitists, highly correlated with situations grounded in the absence of vomiting or delay thereof, adverse psychological reactions, and/or "bad trips" of which the turn of events got out of control. Such cases where the novice does not awaken and dies following an initiation are sporadic. They are mostly regarded as resulting from an incomplete confession, during which serious sins such as homicide, anthropophagy or vampirism are concealed. Such deaths tend to be understood either as punishments. Conventionally, such death was equally understood as caused by a particular novice's soul's direct will to abandon the physical body and remain in the other world where it is destined to dwell after the earthly life anyway (Samorini, 1998). According to Chabloz (2009), the controversial events dampen the reputation of Bwiti, which favour Africa's representation as both "the cradle and the tomb of humanity." At the same time, the Bwiti tends to be downgraded to the rank of "sectarian aberration." The author's narrative further presents the Iboga as not only a plant that is susceptible to salvage the West but as a "killer" too. Overall, the deadly character bestowed to the Bwiti tradition becomes twofold because certain related practices grant access to the world of the dead while also being highly susceptible to cause actual deaths.

11 Conclusion

In contemplation of the long-awaited African spiritual renaissance, we examined the Bwiti, a religious tradition from West-Central Africa, Gabon. Just as old as humanity itself, the origins of this African religious tradition has been traced back to the very roots of the first inhabitants of the Gabonese forest. We first emphasised what the term "Bwiti" entails. Further, various representations for its much-celebrated richness, uniqueness and authenticity were addressed. Thus, we focused on the hallucinogenic plant whose root's scraps serves as a type of holy communion in the religion, the unique features of Bwiti temples, the nature of the initiatory vision, the intriguing personage of Bwitist priest, the symbolisms of Bwiti, its social implications of yesteryears and its evolution prospects.

The Bwiti is understood by many as the primitive religious practices of Africa and humanity, originally practised in southern Gabon by forest-dwelling people of the Babongo group centuries before Christ. This religion has thrived and increasingly transmuted out of millennial interethnic exchanges in this part of the continent. The religion has overcome the ethnic barriers known to Gabon and extending beyond the country's borders, reaching neighbouring countries. In opposition to the fundamental Disumba rite, mother of all Bwiti rites, modern Bwiti is increasingly syncretistic, incorporating animist credence, worship of ancestors and Christianity into the relevant belief system. The cult of ancestors associated with the pure African metaphysics of the "Bwete Dissumba," as initially called, involved an exclusively male rite, contrasting with the gender binary allowed in today's cults.

The Bwiti religion predominantly draws on its initiation rite, a baptism founded on the consumption of massive doses of grated Iboga root, the plant with hallucinogenic virtues on which this African religion is founded. The mysterious tree from Gabon, which Bwitists praise, contains a cocktail of alkaloids. In high doses, its root bark induces religious visions, given its hallucinogenic properties. Alternatively, it may be used for its low-dose stimulating properties, geared towards the specific needs of regular Bwitist night masses. The Iboga has spiritual teleportation and therapeutic virtues. It is conducive to self-discovery. The action of the Iboga can attain the very core of a particular initiate, "dissecting" him (her) "cell by cell", thereby making him (her) visualise up to the contents of his (her) own DNA.

Generally, the Bwiti ceremonies tend to be regulated by a meticulous liturgy, alternating public and private (i.e., secret) sequences, and rituals within a natural ecosystem and those within a rural/urban setting that generally take place in a temple. The initiation is particularly further structured into daytime and night-time phases. The Bwiti temple is thus the place for night sessions par excellence. It is a place where the ground is consecrated. Everything inside, including the different columns that

support the framework of the hut — especially the central pole – including all drawings, frescoes, and sculptures, become burdened with symbolism and meaning. The entire temple was conceived to the image of the human body; the right side is reserved for men, the left side is for women. It is the place for night-time initiation ceremonies and other special celebrations on feasts and funeral dances.

The fundamental scenes of the human lifecycle are symbolically staged in the Bwiti rituals as some representation of the journey taken by the spirit as it enters and exits the world of the living. Death is particularly omnipresent in the scenery of Bwiti, the reason being that the related initiation rite drives those who undertake the mystical journey it induces to the realm of death. Experiencing death is thus one fundamental and intrinsic motive tolerated by a Bwiti initiation, even if this only entails a symbolic death. Among other things, the rite teaches the initiates how to die, allowing them to see death, overcome their fear of it, and so that they can be reborn on the spiritual level. Consistently, the initiation process stages the death and rebirth/resurrection of a neophyte in several ways and at different stages: from the first day upon the opening of the initiation ceremony up until the morning following the last night of the initiation.

Everything in the Bwiti is a symbol, from the temple's architecture, framework and layout, special places outside to the embellishments, artefacts, greenery decorations, and the music art accompanying the ceremonies. Even the bulk of animations at stake in the different ritual staging carry significant symbolic meaning, somewhat connected to what happens on the other side, in the village of death and the mythical entities and animals one encounters there.

The Bwiti has earned for itself the merit of not being jealous. Instead, it is very tolerant, accepting multi-membership and also adapting to modern living standards. People of other religious affiliations may at the same time be Bwitists. Moreover, women are now held in much higher esteem in the Bwitist communities. The evolution context of the religion is focused on the acceptance of their importance and vertical moves in the hierarchical structure of Bwiti chapels. The growing religious tourism around the Bwiti over the past recent decades manifestly incentivises the emergence of a "New age" Bwiti better adapted to western ideology. Reasonably enough, though, the purely therapeutic use which Westerners have made of Iboga outside its original religious context has somewhat benefited an increased awareness towards the Bwiti beyond both Gabonese and African borders. According to Bwitists, the Iboga and the Bwiti must open up to the world in the third millennium. Broadly, the revelations of Iboga are thought to hold the key to global salvation, destined at restoring the respectability of women, blacks, and the entire human species to their original state, as God created them.

Comparable to most African traditional religions, the Bwiti unfortunately still suffers from a lack of sacred scriptures/books or documents defining guidelines supporting the related African beliefs. Notwithstanding, the Bwitists tend to believe that adherents to their belief system become knowledgeable of what followers from "converting religions" as Catholicism derive from their Holy Books by witnessing it themselves and through Iboga. Despite all the benevolence relative to the promotion of initiation by the Iboga and, therefore, the Bwiti itself, undesirable lights shatter the reputation of religion given the many risks ascribed to related practices. Many controversial events have scattered the history and scenery of this religion to date, which galvanises the representation of the Iboga not only as a plant that is susceptible to salvage the West but as a "killer" too, whereas the Bwiti also sees its status downgraded to the rank of "sectarian aberration. Likewise, the representation of the African continent that turns out to be both "the cradle and the tomb of humanity" is further defended under these auspices. Regardless, many of the Afro-centred advocates (Chabloz, 2009; Kipsigei, 2015; Nweke, 2019) opine the ideal of a return to the primitive nature of humanity, of the rebirth of African spiritualities of yesteryears, and the harnessing of the primitive character that many seem to confer on both Iboga and Bwiti. Modern man must therefore find his way back to the repressed origins of humanity. While these origins remain well-engraved in the collective unconscious of humankind, the Bwiti can readily provide access to them through the Iboga. The underlying ideology thus puts forth the premise that anchoring Human development on the primitive characters at work in the Bwiti provide an advanced paradigm and better meaning to Mankinds survival and Global progress. The alleged animism within tends to be posited as representing a form of modernity or a modern prim-

itivism that visibly opposes the Western culture that unfortunately dissociates progress from nature and the necessity of physical and intellectual mastery of natural and supernatural mysteries.

Our humanity under mutation would most certainly benefit from a shift in religious paradigm whereby kinship would be exalted among all human beings, tolerance among religious societies prevails, and where developmental credos ideally embrace more environmentally friendly paths. Akin to all African traditional religions, the Gabonese Bwiti strives not to impede sustainable development, promoting a faith that ought to address human beings' ultimate concerns also permeate and oversee all aspects of human life: vital, social, cultural, personal and interpersonal as well as religious (Kipsigei, 2015). Above everything, the Bwiti faith prescribes that humans form an indivisible whole with the nature surrounding them. Everything in the forest is presented as having vital importance, ranging from the ant to the most ferocious animal. This religion could contribute to nurturing human conscience such that the collective human actions be in respect to all-natural things and the common good. The people of Africa, mainly Gabon, must first stop obscuring the ancestral traditions. This is the only way to restore Africa's lost autochthonous religiousness and respect for primitive religion in the eyes of the world. As far as the Bwiti is concerned, the theological contradictions between the different chapels that proliferate as religion evolves have always presented a significant danger to its legitimacy and perpetuation. Yet, these contradictions are not irremediable (Binet, 1983). Maybe it is time to reduce the paradoxes that accompany the proliferation of individual chapels and reduce the apparent dangers thereof through the institutionalisation of the religion, with a formal oversight maintained upon the accession to the title of "master initiator", for example. To close, the revival of African Traditional Religions, their institutionalisation and perhaps the standardisation of related ritual practices can have a crucial role in the liberation of African societies geared towards the continent's renaissance. Religion has been often instrumentalised towards development around the globe, shaping and influencing societies in fundamental ways while contributing to moral, socio-political and economic transformation. On the continent, the traditional religions remain bearers of crucial elements of "Africanness" and could be harnessed towards achieving authentic faith-based sustainable development in Africa relying on African values. The Bwiti calls to realise that porous fence somehow separates the earthly world and the beyond, which it may be instrumented to breach while harnessing the power of Iboga. The Bwiti conceives the living world, that of the dead, and nature as forming an interlocking whole. Hence, it calls for the respect of the powers of nature and spirits, conceding their essential character and importance in the existence of humans. Solutions to earthly problems can be found on the other side, in the realm of our forefathers and ancestors where the iboga leads. The religion offers the realisation of a Western utopia: the empirical verification of death by a particular Bandzi who visits the dead during initiation. Accordingly, the Bandzi is afforded a tangible experience of faith mostly limited to the imagery of an ideology. The millennial Bwiti tradition may provide a valid alternative or complement to the current Western code of beliefs.

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Audrey Nguema Bekale is a finance expert and holds a PhD from Wits Business School, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. His scientific concerns have been on Africa's emancipation through up to date knowledge backed by sound research. Therefore, his research focuses on economic transformation in Africa harnessing derivatives markets, the dynamization of capital markets and related development push for continental integration. He has authored very impactful articles and working papers. He has consulting experience in finance and investment risk in African markets and how to mitigate and hedge them. Through AREF Consult, he has offered significant input into national and international risk management, regulation of financial institutions and efficient and equitable utilization of Africa's vast wealth concentration.

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Notes

1. According to Nweke (2019) the foremost reasons for this re-emergence of African spiritualities are multiform, ranging from Afrocentrism to anti-religious tendencies to popular religions among both Africans, from racial animosity to politico-economic ideologies.

2. e.g., Christianity, Islam, and, in recent years, Judaism and Asian-derived religions like Buddhism.

3. Bonhomme et al. (2012) stressed that the Babongo may be initiated but are rarely initiators into the Bwiti Disumba. The Bwiti Misoko is more detached from local social organisation associated with its preceding Disumba branch and therefore presented the Babongo with an opportunity to emancipate themselves from their neighbours' ritual supervision, as it made it easier for them to hold important positions under this form of the cult

4. Other branches include the"Bwiti Ndéa Kanga" practised among Southern Gabon ethnic groups, including by the Mitsogo and its alternative and strongly syncretic "Bwiti Ndéa Narizanga" of the Fang in the northernmost region of the country; "Ndjobi" (i.e., also Bwiti of "witch hunt" or "Bwiti of spiritual hardships"); "Bwiti Akowa" (or "Nkondjô" — a simple dance of rejoicing developed by Akoa Pygmies, for which there was no use for Iboga, no religious visions or transmission of initiatory knowledge), etc. (Bonhomme et al., 2012; De Heusch, 2007; Gaulme, 1979; Gladstone, 1997; Laval-Jeantet, 2004; Samorini, 1998; Świderski, 1965).

5. Whereas the "Bwiti Disumba" is viewed as the trunk of the Bwiti religion, the earliest form of "Bwiti Misoko" among the Mistogo was embodied by a rite called "Myobe." This new Bwiti emerged as a very prominent side-branches of the former which firmly established itself, first, among the populations of the southern half of Gabon, then extended into the rest of the country to reach even the most urban centers, generating, in this process, various sub-branches, including the "Bwiti Misoko Ngonde," which specialised in divination and contributed to more spectacular ceremonial styles in the religion. Especially, the Bwiti Misoko Ngonde probably emerged in the first half of the 20th century, spread throughout the country since the 1980s, and displacing Myobe and Disumba ceremonies (Bonhomme, et al., 2012).

6. Though the mythical Pygmies are held to be the first Bwiti initiates, they were in fact quite often the very last links in the chain of transmission. Pygmies, unlike their neighbours, had been more interested in hunting than in witchcraft (Bonhomme et al., 2012).

7. Indeed, in many cases, the iboga ingestion during the initiation, for example, was reported to last 12 hours. Notwitstanding, this is only the beginning of the true "journey" of the initiate (Samorini, 1998).

8. The mongongo is a single string bow which is played by hitting the string with a stick while the player's oral cavity, kept near the string, acts as a sound box (Samorini, 1998). On the other hand, the ngombi consists of an eight-stringed anthropomorphic harp (Mifune, 2014). Musicians may play various musical instruments like drums and other the traditional instruments like the horn and the "obaka," a sort of sonorous rod commonly used by the Fang to symbolise the sound of the hammer on the anvil originally made by a deity they refer to as "None" (Gladstone, 1997; Samorini, 1998). Still, as Samorini (1998) noted, most of the Bwistist rites are organised based on the functional and symbolic polarity maintained between these two instruments which operate the "musical magic" that is mobilised in the Bwiti. These two musical instruments are true sensorial "keys" carrying on opposite functions; they can never be played together, either in rites either during learning to use them (they are never played in profane situations, in which iboga is not used).

9. The initiation is called "tobe si" in the liturgical Bwitist language of the Fang and means "to sit on the ground" (Samorini, 1998).

10. Only the nigh vigil(s) during which the candidate(s) are under the influence of the iboga are public. Women and profanes are invited to attend (De Heusch, 2007).

11. Bonhomme et al. (2012) claimed that this branch of the cult is rather engaged in a process of peripheralisation, whereby Bwiti becomes detached from the traditional ancestor cult and loses its political centrality to take on a therapeutic and divinatory role. The assertion and legitimation of male elders' authority which is accessory to the Bwiti Disumba is no longer really central to the cult.

12. The "Bandzi" is the young initiate; when a "Bandzi" proves to have sufficient maturity, he will be made a "Nima", and will soon be a "Nima Na Kombo". The supreme "Kombo" is the chief, the patriarch, and sometimes the priest at the highest rank inside a community, who belongs to the assembly of ancestors and sees to it within the community that the secrets are not divulged (Gladstone, 1997; Samorini, 1998).

13. Nyongo Ndoua and Vaghar (2018) clarified that "trance" is a change in the state of consciousness, which is in no way linked to being asleep nor allied to sleep and dreams. It is entirely a different physiological and psychical condition and has no more resemblance to sleep and dream than insanity has.

14. For instance, in the days preceding the initiation, the food for the novice can be chosen by the kombo and rationed in quantities which gradually become smaller, and from the day before the initiation the candidate can be put on complete fasting. In certain Bwiti factions, however, the novice must drink emetic beverages before the initiation rite, with the aim of emptying and purifying his/her stomach (Samorini, 1998). According to Gladstone (1997), eating is forbidden to throughout the initiation procedure, for the whole period during where the state of lethargy caused by iboga lasts.

15. For instance, sugar is associated with women, molluscs and acidity to her sexual organ (to which any oral approach is also excluded). Therefore, these elements become contradictory to the identity principles of male initiation: "sugar reduces the strength of the iboga and acid can destroy the protection of the "edika," the antidote that is used to manage the effect of you have inside. On the metaphysical grounds: the one who entered the Bwiti must not "spoil his new strength and existence", he/she must become aware of his position here on earth, the price of life, and the price to be paid for having seen (Laval-Jeantet, 2004).

16. According to Laval-Jeantet (2004), alcohol is very often part of the Bwiti-related bans, because the use of iboga could act as a drunken catalyst for some people such that it would only take very little alcohol for them to feel drunk. Gladstone (1997), for example, observed ritual nights among the Fang – or Ngozes — where followers preparing to take part in the worship by chewing some pieces of iboga root were distributed moderate quantity of alcohol and wine. In contrast, stricter chapels, as portrayed in Laval-Jeantet (2004), often ban alcohol consumption prior to taking iboga,

arguing that "the use of iboga after alcohol consumption would have little effect; but doing the opposite could make you go from life to death!

17. Purification is generally done with a bath in a spring with various leaves of medicinal plants, as one of the rituals that symbolise the decent, death, and effacement of the candidate (Nyongo Ndoua Vaghar, 2018). However, certain differences exist between the initiation rite for different Bwitist faction. For instance, the Ndea Narizanga, as opposed to the majority of initiation rites, may present no purifying bath associated with confession; no drinking of emetic beverages as will be further emphased subsequently; no trial involving the practice of injecting some drops of irritant liquid (ebama) into the novice eyes subsequent to the awakening; no rite of the passage with the pirogue in which the entrance of the novice's soul into the other world is accompanied by the sound of the cithara, ngombi.

18. As Nyongo Ndoua and Vaghar (2018) explained, the Bwiti Misoko is concerned with the healing of the sick, a process that also takes place in stages. The first step is a phase of purity and confession of one's faults in a river. Then comes a second step, during which the patient consumes the broken roots of the Iboga. The third step is the most important one, as it is the one where the patient falls into a trance. Finally comes the stage of healing. The principle here is no trance, no healing. The trance is merely considered to be the trigger for healing in this branch of the Bwiti. While it may be useful for psychical healing, the Bwiti, nowadays, cannot however only be considered as a panacea which cure diseases, but rather a process which allows participants to discover who they are in reality. The focus may be on the psychological quest for oneself, the rediscovery of the deep self or the forgotten body, the healing of the collective unconscious.

19. Existing reports portray initiation scenes where the candidate is taken to the river, and a miniature canoe made of a leaf, carrying a torch of lit okoumé resin, is placed on the water. Akin to the confession of faults and purifying rituals, this rite symbolises the deincarceration, although it rather represents the journey of the candidate's spirit. A stake topped by a diamond-shaped wooden structure, the female sexual organ, is planted in the middle of the current for the candidate to cross in the foetal state, against the current, and then swimming towards the rising sun, as a symbol of his birth or resurrection (Canalblog, 2011). Similarly, both iinauguration and end-of-session blessings symbolise the rising, resurrection and resurgence. The character of the candidate's "death and resurrection," "erasure and resurgence," indeed, apply to the Bwiti in general, which constantly re-enacts it during the initiation process, both before and after the apparition of visions (Nyongo Ndoua & Vaghar, 2018; Samorini, 1998).

20. "Otunga" means "dues" (Gladstone, 1997).

21. Samorini (1998) observed that, for the progressive Bwiti chapels, the tree representing the "Otunga" would generally be erected a day before the novice's awakening from the induced initiation coma. Helped by the high priest, he (she) will have to "eradicate" the Otunga upon his (her) waking up, as a symbole for the braking of the umbilical cord and the new birth. Thereafter, the tree would be planted in a place in the forest again, after having buried a small group of excretions and excrescences of the novice's body (pieces of nails, hair locks, saliva, etc.).

22. The novice must bring, at his/her expenses, a large variety of foodstuff and other objects which will be presented as offerings to the community and also used during the rite. In the Ndea Narizanga, for example, the cult objects (bisièmu) include: a white sheet, a mat, a hunt knife, two white dishes, two live chickens, a red parrot feather, a needle, a handkerchief, strong beverages and spirits (Samorini, 1998). Bonhomme (2005) allowed that a sacrificed chicken is used as part of the "edika" ritual, where its meat constitute a major ingredient in the traditional preparation of the antidote to the Iboga.

23. Gladstone (1997) clarified that the initiation ceremony itself, under such chapels, tend to be held at night, of course, either on a Wednesday or Thursday. The ceremony is announced by sounding the horn and takes place in three stages such that:
    - The Efun, that is to say, the origins, genesis, birth and beginning of God, marks the beginning of the ceremonies. The musical arc and the obaka are heard: this is the bursting of the divine egg. At midnight, at the sound of the horn, the initiates kneel, addressing "Nzame"— i.e., "God"— in their prayers, thus ending the celebration of the genesis;
    - The second stage, Mvenge or death, relates to the life and death of the individual, often re-enacted with scenes that more or less depict the passion of Christ. As the dancing and chanting reach their highest intensity, the cithara is heard and Bwiti will materialize by the appearance in the forest of a cross of straw and wood several meters high which is set ablaze and waved in all directions. It may also appear in the form of banana leaves in an oval design with two torches for the eyes and one for the mouth in the center;
    - The third stage is the beyond, or "Meyaya," during which the rites of the descent into the grave are performed before the kneeling assembly. The novice, torch at hand, then leave the temple when the moon is at its zenith and goes through the main streets of the village, taking three steps forward and two steps back. The horn sounds, announcing each move and setting the pace for this retreat in single file. After this long walk, they return to the mbandja, where the dancing will continue uninterruptedly until dawn's early light. The night-time ritual has made them pass from daylight to daylight, from the here and now to the beyond, and the night has been erased. The novice will go to sleep...

24. Contrasting Ndea Narizanga chapels, though, where the mongongo is played near the novice for a certain time, this instrument is replaced in that function by the ngombi in most Bwiti chapels, whereas either instrument respectively plays a key role in the moment of the "awakening." Generally, the regaining of consciousness by the novice in the Bwiti

is thought to be favoured by the sound of a second musical instrument, ngombi, whereas the "going out" and "coming back" of the "soul" of the novice body can normally take place through the sound of both instruments. The Bwitists affiliated to the Ndea Narizanga doctrine, however, believe that, at the very specific point where the novice's soul is completely separated from his/her body, the special musical sound of the mongongo is sufficient (and necessary) to urge it to "go out" and begin the journey to the other world, but also for the spirit's return. Accordingly, they only use the mongongo for these intents. Overall, the evident relationship between music and modified states of consciousness is clearly established in the Bwiti, not only in its symbolic aspect, but most importantly its efficacy, which is subjectively experienced by each novice (Samorini, 1998).