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## PYTHON SPIRIT ON THE BAGA COAST

A SCIENTIFIC AND ART HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION

*Text by Frederick John Lamp*

*Python Spirit on the Baga Coast* is a multi-vocal, inter-disciplinary examination of Baga culture and specifically the performance of the Serpent masquerade within that culture. It is also the most extensive research on the relationship between ethno- zoology and art and ritual in Africa. This study of the wooden Serpent figures/headdresses of the Baga people of Guinea is a collaboration by the author, as an art historian, with many contributions from di-verse perspectives, including scientists preeminent in their fields: Robert J. Koestler, Roy Sieber, Dennis William Stevenson, Mark T. Wypyski, and Peter J. Zanzucchi.

The book is a thorough exploration of the ethnological and art historical evidence for the Serpent masquerade among the Baga of Guinea, bearing an immense wooden serpent figure on top of the head representing a python. Never witnessed or photo-graphed by outsiders, it disappeared in the 1950s along with most ritual performance after an Islamic *jihad* instated strict prohibitions against indigenous religions. The ritual context is followed by an in-depth analysis of the Serpent masquerade figures now in collections, while the final sections present scientific examinations concerning one particular Serpent figure.

**Frederick John Lamp** now retired from Yale University, was curator of African Art at the Yale University Art Gallery and professor of Art History and Theatre Studies from 2004 to 2014. Between 1981 and 2003, he directed the Department of Art of Africa, the Americas and Oceania at the Baltimore Museum of Art and taught African art at Johns Hopkins University and the Maryland Institute College of Art, among others. From 1973 to 1977, he was archivist at the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, head of higher education at the Museum of African Art in Washington and professor at Georgetown and George Washington universities and the Catholic University of America. He received a PhD in Art History from Yale University in 1982. Over four decades he has conducted extensive fieldwork in Sierra Leone and Guinea, supported by numerous grants from the Fulbright Scholar Award, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, among others. His many publications include *Ancestors in Search of Descendants: Stone Effigies of the Ancient Sapi* (2018); *Continuing Life Histories of African Art: The Collection of Charles B. Benenson at the Yale University Art Gallery*(co-authored, 2012); *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking Africa at The Baltimore Museum of Art*, (ed., 2004); *Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention* (1996); *La Guinée et ses Heritages Culturels* (1992); with invited contributions to many edited books; and articles in *African Arts*, *Afrique: Archéologie & Arts*, *The Drama Review*, *The Dictionary of Art*, *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, *History in Africa*, *Mande Studies*, and *The Art Bulletin*, among many others.