

## **MAFA Blacksmiths – Introduction**

*Mafa is the name of the ethnic group*

*The region's Fulani pastoralists are called Matakam*

The setting is the isolated mountainous Mandara region of northern Cameroon. It is home to the 80,000 members of the Mafa ethnic group who live in calendric clay huts with pointed thatched roofs on paths that wind up the rocky hills bordered by intricate stone walls. They follow their ancient traditions, traditions that, until now, have not been contaminated by modern Western culture.

### **The myth of the blacksmith**

In the tradition of the Mafa, blacksmith's are revered and according to the myth, all are descended from one man.

"At the beginning of time", it says, "as the men of the tribe sat under the canopy of a spreading tree, they shook the limbs and fruits fell off. When they picked them up, they were hard, unripe. But one of the men had an extraordinary experience: the hard and unripe fruit in his hand suddenly became soft and ripe. At that point, the supreme spirit of the Mafa, Dzikile, said: "There, this man will be the blacksmith". And that is why all of today's blacksmiths descend from this man."

To this day, Mafa maintain this concept that equates converting hard matter into soft matter, as happens in the blacksmiths furnace, with making unripe become ripe. Symbolically, they are the same concept.  
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The traditional Mafa blast furnace is not just a simple traditional instrument for smelting metal, it links technology and religion. It is a masterpiece of industrial engineering, but at the same time a sacrificial altar. It is a machine that eats up the mineral and gives birth to a usable metal; it is also a place for divine powers and a destination for offering rituals.

Seventy years ago, Renè Gardi, a Swiss ethnologist, was convinced that he was documenting, at the time, the last breaths of a culture in extinction. "We are just in time," he wrote in the 1950s, "to see the last African furnaces smoking." But those furnaces kept on working.

Until the 1970s, Mafa blacksmiths were still able to demonstrate their work.

Of course, today, Mafa furnaces exist only in recollections, but nothing has changed in terms of forging. The idea of an African blacksmith who is at the same time an artisan, a shaman, a minister, a healer, a prophet has not changed at all. Still today among the Mafa, the blacksmith has an indisputable ancient and charismatic role, he is the Lord and the Master of Fire and its mysterious forces.

The photos in this Mafa gallery present a visual and authentic demonstration of the traditional Mafa iron fusion technique, photographed in Djinglia, a village in northern Cameroon, in 1979. The photo collection is part of a photographic research mission that was undertaken in the late 1970s and they accompanied text written by Professor Vittorio Lanternari, an anthropologist. The work was sponsored by Fiat SpA – Teksid, which is a world leader in production of iron and castings for the automotive industry.

The research was intended to compare two techniques of iron production: the traditional African one with techniques that is based on rituals and spells, and the modern, Western one that is based on science and technology.