

Dobet Gnahoré

"In addition to her voice, she plays a lot of percussion instruments that she skilfully adjusts to suit the dynamics of the concert. Sometimes she sits alone with an earthenware vase (Udu) on the edge of the stage, beating a minimalist beat and concentrating on a soothing song... At other particularly stirring moments, the young woman wins over the audience with her particularly expressive dances." - Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

"It's because Dobet is so passionate, possesses such powerful, vital and bubbling energy, is so impatient but also has such appeal and introspection. And the question rapidly arises as to how to resist the force and diversity of her intonation, which is sometimes solemn and intense but at other times piercing and strident..." - World

Just 24 years old, **Dobet Gnahoré** has got it all - an exceptional voice, amazing dance skills and the engaging aura reserved for artistic greats. After masterful performances across Europe and the United States, she has become one of African music's most exciting young talents.

Given Dobet's upbringing, it should come as no surprise that performing comes so naturally. Dobet's father, **Boni Gnahoré**, is himself a master drummer, actor, and singer who is well respected across the Ivory Coast, where Dobet was born and raised.

The trajectory of her life changed when a young French guitarist named **Colin Laroche de Féline** arrived in the village in 1996. With a backpack over one shoulder and a guitar over the other, Colin had come to discover this unique community. Planning to stay only three days, he ended up staying three years, having fallen in love both with the village's artistic lifestyle and with Dobet.

In Europe, the couple formed a band and while performing at European music festivals, Dobet's unique talent began grabbing people's attention. She earned a nomination for Best Newcomer from the **BBC World Music Awards** in 2006, and her debut album, the 2004 release *Ano Neko*, received wide accolades.

In the fall of 2006, Dobet joined Malian guitarist **Habib Koité** and South African troubadour **Vusi Mahlasela** on Putumayo's **Acoustic Africa** tour, which was presented across Europe and the United States. Sharing the stage with these two established African icons, Dobet astounded the audiences with her exceptional talent. Earning raves from everyone who saw the show, Dobet left no doubt that she was a star in the making.

For her sophomore album on *Na Afriki* (My Africa), which was released by the record label Cumbancha, Dobet offers a personal vision of Africa today. Performed in a number of different African languages, the songs address social and political issues: the struggles of women in African society, the exploitation of children, the impact of greed and violence on the family. Dobet calls upon Africa to seek solutions from within and draw upon its own vast resources to create a better future. She sings of love and loss, as well as joy and celebration, using a wide variety of rhythms and styles that reflects her unique pan-African approach.

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THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Dobét Gnahoré's music knows no borders The singer represents the Pan-African ideal

The Boston Globe

By Andrew Gilbert, Globe Correspondent | September 7, 2007

When it comes to politics, the Pan-African ideal has precious little to show for itself in the post-Colonial era. But in the performing arts, the movement seeking to bring together the traditions of various sub-Saharan peoples has generated brilliant results.

Dobét Gnahoré is the quintessential example of an artist whose work blissfully ignores ethnic and national boundaries. The product of a bold experiment, the 25-year-old singer, dancer, percussionist, and songwriter from the Ivory Coast grew up in a diverse artists' colony where she spoke several languages and mastered the movements and rhythms of a wide array of peoples.

Her new album, "Na Afriki," came out in February on the new Cumbancha label and hit the top of the world-music charts last month. She makes her headlining debut in Boston at the Museum of Fine Arts on Wednesday as part of a 13-city North American tour.

A riveting artist who creates an entire concept for each piece complete with choreography and lighting, Gnahoré is a whirl of motion on stage, her dreadlocks flying as she dances around the bandstand, then sits to tap out intricate rhythms on hand percussion. Singing original material in seven languages - including Dida and Guere from the Ivory Coast, Wolof from Senegal, Malinké from Mali, Fon from Benin, Lingala from Congo, and Xhosa from South Africa - Gnahoré possesses a rich, flexible voice that moves easily from a high, pure girlish timbre to a stern, throaty cry. Her lyrics alternate between direct, declarative verses addressing thorny social issues such as polygamy, family dissolution, and incest, and poetic accounts of love and filial devotion.

Working with her husband, French guitarist and composer Colin Laroche de Feline, she doesn't limit herself to African styles. Living in France for the past seven years, she has absorbed sounds from the polyglot scenes in Paris and Marseilles, while incorporating influences from her quartet, which features a percussionist from Togo and a Tunisian bassist. It's a concept that flows from her upbringing in Ki-Yi M'Bock, an artists' colony founded in 1985 by the visionary Cameroonian novelist and painter Werewere Liking, who gathered together a continental cast of artists, including Gnahoré's father, the master drummer, singer, and actor Boni Gnahoré.

"In the village we danced the traditional dances of each country from where the members came from, and we sang in different languages," says Gnahoré, speaking in French through a translator from her home in Givet, near the border of Belgium. "When I was 12, I began to sing in Zulu, Malinké, and many traditional languages. I started to play Pygmy music. So this all became part of my Pan-African musical, theatrical, and dance culture. I wanted to continue this in my songs because this is my personality. I didn't really accentuate this on my first album. But for my second album, 'Na Afriki,' I took the time to work with the translators, to feel it and to live it throughout the recording."

Appropriately enough, Gnahoré made her US debut last fall as part of the Putumayo label's hugely successful Acoustic Africa tour with Malian guitarist Habib Koité and South African vocalist Vusi Mahlasela. Though she was the young, unknown artist sharing stages with two of Africa's brightest stars, she made a powerful impression with her dynamic performances. "She is so talented in so many different areas," Koité said after a concert in Berkeley, Calif. "With her voice and dancing, she brings energy for everybody. When she moves, we all feel old."

While Putumayo included Gnahoré's "Palea," a gentle, lilting love song in Dida and Arabic, on the "Acoustic Africa" album, "Na Afriki" is her real introduction to US audiences. The fourth release by Cumbancha, the CD is a sumptuous production, with pristine sound, informative liner notes, complete lyric translations in French and English, and gorgeous photos of Gnahoré.

Founded by Jacob Edwards, who did much of the research for Putumayo's international musical anthologies, Cumbancha became his pet project when Putumayo decided to focus on compilations rather than artist development. Edwards knew he wanted Gnahoré to join his global roster of musicians such as Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective from Central America's Caribbean coast, the Idan Raichel Project from Israel, and Ska Cubano, a Jamaican/Cuban hybrid from London.

"She's one of those amazingly charismatic artists," says Edwards from his home in Charlotte, Vt. "I saw her perform for the first time in Holland, and it was incredible, a real Pan-African aesthetic not pegged to one particular tradition or culture. Her husband is an amazing story, too. Colin grew up in rural northern France and fell in love with African music. He showed up at her village with a guitar on his back and spent several years studying various styles. When I decided to start my label, she was one of the first artists I set out to sign." ■

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WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL REVIEW

Gnahore won't be a secret for long

By Howard Reich
Chicago Tribune arts critic
September 17, 2007

Perhaps a performer who's more charismatic, versatile, dynamic and inventive than Dobet Gnahore will emerge during the ongoing World Music Festival -- but I doubt it. The show that Gnahore played during the opening night of the festival drew ecstatic responses from a sold-out house at the Old Town School of Folk Music on Friday night, and for good reason.

If Gnahore, who's from the Ivory Coast, had done nothing more than wrap that voluptuous, supple, nimble, octaves-leaping voice of hers around her listeners' ears, she would have earned the cheers and standing ovations that greeted her work. But she also moved like a dream, expressing the undulating rhythms and buoyant melody lines of her pan-African source material with extraordinary physical grace and poetry.

Add to that the startling emotional range of her music -- which spans plaintive laments to ebullient dance pieces -- and you have a performer who is practically a theater piece unto herself.

The seemingly disembodied voice that opened the set, as Gnahore sang offstage, barely hinted at the experience yet to come. But as Gnahore's beguiling vocals floated through the house, her melismatic phrases and amber tone quickly seducing the ear, listener curiosity had to be piqued.

Soon she took the stage, slowly building the intensity and fervor of her show. By the time this evening had reached the first of several dramatic peaks -- with Gnahore singing, swaying, chanting, dancing -- an intimate auditorium on North Lincoln Avenue had become a window to African cultures past, present and future. Singing in various African languages, combining ancient tribal dance rituals with 21st Century moves, imploring her audience to sing along with her in chants of daunting complexity, Gnahore seemed to bring the voice of a continent to those lucky enough to have heard her.

If there's any justice in this world, she's going to be very, very famous.

The Zimbabwe singer-guitarist Louis Mhlanga opened the evening, the quiet humanity of his vocals dovetailing neatly with the insouciant spirit of his instrumentals. Even so, he was fortunate to open the show, rather than close it, because it cannot be easy for anyone to follow Gnahore.

On Saturday night, the geographical focus of the World Music Festival shifted to Eastern Europe, with two bands offering 21st Century viewpoints on gypsy music, to varying degrees of success.

Surely most listeners attending the sold-out show at the Old Town School would have concurred that the standout artist was Macedonian clarinetist Ismail Lumanovski, performing with the New York Gypsy All-Stars. The phenomenal speed, technical brilliance and musical fluidity of Lumanovski's playing rendered him virtually a Paganini of the gypsy clarinet.

The evening's other originally scheduled headliner, Romano Drom, had to cancel, because of security-clearance issues, "courtesy of the Department of Homeland Security," Old Town School executive director James Bau Graves told the crowd.

If their replacements, New York-based nouveau-gypsy band Romashka, didn't match the technical level of Lumanovski and colleagues, Romashka earned points for high spirits -- and for rushing in to fill the suddenly empty slot.

SFGate.com

African singer Dobet Gnahoré tackles social, political issues

Eric K. Arnold, Special to The Chronicle

Monday, September 17, 2007



Comparisons to such legendary African female vocalists as Miriam Makeba, Oumou Sangare, Angelique Kidjo and Marie Daulne (of Zap Mama) don't faze Dobet Gnahoré at all. "I am quite proud to arrive at that level. However, there's a long way to go," says the 24-year-old West African singer-songwriter. Speaking through a translator via phone from France, she maintains that such praise is "too big to sell to me. I know the place I have."

Listen: MP3s: "[Ma Pao](#)" | "[Yekiki](#)"

But, it's an honor for her to be named in such esteemed company, especially because she's spent considerable time listening to all of those artists. "I feel like the daughter of Makeba and Kidjo," she says.

With the release of her second solo album, "Na Afriki," and her first coast-to-coast U.S. headlining tour (which lands at the Napa Valley Opera House on Saturday), Gnahoré might be a household name sooner than she thinks. "Na Afriki" comes alive with lushly arranged polyrhythmic melodies, topped with soaring, emotive vocals. Blending traditional African elements with folk and jazz influences, it's a serious contender for world music album of the year.

"Me and my husband do the music together. All the music was created by both of us," Gnahoré says. "After that, we asked some musicians to be guests. We had the feeling that could be a nice meeting."

"Nice" seems too polite a word for the vibrant range of expression on "Na Afriki." Not only does Gnahoré sing in six languages, but she also covers a broad range of relevant social issues. "Djiguene," sung in Wolof, makes a plea for gender equality. "Dala," sung in Dida, urges, "Don't forget mutual respect, not respect for money, but respect for humans." "Inyembezi Zam," sung in Xhosa, questions, "Have we become mad? We pollute the planet." And "Jho Avido," sung in Fon, addresses both mortality and the spirit world: "A thread of light separates the world of the dead from that of the living." Another highlight is the requisite love song, "Ma Poo" ("My Breath"), a beautiful ballad sung in Guere and dedicated to Gnahoré's husband and songwriting partner, Colin Laroche de Féline.

Though English speakers would never know it from Gnahoré's hauntingly beautiful melodic tones, several songs address politically charged aspects of African society. On "Massacre" and "Pillage,"

she takes a stand against genocide and injustice. Two of the strongest statements on "Na Afriki's" are made in "Khabone-N'Daw" and "Mouso Tilou," which address the controversial topics of incest and polygamy.

"(As) for the politics, when I meet people or read some incredible story, I feel I have to write something on this matter," she says. "It's just instinctive, when I feel some important or some emotional stuff, to write."

Discussing taboo topics might seem like an indictment of her native culture, yet Gnahoré also celebrates traditional tribal society on "Pygmees," a tune inspired by the forest people of Africa and consisting entirely of rhythmic vocal chants backed by sparse percussion.

In West Africa, a sense of shared culture eclipses national borders and permeates the region's artistic efforts. For that reason, "Pan-Africanism musically is quite normal," Gnahoré says. Noting that her mother is from Ghana, she adds, "globally, I feel like an African."

Growing up in an artists' commune known as Ki-Yi M'Bock in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Gnahoré has been immersed in Pan-African culture since the age of 5. Artistic expression became the lingua franca connecting the multigenerational, multinational enclave co-founded by her father, Boni Gnahoré, which housed artists from across the continent. In Ki-Yi, dance, theater, poetry and song were all intrinsically linked, and several languages were commonly spoken.

"It was really important to be able to meet a lot of artists from all parts of Africa," Dobet Gnahoré explains. At age 10, she joined a group of young artists within the village who staged their own dance, musical and theater performances, and even made their own costumes. "That was school for me," she says. She learned much, worked hard to discipline herself in the arts and pushed her creative sensibilities "for music, for dance, for vocation."

Gnahoré pays tribute to the village on "Na Afriki's" "Yekiyi." Sung in Malinke, the song credits her second family at Ki-Yi with putting the singer on her artistic and musical path. "I found my voice, thanks to you ... I have developed the will to succeed."

In 1999, Gnahoré left her homeland and moved to France with her husband and their child, partially because of political instability in the region. "It's really complicated in Ivory Coast," she says, adding that in Africa, venues and music studios for performing artists are scarce. "It's easier in Europe."

Living in Givet, a French town near the Belgian border, Gnahoré and her husband, who learned African guitar styles while in Abidjan, started composing music. Soon they became affiliated with Belgian management company Contre Jour, whose roster includes a number of African artists. Once again, Gnahoré began to collaborate and create with a collective of artists in the spirit of Ki-Yi, and the result was her debut album, 2004's "Ano Neko." In 2006, she received a BBC World

Music awards nomination for best newcomer.

Gnahoré came to the United States for the first time last year as part of Putumayo's Acoustic Africa tour, where she earned rave reviews as the youngest artist on a bill with South Africa's Vusi Mahlasela and Mali's Habib Koité. Gnahoré admits to being nervous about her first big solo tour, which began in New York on Sept. 10, and ends in Seattle two days after her Napa concert. "Of course I'm a little bit afraid," she says.

Gnahoré admits it would be nice to actually become the next big African music star, as some critics have predicted. "If I become a star, I could help my family and people back home," she says. And while she claims she's somewhat of a perfectionist both onstage and in the studio, she's getting more comfortable with the idea of being on the road. "Onstage, it's like theater. I dance. I sing."

Dobet Gnahoré: 8 p.m. Sat. Napa Valley Opera House. Tickets: \$30-\$35. Call (707) 226-7372 or go to www.napavalleyoperahouse.org.

Go to SFGate.com to hear samples of Dobet Gnahoré's music.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/09/17/DDMFS185R.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle



Story and photographs by Sean Barlow

Strictly Mundial Comes to Montreal: Exceptional performances by Dobet Gnahoré...

The biggest revelation was Dobet Gnahoré. In my interview with her before her concert, Dobet sang a capela with a rich, warm vibrato. Wow! This is one helluva talented artist. She showed me the sonic and tonal differences between the Fon and Bete and Baoule languages. And what poise too. Very sharp with a delightful, friendly personality.



Dobet told me that as a teenager she had immersed herself in African music, dance, theater and languages at the artist village near the capital Abidjan run by the legendary Were Were Liking. She performed in their group Ki Yi Mbock that has played the Kennedy Center in DC and other prestigious venues. You could see the result of this multi-disciplinary, pan-African training on stage at Club Soda in Montreal when Dobet Gnaore performed her North American debut. Powerful singing combined with a charismatic stage presence, original choreography, and a theatricality that reminded me of Marie Daulne of Zap Mama. Dobet performed several different traditional percussion interests too, backed by a very talented pan-African guitar stylist who also studied with Were Were Liking in Abidjan, a backing singer from Tunisia and a percussionist from France.

Dobet Gnahore has one international release, "Ano Neko" on Contre Jour (Habib Koite's label). We look forward to seeing Dobet Gnahoré and her group in the States!

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DOBET GNAHORE (IVORY COAST)

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Côte Ivoire used to be known as a magnet for recording artists from all over West Africa. Many came to use the modern studios in the capital Abidjan, but ironically, the country has never produced much in the way of distinctively local vibes, apart from reggae stars Alpha Blondy and Tiken Jah Fakoly. These days it's the vicious and ongoing north/south conflict that garners most headlines. The present situation arose as a result of a coup in 1999 the same year that 23-year-old singer and songwriter Dobet Gnahoré left her homeland and settled in Marseille. She has been based there ever since.

The thriving multi-cultural music scene of that vibrant French port city provided her with opportunities that were no longer on offer back home, but she has not forgotten her roots. She may not have felt safe enough to go back to Côte Ivoire itself yet, but she has performed in many of the African countries she draws inspiration from in her music, visiting Congo, Gabon, Chad and Equatorial Guinea on a recent tour.

She's also keen to stress the importance of her training back home with the Pan African Ki-Yi Mbock company, based in an 'artist village' near Abidjan. There she was taught to take a multi-faceted approach to music, which incorporated song, dance, percussion and theatre. To this day, she sings in seven African languages as well as French, defining her approach as 'defiantly diverse, musically and linguistically'.

Her band includes French and Tunisian members as well as her master percussionist father Boni Ngahoré, so the title of her 2004 debut *Ano Neko* ('let's create together') seems to fit. Apart from the sounds of Côte Ivoire's Bété and Baoulé cultures, you can also hear echoes of Cameroonian bikutsi, Congolese and East African rumba and Manding music plus, of course, reggae in her original songs. Her socially conscious lyrics deal with subjects such as the AIDS pandemic, the importance of family, village life and remembering your roots.

Onstage, Dobet is a vivacious bundle of energy, blessed with a powerful voice and infectious charisma. She wears sumptuous

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Afro-chic outfits, and her hair extensions toss as she swaps a flute for a thumb piano, a shaker or just a pair of dancing shoes.

Jon Lusk.

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I heard one of her songs in Putumayo's Women of Africa compilation (Abiani) and the minute I heard her voice, I was astounded. I then decided to bought her album "Ano Neko" and I was even more astounded. She has an incredibly strong vocal which is projected in each song in the album. I hope I can see her live in person before I die. Please come to Asia, to our Womad this year in Singapore!
Aki Baihaki, Singapore

Love her. Sings with passion and peace in her voice. Have only heard "Kakuo" from Music From the Chocolate Lands though. Wish I knew what she was singing about!
Peter, Toronto

Saw her at Africa Oye in Liverpool. She is brilliant. Listened to her album continuously for 6 weeks until WOMAD and frequently revisit.
Rob - North Wales

I saw het in The Netherlands and she is just great! That is all I can say.
Charlotte

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DOBET GNAHORÉ

steps into the spotlight

STORY CHRIS NICKSON
PHOTOS DIRK LEUNIS

We're so familiar with many of the major African names, from Youssou N'Dour to Thomas Mapfumo, it's easy to forget that a whole other generation is rapidly coming of age behind them. One of the leading young lights is Dobet Gnahoré from the Ivory Coast whose recent second album, *Na Afriki*, marks her not so much as a talent to watch, but one who's already arrived, bearing a masterful slice of Afropop whose influences draw from across the continent.

From an early age, Gnahoré was schooled in music, percussion and dance. "I was taught a lot of different arts and how to express emotions, and that's helped me a lot," she recalls. "I'm used to having everything mixed into one—music, dance, singing." One of her primary teachers was her father, percussionist Boni Gnahoré, who schooled her extensively in the traditions of the Bété people, which you can still hear in her sound. "I was born in a village and grew up in a city," she says, "so I've always been very close to my parents and the people in the village."

Like her father, she began training and performing in the Ki Yi Mbock company in Abidjan, which offered her grounding and experience onstage, evident today in her highly kinetic live performances and natural command of an audience. Additionally, it helped her pick up a number of African languages; she currently sings in seven.



While working with Ki Yi Mbock, she met Colin Laroche de Féline, a French guitarist, and began working as a dancer with the Tché Tché company for a short while. In 1999, as Abidjan was surrounded by the strife of a coup, the couple moved to France. "It was actually purely personal," Gnahoré insists. "I got pregnant and there were problems, so that's why we moved to Europe. Then we went back, and now I go back and forth a lot."

Laroche and Gnahoré began working and writing music together, touring and performing with others for a couple of years until their return to Africa. A 2001 performance at the illustrious MSA festival made people sit up and take notice of her abilities and stagecraft, and the pair began working with producer Marcellin Yacé, who sadly died in 2002. Then, in 2003, Gnahoré's debut, *Ano Neko*, was released.

The album drew from the continent's full range of sounds, pulling together Congolese rumba, pennywhistle jive from South Africa and even Cameroonian bikutsi all into one package, with lyrics that were very relevant to contemporary society. "The texts are from African reality, all over Africa," observes Gnahoré. "Traditional music is my inspiration, and I tried to translate the environment and emotions that surround it and use it."

Ano Neko got her noticed at home and abroad, and led to extensive touring, bringing her a nomination as Best Newcomer in the 2006 BBC Radio 3 World Music awards. She didn't win, but it raised her profile even higher, leading to more concerts abroad. "It's been a very fulfilling experience, getting different elements from everywhere I go and all the people I meet," says Gnahoré. "It actually helps me when I'm writing material and gives me a lot of inspiration."

Now, with *Na Afriki* fresh on the shelves, she's really ready to break out as one of Africa's new voices. "It's more of a back to basics album with less instruments," she explains. "There are more languages on this album, and it's more to do with the songs. There are more guests on this new one, too." Once again, the music was a family affair, with her husband playing guitar, and "my father helped me with a lot of the lyrics, and played on three of the songs." Although there are traces of soul and even R&B on the disc, Gnahoré argues that, "for me, it's purely an African album. It's possible that I listen to soul and R&B, and there's plenty of it in Africa, I don't think it's there, not from American soul, anyway."

The album's been out in Europe for a little while, and she's been promoting it with shows there. To follow on from that, "I'm actually preparing an African tour right now, with some dates in America later this year."

But, like most artists, she's thinking ahead. *Na Afriki* might just be consolidating her reputation, but she's already planning ahead. "I've been thinking about an album that's even more African, and bringing in even more languages than this one," says Gnahoré. "It'll probably also be more acoustic, too."

In other words, each release seems to be taking her closer to a very raw African sound. Her voice vaults her out of the crowd, but it's her mastery of so many different African musical forms (and languages) that really makes her unique. Gnahoré could be the first African artist (and certainly the first woman) to speak to her people across the continent in their own languages, as well as the next major international breakout, following Miriam Makeba and last month's cover star Angélique Kidjo, among others.

The young generation of African musicians and singers is emerging, building on the work of their elders, but also bringing a broader vision to what they do. And Dobet Gnahoré is at the head of the pack. •

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Ivory Coast native Dobet Gnahoré is not only a sublime vocalist, she's also a notable songwriter. She co-authored all 15 tunes on the CD with Colin Laroche de Féline, and Gnahoré is a perceptive, frequently critical observer of social custom and practice. Titles like "Incest (Khabone-n'daw)," "Pillage," "Massacre" and "Polygamy (Mouso Tilou)" indicate that Gnahoré has a weighty authorial agenda. Her Pan-African intent is signaled by the fact that she sings her tunes in Wolof, Xhosa, Malinké, Fon, Lingala, Dida and Guéré, languages of Senegal, South Africa, Mali, Benin, Congo and the Ivory Coast, respectively. The CD has a contemplative, acoustic feel, though such uptempo interludes as "Dala" and the elemental "Pygmées" offer added textures. — Philip Van Vleck

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