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# Symbols

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Woman having hair dressed while looking into bronze polished mirror. #N31102:  
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## A timely encounter: 19th c. photographs of Japan by Melissa Banta

Before the invention of photography, the written and spoken word and artistic representation passed on the traditions of Japanese culture. The opening of Japan to international trade in 1854 and the Meiji Restoration in 1868 resulted in rapid modernization and profound cultural changes in Japanese life. At this time, the West brought with it the technology of photography ironically to record the traditions that were vanishing as a result of Western influence. By the turn of the century, Japan had evolved from an insular country to an industrialized power. Its photographic record from the mid-to-late 1800s thus represents a timely encounter with a culture.

The daguerreotype process heralded the beginning of photography in 1839. Technical innovations rapidly followed, making photography a less complicated science and more accessible to both

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# The iron currencies of Southern Cameroon

JANE I. GUYER

Jane I. Guyer is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Harvard. She was born in Britain and took her undergraduate degree at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1965. Her Ph.D. (1972) in Social Anthropology is from the University of Rochester, N.Y.

The main focus of her work has been the social organization and history of material life in Africa, with particular attention to agriculture. Her dissertation was on "The Social Organization of Traditional Farming" in the Western State of Nigeria. Her subsequent field research was in Southern Cameroon, where she studied women's food farming in the hinterland of the capital city, Yaounde, from the early colonial period to the present. The present project is a new departure into another aspect of material life — exchange — in the period before colonial rule.

She has published a monograph on *Family and Farm in Southern Cameroon*, articles on colonial economic history, African agriculture, and women in African economies, and is editing a collection of case studies entitled *Feeding African Cities: Studies in Regional Social History*, International African Institute, Harvard University Press.

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The renewed concern to integrate historical understanding into social anthropology is a challenge and a problem. The uneven quantity and quality of the historical record for many of the peoples amongst whom we work, particularly in Africa, was a powerful justification for limiting analysis to synchronic or evolutionary frameworks. The development of oral historical methods and the scouring of written sources has yielded greatly enriched understanding of pre-colonial state structures, the coastal trade, and other aspects of life which were squarely in the public domain. The history of basic institutions, however, such as production, local exchange, and the family, remains largely recalcitrant to these methods, and is especially silent on quantitative dimensions of social life: marriage rates, polygyny rates, farm sizes, productivity, and exchange values as they fluctuated over time. And yet the social history of Europe shows the enormous importance of studying these shifts for any understanding of the dynamics of social change.

The urgency of the problem provokes a new look at familiar sources and methods, to see whether they might not be brought together in new ways. The museum collections and photo archives constitute an invaluable resource in this regard. The artifacts and photographs, often ex-

emplifying and depicting practises which have long since faded, can be brought together with oral historical and interview techniques with the purpose, not of using the social commentary to illuminate the object, but of using the object or image as an aid to eliciting the social commentary. During the early summer of 1984, I took a series of photographs of items in the Peabody Museum and photo archives to Southern Cameroon, to explore the topic of pre-colonial and early colonial exchange.

The central problem was to relate inter-regional trade to local exchange, including the transactions of marriage. One suspects, but has little data to demonstrate, that the "special purpose monies" described by anthropologists as regulating exchange within particular societies, interacted with the currencies which mediated the long distance exchange between regions, as described by historians. Over the long run, the local and the regional certainly inter-penetrated, since we know that local currencies changed over time as particular currency types diffused over extensive regions. Through the subject of currency systems, then, one might address, with some historical precision, a series of inter-related issues raised in the ethnographic literature: the control of value in non-centralized political systems and the power of different media of

exchange to mobilize and transfer the greatest value in pre-colonial African systems, namely rights in people. It also offers a way of working beyond an ethnic framework, to regional distribution and the shifting geographical boundaries of exchange networks for different goods. These constituted the social frontiers over that period of vast demographic and cultural change, the African Iron Age.

The present case is a small building block towards a larger picture. It describes a type of currency which was obviously a direct product of the development of iron technology, and which seems to have characterized large areas of Central Africa. Unlike imported currencies, such as cowries in West Africa and iron hoe blanks in East and Southern Africa, the iron currencies of Central Africa were locally produced in a village context. But unlike other commodity currencies, such as textiles, they demanded highly specialized expertise and a certain level of group labor. It seems likely, therefore, that different currencies tended to be produced, controlled and distributed in different ways, and that the rapid shifts in currency use which are known to have occurred, were associated with important social change. The examples of currencies which exist in museums provide absolutely crucial informa-

tion on the forms, weights, quality of material, and possible denominations in these systems, without which the ethnographic reconstruction would be impossible.

The George Schwab collection from Southern Cameroon is one of the Peabody Museum's most exhaustive collections on a single region of Africa. Schwab was a missionary in the Bassa area from 1917 to 1940. He collected a wide variety, and many examples, of commonly used tools and materials from the whole of the southern region, amongst them, a quite large and varied collection of the indigenous iron currency of the Bulu-Beti-Fang ethno-linguistic group. The existence of this currency is well known from the historical ethnography. It is usually referred to by the term *bikie*, plural of *ekie*, meaning simply metal, or more precisely, iron. It was made locally and used primarily for the payment of bridewealth. *Bikie* could also be used to purchase food, barkcloth, medical and ritual services, crafts, livestock and to pay fines to religious associations. During the German colonial period *bikie* had an accepted exchange rate against the Deutchmark.

None of the written sources, however, indicates clearly such a variety of forms as the collection shows. There is a written record of a variety of linguistic terminology for *bikie* in different dialects — *minsoe mi ngama*, *mekoy*, *mimbas*, *bikwele* — but the terms have never been unambiguously linked to differences in the objects themselves. The physical variations are quite interesting because they imply, not only differences in style, but different degrees of abstraction of the symbolic currency function from the nexus of material use, and different amounts of iron taken out of utilitarian use to perform symbolic exchange functions. All are based on the notion of a spearhead, but they differ in size and therefore amount of metal, in the care and expertise involved in their production, and in the potential of the finished article for any kind of immediate use other than exchange (Figure 1).

The kind of *bikie* most often depicted in the literature is the Ewondo/Bene bundle of roughly spear-shaped rods, of which the Schwab collection contains several

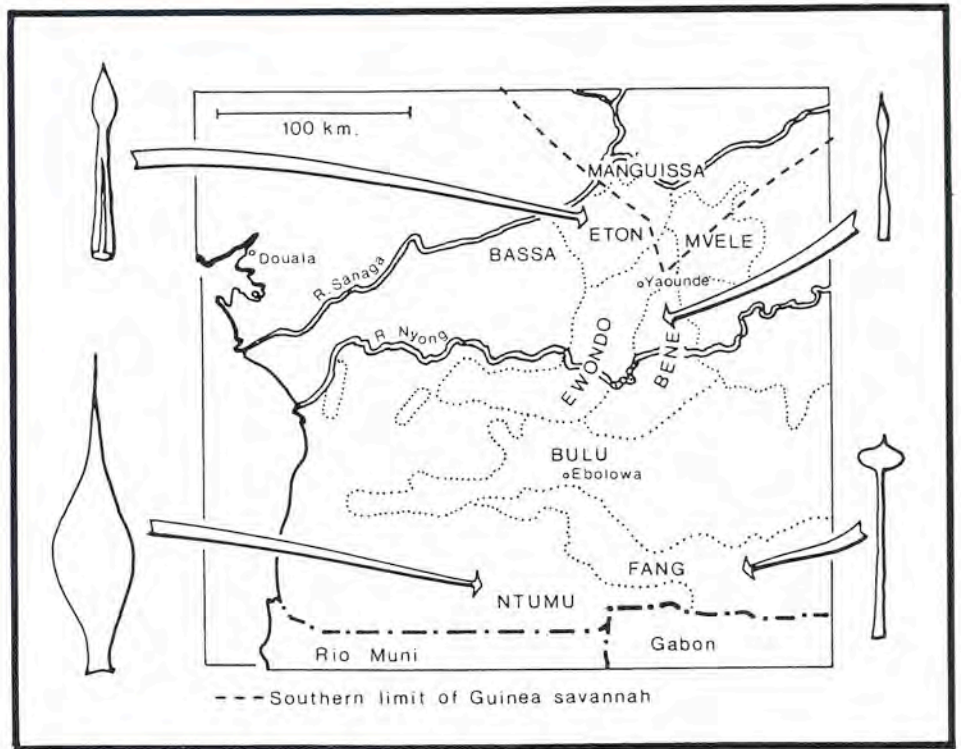


Fig. 1. Southern Cameroon: distribution of *bikie* types.

examples, in two sizes. Some of the general characteristics of the iron currency will be worked out on this kind of *bikie* (*mimbas*), simply because both the collection and the historical ethnography are more complete for this case.

The bundle on the left contains about 30 *bikie*, between 13.5 cm.

and 18.5 cm. in length, 1.7 cm. wide at the widest point, and weighs approximately 1.8 lb. (collected 1919-20). The bundle on the right contains about 50 *bikie*, between 10 cm. and 11.2 cm. in length, and 0.6 cm. in width, weighing about 0.75 lb. (Figure 2).

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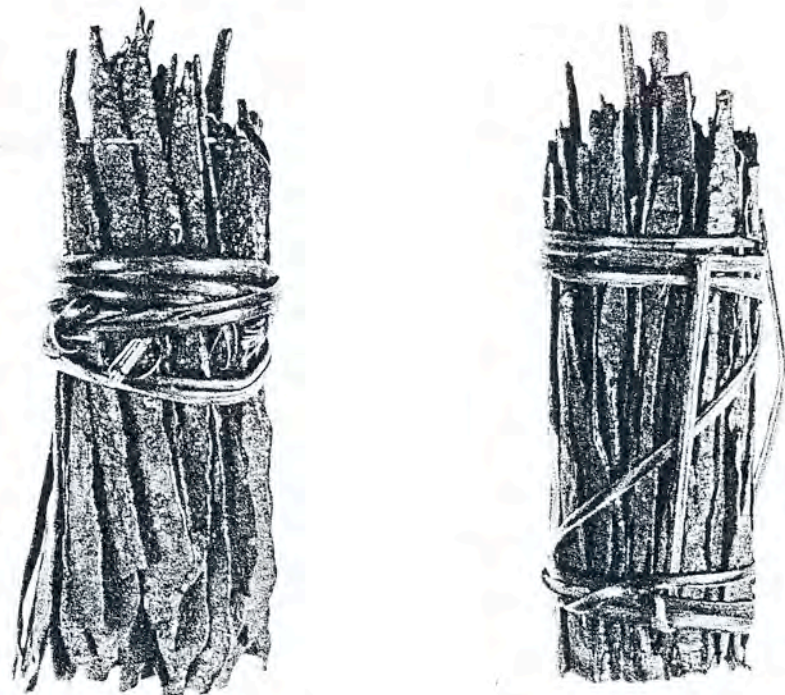


Fig. 2. Bundles of Bene *mimbas*. (20-29-50/B2166, B2167)

Another bundle, collected in 1935, contains smaller *bikie* yet, with some pieces only 7 cm. long and very thin, and is therefore considerably lighter, at 0.7 lb. for a bundle of 92. (Figure 3). These pieces are clearly not usable for anything but symbolic purposes; they are roughly shaped, unsharpened and very small.

The amounts needed to make a bridewealth payment were quite large. The literature gives many exact examples, but their interpretation remains somewhat problematic because of differences of opinion about the meaning of archaic numerical terms. The numerical system seems to have applied primarily to *bikie*, the only item in material culture which had to be counted in large quantities. The key terms were *etini* (or *letini* in Eton), meaning twenty, *ntet*, meaning one hundred, and *akuda*, whose meaning is differentially interpreted as one thousand or ten thousand. Two experts, Abbe Tsala (1956:43) and Philippe Laburthe-Tolra (1977:568), define *akuda* as ten thousand, the latter adding that *akuda* is tending to be applied more and more to one thousand, as an indigenous term for an amount otherwise known in pidgin as *toasin*. The other terms appear to be unambiguous; *ntet* has been assimilated to the modern metric system, and *etini* seems to have faded in use, in favor of *mewom mebe*, two tens. Even with the photographs of bundles of *bikie* to show to people, it is still difficult to have complete confidence that one understands informants' use of numerical terms.

In his historical ethnography of an Ewondo group, Laburthe-Tolra (1977) quotes amounts of up to 10,000 (*akuda*) as constituting a bridewealth, that is a hundred bundles of a hundred. Such a bridewealth would weigh at least 80-100 lbs. Other sources give amounts ranging from one to "many" thousands. If one compares the total weights implied by these numbers with the weight of tools from the same date and region, it is clear that the currency system was taking substantial amounts of locally produced iron out of practical use. A Bene axe from the Schwab collection, complete with a relatively light wood handle, weighs 2.4 lbs (B-2169), a machete weighs 0.9 lbs

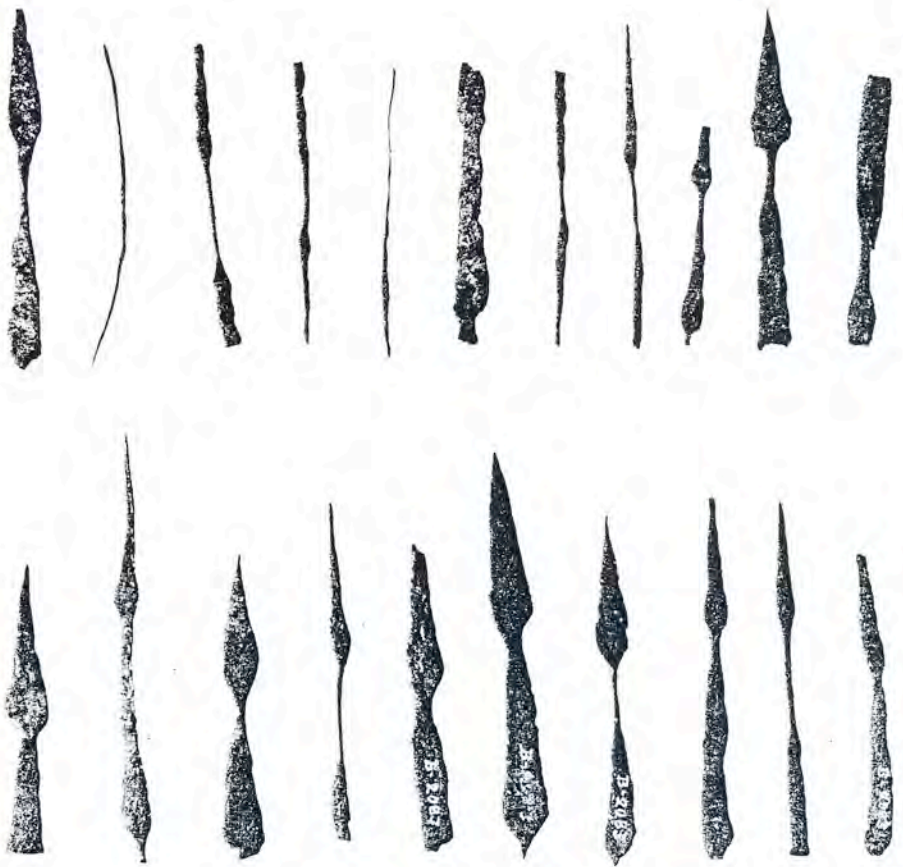


Fig. 3. Bene *mimbas*, individual specimens. (35-31-50/1270)

(18-21-50/B2088), and the largest iron item, a hammer-cum-anvil, weighs 7.2 lbs (20-29-50/B-2126). One bridewealth therefore took enough iron to produce a fairly massive inventory of tools. The actual rate at which iron was being diverted from "practical" use depends, of course, on the rate at which different iron items were used up and discarded. For the moment, it is simply worth noting that the amounts of iron in the currency system were not insignificant, and that metallurgical analysis of pieces in the museum collection suggests that the quality of iron in *bikie* was not inferior to the iron in the tools.

This observation needs elaboration and emphasis. Iron production in the Beti economic system potentially mobilized larger cooperative work groups than agriculture or hunting. Their work was not just devoted to expanded production, in the narrow sense of tools, but, in significant proportions, to expanded reproduction through the promotion of accumulative polygynous marriage. As in many African systems of marriage, the "original" form is said to be sister exchange

(or perhaps better, sibling exchange). A locally-produced currency provides the possibility for particularly enterprising, gifted or capable men to marry more wives than would be possible through sister exchange, and possibly even more than through bridewealth payment in livestock. Iron, wives and livestock are the items which elders refer to as *akuma Beti*, the true wealth of a noble and independent people.

One might comment further here, that the association found by Pierre de Maret between male symbolism and iron working in Central Africa (1980) may reflect not only literal physical resemblances between foundry and womb, bellows and male genitalia, and their extension to a general metaphoric of procreation and death, but also the social fact that a certain, perhaps quite substantial, proportion of high quality output, produced by arduous group labor under the expert supervision of a smelter, was used to create marriages in those vast regions of Central Africa in which metal currencies were used for bridewealth.

Comparable calculations of amounts and weights of iron currency are less reliable for the other sub-groups of the Bulu-Beti-Fang. Eton bridewealth took considerably less metal, but probably considerably more work by the smith. The Schwab collection contains no examples of *bikie* from this far north, so the following information is based on fieldwork. Eton *bikie* were fully formed spearheads, finely worked, with a placing for the haft, and in all respects, ready to use. *Bikie* for exchange were limited to one particular type (*iten'ge*), without barbs; this kind of spear-head was not necessarily a favorite hunting weapon because it could fall out of the wound, but it could be used for hunting. A copy of such a spearhead, made from scrap iron, measured 14 cm., of which 4.8 cm. was blade, the rest being a placing for the haft.

As in the Bene area, bridewealth was negotiable, but twenty spearheads (*letini*) constituted an adequate payment. By comparison with the Bene *bikie*, the components of labor and raw material seem inversely related.

Finally, the Ntumu spearheads collected by Schwab in 1924 fall in a category between the other two with respect to the utilitarian-symbolic continuum. They are considerably larger and heavier than either of the others, with a leaf-shaped flat blade, and no placing for a haft. They range about 18-20 cm. in length, and 2.5-3.5 cm. in width; one example is a bundle of about twenty-five pieces, weighing 0.75 lb. (26-1-50/B-4274). Another bundle, in which the spearheads are broader, (up to 5.7 cm.), contains about 70-80 pieces and weighs 6.4 lbs. (Figure 4). If a bridewealth were only ten such bundles, in other words if *akuda* meant only one thousand, this would still be 64 lbs. of metal.

Unlike the case with Eton and Ewondo spears, the fungibility of Ntumu blades is unclear. A blade of very similar shape in the Smithsonian Institution Africa collection, said to be Mangbetu, is set into a short handle and obviously used. It is slightly bigger than the Ntumu blades, 30.5 cm. by 8 cm., but it also narrows less precipitously to the point, and therefore looks considerably stronger. It is

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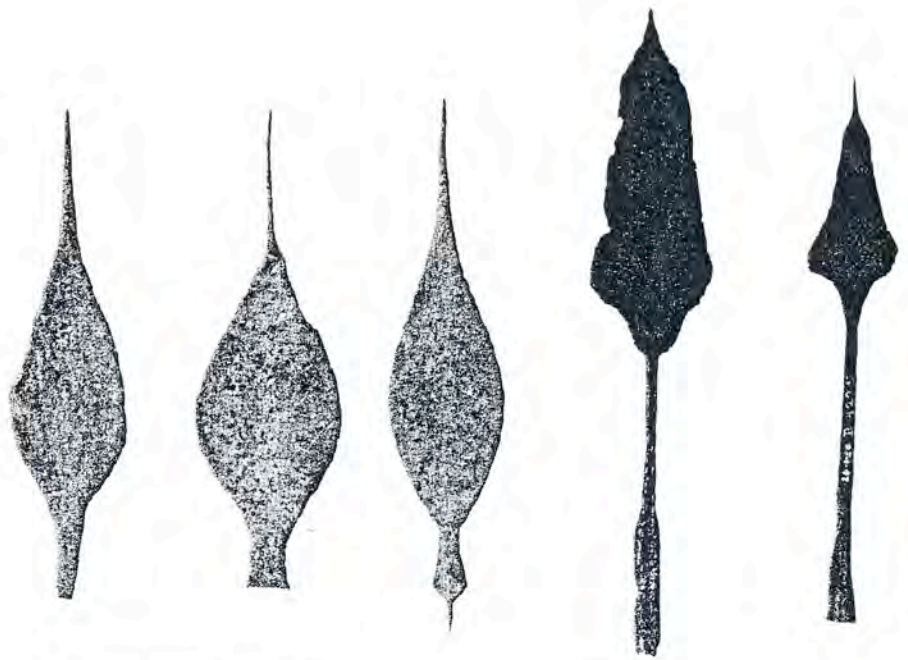


Fig. 4. Ntumu *bikie* (26-1-50/B4275).

Photo: Hillel Burger



Fig. 5. Metso, Elias of Zima, with iron gong.

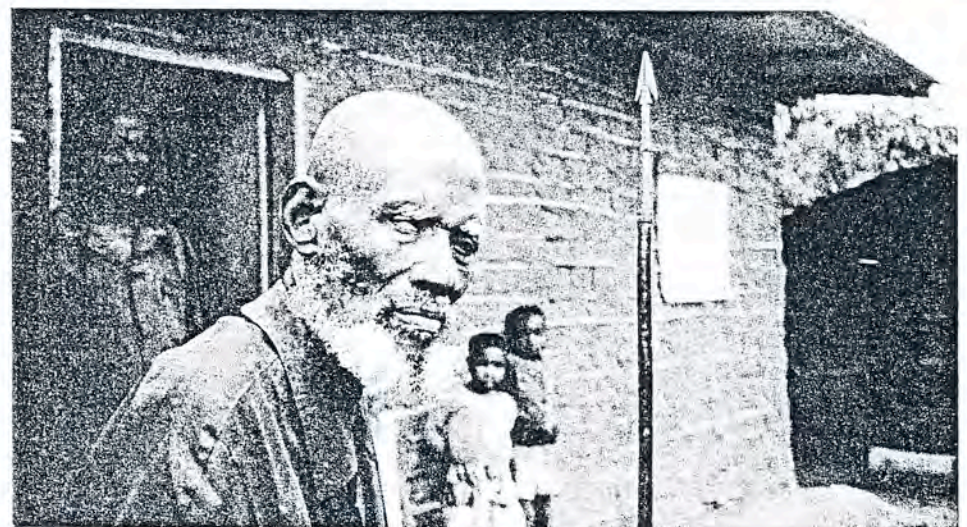


Fig. 6. Enama, Michel of Nkolkosse, with spear.

study of Buddhism, participating in a priest's regular educational course of study. In 1908 he received from the Emperor of Japan the Order of the Rising Sun with rank of commander.

Bigelow's donation to the Peabody Museum represents a fine collection of nineteenth-century Japanese images. The photographs show little signs of fading and are in excellent condition after the passage of a century of time. Many of the prints have positive identification verifying that they come from Baron von Stillfried's studio. Visitors to the archives are drawn to the collection for many reasons, inspired and intrigued perhaps by the delicate and subtle hand-coloring, beautiful landscapes, compelling portraits, record of vanished traditions, or a photographic encounter with a people sustaining their own traditional spirit as they approached Westernization.

Recognizing the collection's size, artistic value, and historical significance, the Peabody Museum is working to conserve, document, and exhibit these photographs with an accompanying catalogue. With funds from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities the Photographic Archives has already begun to preserve the collection by matting the images with new mounts and placing them in archival storage boxes. The museum is continuing to raise funds and asks for your support on behalf of this remarkable collection. Individuals interested in contributing to this project should contact Melissa Banta, Director of Photographic Archives, Peabody Museum, 11 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138 Phone: 617-495-3329.

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Guyer, continued from page 5

difficult to imagine that the Ntumu blades were anything but fragile as tools or weapons.

The Smithsonian collection also contains Fang iron currency from Gabon, which is clearly symbolic and resembles the Bene bundles in size, although the shape is broader at the tip.

The pattern of distribution shown on the map in Figure 1 suggests that currencies circulated within quite defined regions, larger than clan territories, but considerably more restricted than either the longer distance trade routes of the end of the nineteenth century or the ethno-linguistic boundaries of the Bulu-Beti-Fang group as a whole. The varying quantities of metal in the kinds of *bikie*, and the different possibilities for fungibility from use to exchange in the four regions, raises the question of variability in the social processes of production and control. These internal and external dynamics were of central concern in the fieldwork. Let me simply describe here the use of the photographs in the field, and outline some overall conclusions about the place of iron currencies in local and regional exchange.

First, a brief note on the human factor. Informants such as Metso and Enama (Figures 5 and 6) were well over seventy years old, and have the very poor eyesight characteristic of the populations in onchocerciasis-endemic areas. Use of the photographs had to be combined with verbal descriptions in some cases, simply because they could not make out the details. With this proviso, however, the photographs performed two important functions. The first was the obvious one, that they fixed the topic of conversation in unambiguous terms.

Secondly, people's responses revealed their level of expertise on the topic very quickly. For example, Metso Elias is the son of a famous blacksmith, Ngoa Asse, who died in 1973, at the age it is said, of 120. People in a village about 20 km. away spontaneously mentioned him, over ten years after his death, as the pre-eminent blacksmith in the whole area. Metso was the only expert interviewed who recognized all the types of *bikie*, and could place them geographically, down into the Ntumu area, about 150 km. away. Enama Michel by contrast, was far more knowledgeable about inter-group exchange between the Western Eton and the Bassa, than about the production of metal goods within the area. Other elders, highly knowledgeable on other aspects of culture, often knew about only one or other aspect of

the metal currency system: payments and prices for goods and services, sources of ore, and so on. Differential recognition of the items and the terms for them therefore provided some guide to differential areas of knowledge. It is worth noting that many people only one generation younger who attended the interviews said that they were hearing some of the historical accounts and even some of the terminology for the first time.

The patchiness of older people's knowledge is partly a function of their age at the time that *bikie* went into demise; this seems to have been a fairly rapid process in the immediate post-World War I period, at exactly the time at which the Schwab collection was made. But it also reflects the degree to which pre-colonial Beti expertise was specialized. This, in turn, lends circumstantial evidence to one of the findings, namely that in the late nineteenth century *bikie* mediated a whole range of local exchanges, including payment for specialist goods and services as well as bridewealth, much more than they facilitated inter-regional trade. Currency type, bridewealth marriage, the exchange of specialist services and dialect may describe fairly discrete social and economic regions, regions integrated by exchange rather than by genealogical charter or ecological circumscription.

In such local systems, access to wealth was not as tightly controlled by the elders as gerontocratic models of social organization would suggest. There were ways for other men to get a share of the iron produced at the smelt, and to earn it through personal prowess, whether in physical strength and dexterity, intellectual and oratorical gifts, or musical and artistic achievements.

The corollary is that exchange across regional boundaries was generally mediated in other ways than through currency, and therefore set up other internal dynamics. Enama described the alliance system through which the Beyembassa sub-group of the Eton more or less monopolized the growing salt trade between the northern Eton and the Bassa, who were intermediaries with the sources on the coast. Important headmen of the two groups ex-

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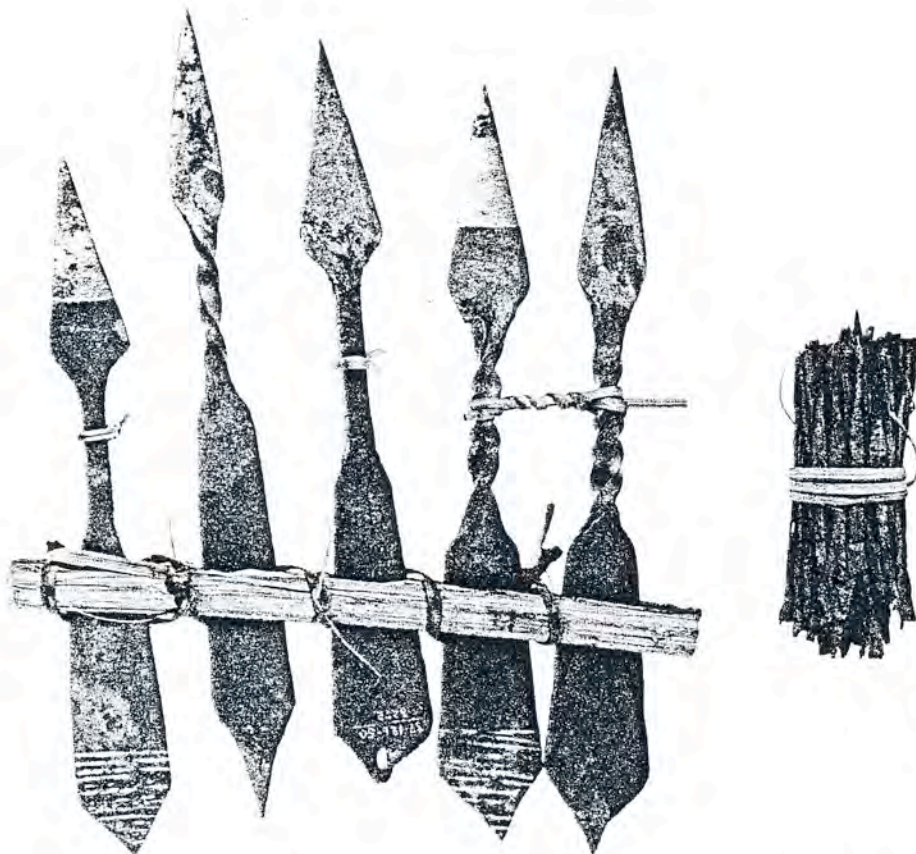


Fig. 7. "Imitation" *bikie*, with bundle of Bene *mimbas*. (37-126-50/3272; 35-31-50/1270)

changed sisters, without bridewealth, to establish ties of affinity. These relationships guaranteed equality and safe passage in trade, salt going in one direction and mainly livestock in the other. Within the Eton area the distribution of the salt was carried out through clientage and relationships of inequality, also cemented by marriage. The Beyembassa demanded bridewealth for their daughters, but took wives from clients, without payment, in return for access to salt. By virtue of the salt monopoly, wealth of all kinds could accumulate far faster than the internal exchange system, based on currency, could allow.

Marriage without bridewealth was therefore associated with the egalitarian relations of sister-exchange, and with the inequalities of monopoly control of valuable trade items. *Bikie* marriage was associated with a competitive struggle to accumulate. All three modes coexisted in the Beti exchange system, the emphasis shifting from one to the other over space and time. The material base and social

implications of this kind of change must surely depend on the kind of currency, its origin (imported, or home-produced), its fungibility, and the rate of loss from the system. Changes in currency use and in marriage are mutually implicated in Africa, and perhaps thereby constitute indicators of political shifts in the flexible, mobile and competitive social systems characteristic of the Iron Age and the Bantu Expansion.

A final note on the Schwab collection: one mysterious item collected in 1937 is a set of five huge spear-points, attached between two sticks, said to be "an imitation" of old iron money (Figure 7). They are 27 cm. long, the five together weighing 1.8 lbs., heavy, blunt, the neck between blade and haft decoratively twisted in a way totally unreminiscent of other *bikie* or other spearheads and blades. They were purchased at a fair in Yaoundé, the capital city. According to Metso, this fair was the last occasion for which native iron was smelted by the old techniques. It had been about ten years since his

father, Ngoa Asse, had last smelted iron, but the colonial chief requisitioned a special batch for the administrative exposition. Besides perhaps reflecting some personal artistic agenda of the smith, these dramatically odd *bikie* seem to indicate both past and future. They can be seen as a final flourish on an ancient technology in rapid demise. But their exaggerated size, set free from convention, also reminds one that the pre-colonial currency system was a powerful institution, whose values, pruned away from the indigenous politics of the pursuit of *akuma*, still mark many aspects of rural domestic life.

#### Acknowledgments.

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Photo: Hillel Burger

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