

Gabon

Ethnicity in Gabon

Group selection

In Gabon, there are about 60 ethnic groups which can be classified into a set of much fewer socio-linguistic macro groups (¹⁷⁴⁰, 83). The largest of them is the Fang group with about 35% of the country's total population. (Different sources provide varying estimates of the size of the Fang population: between 35% and 40% (¹⁷⁴¹), 30% (¹⁷⁴²), 30% to 35% (¹⁷⁴³, 134).) There has always been a politically relevant divide between the Fang of the province of Estuaire and those of Woleu-Ntem, that reaches back to the rivalry between the two most powerful political leaders during the period immediately before and after independence, both of which were Fang, but one of them from Estuaire (Léon Mba) and the other from Woleu-Ntem (Jean-Hilaire Aubame) (¹⁷⁴⁴; ¹⁷⁴⁵; ¹⁷⁴⁶, 95).

The second largest group is the Eshira/Bapounou cluster, followed by the Mbede groups who live above all in the province of Haut-Ogooué, and are comprised of the Batéké, Obamba, Nzebi and other groups (¹⁷⁴⁷, 23). Note that the Nzebi are sometimes counted as a sub-group of the Mbede cluster and sometimes as a separate ethnic group (see e.g. ¹⁷⁴⁸, 458; ¹⁷⁴⁹, 22-3). The ethnic map of the collection of University of Texas' Perry-Castañeda Library – on which the spatial coding in GeoEPR-ETH is based on – shows the Nzebi to be part of the Mbede cluster (¹⁷⁵⁰). The EPR coding follows this pattern. As a result, the relative size of the Mbede cluster is given by the sum of the Bateke and Obamba (8%) and the Nzebi (12%) = 20%.

Finally, the Myene are concentrated in the region around the country's economic hub Port-Gentil. There are several other ethnic groups in Gabon, such as the Bakota or the Bakele, which have never been represented by any political party (or other political organization) (cp. e.g. ¹⁷⁵¹, 103-4), and thus are not politically relevant according to the definition used in EPR-ETH.

All group sizes (apart from the Fang group) according to the 1993 census, published in Gardinier and Yates (¹⁷⁵², 259). The estimates for the Nkomi and Orungu subgroups (not provided by the census) rely on Fearon's list (¹⁷⁵³), who provides realistic numbers.

¹⁷⁴⁰ [Midepe, 2011]

¹⁷⁴¹ [Jeune Afrique, 2012]

¹⁷⁴² [Morrison, 1972]

¹⁷⁴³ [Levinson, 1998]

¹⁷⁴⁴ [Jeune Afrique, 2012]

¹⁷⁴⁷ [Ndombet, 2009]

¹⁷⁴⁸ [Morrison, 1972]

¹⁷⁴⁹ [Ndombet, 2009]

¹⁷⁵⁰ [University of Texas, 2013]

¹⁷⁵¹ [Midepe, 2011]

¹⁷⁵² [Gardinier Yates, 2006]

¹⁷⁵³ [Fearon, 2003]

*Power relations**1960-1962: first part of Mba's rule*

Three important political leaders: Leon Mba, leader of the BDG party and a Fang; Jean-Hilaire Aubame, UDSG and also a Fang; and Paul Gondjout, a Myènè. Gondjout allies himself with Mba, and the latter is elected president. Soon thereafter, however, the two parties BDG and UDSG form a coalition, and Aubame becomes foreign minister in Mba's government. Thus, the Fang are clearly the politically leading ethnic group in this period.

The Myènè did not have a single member in Gabon's independence cabinet (¹⁷⁵⁴). Moreover, their leader Gondjout is jailed from November 1960 until late 1962 for political reasons (¹⁷⁵⁵, 159). The Myènè are thus coded as "powerless".

¹⁷⁵⁴ [Morrison, 1972]¹⁷⁵⁵ [Gardinier Yates, 2006]

In 1958, the PUNGA party is founded to represent the interests of the (linguistically related) Eshi-ra/Baponou. One of its original leaders is René-Paul Sousatte, an Eshira (¹⁷⁵⁶, 255, 317). After independence, PUNGA is not included into the government (and the party ceases to function later). However, Sousatte himself becomes minister of agriculture (¹⁷⁵⁷, 256). Thus, the Eshira/Bapounou are coded as "junior partner" in this first period within a power-sharing arrangement with the Fang as "senior partner".

¹⁷⁵⁶ [Gardinier Yates, 2006]¹⁷⁵⁷ [Gardinier Yates, 2006]

The Mbédé group is not involved in national politics yet, which is why they are coded "irrelevant".

1963-1967: second part of Mba's rule

Mba has become more and more authoritarian and UDSG representation dwindles. He tries to install a one-party state and to ban Aubame's UDSG (¹⁷⁵⁸). Aubame leaves the cabinet in February 1963. Also Gondjout is in the opposition (¹⁷⁵⁹). Sousatte, too, leaves the government with the breakup of the coalition (¹⁷⁶⁰, 317-8), and - as mentioned above - the Eshira/Bapounou party PUNGA had already ceased to function. Overall, the Fang dominate the political life now and by 1967 occupy 70% of all cabinet seats (¹⁷⁶¹, 460).

¹⁷⁵⁸ [Africa Report, 1964]¹⁷⁵⁹ [Africa Report, 1964]¹⁷⁶⁰ [Gardinier Yates, 2006]¹⁷⁶¹ [Morrison, 1972]

Therefore, the Fang are coded as "dominant", and the Eshira/Bapounou and Myènè groups as "powerless". The Mbédé are still considered "irrelevant".

1968-2000: Bongo's rule after Mba's death

Bongo hails from the numerically small Batéké people which has not been involved in political rivalries so far. However, Bongo now favors and promotes Mbédé people from his own Haut-Ogooué province (¹⁷⁶²). Especially the military and security forces are controlled by members of Bongo's own ethnic group (¹⁷⁶³). Furthermore, Gabon's political system provides for a very strong presidency and Bongo virtually dominates the political system himself (¹⁷⁶⁴, 1999). Thus, the Mbédé group has turned from a politically irrelevant to the country's leading ethnic group now.

¹⁷⁶² [Gardinier, 1997]¹⁷⁶³ [US State Department, 1999-2016]¹⁷⁶⁴ [Freedom House, 1999-2017]

However, Bongo acknowledges the necessity to include all ethnic interests, and his newly created single party PDG allows for the accommodation of these interests. As one author states, Omar Bongo was like “a fruit tree planted in the middle of the Gabonese village of whose fruits and shades everyone benefitted” [author’s translation] (¹⁷⁶⁵, 80). His style of governance rests on a conscious politics of equilibrium, built around informal ethnic quotas that apply even to certain institutions of higher education, an approach that in the French-speaking literature has been coined “la géopolitique” (cp. e.g. ¹⁷⁶⁶). In this way, he achieves a remarkable ethnic balance in the public sector with elites from all major ethnic groups occupying prominent positions in the government, state bureaucracy, and party apparatus (¹⁷⁶⁷; ¹⁷⁶⁸; ¹⁷⁶⁹, 9). The regime’s “number 2” has consistently been a Fang, and Bongo also gives Myènè leader Gondjout and other former opponents of Mba important posts in the government and the state apparatus (¹⁷⁷⁰). Nevertheless, opposition parties tend to be mainly based on ethnic support. In the 1980s, the MORENA movement has the support of and represents the Fang and Bapounou groups which demand - among other things - a more equal distribution of wealth between the provinces (¹⁷⁷¹; ¹⁷⁷²).

Democratization at the beginning of the 1990s sets the stage for a surge in ethnic mobilization. During and after the national conference in Gabon in March and April 1990, opposition to Bongo crystallizes into two relevant forces: the Fang- and Bapounou-based Rassemblement National des Bûcherons (RNB), led by Paul Mba-Abessole (a Fang) and stemming from the former MORENA, and the Parti Gabonais du Progrès (PGP) that unites leaders of the Myene group. Later, in 1998, the RNB splits further along ethnic lines: The larger faction, now called RPG and largely Fang, supports the increasingly conciliatory and accommodating approach of Mba-Abessole; the smaller faction - calling itself RNB-Démocrates - is more militant and led by Kombila, a Bapounou (¹⁷⁷³; Gardinier and Yates 2006; ¹⁷⁷⁴, 103-5). Nevertheless, Bongo once again is able to co-opt most of the dissidents and to maintain the ethnic balance within the party and the government (Gardinier and Yates 2006; ¹⁷⁷⁵, 90). Mba-Abessole, for example, the president’s arguably most dangerous rival and an important Fang leader, soon closes ranks again with Bongo and joins the government coalition (Gardinier and Yates 2006). Likewise, most other leaders of one-time opposition parties would sooner or later renew their bonds with the country’s ruler (¹⁷⁷⁶).

Hence, the long-established trans-ethnic alliances withstands the centrifugal forces of democratization with the PDG functioning as a multi-ethnic vehicle of political inclusion while Bongo is astute enough to give sufficient political space to elites from other ethnic groups (not only, but especially the Fang) in his system of patronage and self-enrichment. Therefore - and despite ethnically based opposition parties that do not have real access to central power - the Fang, the Eshira/Bapounou and the Myènè are all coded as “junior

¹⁷⁶⁵ [Midepe, 2011]

¹⁷⁶⁶ [Moundounga Mouity, 2011]

¹⁷⁶⁷ [Gardinier, 1997]

¹⁷⁶⁸ [Moundounga Mouity, 2011]

¹⁷⁶⁹ [Tshiyembe, 2011]

¹⁷⁷³ [Gardinier, 1997]

¹⁷⁷⁴ [Midepe, 2011]

¹⁷⁷⁵ [Midepe, 2011]

¹⁷⁷⁶ [Ingueza, 2011]

partners”. The Mbédé group is labeled “senior partner”.

2001-2005

Minor change in Gabon’s national politics in September 2000: the Myènè-based PGP splits along sub-ethnic lines and a new opposition party (ARD) emerges which is the party of the Orungu subgroup under the leadership of Marie-Augustine Houangni-Ambouroué (whose rivalry with Nkomi leader Agondjo-Okawe was one of the reasons for the party split). The PGP now becomes the party of the Nkomi subgroup (¹⁷⁷⁷, lxiv-lxv, 6-7, 164-5, 258, 280). In its conflict with the Orungu elements it was supported by Bongo’s PDG (¹⁷⁷⁸, 258). Under these circumstances, it is assumed that the Orungu do not have any access to central power (neither to local), whereas the Nkomi - as the Myènè subgroup “favored” by the PDG - can still be considered politically included. Therefore: Orungu “powerless”, Nkomi “junior partners”.

¹⁷⁷⁷ [Gardinier Yates, 2006]

¹⁷⁷⁸ [Gardinier Yates, 2006]

2006-2017

Bongo ruled until his death in June 2009. The country’s ruling party PDG then chooses his son Ali Bongo as its candidate for presidential succession. Ali Bongo is elected in August with 42% of the vote and assumes office in October 2009. Note that The short interim period (June-October) with Rose Rogombe (president of the senate) as acting president is not considered here.

The two prime ministers acting during these 4 years (Jean Ndong and Paul Biyoghé Mba) were Fang like before. Also Pierre-André Kombila, an important Bapounou politician, formed part of the government until July 2009. And generally, Gabon’s governments continued to be ethnically balanced including all major ethnic groups although the Bongo family’s Mbédé group dominates the (strategically important) security sector (¹⁷⁷⁹, 2006-2009). Thus (and congruent with the analysis of the foregoing period), the years of 2006 to 2009 are marked as a period of power-sharing. (The only reason not to add the years to the previous period is the merger of the two Myènè subgroups - see below!). The Mbédé are again labeled “senior partner”, all other groups coded as “junior partners”.

¹⁷⁷⁹ [US State Department, 1999–2016]

Regarding the ethnic relevance of the two different Myènè subgroups (which were listed separately in the last period): No information could be found on this issue anymore. There is no recent information available either about the ARD or about its then leader Houangni-Ambouroué. Her former Nkomi rival Agondjo-Okawe died in 2005. No evidence of the party’s participation in the 2006 legislative elections could be found - nor even of its continuing existence. (In 2001, the ARD did participate but failed to win any seats.) Given this lack of convincing evidence, it does not seem adequate to maintain the distinction within the Myènè group in the coding, so we return to the coding of before 2001 and list the Myènè as one single politically relevant ethnic group. Like the Eshira/Bapounou and

the Fang, they can be considered “junior partners” in this ethnically inclusive power-sharing arrangement.

Gabon’s politics under Ali Bongo continued to be characterized by a high degree of ethnic power-sharing. According to the information collected during the author’s field research in the country in 2012, the government includes members of all relevant ethnic groups. The former single party PDG still plays a key role in this regard. The top positions within the party - associated with high political power since decisions are still mostly taken within the PDG - are also filled with elites from all relevant ethnic groups. Furthermore, the names of the regional advisors to the party’s (and the country’s) president Ali Bongo, and those of the members of the regional political bureaus show that these posts are usually composed of “sons of the region”. This is also true for the regions inhabited by ethnic groups with a history of independent mobilization, most importantly the (northern) Fang and the Bapounou. For example, the names we currently find in these positions in the province of Woleu-Ntem are almost all Fang, and those in the provinces of Ngounie and Nyanga are overwhelmingly Bapounou. (These names are listed in the official agenda of the PDG of 2012.) Hence, Gabon’s PDG-dominated political system still reflects an inclusive ethnic power-sharing, in which the president’s Mbede group takes the lion’s share of the country’s political and economic resources.

Presidential elections took place in August 2016. The results of the elections were highly contested. Ali Bongo officially defeated his opponent Jean Ping by little more than 5000 votes. After Ping had won in almost all districts in which the votes had been counted, in Bongo’s home district, the turnout was claimed to be over 99% and the vote share for Bongo extremely high as well, which led Bongo to win the election eventually. Many voices within the state, but also external actors such as the EU, questioned this result and suspected electoral fraud (¹⁷⁸⁰; ¹⁷⁸¹). Protesters set the National Assembly on fire, at least three deaths were recorded and many people were arrested (¹⁷⁸²). However, the constitutional court decided that the vote was valid and Bongo remained in office for another 7-year-term (¹⁷⁸³, 2017).

Emmanuel Issoze-Ngondet, ethnic Bakota and former minister of foreign affairs, was appointed as prime minister (¹⁷⁸⁴). Issoze-Ngondet originates from the Ogooué-Ivindo region, which is one of the regions where the official turnout was unusually high and the election result very contested (¹⁷⁸⁵). Furthermore, Issoze-Ngondet had supported Bongo throughout the election campaign and after the election, which is why his nomination as prime minister is interpreted as a personal reward rather than an explicit inclusion of the Bakota ethnic group into politics (¹⁷⁸⁶). Correspondingly, there is no indication that the Bakota are politically active on the national level or that Issoze-Ngondet acts on behalf of his ethnic kin. The Bakota are thus not considered politically relevant.

To show his willingness to form an inclusive government and in-

¹⁷⁸⁰ [DW, 2016]

¹⁷⁸¹ [The Guardian, 2016]

¹⁷⁸² [Bernault, 2016]

¹⁷⁸³ [Freedom House, 1999-2017]

¹⁷⁸⁴ [Reuters, 2016]

¹⁷⁸⁵ [Jeune Afrique, 2016]

¹⁷⁸⁶ [RFI, 2016]

crease his legitimacy, Bongo included several oppositional politicians in the government. Consequently, members of the Bapounou, the Fang and the Myene are still considered “junior partners”, while the Mbede are “senior partners” (1787).

¹⁷⁸⁷ [Reuters, 2016]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Gabon

From 1960 until 1962

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Fang	0.35	SENIOR PARTNER
Eshira/Bapounou	0.24	JUNIOR PARTNER
Mbede (Nzebi, Bateke, Obamba)	0.2	IRRELEVANT
Myene	0.05	POWERLESS

From 1963 until 1967

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Fang	0.35	DOMINANT
Eshira/Bapounou	0.24	POWERLESS
Mbede (Nzebi, Bateke, Obamba)	0.2	IRRELEVANT
Myene	0.05	POWERLESS

From 1968 until 2000

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Fang	0.35	JUNIOR PARTNER
Eshira/Bapounou	0.24	JUNIOR PARTNER
Mbede (Nzebi, Bateke, Obamba)	0.2	SENIOR PARTNER
Myene	0.05	JUNIOR PARTNER

From 2001 until 2005

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Fang	0.35	JUNIOR PARTNER
Eshira/Bapounou	0.24	JUNIOR PARTNER
Mbede (Nzebi, Bateke, Obamba)	0.2	SENIOR PARTNER
Nkomi	0.02	JUNIOR PARTNER
Orungu	0.01	POWERLESS



Figure 324: Political status of ethnic groups in Gabon during 1960-1962.



Figure 325: Political status of ethnic groups in Gabon during 1963-1967.



Figure 326: Political status of ethnic groups in Gabon during 1968-2000.



From 2006 until 2017

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Fang	0.35	JUNIOR PARTNER
Eshira/Bapounou	0.24	JUNIOR PARTNER
Mbede (Nzebi, Bateke, Obamba)	0.2	SENIOR PARTNER
Myene	0.05	JUNIOR PARTNER

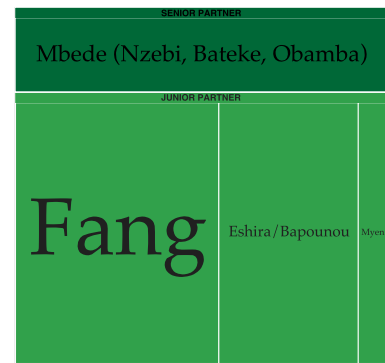


Figure 328: Political status of ethnic groups in Gabon during 2006-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Gabon

From 1960 until 1967

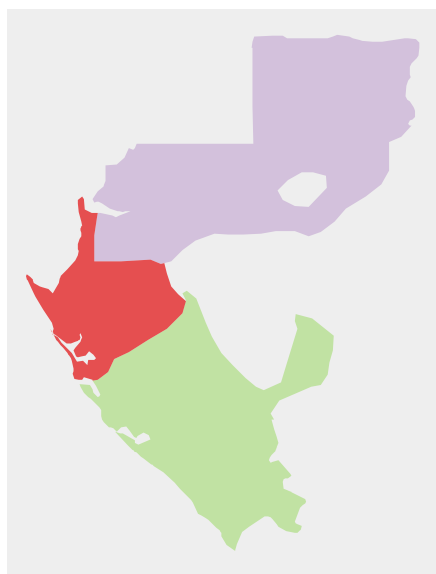


Figure 329: Map of ethnic groups in Gabon during 1960-1967.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Fang	72 182	Regionally based
■	Eshira/Bapounou	50 908	Regionally based
■	Myene	21 312	Regionally based

Table 109: List of ethnic groups in Gabon during 1960-1967.

From 1968 until 2000

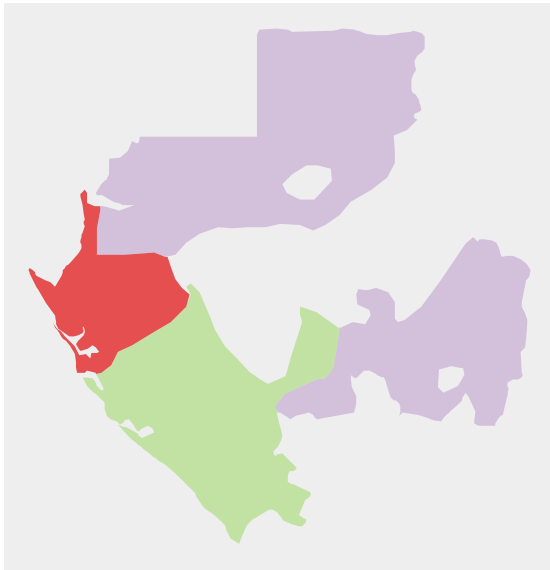


Figure 330: Map of ethnic groups in Gabon during 1968-2000.





Group name	Area in km ²	Type
 Fang	72 182	Regionally based
 Eshira/Bapounou	50 908	Regionally based
 Mbede (Nzebi, Bateke, Obamba)	41 979	Regionally based
 Myene	21 312	Regionally based

Table 110: List of ethnic groups in Gabon during 1968-2000.

From 2001 until 2005

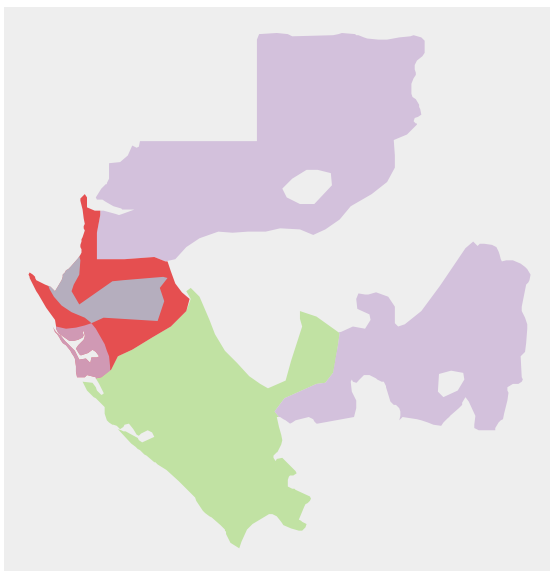


Figure 331: Map of ethnic groups in Gabon during 2001-2005.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Fang	72 182	Regionally based
■	Eshira/Bapounou	50 908	Regionally based
■	Mbede (Nzebi, Bateke, Obamba)	41 979	Regionally based
■	Myene	21 312	Regionally based
■	Orungu	6 453	Regionally based
■	Nkomi	2 751	Regionally based

Table 111: List of ethnic groups in Gabon during 2001-2005.

From 2006 until 2017

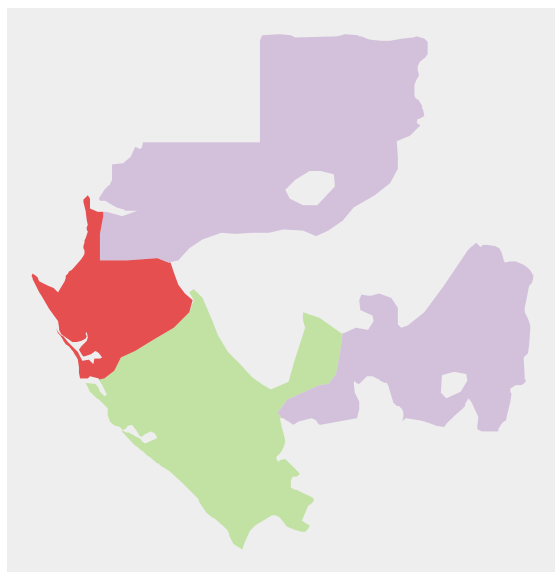


Figure 332: Map of ethnic groups in Gabon during 2006-2017.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Fang	72 182	Regionally based
■	Eshira/Bapounou	50 908	Regionally based
■	Mbede (Nzebi, Bateke, Obamba)	41 979	Regionally based
■	Myene	21 312	Regionally based

Table 112: List of ethnic groups in Gabon during 2006-2017.

Conflicts in Gabon

Starting on 1964-02-17

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Gabon	Military faction (forces loyal to Léon M'Ba)		1964-02-17			