

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

Fang society, Fang language, Bantu language family

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

fan

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

Equatorial Guinea (3°45'N 8°47'E) Gabon (0°23'N 9°27'E)

1.4 Brief history:

The Fang compose the largest ethnic group in Gabon. They arrived sometime in the mid 19th century upon the coast from southern Cameroon. A complex migratory pattern developed from the Sanaga River region. During this migration the Fang, who were a historically warlike people, had no trouble dominating the tribes they encountered near the coast. They were especially fierce warriors and even gained a reputation for cannibalism, which they embraced as it would prevent outsiders from making unwelcome contact out of fear. At the time French trade dominated the area, and it was clear that the Fang had become drawn by the prospect of direct trade with Europeans, rather than relying on coastal middle-men. Their complex imperial history was marked by forced labor on large farms, and periods of violence.

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

This strong European presence has continued into the modern era and has established Gabon and Equatorial Guinea as two of the most stable and wealthy West African nations, with the Fang enjoying relative peace and prosperity. Recently Christian missionaries have had a profound effect on Fang social structure (see section 4)

1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

This area is tropical rainforest, and as such the equatorial climate is characterized by heavy rainfall and constant high temperature and humidity. Coastal regions are defined by tropical grasslands while extremely dense tree coverage dominates the remaining area, with soil being generally nutrient poor; marked by great animal and plant diversity.

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

1,027,900 total Fang people; with 297,000 in Equatorial Guinea; 588,000 in Gabon; 121,000 in Cameroon. The Fang are known for being a widely dispersed people, with small, sparsely populated villages existing in relative isolation in the dense rainforest.

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

Manioc was brought to equatorial Africa by Europeans during the 20th Century, and plays a crucial role in Fang diets

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

Fishing, hunting; raising livestock is difficult because of the presence of the disease-bearing tsetse fly, however the Fang have recently had success with poultry and their eggs. Introduction of tsetse resistant cattle has provided more opportunities for protein consumption.

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?

Fang have traditionally used spears, which are more efficient at hand-to-hand combat in a rainforest environment

2.4 Food storage:

Storage is almost impossible, considering the tropical climate and constant threat of flash floods. The Fang have long utilized a pattern of agriculture based on planting crops that ripened during different periods of the year, ensuring a constant source of fresh food.

2.5 Sexual division of production:

In subsistence farming villages men are responsible for hunting, livestock, while women spend majority of their time tending to crops. In urban settings many men have joined civil service and armed forces, with women relegated to administrative positions.

2.6 Land tenure:

Villages are often areas in rainforest adjacent to small clearing for agriculture. Each village is lead by a male who is the descendant of the man who founded the village, therefore land is passed down indefinitely.

2.7 Ceramics:

Not found in literature

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

Anything that belongs to the village will belong to a small community of a man and his wives/children

2.9 Food taboos:

Not found in literature

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

Not found in literature

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

Available as a societal mean only: 1.69 m

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

Data not available

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

Data not available

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

Data not available, however, men and women were expected to be married quickly after physical maturation and resulting births occurred soon after

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

Sparse data suggests men often had 2-3 wives with each wife providing anywhere from 1-5 children on average

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

Approximately 2-3 years

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

Approximate data suggests males around 17; females around 16

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

Relatively few, the most prevalent reason for divorce was the lack of a child conceived during the relationship

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

Data not available, but polygyny was cultural norm, and dominated Fang society.

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

Called nubsa, this fee was due to the wife's family at the birth of the first child resulting from the marriage. If the wife failed to produce children, she was divorced and the nubsa was not paid.

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

Sons inherit from father, with resources essentially split between eldest sons

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

Not found in literature

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

Not existent

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

Young men were expected to marry outside of their village, enforced strictly

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?

One father for children

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")

She is seen as the nourisher, and is generally respected as such during her pregnancy

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

No

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

Not found in literature

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

Males are expected to marry outside of their village, likewise females are expected to marry an outgroup male.

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

They are expected to be virgins until marriage, and have one husband.

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

Not found in literature

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

As in other polygynous societies, females primarily care for their own children, however, the wives of one male often assist each other in child rearing. Following the death of a mother, one of the other wives will often assume a primary caretaker role for her children.

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

Not found in literature

4.22 Evidence for couvades

None

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

Not applicable

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

Males maintain close relationships with their close kin, as these associations often perform religious and judicial ceremonies. These relationships are also vital during war times, as alliances of families and clans often form based upon male relationships. Females are generally removed from their immediate kin and do not have as many opportunities to maintain relationships.

4.24 Joking relationships?

Not found in literature

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations

Patrilineal descent is dominant in associations and rights, as is common in other traditionally warrior like peoples. Land is passed down to males, and references to male ancestors are especially important in daily life.

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

The rule imposed upon males to marry outside of their village is a means to prevent incest.

- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?
Not found in literature
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?
Birthing ceremonies are important for infants at which the name given by the father is celebrated. Name changes are not common in adults. It is unclear whether name changes occur for females after marriage.
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)
Outside of the village; a village was colloquially used to mean a male, his wives, and his children by those wives, who were capable of living autonomously, yet maintained very close associations with nearby villages who were often headed by male relatives
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?
Parents usually played a role in arranging who their children would marry
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:
Marriage could be used to ally one clan to another, often bringing strong political undertones into the marriage arrangement process

Warfare/homicide

- 4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:
Historically high, as the Fang were very warlike, percentages not available.
- 4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:
Ambitious Fang acquisition of territory belonging to other peoples
- 4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:
Homicide data not readily available
- 4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):
The Fang have been relatively isolated for long periods of time, during their migration to the coast, they easily dominated most neighboring societies. They share many characteristics with the Tiv people
- 4.18 Cannibalism?
Many reports during colonial era, which were embraced by some Fang people as a means to intimidate nearby rivals and discourage encroachment into their territories. Unclear if this played a role in religious ceremonies or if it was totally true, as little real evidence suggests the Fang consumed their enemies.

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

- 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:
Single villages consist of a man and his wife/wives along with the resulting children, usually between 7-10 people, with villages sometimes associating to form clans. These clans can be in close association, almost creating super-villages.
- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):
Villages stay on the same land throughout the year, simply growing different crops during different times of the year, as seasons are nonexistent in the rainforest. Males will go on hunting/fishing missions.
- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):
One male leader from each village will be part of ngil committee, which has judiciary, political, and religious authority; committees will be formed by males from many different villages. Some villages will associate to create clans. The ngil committee of the clan will have one preeminent male or clan leader. Historically, the Esangui clan has exercised extreme power. This is an association of villages descended from a common ancestor. The first president of Equatorial Guinea, Francisco Macias Nguema, was a member of this clan.
- 5.4 Post marital residence:
Husbands live with wives, children. Unclear whether they live in the same or different huts.
- 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):
Suitable land for crop growth in the rainforest is somewhat rare, therefore crop lands will be defended by villages and clans. Skirmishes between Fang seem to be relatively rare as a recent, common ancestor links most villages in close proximity.
- 5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):
Strong tendency for adult males to congregate; wives take care of their own children primarily, but the wives of one husband often work together.
- 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:
Most close relationships decided by heredity among adults. Other relationship data sparse.
- 5.8 Village and house organization:
Not available in literature
- 5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):
Young bachelors still live with father's village, but once of age, expected to marry outside of village and create new hut with bride in close proximity to father's
- 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?
Live in huts, and sleep on beds made of foliage
- 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:
Society is strongly patrilineal, with resources and power passed down among male descendants.

5.12 Trade:

Recently, the Fang have growing cocoa as a cash crop and trading asset. Much of the rainforest has been cleared to provide timber. Petroleum exports also play a large role in the economies of Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. Historically the Fang have been encouraged to grow and trade coffee, as the climate is ideal for such growth.

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

Older males possess the vast majority of power in Fang societies. Their sons answer to them in alignment with their birth order

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

Time not spent working on tools, farming, or hunting is spent on art and ceremony. While the men administer most village ceremonies, the women are in attendance for most, with the exception the meeting of the ngil committees.

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

The ngil secret committees have the special task of battling witchcraft, performing exorcisms, and investigating potential demonic possessions. These committees also play an important role in the initiation of young boys into manhood.

6.2 Stimulants:

No evidence of the use of stimulants in ceremonies

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

Weekly ceremonies celebrating birth, death, and creation; celebrate male initiation, with elaborate circumcision ceremony; evidence of female initiation ceremony not found.

6.4 Other rituals:

The Fang people often keep the bones and skulls of their ancestors because they believe that these skeletal remnants still hold power. This power is extremely influential in the daily activities of the tribe. The Fang called this practice *bieri* and usually only kept male ancestor's relics in the bark containers. To this end, the Fang spent copious amounts of energy creating reliquary figures and heads. These are carved, wooden figurines designed to sit upon chests containing ancestral relics and remains. The relics are intricate and beautiful, however, they are not viewed by the Fang as being as powerful as the remains they presided over, and as such often became objects up for sale to intrigued Europeans.

6.5 Myths (Creation):

"The Fang believe in the supreme God, *Mebere*, who is viewed as the creator of the known world. Mebere not only blew life into Earth, but also the creator of the first ancestor, *Zambe* or *Sekume*, who was fashioned from clay and whose form was first as a lizard. Mebere placed this lizard in the waters for 8 days; on the final day, the lizard gratefully emerged from the water as a man. The Fang also believe that Mebere was one god with three different aspects: Nzame, Mbere, and Nkwa. These three parts consulted with one another during the creation process and particularly in the creation of the first man. It was the Mbere and Nkwa parts of the god that suggested that there be a chief of the Earth; whereas the elephant, the monkey, and the leopard were all considered, this first creation was named Fam and was given three things from each part of his god. He received strength from Nzame, leadership from Mbere, and beauty from Nkwa. Unfortunately, Fam became arrogant and attempted to usurp the authority of his god. Mebere could not tolerate this and destroyed the Earth with the exception of Fam, who had been promised to never experience death. Mbere then desired to create a chief of the Earth that would be reflective of the god's own image and therefore created the new man known as Zambe or Sekume. This new creation became the first ancestor of the Fang. Mbere created a woman whom he called Mbongwe from a tree. Fam, now with no dominion and forced to live below the Earth, is believed to still find his way to the surface of Earth to harm the descendants of Zambe/Sekume. The Fang also believed that Zambe, the first ancestor, was the creator of the races." –Tracy Michael Lewis

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

The Fang are best known for their reliquary figurines and mask. Ritual songs called "mvet" are performed each week and enact birth, creation, and death. The singing rituals are meant to encourage "one-heartedness"

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

Women could play essentially equal roles in worshipping the ancestors, but were less likely to be worshipped themselves after death. Ngil committees were strictly male.

6.8 Missionary effect:

The Fang began assimilating aspects of Christianity and *bieri* into a hybrid religion, *bwiti*. Many Christian missionaries mistook the reliquary figurines for falsely worshipped idols, and attempted to destroy them. The missionaries did not understand that the Fang believed their masks and figurines had no inherent powers. Instead these figures acted as important intermediaries between ancestors and the living.

6.9 RCR revival:

After the halting of many Fang practices by missionaries, the ngil committees were forced to underground. These elite meetings of male leaders would begin occurring at secret locations often under the cover of darkness so the committee could still complete their tasks.

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

The Fang believe each person is made of a body and a soul. The soul gives life to the body. Therefore, when the body dies, the soul lives on. Ancestors are believed to possess even more power as spirits than they had as living people. This is particularly true if the dead had lived honorably and had died in a similar fashion.

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

No evidence found

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

No

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

The Fang practiced a form of monotheism with strong emphasis on ancestor worship. Ancestors are considered spiritual guides and are highly influential in the lives of future generations. They also set the moral standard for the Fang community, and it is believed that the ancestors can communicate to their descendants through dreams and visions. Although the ancestors who are honored can be both male and female, male ancestors are more likely to be revered because of the patrilineal structure of Fang society.

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

Not especially prevalent, except for males as they prepared for battle; the Fang spent the majority of their time decorating masks, and especially reliquary figurines.

7.2 Piercings:

Ear piercings common among females, with earrings often intricately designed

7.3 Haircut:

For males and females hair was often kept long and in braided fashion; this hairstyle shows up throughout the Fang tradition of ancestral figurine making as well.

7.4 Scarification:

No evidence of scarification based upon my research, however, never found information denying it either

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

Headbands were often worn by warriors, with ornate protrusion above forehead

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

The male leader of the village would wear what is known as a "ngil" costume during ceremonies. This leader was endowed with judicial and political powers. The focal point of the ngil costume was a large and vertically stretched mask. The mask was a symbol of retribution and was meant to strike fear into any sorcerers or criminals that may be attempting to harm the village. They were often painted white to express the power of dead spirits.

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

Women were not allowed to become the leaders of villages or clans, and therefore were prohibited from wearing ngil costumes. They were also forbidden from wearing the headband of the warriors.

7.8 Missionary effect:

The vast majority of the Fang have assimilated Christianity into their lives, however, there remain many animalistic and ancestor based worship traditions. Christianity has also insisted on the Fang becoming monogamous. The Fang, however, have rebelled against this cultural institution, maintaining their polygynous relationships.

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

Often children of the first wife were given priority over children of subsequent wives. Within one woman's progeny, males were often classified according to birth placement

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

Not found in literature

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

Not found in literature

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

Numbered references

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