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Adam, Eve and Iboga

Zusammenfassung:

Adam, Eve und Iboga. In diesem Artikel beschreibt der Autor seine persönliche Erfahrung in einer religiösen *Bwiti* Gemeinschaft in Nord Gabon, wo *Tabernanthe iboga*, eine stark geistbewegende Pflanze, als Sakrament in Gebrauch ist. Er ist der Auffassung, daß *Bwiti* eine der größten zeitgenössischen Religionen ist, die auf rituellen Gebrauch von geistbewegenden Substanzen begründet sind. Er bespricht die Bedeutung dieses afrikanischen Kults im Verhältnis zum allgemeinen Untersuchungsgebiet der Halluzinogene.

Summary.

In this article, the author describes his personal experience in a *Bwiti* religious community of Northern Gabon, where *Tabernanthe iboga*, a powerful hallucinogenic plant, is used sacramentally. He believes that *Bwiti* represents one of the greatest contemporary religions based on its ritual use of hallucinogens, and discusses the importance of this African cult in relation to the general field of research in hallucinogens.

"You have heard what the Catholics tell us regarding a fruit that our first parents ate. What kind of fruit did our first parents think they ate, Adom-Obola and Eve-Biome? What type of tree was it? They are lying because they do not want to tell us the truth. For this reason God left the *iboga*, so that men would see their bodies as God had made them, as He himself has hidden inside them. Therefore brothers take the *iboga*, the *iboga* plant that God gave to Adam and Eve, Obola and Biome." (quoted in Swiderski, 1979).

Iboga, identified in this sermon as the Tree of Good and Evil of the Garden of Eden of the Catholics, is a powerful hallucinogenic plant widely distributed in Equatorial Africa (1); since the second half of the last century, the ritual use of its roots, and the hallucinatory-visionary experience following their ingestion, have been the cornerstone of a system of religious beliefs, recognized today by researchers as a true monotheistic religion: *Bwiti*. Its area of origin and development is in the forests of Northern Gabon, presently populated by the Fang, who belong to the large Bantu language family.

According to the Fang themselves, the discovery of the psychoactive properties of the plant goes back to the Pygmies, who have profound knowledge of the secrets of the equatorial forest. This knowledge was passed on to the Apindji and on to the Mitsogho, peoples who originated the first *Bwiti* thinking and practice. The common awareness of *iboga* effects amongst the Fang (which took place around 1890) is what gave rise to the *Bwiti* cult, which was the result of an adjustment to Christian beliefs. This transformation was so important that in a few decades the *Bwiti* cult has become a strong syncretic African religion. In the last twenty years, the *Bwiti* creed has crossed the national borders of Gabon. *Bwiti* temples have arisen in



Gabon. A Fang village in the equatorial forest. In the background is the *Bwiti* temple. (to the left: *Tabernanthe iboga*)

Equatorial Guinea, in Cameroon, in People's Republic of Congo and in Zaire. Some believe that the *Bwiti* religion will become (if it is not already so) one of the most important religions of Equatorial Africa; one that should reach the same level as the competing religions – Missionary Christendom and Islam (Raponda-Walker & Sillans, 1962; Swiderski, 1965 and 1990–91; Fernandez, 1982; Mary, 1983).

Since my first days in Gabon (Spring 1991), in a tiny and unknown Fang village surrounded by a great forest, I distinctly felt that I would be witnessing something very real; in contrast to meagre ethnographical remnants of the cults of renowned hallucinogens. For the first time, here in Gabon, I was able to understand the profound religious aspects of the conscious states induced by powerful hallucinogens, the absolute trust in the mystical experience and in direct contact with the divine (the *visio-beatifica*) which is a basic and indispensable factor in all ecstatic religions.

Even though the *Bwiti* religion is syncretic to Christendom, its syncretism seems to be more vital than that achieved by means of symbolic substitutions and superimpositions of the hallucinogenic cults onto Christianity in other parts of the world. The *Bwiti* syncretism is a system of symbolic, theological and ethical adjustment continually transforming and evolving, through which the following criticism against the Catholic Mission is uttered: "We are the true Christians. The Catholics have lost the way that leads you to Christ; the missionaries who offer us their insipid Host and ask us to abandon *Iboga*, do not know what they are talking about".

Due to the constant interpretation of myths from the Old and New Testament, the *Bwiti* religion can be considered as a "parallel" to Christianity, and it has its own interpretation of biblical events. For example, according to the *Bwiti*ists, the original sin was the incestuous

sexual bond between Adam and Eve, Obola and Biome, the first human twins. Abel's remains have become the ancestors' (*bieri*) first relic of the cult. The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is *iboga*, and the Universal Deluge is the *Ozambogha* – an historic event which took place at the beginning of this century, during the difficult migration of the Fang population from Cameroon to Gabon. The Christian Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is in Bwiti represented as the divine Trinity *Nzamé*, *Gningone* and *Noné*. *Noné* is the evil one – the Devil.

Nzamé and *Gningone* created the first human beings, Adam and Eve. Eve conceived her first child with *Noné*, who entered her vagina in the form of a serpent: "...She delivered three children: a White one, a Black one and a Red one. The White resembled the colour of Adam. The Black had the colour of *Noné*, the colour of the Devil. It was only after this first copulation that Adam and Eve united in flesh and brought forth twelve children, who became the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. *Noné's* children were the Monkeys... After having killed his brother, Cain departed for the forest and there he mated with a chimpanzee and from this union the Pygmies originated" (passage taken from a sermon quoted by Swiderski, 1990, vol. II: 65–66).

The differences between Bwiti and Christian theogony may appear trivial to Westerners who are unprepared to deal with the deductive labyrinths of religious syncretism, and all of this may seem but a superficial interpretation of misunderstood biblical myths. Yet the Bwiti mythology, through its biblical *interpretatio*, expresses principles intrinsic not only to the self but also to the African spirit.

Various versions have been reported of the myth regarding the discovery of *iboga* and the origin of Bwiti (called "histoire de Muma" by the Fang people), which is a "feminist" mythologem cherished by all Bwiti sects (Swiderski, 1980 and 1990–91; Fernandez, 1972 and 1982). The first human being ever to eat *iboga* was in fact a woman, *Bandzioku*, as she was told to do by the spirits of the dead, so that she could see them and communicate with them. Similarly, a woman was the first to be initiated into the Bwiti cult. *Bandzioku* was also the first woman to be sacrificed – originally, it was part of the Bwiti cult to offer a human sacrifice and to enact ritual anthropophagy during the ceremony of initiation of new converts. This was done to recall the mythical event of *Bandzioku's* human sacrifice. Today, chickens are sacrificed rather than human beings, and most of the rituals that take place during the Bwiti ceremonies involve the ritualized reenactment of the original mythological event.

Having been accused by the missionaries of sanctioning drug addiction and homicide for ritual cannibalism, the Bwitists had their first martyrs as the result of the persecution (which reached its peak during the years 1920–1940) against the Bwiti and other tribal cults by the missionaries with the support of the French Colonial government. Among the Fang people, the original Bwiti cult progressively abandoned an ancient ancestors' cult, the *bieri*, which worshipped the skulls of ancestors and made use of a different hallucinogenic plant, *alan* (plural *melan*) (2). Various aspects of the *bieri* cult, including human sacrifice, were at first adopted by the founders of Bwiti. It was only

after the 1948–1969 reform movement that the Bwiti religion abandoned these practices and, with the religious and ethical unification of the different sects, Bwiti became part of a social movement of nationalistic and racial unification which brought about the end of French colonialism and gave rise to the new Republic of Gabon. It was no coincidence that the first president of the Republic, Léon M'Ba, was a Bwiti initiate. Under his protection, the cult achieved strength especially against the Catholic missions, and it experienced a period of peace which continues to this day.

The Bwiti sects are numerous. Each has its own founders, its own reformers and its own temples (*abeñ*) and each has a particular degree of syncretism with Christendom. The Dissumba, one of the oldest sects and one most antagonistic toward the Missions (one of its proverbs states "Baptism and *iboga* are incompatible"), has retained most of the mythology and cultic practices of the past tribal traditions. The Ndeya Kanga sect on the other hand, also widespread in the capital city of Libreville, has embraced numerous Christian principles, and not just with regard to aesthetics.

It was in one of the Ndeya Kanga communities that I was invited to partake in a four-night-long Bwiti Easter celebration. Although I was the first white man to participate as a matter of fact they seemed rather intrigued. To these people Bwiti is a universal religion and its doors are open to any person who may wish sincerely and humbly to enter.



The author with two female initiates, after the four-night celebration of the Bwiti Easter.

They dressed me as one of them and treated me as a special guest. I ate *iboga*, danced, sang and rejoiced amongst them and with them. Whenever I accepted *iboga* offered to me, I could see that a deep sense of respect was felt towards me; and for this reason they considered me to be a strong man.

The woman participants were dressed like nuns, the officiants like cardinals or bishops. At first glance one might have thought this was an ironic parody of the Catholic mass, but as time passed, I realized that this was something else. "Il faut voir pour croire!" ("You have to see to believe!"), was a saying that was often repeated to me by the members of the various sects of the Bwiti cult. This is a parody of the saying of the missionaries: "You just have to believe".

The village is the small social nucleus around which the Fang people's life revolves; it is a microcosm of archaic spatial symbols, built in two parallel rows of 3–5 wooden huts, which are flanked by a Bwiti temple.

The temple is also a wooden hut, but of larger size and with an ample room in back, the "vestry", where musical instruments are stored. The *iboga* and other paraphernalia of the cult are kept in a small tabernacle. In the entrance to the temple's large hall, there is a pole (*akum*) symbolizing the Tree of Life or *axis mundi*, and its decoration varies from sect to sect.



Nocturnal-view of the Bwiti temple before an *iboga*-ceremony (*ngozé*).

Outside, surrounding the temple, there are numerous *iboga* plants carefully cultivated and venerated by all. The *iboga* roots are considered ripe only after the plant is four years old. A few ripe roots will be completely uprooted for use on occasions such as Christmas, Easter and during the initiation rituals. Otherwise the plants are left in the ground, and small holes are dug laterally in order to allow parts of the roots to be harvested. This allows the plant to continue its growth and therefore to produce more roots. With a precise rotation program, the village's yearly requirement may be fulfilled. In larger villages, *iboga* is cultivated in fields, usually along one side of the village.

While on a trip of a few kilometers in the Gabonese forest, I was able to see twenty Bwiti temples in as many Fang villages. My guides, mainly temple officiants, told me that in Gabon there are about

1000–2000 Bwiti temples, mainly scattered along particular pathways called the "streets of the *iboga*".

The Bwitists meet to celebrate their nocturnal rituals (*ngozé*) according to dates taken from a religious calendar similar to that of the Catholics: every Saturday night, Christmas night, Pentecost night, Ascension night, the nights of mourning; and whenever the group feels the need to reinforce and renew community relationships. "If the Catholics hold their ceremonies during the day, it is only because they venerate the sun. We hold our ceremonies during the night because we worship the moon... The night is muliebrity, the night is dark as we are" (quoted by Swiderski, 1979).

The *ngozé* are dedicated to the glorification of God and to collective spiritual rejoicing expressed through hymns and dances rich in movement and choreography. The celebrants sing, play and dance all night; some breaks are allowed for rest, refreshment, talking and even for jokes and laughter.



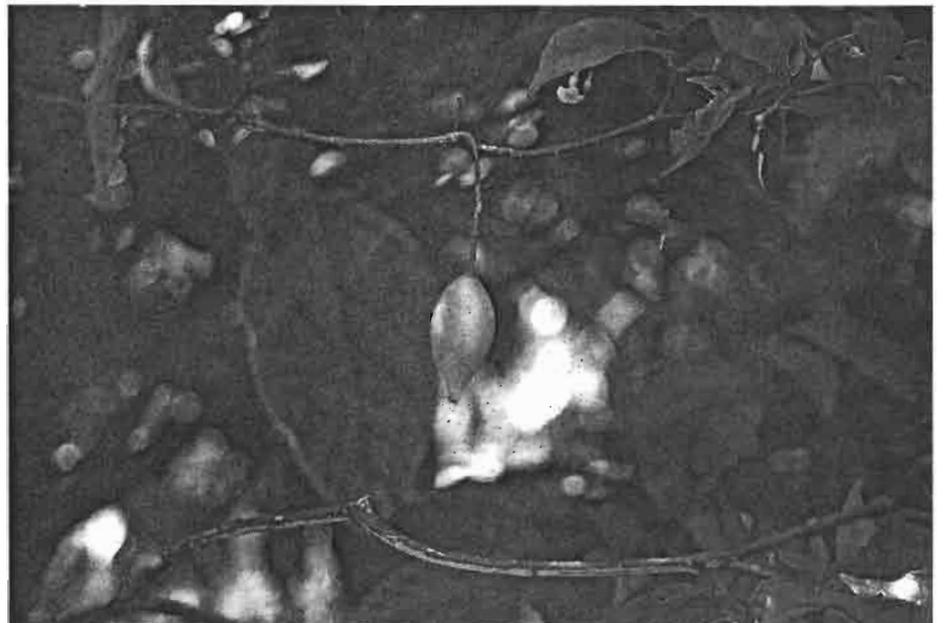
A moment of the *iboga* communion within the vestry of the temple.

In the early part of the evening, *iboga*, the sacred Host, is distributed. As the night wears on, upon approval by the officiants, *iboga* is given to whomever may wish to have more.

Like everyone else, I kneeled, placed my hands together and opened my mouth when the officiant was about to place a teaspoon of *iboga* root powder on my tongue, after making a sign of blessing before my face. The *iboga*, being the Host, must not be touched. It has a strong bitter and aromatic taste and it immediately numbs the inner part of the mouth, a sensation that fades away in a few hours. A full teaspoon is sufficient to take a "trip" that will keep a person awake for the entire night and will be accompanied by a state of euphoria with hallucinations.

On the basis of my personal, but limited, experience with hallucinogenic substance, I can say that, with *iboga*, I distinctly felt that I was dealing with a sacred plant, comparable to the "great" hallucinogens such as *péyotl* and the Andean *San Pedro*.

Sleep is not allowed during the four nights and three days of the Bwiti Easter celebration (from Wednesday evening to Sunday morning): This is a "sacrifice" which, in the strongly syncretic sect of Ndeya



*Shrub of Tabernaemontana iboga
cultivated near the temple.
The roots are used as hallucinogen.*

Kanka, is meant to recall the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, his Passion. *iboga* helps you stay awake and reduces fatigue.



Exhausted women at the end of the *ngozé*.

During the *ngozé*, the initiates relive the moment of the world's creation and that of the discovery of *iboga* by Bandzioku, the first woman initiate. The musical instruments, which are considered to be sacred, must recreate the mythical atmosphere of that time. The bow, *mongongo*, symbolizes the Word of God and his will to create; the player's mouth, used as a sound box, expresses the cosmic void in which the first Word echoed. The *obaka*, a pair of sonorous sticks that give brief and sharp sounds when stricken, reproduce the violent creaking that caused the burst of the primordial egg from which the divine trinity originated. The most melodious and penetrating instrument, however, is the sacred harp, *ngombi*; it has an anthropomorphic shape so as to recall Bandzioku and its sound represents the voice of the dead who called the woman and showed her, by means of *iboga*, how to establish contact with them. The sound box symbolizes the cave from which the dead called Bandzioku (Swiderski, 1970).

Among the officiants in each Bwiti community, there is a fixed hierarchy of different roles. The highest official and the unquestioned leader of the community is the *nima*; he is followed by the *yemba*, who always introduces and explains the rituals, the songs and the words of the Gospel. The *nganga* leads the dances and the *kombo* is the guardian of the temple and supervisor of the rituals. Finally, there are the players of musical instruments. The player of the sacred harp



Fire-dance accompanied by the sound of musical instruments.

must be especially pure, both in spirit and flesh; he is subject to special obligations and taboos and must consider himself to be "wedded" to the harp. A female leader, *yombo*, is always present in the communities, and she is responsible for the ritual behaviour of female worshippers.

Outside of the cult, these people lead a life which is similar to that of other members of the village. They have families and work to support them. In fact, it is typical of the African spirit to regard being single and without children in a negative light. According to the Bwitists, the celibacy of the missionaries is unacceptable – it can only lead to a person's insensitivity and depravity. They give the example of the missionaries who sexually molest the young black males attending catechism in their missions (among Africans, apart from those who are influenced by the life of the big cities, homosexuality does not exist and it remains inconceivable).

The Bwitists are known to be experts in the effect of *iboga*. During their nocturnal sessions, when groups of 20–50 people (inhabitants of the village, children and elderly included) take this hallucinogen, precautions are taken to protect individuals and ensure that everybody feels secure. While under the effect of *iboga*, a number of people, who have taken it in smaller quantities, have the appointed task of looking after the others and being assistance, should the need arise.

As a special guest, I was treated with extra care. Whenever I was offered food or drink, somebody tasted it before me to assure me there was no risk of poisoning (among the Fang, poisoning is the most common method of homicide). When I left the temple to go to the forest and relieve myself, discreet glances followed me. It is easy to lose oneself in the forest by night, especially for a foreigner under the effects of *iboga*.

The Bwitists know what we mean by a "bad trip". When this occurs in Bwiti (much rarer than in the Western world), it is never attributed to the drug. The individual is held responsible owing to impurity and evil thoughts.

The especial importance given to initiation was always stressed during the numerous conversations I had with the officiating priests and the rank and file initiates.

According to the Bwitists, initiation is a moment that a person should remember for the rest of his life; an "experiential example" always to be borne in mind. When it appeared that I was unable to understand their answers to any questions I asked, from theological to simply ethnographical questions, they explained to me paternally and respectfully that this was because I had not been initiated and that only through initiation might one understand and find answers to all of the different questions.

According to the Bwitists, white people have more chances to get in touch with the Divine than do blacks. Nobody doubted this, but me. I forced myself to accept this convention, but regarded it as contradictory: as an underestimation of themselves, or an unjustified over-

estimation of whites. The phrase that always ended these pretentious discussions was invariably: "Only through initiation will you clearly understand your position in this world and your gift of being white. Good and Evil are everywhere, among the white, the black and the red people, but you have better chances than we have, because you are closer to God; for this reason we must respect you".



A moment of relaxation in the vestry. Behind the priest it is possible to see the tabernacle in which the *iboga* powder is guarded.

During one of the *ngozé*, while the *iboga* effect was spectacularly dominating my mind, a young man who had become *bandzi* (initiated) a few months before, seeing my perplexity, came to me and said: "See this temple, this House of God, if you observe it carefully you will realize how much it looks like a man. The central truss that supports the roof is his spinal column; the altar is his heart; the two doors leading to the vestry are his ears; the vestry is his head; the pole at the entrance of the temple is his phallus". Maybe it was the *iboga* effect or mere auto-suggestion or..., but there, where the temple had stood, I suddenly started to perceive the man that the boy was describing to me. The temple was alive! There was a small door in the vestry that led to another room from which non-initiates and non-officiants were excluded. The boy, anticipating my curiosity, told me that the room represented the memory of the man-temple. He concluded by saying: "The House of God is in the shape of a man, it is a man. You will understand the reason for this only after you have been initiated."

In all Bwiti sects, initiation is considered to be a direct contact between man and the Divine and this is triggered by the ingestion of *iboga* root in large quantities: 50–100 times the quantity used during the ordinary collective *ngozé*. The person to be initiated must ingest it in repeated small doses within a 7–8 hour time-span.

The ingestion of the hallucinogen is preceded by a ritual offering to the forest and to its trees, and also by a confession pronounced before the presiding officiants. The confession concerns the entire past of the individual. According to the Fang people, sins of an antisocial nature are by far the worst. In the event of non-confession of sins, it is thought that the effect of *iboga* can trigger a "bad trip" with unpredictable consequences, leading to madness or – should the concealed sin be homicide – even to the death of the person being initiated.

There is only one confession and it is made once in a lifetime, during the first part of the initiation. Initiation is considered to be a unique moment in an individual's life. Further initiations are necessary for the acquisition of higher officiant's ranks.

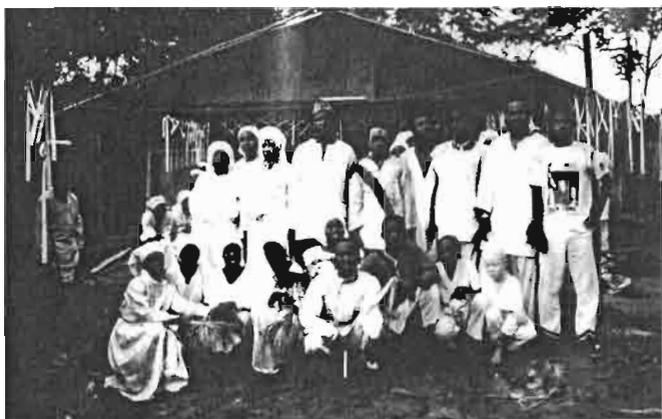
The effect of this heavy dose of *iboga* lasts three whole nights and days. During this time, the initiate remains stretched out on the ground inside the vestry of the temple and is overseen by an initiated couple, a man and a woman, considered as the "mother" and the "father" of the initiation. The person being initiated will have to respect and regard them as his/her second parents for the rest of his/her life.

I felt a shiver through my body when, led by an old Fang, I entered the vestry of a temple belonging to the Dissumba sect, during an initiation rite. Two young women were being initiated. They were sitting on the floor and looked dazed and completely inebriated. Beside them, their two pairs of "parents" were meekly singing a sweet song accompanied by the sacred harp. It was their third and last day of initiation. The following morning, they would "awaken" from the long trip; according to the Bwitists who are baptized in this manner (initiation is also called "*iboga* baptism") this trip brings you to the roots of life and to a direct dialogue with God.

Towards the end of the initiation ceremony, the initiate-to-be will have to reveal publicly the content of his visions; this is to verify whether the person "has seen". One who has seen can be considered *bandzi* in every respect.

Through initiation the individual enters into a relationship with the divinity and finally finds his place in this world. Then he is ready to go on with his renewed life, rejoicing with the other members of the community. Every time the initiated again takes the holy plant, in smaller quantities, he will recite the prayer of communion together with the other members: "Ebôga, tree of life, the tree that reveals, that drives the shadows out of our souls and which illuminates us with its holy light in order to lead us to eternal life. It is with its grace and its holy light that we give glory to God in the Higher Heavens and to He only the way of the Ebôga, our Savior" Then, in the end, individually: "I thank Ebôga for coming to me; strenghten my heart with your celestial fire, you oh Lord, Lord Eternal." (quoted in Swiderski, 1971). After this first contact with the Bwiti religion, I can say that I have finally encountered a pure hallucinogen-based religious cult, alive in this day, of great importance with regard to the relationship between man and hallucinogenic substances. This relationship shows the temporal and, simultaneously, the atemporal value of correct use of holy plants.

In spite of the extensive ethnographical and anthropological studies carried out by Stanislaw Swiderski and James W. Fernandez (see bibliography), the importance of Bwitemism hasn't been understood by western experts on hallucinogen cults. Nevertheless, Bwiti, along with the North American Indian sacramental use of *peyótl* (called Red Christ) in the Native American Church, represents one of the greatest contemporary religions based on the use of an hallucinogenic substance (3).



The Bwiti community where the author spent the Easter ceremonies.

Notes.

(1) – *Tabernanthe iboga* Baillon is a small perennial shrub belonging to the Apocynaceae family. The strong roots, extensively branched, contain indolic alkaloids, in particular ibogaine, which is considered to be the main compound responsible for the hallucinogenic effects [for a biochemical review see: Gagnault & Delourme-Houdé, 1977]. The Fang recognize two varieties of this species, based on the form of the fruit, oblong and smooth, or round and rough. The latter is considered to be stronger.

(2) – *Alchornea floribunda* Müll.-Arg. is a small tree, belonging to the Euphorbiaceae family, which can reach 12 meters in height. The parts used as an hallucinogen are the roots. The Fang consider it to be less powerful than *iboga* with effects of shorter duration. Its roots do not contain yohimbine, as many researchers state, in reference to an obsolete biochemical survey carried out by Paris & Goutarel (1958). They do contain alkaloids belonging to the alchorneine group (Khuang-Huu et al., 1972), whose pharmacological properties haven't been studied as yet.

(3) – Numerous aspects of the religious cults of Gabon deserve a more detailed analysis. Field research could reveal interesting surprises. For example, not everything is known about the ethnobotanical aspects of these cults. Besides *iboga* and *melan*, a series of plants, apparently also with psychotropic properties, are used during the rites. Surprisingly, one of these is a mushroom (called *duna* from the Fang name) and its psychoactive properties have already been hypothesized by other authors (Fernandez, 1972 and 1982). A wideranging investigation of religious texts and popular tales in this geographical area convinced me of the importance of this mushroom, which could represent a traditional hallucinogen known and used in Gabon and environs. Preliminary field research confirmed that this mushroom is still present in the Fang collective memory. After all, the relationship between man and hallucinogenic mushrooms does not seem to be new in Africa, as recent ethnomycological studies have demonstrated (Samorini, 1992).

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Tabernaemontana iboga Baill.