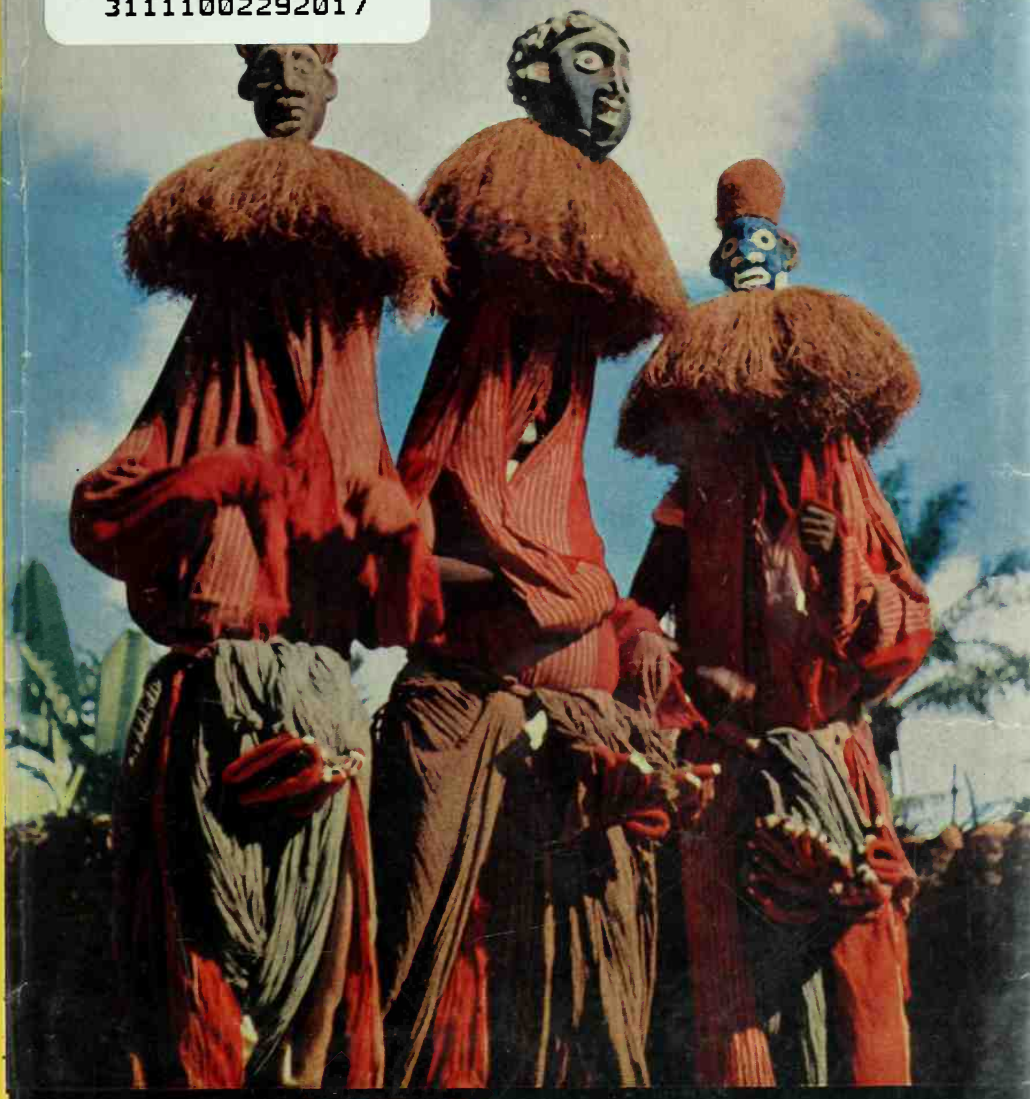
Denise Paulme



AFRICAN SCULPTURE

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When it was 'discovered' in that lively period immediately following the First World War, African sculpture was hailed by some as the most vital new influence available to the twentieth-century artist. Fauves and Cubists turned for inspiration towards African art in much the same way that the Impressionists before them had looked to the Far East; and in the strong, bold forms of Negro sculpture they found much to draw on. But in calling it 'naive' and 'barbarous' the first enthusiasts were ignorant of the important cultural bases of this art. In the last twenty years ethnographic research has given a richer sense to the work of the African artist, in locating it in the milieu which created it, explaining its function and its symbolic value.

In this definitive study Denise Paulme, in charge of the African section of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, explores African sculpture as a whole, relating religious and ethnographic factors to the aesthetic values of the work of art, thus adding to our complete understanding of the form. A first section deals with the often highly advanced technique of the African sculptor; but the major portion of the book is devoted to a comprehensive survey of the regions of Africa, the life and customs of the people, from which follows their art.

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Part I

Generalities and Techniques

CHAPTER ONE

THE DISCOVERY OF NEGRO ART

GENERAL awareness of 'negro art' in all its forms – music, the plastic arts, literature – dates back to the years immediately following the First World War. In London, in Paris, jazz with its African ancestry conquered the musicians. In May 1919 the Devambez Gallery organized in Paris the first exhibition of African and Oceanian sculpture. In 1920, the *Editions de la Sirène* published the *Anthologie Nègre* of Blaise Cendrars, which brought together myths, stories and proverbs of the African native. In the same year, the April issue (No. 3) of the review *Action*, edited by Florent Fels, presented 'Views on Negro Art' of well-known artists and writers: Picasso, Juan Gris, Jacques Lipschitz, Cocteau, André Salmon, Jean Pellerin – whilst from Guillaume Apollinaire, who had died in November 1918, came an extract from the article in the *Mercure de France* where, in April 1917, he had devoted two pages to the 'fetichist sculpture of the black races'. These testimonies were not all eulogistic. The dealer Paul Guillaume saw in African sculpture 'the quickening seed of the spiritual twentieth century'; but Jean Cocteau affirmed that 'the negro crisis (in art) has become as big a bore as Mallarmé's *japonisme*'. Disparate views indeed; but views from which one gleans the impression of a convergence between African plastic art and certain aspects of Western art of that period.

In fact, negro sculpture was first hailed as an art form by a group of painters living in Paris at the beginning of this century – Vlaminck, Matisse and Derain among others – who frequented

the galleries of the old Trocadéro. While in London, Derain spent much time in the ethnographic department of the British Museum. In Brussels, a magnificent collection (starting-point of the museum of the Belgian Congo) had been assembled for the 1897 Exhibition and has been on public view ever since. Among these *souvenirs de voyage*, these 'curios', artists who would one day be described as 'Fauves' and 'Cubists' discovered a new art form whose echo seemed to respond to what they themselves struggled to express. In 1908 the Henri Matisse collection included twenty or so 'negro' statues ; Derain, Braque and Picasso were now the possessors of African masks.

At the same time a parallel movement began in Germany. In 1912 the painters Kandinsky and Franz Marc issued their *Blue Rider* in Munich. Here, side by side with the works of Picasso, Matisse, Cézanne, Gauguin, appeared children's sketches, glass-paintings, medieval carvings, Chinese paintings, etc. Evoked by Gauguin, the South Seas was again represented by a statuette from Easter Island, a mask from New Caledonia, also a wood-carving from the Cameroons, a plaque from Benin and a mask from Gaboon.[1]

Two years earlier, in the Berlin of 1910, there had appeared the *Black Decameron* of Frobenius, a miscellany of African myth and legend. The work was quite beautifully written: it not only commanded the respect of the specialist in negro art, but also attracted the attention of people of culture throughout the West.[2]

Music, plastic arts, literature. From 1914 onwards, Africa was no longer the forgotten continent. Its existence was recognized, along with intimations of the riches it was to reveal.

[1] Kandinsky and Marc, F. (ed.), *Der Blaue Reiter*, München, 1912.

[2] Frobenius, L., *Der schwarze Dekameron. Liebe, Witz und Heldentum in Innerafrika.* An earlier work published in 1904 featured Oceanic, African and American myths and also stories drawn from European folk-lore (*Das Zeitalter des Sonnengottes*, Berlin, 1904). It should be remembered here that the first study devoted to African masks is due to Frobenius. It goes back to 1898, but it remains a valid and authoritative source-work: Frobenius, Leo, *Die Masken und Geheimbunde Afrikas*, 14 pl., 33 drawings, Abh. der Kaiserl. Leop. Carol. Deutschen Akademie der Naturforscher, LXXIV, No. 2, Halle, 1898.

The first volume of aesthetics devoted to African sculpture was the *Negerplastik* of Carl Einstein, published in 1915.[1] Einstein saw in negro statuary a profound and archetypal significance, something worthy to inspire the modern artist. Over-influenced by painting, Western sculpture had reached an impasse. African sculpture, according to Einstein, resolved the fundamental problem of the expression of volume, of mass. African sculpture alone, in his view, was 'true' sculpture.

Breaking with all academic formulas, and reacting against the mannered Impressionists which resulted in pictures where everything became dissolved in a cloud of coloured dust, both Fauves and Cubists sensed the urge to forge a new style. In search of signposts they turned towards 'negro' art (a term which for a long period embraced the divergent sculptures of Africa and Oceania) – in much the same way that the Impressionists before them had turned to the Far East. They in their turn sought above all else to find in the 'primitive' arts arguments to justify their flight from convention. Negro art, with its highly-communicable sense of mass, furnished the example of a tradition which its disciples claimed to be viable. It offered, too, as bait, the attraction of novelty; it answered the taste for the exotic. '*Naïf*', 'barbaric' . . . these adjectives exalted the souls of amateurs who cared little for the exact source of the work in question, still less for its initial impulse and meaning in the hands of the artist.

It is due to the research of ethnographers well schooled in the art of their period that for the past twenty years African sculpture has been given a richer, deeper significance. They have been able to assign each single work to the period and community which gave it life, as well as explaining its function, its method of usage and its symbolic values. The importance of the religious factor in all aesthetic activity of the African cannot be exaggerated: means and ends, integral parts, are all imbued by this consideration. To set out to judge a mask or statue of the African continent purely on the aesthetic plane – wilfully ignoring the artist's motive force – is not less absurd than to pretend to study medieval sculpture while disregarding Christianity.

[1] Einstein, C., *Negerplastik*, Leipzig, 1915.

Such ethnographical museums as house the most important collections of African and Oceanic art strive nowadays to adapt themselves to this double necessity. They would be failing in their function if they were not also museums of art: their choicest specimens – a Benin ivory, for example, a Baule mask, a Baluba caryatid – are invariably isolated from the rest, placed at an angle and in a light which seems best suited to reveal their form and balance.

Although it may not be essential to understand its precise significance in order to appreciate the form which is given to a piece of sculpture, it is not unimportant to realize that African masks, with rare exceptions, are a male prerogative, from which women are kept rigidly excluded. In a number of societies, myth attributes the invention of masks to a woman who steals the disguises abandoned by demons; the men-folk then proceed to seize them, regarding the masks – the symbols of power – as the sole means of enabling them to exert over their wives the superiority essential to the maintenance of social order. The variety which we observe in the masks is explained by their purpose. The effect of terror will sometimes be secured by a stylization where human elements blend with zoomorphic ones (e.g., monkey-, buffalo-, and antelope-masks), sometimes by an exaggeration, accompanied by a simplification of facial planes, sometimes again by a juxtaposition of colours of symbolic significance. Adjacent to these terrifying exhibits there are others which aim solely to entertain and relax the viewer: it so happens that these comic masks appear on the heels of their horrific neighbours, providing a breathing-space which has been judged to be necessary. But the uninitiated critic who is ignorant of this division will judge both the one and the other impartially as being either beautiful or monstrous.

One statuette may evoke the memory of an ancestor, while its neighbour's mission is to protect its master against ever-terrifying black magic, always to be feared. Yet another is acting a role in a ceremony of divination. The last may be a 'doll' – one of a pair of twins; and during his lifetime the survivor will feed, wash and dress the statuette – an image of his dead brother.

It is all this that the museum strives to evoke. With the excep-

tion of certain pieces which have been deliberately isolated, the emphasis in each case is on the role played by the sculpture in the society in which it has its origins. A mask will be exhibited crowning a costume of vegetable fibres or perhaps a cotton tunic which belongs with it, surrounded by accessories which emphasize its dance – canes, fly-switches, stilts. Photographs or designs will illustrate the mask in action, will depict its pantomime. A leaflet will explain its purpose, the ceremonies in which it plays a part, sometimes the myth of its origin. Certainly, whoever retains the memory of a great African feast will recognize, not without a certain sense of *malaise*, that there, behind a glass case, is the brother of the fabulous creatures whose image is inseparably associated in his mind with the beat of drums, the clamour of the crowd, the heat and dust and light and – above all – the unforgettable odours. The original significance of the sculpture has vanished: inert and immobile, it is now no more than an *objet d'art*. But at least its survival is assured. The museum will conserve the evidence of an aesthetic form. Were it not for the museum, no trace would remain of the work, for in their original societies, masks and statues have in most cases only an ephemeral existence.

Finally, it would be absurd to suppose that all specimens are of equal value. Within a series originating from the same region, the level appears to be more or less high – the masterpiece is always unique. A single visit to a great museum is enough to show the differences which distinguish pieces from the same source, or more or less derived from the same inspiration and obedient to the same stylistic exigencies. W. Fagg, who studied the present-day Yoruba sculptors in Southern Nigeria, remarks on the aesthetic consciousness evinced as much by artisans as the patrons who order works from them: 'a great sculptor can ask a higher price than the others, and often gets commissions from distant towns, and even regions where another style prevails'.[1]

[1] Fagg, W., De l'art des Yoruba, *L'art Nègre. Présence Africain*, 10–11, 1951, p. 119.

CHAPTER TWO

TECHNIQUES

THE term 'negro art' instantly evokes the picture of wood-carvings from West or Equatorial Africa, though in fact the Africans have also worked in stone, metals and ivory. Although the South African tribes are not mask-carvers like those of the West and Equatorial provinces, they are gifted with a remarkable ornamental flair, and in particular many of their head-rests incised and ingeniously decorated with geometrical motifs are perfect works of art. But it must be admitted that the African has a predilection for wood, and that the masks and statues of the Ivory Coast, the Sudan, Gaboon and the Belgian Congo have been the means of acquainting the Western world with negro sculpture.

It is well known that sculpture has grown and flourished in agricultural communities leading a more or less sedentary life. The pygmies of the equatorial forest – hunters and collectors – have an admirable tradition of music unknown to the West until recently; but their only 'mask' is a disguise made from fibres, one which was no doubt inspired by the authentic wood-masks of their Congolese neighbours. The Bushmen of the southern regions, who are now practically extinct, were painters, not sculptors. As for the cattle-breeders of East Africa, we have no evidence that they ever produced anything of artistic value: they adorn only their own bodies.

In these communities of villagers and agricultural workers, the only artisan is usually the blacksmith, who also works in wood. He it is who supplies the handle for the axe, the blade for the hoe; with his white-hot iron he will burn a decoration into the staff

of a spear, or the handle of a knife; he carves chairs, doors and locks, adorning them with imaginative designs inspired by traditional models. The masks are rarely the work of a professional: the young man of the village will make his own first mask, assisted by the advice and supervision of his elders.

African sculpture has suffered throughout the centuries from the repercussions of political events. Wherever states have been permitted to establish themselves, and, even more important, to maintain their existence and autonomy for a sufficiently long period of time – in Benin, for example, or in the kingdoms of the Belgian Congo – sculpture reveals itself as an art practised by professionals under royal patronage. But too often material insecurity, fear of plunder or the raids of slave-hunters have, by provoking the disintegration of society, also killed the art of the people. And (this is the ultimate factor) wherever the forces of Islam have imposed themselves, the representation of the living being has been forbidden – nothing is left but a geometric art of which the Hausa embroideries are perhaps the best example.

The chief merit of African sculpture, wrote Roger Fry, is its 'entire plastic freedom' – meaning by this the facility demonstrated by negro artists, who seem to move naturally in a three-dimensional universe. 'It seems that the conversion of a flat surface to a carving presents no difficulty to them.'[1] And in fact there is no difficulty. Material conditions are such that the African starts off with a tree-trunk or branch – that is to say with a more or less cylindrical block which he strips, scrapes and fines down, first with an axe and then with an adze and knife. The original forms of the trunk or the branch are still discernible in some completed sculptures. In the case of a male statue, a cylinder represents the body up to the horizontal shoulders, the arms are two smaller cylinders, parallel and sometimes attached to the body, the forearms are brought in to the stomach, the knees are bent, angles represent the articulation of joints. The face is always extremely stylized. A faint, unbroken line, in raised relief on a flat surface, may indicate the eyebrows and continue into the ridge of the

[1] Fry, Roger, *Vision and Design*, London, 1920.

nose – or, alternatively, the facial planes may be grotesquely distorted beyond any realistic convention.

Whether carving out of a tree-trunk or elephant tusk, the African artist as a general rule works only from a single block, to which he can add nothing. Let us consider for example a wooden stake which represents a man on horseback. If the artist observes and follows the 'correct' proportions of anatomy he is unable to apply them to the horse without reducing the rider to a size at which he would be virtually invisible. The sculptor gets round the difficulty by reducing the horse to the diameter of the stake. This departure from nature is a calculated choice and does not spoil the balance of the composition.

A systematic lack of 'correct' proportion is not at the base of all African sculpture. But excepting the sculpture of Dahomey and the Cameroons, human statues of 'exact proportions' are the exception. Not that the artist is incapable of reproducing them, but he feels no obligation to conform to them.

The starting-point of a mask is always the same. The artist secures a trunk or a squared branch, never a flat surface. The original form, whether cylindrical or cubic, is still evident in certain helmet-masks from Gaboon or the Congo, sculpted on all four sides.

The wood which is used is always 'worked' when green. The sculptor chooses a tree or branch of the required sort and of the length and bulk that seem to fit his purpose. After a brief invocation of the spirit of the tree, sometimes followed by the sacrifice of a hen, he hews down and strips the tree on the spot. The block is then conveyed to his work-place – which is not neces-

Fig. 1. Painted wooden veranda support of the King of Savé, South Dahomey Ht.: 135 cm.

sarily his dwelling-place. The mask may not be carved in the village, under the eyes of the women-folk, so the workshop is likely to be situated in a clearing where the young men of the tribe undergo their initiation retreat, or even in the hiding-place where the catachumens foregather. The blacksmith will work near his forge, on the outskirts of the village. But wherever the work-place may be, a sculpture destined for a religious use, an authentic mask, will only become 'itself' after an invocation and sacrificial consecration.

It is always fascinating to see a sculptor at work: the man squatting, supporting the block with one hand – not necessarily the left hand – whilst wielding a great knife in the other. The Bakongo tribe in the Congo make use of a knife with a single edge and furnished with a long handle, the base of which tucks into the hollow of the elbow. The block is quickly squared, the statuette roughed-out – the sculptor then works for a while with his howel or adze, and finally with a knife with which he defines his angles, rounds off his contours and with which, perhaps, he even engraves a pattern. The finished product will be smoothed down with rough leaves which make a substitute for glass-paper.

The art of wood-carving is governed in part by the poor quality of the tools, the blades and cutting-edges of which are ineffective when faced by a hard and unyielding substance. Further, the sculptor who practises the 'direct' method of carving, with neither a design nor a ground-plan of the work in progress, works by trial and error: he requires, therefore, a material which is malleable and easily cut, one that lends itself to experiment and correction.

This is not to suggest that the artist dispenses with a model. Very often he has before his eyes a damaged article which he wishes to replace – a vase, a spoon, or a foot-stool. He will draw his inspiration from them without seeking to copy them in every detail.

Carved in green wood, many African statues split when the wood dries out. The natives are not unaware of this risk; they seek indeed to avoid it. After superficial carbonization, or the

application of a dye, the sculpture is coated with a fatty substance – palm oil or vegetable butter, according to the region. Renewed every so often, this treatment, by blocking the pores of the wood, imparts at length a certain solidity to the superficial coatings. This lubrication, together with the action of smoke in their homes, explains the beautiful patina which some sculpted woods possess; they have the grain and the gradations of colour of an oxydized metal. A carving which is frequently handled acquires a polish which gives it a really beautiful appearance – the most magnificent species being, naturally, those from the forest regions of the Ivory Coast and from the Congo.

The first object to be ornamented by man in order temporarily, or, sometimes even permanently, to alter its appearance, is the human – in particular the male – body. No traveller's tale is without mention of this preoccupation with adornment. A Dutch traveller wrote in 1599 of the inhabitants of Gaboon:

. . Both men and women go bare-headed as a rule, their hair arranged and bound in a peculiar fashion. . . . Some have holes in their upper lips, through which they pass pieces of ivory which cover their mouths up to the nose. . . . Some wear ear-rings which may weigh three or four ounces; others, in place of pendants, insert small canes to the length of five or six fingers'-breadth. Their clothes are made from plaited tissue derived from bark and fibres, and are of a reddish hue. Some natives attach to these plaits the skins of monkeys, wild cats or of other wild beasts, with a bell in the middle, in the manner of cows and ewes. Their bodies are painted red with a dye procured from a certain red wood. . . . With this dye they colour one eye-lid, the other is painted white or yellow, and for good measure three or four stripes are applied to the face. Many of them wear belts of buffalo-hide, in width three or four palm-spans or more, and from these they hang their short, broad daggers with iron blades and very deadly three-cornered arrows. Further, among the women are some who wear great rings of iron or copper around their legs – these so well affixed and joined that no one could imagine how

they had been able to set them there; and of these rings, some weighed up to four or five pounds.'[1]

Today on feast days, just as four centuries ago, both men and women coat their arms and legs and their entire bodies with palm-oil or vegetable butter; as a result, their black skins gleam with a brilliance which is an ornamentation in itself. The palm-oil, which has a reddish tinge, is often reinforced with a varnish – also red – made from tree bark. The inhabitants of equatorial Africa keep their *tukula* powder in decorated wooden boxes, or moisten the paste and mould it into cakes, in the shape of tortoises or lizards.

Some African societies have no tradition of carving, either in wood or stone, and lacking even a blacksmith they are obliged to obtain essential tools from outside. In these particular communities, during the feasts which celebrate the initiation of boys, the participants are quite unrecognizable, heads and bodies being entirely painted with whitewash and ochre. The effect sought is identical with that produced by a mask: the actors are no longer themselves, and the only difference is that the disguise is not separate from its wearer. Similar instances have been noted in Australia, where, in addition to symbolic body-painting, primitive hoods made of bark are worn. I was present at several such ceremonies in Kissi territory (French Upper Guinea) where the smallest of the boys, chosen for their agility, make their appearance with their faces and heads painted in geometrical motifs in red and white – this in dramatic contrast with their brown skins and shaved skulls. The effect is startling. A yoke, placed on the shoulders of the 'mask', supports a circular fringe of raffia fibre which trails to the calves. The wearer shakes this fringe by a constant movement of the shoulders. He moves with bent legs, trailing a long wand which he uses to keep the over-inquisitive at a distance: not that these dare approach too close, for it is rumoured that the rod is poisoned and its touch would result in leprosy

[1] *Histoire de la navigation*, by Jean-Hughes de Linsoot, Dutchman, with annotations by Dr. Paludanus, Amsterdam, 1610. The original Dutch edition appeared in 1599.

(cf. Pl. VI). The other initiates are completely nude, their heads and bodies whitened with clay; white is the colour of the next world! They bear in their hands the accessories of the dance, notably wooden muskets; and their evolutions, dictated by rhythms rapped out on a wooden drum, bring to mind paramilitary gymnastic exercises.

Nor are there any masks among the Banda of the Ubangi, where the circumcised boys display their bodies painted in white clay.

And now to an adornment of a permanent nature: African tattooing (an inaccurate term, but one hallowed by usage) does not consist only in inserting under the skin an indelible pigment by means of a needle, as it does in the case of the ancient Maoris and in Europe, it also embraces the art of scarification, which produces – depending on the regional customs – depressed, linear or relief scars. We are again in the realm of sculpture. Many of these scars are a tribal brand. During the initiatory retreat which takes place in adolescence, the young see stamped in their flesh the emblem of their new dignity and responsibilities: they have become men. In Dahomey, the *Vodusi*, men and women consecrated to a special cult, are also branded for life. Other tattoos – in particular the majority of female tattoos – have a purely aesthetic motivation. Here is a description of the process in the Bamileke region of the Cameroons:

'The operator (a blacksmith in iron or wood), guided by inspiration, plans a design which is more or less elaborate. . . .

To effect the scarification, the artist utilizes three instruments: a long iron needle 12–15 centimetres long, called a *syap*; a knife with a wooden handle and a curved blade of 18–20 cm. – a *ngwa*; and a native razor of triangular shape – a *neten*. The design is first traced lightly with the knife, and is then retouched with the razor and needle. The needle is then inserted at a suitable place and the skin is raised; then the razor is used to cut into sections the required length. Although the operation is sufficiently painful, it is generally borne with courage and fortitude by the young women.

Certain skins react immediately and form, without further

intervention, the correct design; others are more sensitive – they become inflamed and produce relatively large swellings. To avoid this ill-effect, they usually apply to the wound a vegetable essence which has the property both of producing an even distension of the skin and of emphasizing the design traced. The whole area is then soaked in a fatty substance to encourage the wounds to heal. Accidents resulting from these practices are infrequent, in spite of the imperfection of the methods employed, and of the surrounding filth.'[1]

It often happens that the motifs tattooed on face or body are borrowed by the sculptor as a decorative element. The presence of such designs can assist the identification of specimens of which the provenance remains uncertain.

Special aesthetic attention is given to the coiffure. Sometimes the woman's hair is dressed over a framework of wood or fibre. Wigs and switches are not used. The Bambala tribe of the Congo arrange their hair in five longitudinal ridges between which the gaps are close-shaved. Their Bapende neighbours dress their hair in a number of tiny plaits abundantly smeared with palm-oil and soot, or dyed red with clay. The hair over the forehead is cropped in a straight line into a fringe, and to thicken the fringe, a pad of palm-fibre is inserted. The back hair hangs to its full length and looks like the thatched roofs of the native huts.[2]

The women's plaits are stiffened by the application of vegetable butter; and these are then loaded with bright-coloured pendants, berries, shells and imported pearls. In the Ibo tribe of Nigeria, young girls of marriageable age, young newly-married women and young mothers all observe a different style of coiffure, which corresponds to their social status. Widows and mothers who have lost a child shave their heads in token of their grief.

The elongation of the cranium, practised among the Mangbetu of the Congo – which is also represented in their anthropomorphiodɔtter y – brings to mind the customs of ancient Egypt.

[1] Labouret, H., *Catalogue of the exhibition of H. Labouret's mission to the Cameroons*, Paris, pp. 137–8.

[2] Torday, E., and Joyce, T. A., *Notes ethnographiques sur des populations habitant le bassin du Kasai et du Kwango oriental*, Brussels, 1922.

In a general sense, ornament, whether it be on a living body or on a wooden statue, serves a double purpose – to adorn and to protect. The bracelet, the collar, are amulets as well as decorations, and the sculptor takes care to stress the fact. Prudence dictates the insertion of rings through the lips or in the lobe of the ear: one cannot do too much to safeguard the orifices of the body!

Whether it concerns the human body or inanimate objects – jewellery, arms, pottery or furniture – the design is inspired both by the aesthetic and the symbolic. A panther – the royal beast – supports a chief's throne; a fabulous bird with a great beak surmounts the pulley of a loom. The surround of a lock is designed to resemble the body of some personage, such as an ancestor; in one place the head and feet will be treated realistically, in another they will be so stylized as to become unrecognizable to a stranger. Knives have their hilts ornamented with strips of copper, their scabbards are engraved, the design on the blade denotes its ownership.

Both the choice and the blend of colours have made famous the 'vegetable velvets' woven by the Bakuba of the Congo. The design of these stuffs is produced by means of small tufts of coloured fibre passed through the woof and weft and knotted on the reverse side of the tissue. The Bakuba are as good sculptors as they are basket-makers and weavers. They borrow from their basket-making their decorative characteristics, copying in wood the patterns of baskets and adorning boxes, drinking utensils, etc., with motifs used in the first place in the designs of their fabrics. These motifs appear to us to be geometrical; but where a European may see merely a simple knotted fringe, the indigenous language says 'smoke' or 'village'. What we would call a swastika means simply 'the knee'.

The hardened bark of the calabash-tree is worked into designs with a knife or a red-hot iron: aesthetically pleasing, the selection of motifs also translates a proverb or bears a message. Cups of wood or pottery, pipes and snuff-boxes – all are decorated; and there is no design which is not symbolic. Nor should we overlook

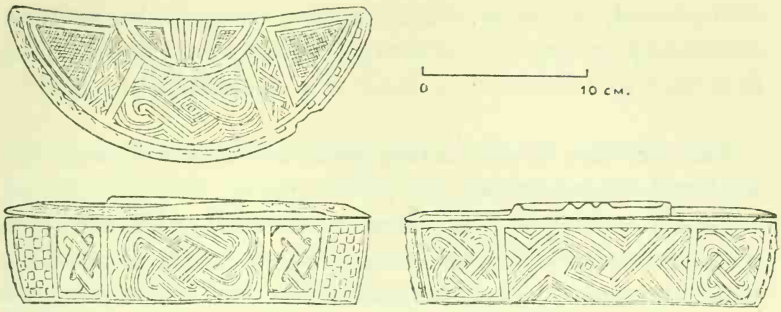


Fig. 2. Cosmetic box, Congo, *Bakuba*. Ht.: 22 cm.

musical instruments: wooden drums, skin drums, bell-handles, harps, wooden trumpets, ivory trumpets, *sanzas* and the rest: all carry their illustration and message.

The delicate and charming dolls of the Sudan should also be mentioned. They are fashioned from ears of maize, wooden sticks or sheep-bones; and the heads, with neat plaits and invariably an aquiline nose, are moulded from wax. The dolls have neither arms nor legs, but two wax cones affixed to the trunk indicate the breasts, while red or white pearls represent eyes and jewels. The most elegant models are dressed in a scrap of rag placed over the horizontal stick which indicates the shoulders. Little girls carry these dolls, which are supposed to foreshadow their destiny, tucked into the cloth tied round their waists.

Finally, there remain those works which are not transportable. Clay sculptures of massive proportions (Tessman speaks of Fang statues ten feet high erected in the forests), or flimsy edifices built secretly for a solemn occasion and then abandoned or immediately destroyed. Such constructions are dispersed over a wide area. They are of crude earth streaked with bright colours, or – in the Atlantic forest – with tree-ferns (*poro*[1] sculptures). In other regions they are built of branches plaited together and painted. Such ephemeral structures, together with the dances associated with them, may be the only known means of artistic expression. The Yembe of the Congo, to the east of Lake Leopold II, who work neither

[1] Initiatory ceremonies for youths. [Translator's note.]

stone, wood, nor ivory, erect immense *emumu* which resemble towers or palanquins. These are revealed only for a moment, and then burst into flames at the finale of a veritable ballet.

The Africans, while making great use of wood, have not neglected other materials.

Firstly, *stone* – generally soft stone (steatite). Although stone sculptures – nearly all anthropomorphic – are confined to a fairly limited area, examples are numerous. The most important region covers French High Guinea (Kissi-land), Sierra Leone (Mendi country), and extends to the coast and the islands of Sherbro. In Southern Nigeria, stone statues have recently been discovered at Esie in the province of Ilorin. The stone sculptures of Bakongo, collected not long ago in Angola, are equally well known. The significance of these works changes little. Whether the sculptor in carving his stone is commemorating a recent death, or whether an old work is brought to light which bears witness to a vanished age, the function remains the same: a function at once funerary and tutelary.

Ivory has always been in great demand. Its polish, its hardness and its patina attracted foreign merchants – Arab and European – quite as much as human flesh. Many ancient specimens (bracelets, pendants designed as tiny masks or figurines) were worn on the body and thus acquired a beautiful patina, yellow or brown, with their contours sometimes worn away. Some great ivory horns from the Congo, polished with *tukula* and palm-oil, are of a magnificent deep-red shade.

The most renowned ivory sculptures come from the kingdom of Benin: great tusks sculpted along their total length, bracelets, armlets with open-work designs, statuettes, cups and goblets – and elephant tusks, some of which reveal a strangely Byzantine design.

Nearly everywhere nowadays – in the Loanga region, at Dahomey and throughout Western Africa – craftsmen accept commissions to execute brushes, powder-boxes, vases made from three miniature tusks linked together, and pendants showing a

woman's elaborately coiffured profile. These objects are completely irrelevant to true African art. They are mentioned here only as a reminder.

Statues in *terra-cotta* are rare. But nearly all earthenware containers, of widely varying dimensions, carry a painted, incised or modelled design. There are no potter's wheels. Indeed, the whole of black Africa rests in ignorance of the potter's wheel, which is, however, represented in Egyptian paintings[1] and is present in the modern Kabylie: in other words, it has failed to cross the Sahara. Another characteristic of African pottery is that the craft is generally practised by women who follow the tradition of having a blacksmith as husband. The technique here is that of kneading an already existing form (a vase moulded upwards from its base, for example) – or of building up, by successive applications of small pieces of clay. In most cases, the potter combines both processes: she moulds the base of her pot on the bottom of an older vase; then raises the sides by means of a circular wooden spatula whose edges are slightly raised. Sitting on the ground, the woman grips between her outstretched legs the dish which holds the rough outline of the pot she requires. She then spins the dish with her forefinger and takes advantage of the movement to add blobs or strips of clay to the inner surface, endeavouring to obtain a uniform thickness. Alternatively, she starts from a single lump of clay which she hollows progressively. Her tool-kit comprises a wooden blade or a large pebble as polishing agents. Seeds, tiny wood shavings or basket work serve to impress the design on to the moist clay; while the long spout of a water jug will be moulded round a hollow plant stem inserted deep into the side of the pot. There is no kiln; the pottery dries in the shade and bakes in the open under a heap of straw. The uneven baking explains the frequent explosions which accompany the process. The regularity of form and purity of design of this pottery are quite extraordinary when one considers the primitive methods employed. Finally among pottery techniques comes modelling, which is

[1] The potter's wheel is not depicted, however, in pre-dynastic art. [Translator's note.]

encountered chiefly in the hands of children, who model small pots and animals from crude earth – but nowadays they are more likely to fashion aeroplanes and lorries.

In various centres of West Africa, archaeologists have brought to light anthropomorphic statuettes in terra-cotta, for example near Mopti on the left bank of the Niger, also in the southern parts of the Ivory Coast (Agni country), at Ife in Southern Nigeria and on the outskirts of Fort Lamy (Sao pottery). Nearly always these statuettes are discovered on tombs or form part of some funerary rite. Unfortunately their age is difficult to assess, but as a rule they would not appear to be more than four centuries old. Not only were these terra-cottas put to the same use as similar works in stone, but they are akin in style to other works found over a very large area. It is difficult when viewing the Mopti figurines not to think of certain Chad statuettes, rare though the former may be. Perhaps archaeologists will one day furnish us with proof that there was a unity of Western African civilizations in the centuries immediately preceding the appearance of Islam on the scene.

We note finally that the most ancient of African works of art known to us today are tiny anthropomorphic or zoomorphic terra-cottas. These specimens, which show extraordinary mastery of execution, were found in a tin mine in the neighbourhood of Jos in Northern Nigeria. These works belong to what is known as the Nok civilization, and geologists date them back to the second half of the first millennium B.C.

The most famous African *bronzes* are from Southern Nigeria, from Ife and Benin. The most common, which are by no means the least charming, are Ashanti and Baule weights. But jewellery in copper and brass is to be found all the way from the Cameroons to the Sudan. Perhaps one of the oldest specimens is a tiny figurine in the form of an ibis with outspread wings, discovered in one of the numerous tumuli near the bend of the Niger. These tumuli correspond to the ancient tombs ascribed to what is known as the Gana civilization, which disappeared in the eleventh century of our era.

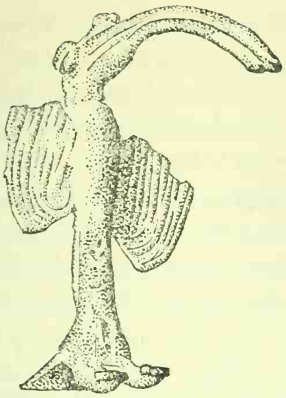


Fig. 3. Ibis or toucan. Bronze found in the Tumulus of Killi on the banks of the Niger, south east of Timbuctoo. Ht.: 65 cm.

In common usage, the term 'bronze' is inexact when applied to African work. The metal employed is an alloy with a base of copper and contains among other metals, tin and lead in extremely varying proportions – as though the native artisans had not grasped the superiority of an alloy where copper and tin are combined in a constant proportion of nine units of copper to one unit of tin, or as if these virtuosi of smelting and casting, deprived of the essential constituents, had been obliged to make the best of a defective material. In fact, the artisans of Guinea for the most part avail themselves of imported metals, except where *gold* is concerned – for they can acquire this metal themselves by sifting and washing.

This metal, which focused the attention of both the Arab and the Western world on Africa, is also that which the natives themselves often value the least, possibly because of its abundance. The Africans have always worked gold in their ornaments, but they have never used it as money in their interior exchange.

Beginning in the sixth dynasty, Africa furnished gold to the ancient Egyptians. It is widely believed that the Somali coast was once the fabulous country of Punt, from where gold, ivory and precious woods flowed to Egypt. The first Arab geographers and, later, the travellers of the Middle Ages, indicate the importance of the trade in gold-dust from its source in Africa. We need only cite a single instance of this. In 1324, following the example of

his predecessors, Mansa Mussa, Emperor of Mali in the Western Sudan, departed for Mecca. During their stay in Cairo, the Sovereign and his suite spent the precious metal with such prodigality that gold coinage suffered a devaluation from which it never recovered.

This gold came chiefly from two regions to which the native Emperors were always careful to forbid the entry of strangers: Bambouk (between the River Senegal and its tributary the Faleme) and Boure (on the upper course of the Niger). Caravans from North Africa collected the gold-dust from the Sudanese centres of Oualata, Timbuctoo and Gao, in exchange for fabrics, copper and, above all, salt, a commodity which the interior of the African continent has always lacked. The Venetian, Alwise da Ca da Mosto, wrote in 1452 that Sudanese gold was exported in three directions – to Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. From the fifteenth century, the Portuguese settlers on the coast monopolized the trade with the natives, supplying them with copper, cotton goods and the sea-shells which served as native currency, in exchange for slaves and gold. As a result of the development of trade with the exterior, the demand for gold became so pressing that nearly all the gold-dust left the country without ever having been wrought.

It would appear that the Africans have always obtained the metal by the most primitive processes. They prospect river beds or sink pits in the alluvial terrain which is the result of disintegration of the rocks which formed the original primitive stratum. In the Siguiri region and in Baule country there are pits of up to 240 feet in depth. There, at the bottom, the men hew out auriferous lumps of earth which the women pound to powder and wash for a long time with the same circular movement they employ in winnowing grain. The dust extracted in this manner is smelted into ingots (often very impure ones) which the Baule preserve in pots and bury underground. The absence of labour costs, together with the incessant demand for the metal, explains why the natives should exploit seams which contain only minute samples of auriferous soil. The same reasons explain the failure of several European enterprises which brought modern equipment to similar terrain with results that always proved disappointing.

Gold and slaves were the main products which justified the setting-up of European trading-posts in that part of the coast which, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was already known as the Gold Coast.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, an English mission made its way to the territory of the king of the Ashanti, Sai Tutu Quamina, in the south of the Gold Coast, now known as Ghana. T. E. Bowdich, leader of the expedition, has described the sumptuous reception given to the foreigners.[1]

'The king wore a fillet of aggry beads round his temples, a necklace of gold cockspur shells strung by their largest ends, and over his right shoulder a red silk cord, suspending three saphies cased in gold; his bracelets were the richest mixtures of beads and gold, and his fingers were covered with rings; his cloth was of a dark green silk; a pointed diadem was elegantly painted in white on his forehead; also a pattern resembling an epaulette on each shoulder and an ornament like a full-blown rose, one leaf rising above another until it covered his whole breast; his knee-bands were of aggry beads, and his ancle [*sic*] strings of gold ornaments of the most delicate workmanship, small drums, sankos, stools, swords, guns, and birds, clustered together; his sandals, of a soft white leather, were embossed across the instep band with small gold and silver cases of saphies; he was seated in a low chair, richly ornamented with gold; he wore a pair of gold castanets on his finger and thumb, which he clapped to enforce silence. The belts of the guards behind his chair were cased in gold, and covered with small jaw bones of the same metal; the elephants tails, waving like a small cloud before him, were spangled with gold, and large plumes of feathers were flourished amid them. His eunuch presided over these attendants, wearing only one massy piece of gold about his neck: the royal stool, entirely cased in gold, was displayed under a splendid umbrella, with drums, sankos, horns, and various musical instruments, cased in gold, about the thickness of cartridge paper: large circles of gold hung by scarlet cloth from the swords of state, the sheaths as well as

[1] *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, London, 1819, pp. 37–9.

the handles of which were also cased; hatchets of the same were intermixed with them: the breasts of the Ocrahs, and various attendants, were adorned with large stars, stools, crescents, and gossamer wings of solid gold.'

This jewellery is for the most part obtained by the process of smelting called *cire perdue* ('lost wax'). The artisan prepares a model, in wax, if the work in question is of very small dimensions, or in clay covered over with wax. He surrounds this model with a thin layer of potter's earth, and then with a thick coat of clay. When the clay is dry, he melts the wax, which runs down the channels contrived for this purpose, leaving a hollow mould.

The artisan inserts small pieces of metal inside the mould, which is then subjected to an intense heat. The metal melts and gradually fills up the interior of the mould – the colour of the flame indicates the degree of fusion. When he judges that all the metal is melted, the goldsmith breaks the mould. The result obtained by this process is the exact replica of the wax model which has now disappeared, hence the term '*cire perdue*'. Each model remains unique.

In addition to this process, African gold-work includes jewellery both hammered and repoussé; but examples are few and far between. They include pendants, small cylindrical boxes, bracelets, collars and other accessories, and all appear to originate in Ashanti country.

A technique which is much more prevalent, though extremely localized, is that of covering a wooden object with gold leaf; this is so closely and deftly applied that the leaf takes up the most minute details of the wood. Tiny hooks of gold wire are inserted into the wood. This is a very old process, in use in the days of ancient Egypt. The Ashanti and the Baule adopted it for coating large objects such as the hilts of ceremonial sabres, handles of fly-switches, etc. Some of these prerogatives of royalty have a striated or fluted design of stylized lizards and miniature human masks.

The area in which gold jewellery and ornaments are to be found in native Africa is a strangely circumscribed one. Practically no works in gold have ever come from the kingdoms of Dahomey,

Yoruba or Benin, whose riches and political development are in no way inferior to the Ashanti. Possibly the excavations now in progress on the Ivory Coast and in Ghana will furnish new evidence concerning the antiquity of the metal-casting of this region. In Europe, as in Asia and Egypt, gold was the first metal to be worked: will it prove to have been otherwise in native Africa?

We are not concerned here with *filigree* work, a technique which is unknown throughout practically the whole of Africa. Jewellery fashioned in this manner is found only on the fringes of the Sahara, in places where the caravans from North Africa ended their journeys. Sometimes these caravans included artisans, some of whom remained on the spot. It is in a similar way that Ualata, nowadays almost a dead city, but formerly a resting-place for caravans from Morocco, sheltered and protected the Jews in the fifteenth century – 'very rich, but very oppressed, they are either itinerant dealers or goldsmiths and jewellers'.[1] The methods of these jewellers have survived; they are to be seen in the cabochon and filigree work of modern Senegalese and Songhai jewellery – akin to the jewellery of North Africa.

The greatest example of this transplanted art-form is the magnificent breast-plate in gold, found during the course of excavations in the neighbourhood of Saint Louis in Senegal. That the origin of this highly individual style must be sought in the North is confirmed by the presence in medieval Spain – and even later – of jewels comparable both to those of Southern Morocco and to contemporary Senegalese and Sudanese necklaces and pendants. Once again Africa plays the role of guardian of lost traditions: here we are concerned with the last art practised in Moslem Spain.[2]

Old as is the tradition of gold work in native Africa, scarcely

[1] Fernandez, Valentin, *Description de la Côte d'Afrique, I. De Ceuta au Sénégal*, Introduction and notes by Th. Monod, Paris, 1938.

[2] Joire, J., 'Archaeological Discoveries in Senegal', *Man*, 1943, No. 34; and Terrasse, H., 'Notes sur l'origine des bijoux du Sud marocain', *Hesperis*, 1930, pp. 125–30.

anywhere on its soil have tools or arms made of *copper* been discovered. This absence explains itself. Whenever the natives came into possession of this metal, they had, for lengthy periods, been working iron, which had always been abundant south of the Sahara. They had no reason to use a metal both softer, rarer and more precious than iron for any other purpose but that of ornament. Africa passed without transition from stone-work to iron-work. She has never known a 'Bronze Age'.

If work in iron has been on the whole general,[1] only four regions exploited bronze: the Transvaal, Katanga, Angola and its neighbouring territories – the Azande countries. However, in all regions the native blacksmiths worked imported copper, obtained against exports, and often arriving from distant parts. (It must be added that they made admirable use of it.) Towards the east, Katanga copper travelled as far as the East Coast; it attained the tree-less plain to the north of the Great Equatorial Forest; and from there, very gradually, it gained ground right up to Ashanti country. More recently, caravans transported Katangan ore as far as the Atlantic coast. But the great majority of copper used outside the Congo basin must have come from a source outside Africa. In West Africa – to quote a notable example – practically all the metal was acquired from Moroccan and Algerian merchants or from European ships.

In recent years a number of small centres of copper metallurgy have been discovered in the south-west of the Aïr, in the cliff of Tidjeddi and in the modern territory of the Niger. There seems no doubt that these areas had once been exploited and the bars of copper exported to great distances, right up to the time when the trade ceased to be fruitful and the native buyers found their metal at a more economic price among the Europeans.

[1] Only three populations were not working iron at the time of their first contact with Europeans: the Pygmies of the Equatorial Forest (they borrowed from their neighbours axes and spear-heads), the Bushmen of the Kalahari desert, and the inhabitants of Fernando Po – these last having either quitted the dry-lands before the discovery of metal casting, or (a more likely hypothesis) having abandoned a technique which had no useful purpose on their volcanic island.

In the fourteenth century the great Arab traveller Ibn Batouta described the copper trade as practised in Takedda, an oasis of the Southern Aïr (could this be Teguidda N'tesemt, 120 miles north-east of Agades – or Azelick?). At Takedda, he wrote, 'the water is discoloured and has an unpleasant taste, for it flows across the copper mines. . . . The inhabitants are only concerned with trade: each year they make a journey to Egypt in quest of beautiful stuffs and other merchandise. . . . The copper mines are outside the town. They dig the earth to extract the mineral, and then carry it off to their homes to be smelted by slaves. After processing, the copper appears in strips a hand's-breadth and a half long, some thin, others thick. These last are sold to the number of 400 for a mithcal of gold; but for the same sum may be obtained 6–700 of the first. The bars are used as a medium of exchange. From here, the copper is exported to the city of *Kouber*, in infidel country; to *Zaghaï*, to *Bernou*, a land situated a four-day journey from Takedda and inhabited by Moslems who acknowledge the authority of a king called Idris.'[1]

Kouber denotes Gober, in Northern Nigeria; *Zaghaï* indicates – though not with very great precision – the region to the south of Timbuctoo; and *Bernou* would correspond, not to the present-day Bornu, but to Kanem whose empire – then immense – extended on the east as far as Fezzan, to Darfur in the west, and which covered, on the southern extremity, what is now Northern Nigeria. Idris, sovereign ruler of Kanem, reigned from 1307 to 1326.

The coastal region was obliged to import its copper to an even greater extent than the Sudan. The eleventh-century writer El Bekri speaks of copper rings smelted in Igli in South Morocco for export to the country of infidels (meaning the Sudanese empire of Ghana, by then on the wane) and to countries lying even farther afield. A century later, on the evidence of Irissi, Moroccan merchants exported copper and sea-shells to Tekrour which they exchanged for gold-dust and slaves. All subsequent travellers speak of copper as one of the commodities in greatest demand by the African natives.

[1] Ibn Batouta, *Voyage dans le Soudan*, Paris, 1843.

Tin was hardly more plentiful. Its only source in West Africa is in Northern Nigeria, where the mines of the Bauchi plain are today intensively exploited. A derelict pit on the outskirts of Liruen marks the site from which the old population, from the earliest times, extracted the metal. The workmen crushed it in a wooden mortar and mixed the powder thus obtained with water; the mixture was stirred and kneaded into ingots. (The entire process recalls the method employed by forest-dwellers to preserve the cosmetic they make from red bark.) The ingots were then melted, and the metal stretched into strips or wires. Bauchi tin travelled great distances in the hands of those great travellers the Hausa, the main inhabitants of Northern Nigeria: Hausa colonies are to be found scattered throughout the whole of West Africa; they have even been remarked in Morocco and Tunisia. Their pedlars transported sheets of tin to the east as far as the River Nile, to Tripoli in the north, and to the Guinea coast in the west – where Bosman in the eighteenth century witnessed the casting of a mixture of copper and tin to be made into weights for weighing gold.

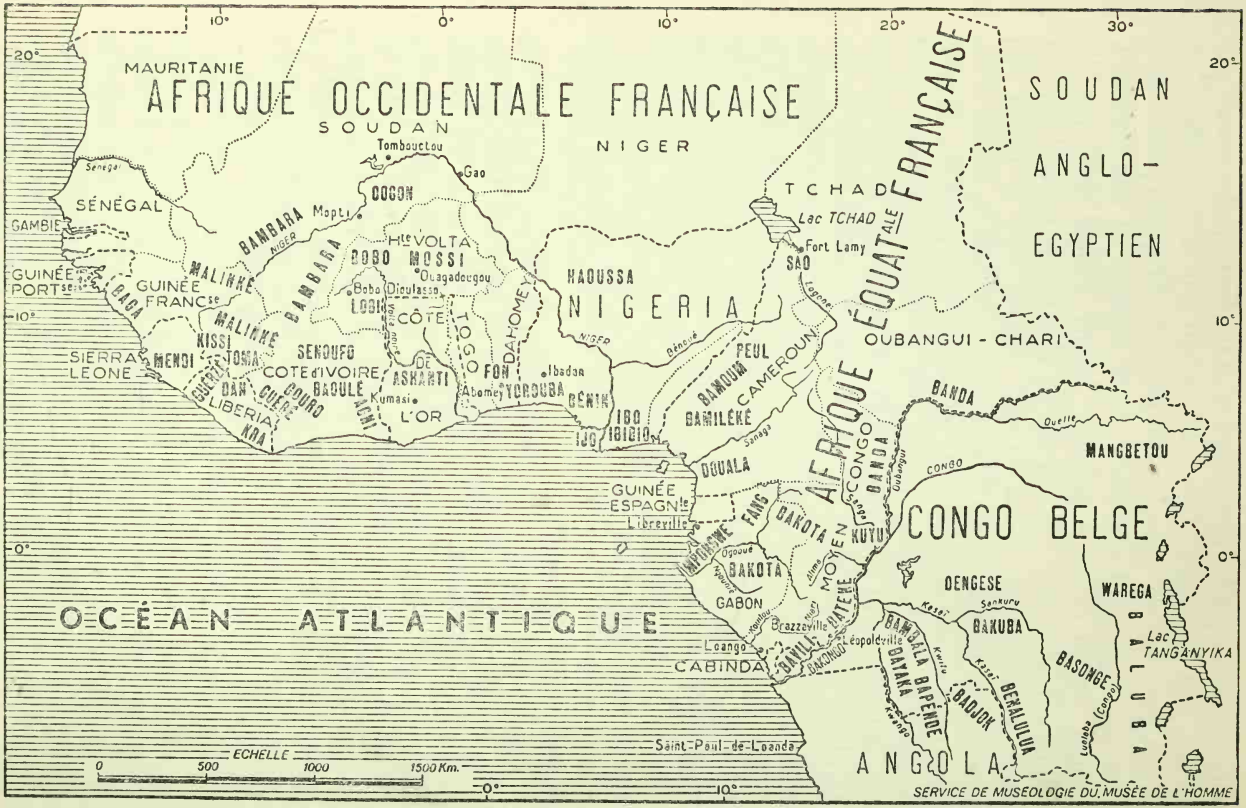
In our own time, the casting process known as *cire perdue* has been observed among the Shilluk people, the riverside dwellers of the White Nile, and as far south as the Bangali of the Congo. In Bamum country (central Cameroons), the system was imported in the last century by invaders from the north-east (which brings us back in the direction of Northern Nigeria and to the Hausa, who certainly played their part in the dissemination of the process). H. Balfour has described the way in which these same Hausa mould boxes by applying the moist membrane of an animal on to a clay shape as it dries, the membrane contracts at the same time as the clay, while retaining the same contours. Finally, the mould is broken.[1] This process could have two origins: in the casting of the *cire perdue* (in both cases the model is destroyed in the course of manufacture), or in the technique of the potter who applies a coating of damp clay on the earthenware model base.

Southern Nigeria was not ignorant of Bauchi tin, as is irrefut-

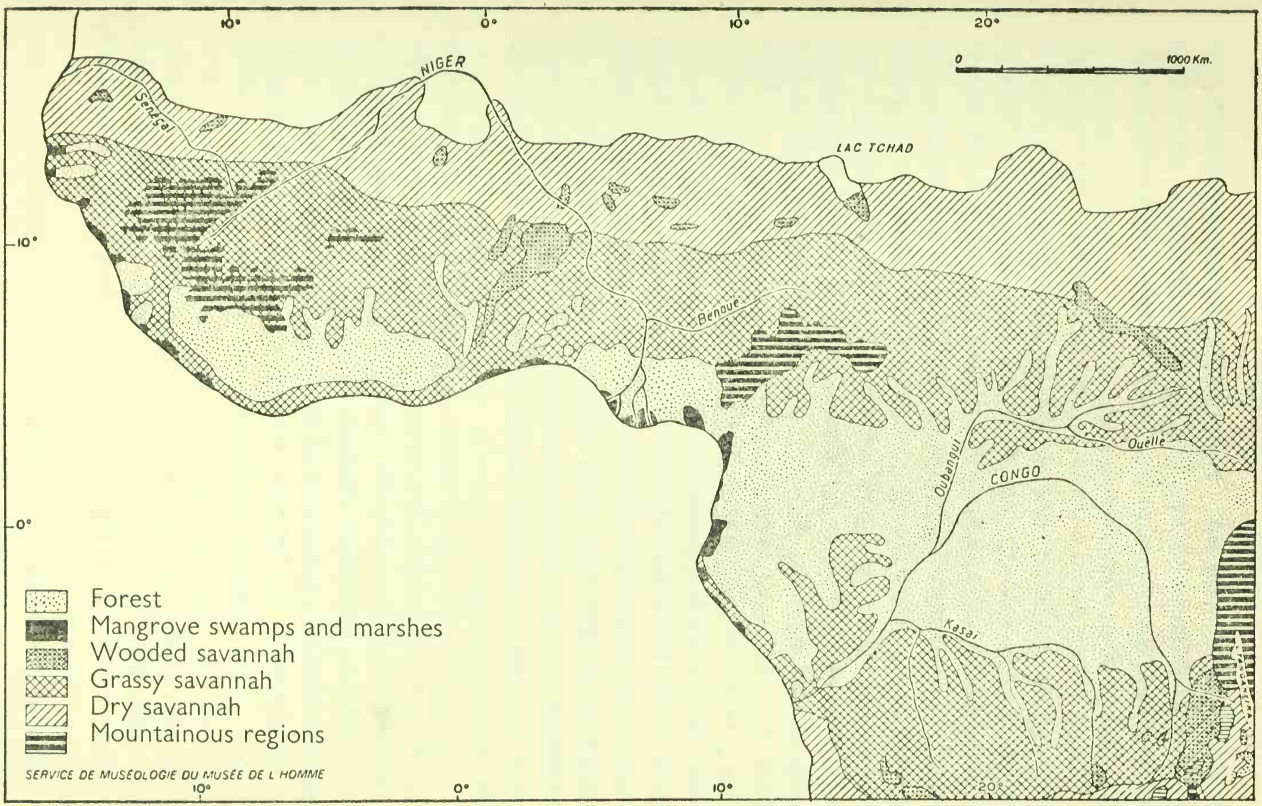
[1] Balfour, H., *The* Tandu *industry in Northern Nigeria and its affinities elsewhere. Essays* presented to C. G. Seligman, London, 1934, pp. 5–17.

ably demonstrated by Ife specimens of the fourteenth century and earlier. But this metal plays only a small part in the 'bronzes' of Benin, cast after the arrival on the scene of Europeans (never more than seven per cent according to the analyses of von Luschan). Ought we to detect a political motive behind this apparent falling-off of barter? Or is it simply that native artists judged it more profitable to re-cast existing objects such as basins and bracelets in bronze or tin which they were able to obtain from their commercial associates? At all events, they made the most of opportunities which came in this way. In 1668 Dapper mentioned the importance of the copper sold by Europeans to the natives all along the coast from Senegal to Benin – sold notably in the shape of bracelets or *manilles* of an agreed weight. Twelve or fifteen of these *manilles* in 1505 represented the price of a slave! A mixture of copper, lead and zinc, the alloy of the *manille* lent itself admirably to *cire perdue* casting, at which Nigerian artisans excelled. They excelled to a degree, for when the first Benin statues and plaques appeared in Europe, they were assigned to a source unknown! The history of the 'artistic' discovery of Benin is well worth recounting.

In 1851, the English were installed on the coast, at Lagos. The *oba*, or sovereign, of Benin, controlled by right of tradition a vast territory to the west of the Niger. In the year 1896, the British consul, a man named Phillips, wished to enter the capital during a period of religious celebrations. The *oba* asked him to defer his visit, but Phillips was obdurate and proceeded. The consequences were tragic, for he and his companions fell into an ambush and were massacred. A punitive expedition was immediately authorized by the British Government. It reached the city of Benin in January, 1897, dethroned the *oba*, established British control and – as indemnity – seized at random all the treasures of the royal palace and the houses of the leading chiefs. Bronzes and ivories were despatched to London, either as souvenirs or as plunder. In his catalogue, von Luschan lists 2,400 pieces, bronzes and ivories. At one stroke nearly all that remained of a declining, but once great, civilization vanished from its native soil. Three great collections share the spoils. One of these is the British Museum, another



Map I. Areas and populations.



Map II. Vegetation.

is the Pitt-Rivers museum at Farnham, Dorset – the biggest was that of the Berlin Museum. Nigeria today keeps only about fifty bronzes, grouped by the efforts of the Archaeological Service in the palace of the *oba* of Benin.

These works posed a problem, one both artistic and technical. How could one believe that savages had ever possessed the genius to create such masterpieces, of which their modern productions offer nothing but a caricature? 'Cellini himself was not able to cast better, nor anyone before or since him' (von Luschan). The presence on certain plaques of Europeans in sixteenth century dress suggests a Portuguese influence, for the Portuguese introduced bronze-casting in the fifteenth century (the first Portuguese ship arrived in Benin in 1472). But no European would at that time have been capable of teaching such a technique. A closer study of the history of these regions, together with an examination of Benin art, quickly dismisses such an hypothesis. On the heels of the first discoveries of Frobenius in 1910, the bringing to light of the magnificent Ife bronzes in 1939 supports the tradition which holds that the Benin craftsmen had acquired the art of casting from their neighbours in Ife, sacred city of the Yoruba race. The date here could be placed as towards the end of the thirteenth century.

The problem is not, however, resolved, for the origins of Ife art remain uncertain. We know, at least, that the *cire perdue* method was followed by the ancient Egyptians, who passed on the secret to the Greco-Nubian civilization of Meroë. Certain details of Nilotic specimens of the early Christian era have their counterparts in Ife bronzes, though these last are considerably larger. These technical similarities are not the only ones which have of late been detected between ancient Egypt and West African societies. We cite here only the elaborate ritual of slaying the divine king and enthroning his successor – this is to be found, with local variations, throughout West Africa, in the Congo and as far as Nigeria.

Along the unchanging trails one caravan succeeds another, following a trade which from one century to the next remains unaffected by the vicissitudes of history. But the route from the

Sudanese interior is not the only one. We have already referred to the *cires perdues* of the sepulchral mounds in the Niger valley and north of Timbuctoo, and the gold pectoral, brother to Moroccan jewellery, which was discovered near Saint Louis in Senegal.

In fact, right up to the end of the Middle Ages, two currents united the civilized world with the privileged region which is the heart of the Gulf of Guinea: the one starts from Upper Egypt and crosses the Sudan to Lake Chad; the other begins in North Africa and passes over the Western Sahara. It took the arrival of Islam, by these same routes, to break the chain and raise a wall between the black continent and the Western world: the West henceforth knew nothing more of Africa. Trade continued between Moslems and the natives who remained pagan, Islam transporting methods and techniques from one end to the other of her immense domain; but the natives failed to profit. By the eighteenth century their presence as slaves was noted in Malaya and as far away as the interior of China. This slave-trade was pursued without hindrance; it was on the increase until the intervention of the European powers, and only their actual occupation put an end to Islam's secular traffic. The West then became indignant at, and moved by, the spectacle of an inhumanity of which, in fact, it was not itself entirely innocent. Exactly to what degree the ever-renewed demand for slaves for the American plantations has contributed to the decay of societies over which the first visitors had flaunted their authority, we shall never know. How many masterpieces of art have been lost to the world in this way? Again, we shall never know.

Part II

Regions and Styles

IT is difficult to draw up a catalogue of African sculpture. The Congo alone comprises around a hundred races, many of which possess their own individual art. We can do no more here than list the principal styles, confining ourselves to West and Equatorial Africa, domain of native art in its truest sense.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SUDANESE SAVANNAH

(French Sudan, Upper Volta)

SOUTH of the Sahara the climate of West Africa has only a single season of rains, in the winter. Its duration is brief in the north and becomes proportionately longer as one moves south. The tropical Sudanese regions, for months at a time, experience drought, which precludes the growth of forest-land, except along the banks of streams and water-courses, where the humidity may give birth to shrub and undergrowth. It is a wilderness in the north, but towards the south savannah takes its place and gradually becomes populated, while trees – baobab, acacia and tamarind – replace thorn-bushes. Cattle-raising is still possible in the savannah which is also the domain of millet and ground-nut; and it was from here that man looked far ahead and built himself empires which ranged from the south of the Wolof country, by way of the Mandingo, the Bambara and the Mossi, up to Hausa and the Bornu.

The BAMBARA, or *Banmana*, is the most important stem of the great Mande group. Through the centuries, the Bambara have founded powerful empires; they have at all times been farmers, by vocation, rather than warriors. They comprise the bulk of the population of French Sudan. Of all the *Mande*, it was they who offered the greatest resistance to Islam: *Bambara*, 'the infidels', they are called by their Moslem neighbours.

The wood-carving here is done by blacksmiths – a despised race of men, but one which plays a vital role in social and religious

life. These artisans work soft woods, such as the *kapokia* or *Ceiba Pentandra*. The designs are simple and clear-cut, for the light and spongy fibre of the wood does not lend itself to much carving. The sculptures are generally finished by carbonizing their surfaces with a red-hot iron, which both protects the statue and gives it the desired black hue. A set of incisions or poker-work strokes overlay the groundwork of webbed arabesques in geometrical lines. Strips of copper or tin, ornamentally cut and embossed, are often affixed to the statue, as well as sea-shells, seeds and cultured pearls – and sometimes tiny, cheap mirrors, obtained from traders, are added.

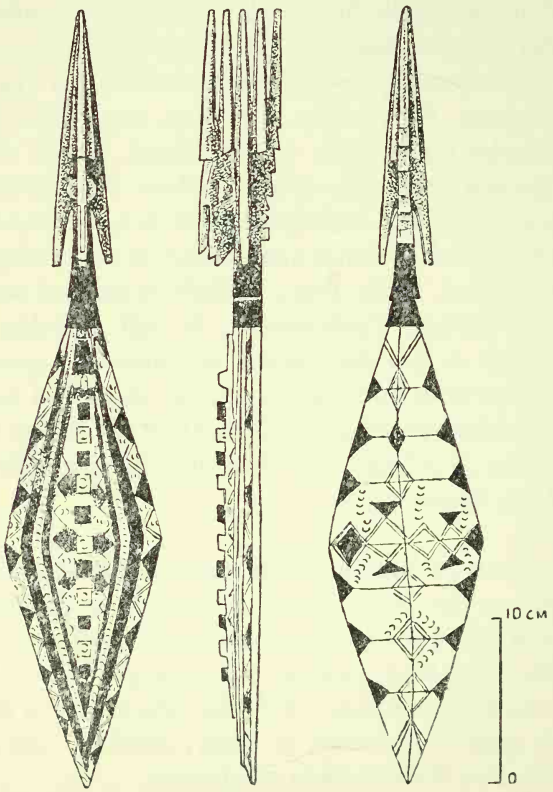


Fig. 4. Pair of wooden clappers used to beat time in dances. French Sudan *Bozo*. Length: 46 cm.

The Bambara blacksmiths sculpt statuettes of their ancestors, though these are becoming rare. They also sculpt dolls (which were at one time given to young girls to assure them of numerous progeny), marionettes and statuettes of twins. These last are destined to take the place of a dead human twin by the side of the survivor, who is never separated from his statuette. It bears the dead twin's name and gets a small present whenever its owner receives a gift. The effigy is also a protection against the attacks of scorpions. All these objects are of geometrical shape with angular contours. The features are elongated, the expression is severe, while the hair is represented by a horizontal ridge which completely encircles and extends towards the lower part of the face. The arms are set away from the body.

The *ntomo* mask presents a life-sized human face, often trimmed with sea-shells and surmounted by from two to eight horns – some examples carry between their horns a tiny, nude female figure. This mask is used in the societies of young boys: *ntomo* denotes the preparatory group which reproduces the ceremonies used in adult fraternities, and its purpose is to encourage discipline and fellowship.

Zoomorphic masks – lion, hyena and monkey – are used for one or other of the numerous, and more or less secret, societies to be found in all villages: *komo* in the Ségou region, *koré* in the Bani, *nama* in the Bélédougou. The name of the society may vary, but the general principles remain the same. Adolescents are initiated in the course of a retreat which confines them to the bush for a certain time, away from the women: this period of ordeal, marked by circumcision, gives them adult social status. They are instructed in local traditions, rules of fellowship, morals, the prohibitions and the duties which rest on members of the brotherhood, and the penalties to which they will expose themselves by infringing the rules. The society is hierarchical. At the bottom are the most recent initiates, and at the top are the Council of Elders and the chief. The essential sacred implements are musical instruments – iron or wooden trumpets, rhombs and drums – and one of the many species of *boli*. The *boli* are made from bark, wood, roots, horns, paws, claws and venoms or other

excretions of magical significance; and they are covered by a blackish crust of dried sacrificial blood. The societies moreover possess many disguises and masks, some of which are zoomorphic, while others combine human characteristics with a horse's mane, antelope horns or the jaw-bone of an ox. The masks emerge in the dry season, and may celebrate either the end of the rains, a hunt or a collective fishing trip. The most solemn of their feasts accompany the ordeals of initiation and the funerals of the great initiates. The masks appear in procession during these feasts, singing and chanting in an atmosphere of carousal and sacrifice. During these periods all farming ceases.

The main feature of the disguise adopted by the *tyi wara*, 'the great agriculturalists', is an apex to the coiffure which depicts a stylized antelope. The wearers belong to the *fla-n-kuru*, a society formed by young men who have undergone their initiation at the same time. Members of *fla-n-kuru* work communally at tasks such as clearing and tilling land, sowing and harvesting; and their masked and costumed dances have much in common with ancient agrarian rites. The mask is fixed on to a small straw cap; the dancer moves half-crouched, supported by a cane, and performs jumps which recall the bounding of an antelope. The male mask is larger than the female one, and the antelope is usually depicted complete with penis. It is also provided with a mane, the construction of which lends itself to an extremely stylized design executed in open-work (Pl. 1). The apex of the coiffure representing the female is both smaller and less elaborate; the neck-line, which is completely open, allows the antelope to carry her young on her back, like all African mothers.

The sculpture here includes the ornamentation of articles of furniture, notably wooden locks. These locks are of a type which Islam has scattered from the Near East and North Africa as far as Tanganyika and Chad. Only in the Sudan, among the 'pagan' natives, has a lock of this type resulted in a work of art. The Bambara sculpt the centre surround of the lock in the form of human beings, crocodiles, lizards, tortoises, of wooden clogs and even of crescent moons.

Lastly, the *wasamba* are sistrums, or rattles, made of small pieces

of calabash threaded on to a wooden stem; and they are played by shaking the stem backwards and forwards. The instrument often carries at the apex the tiny model of a mask. The *wasamba* are to be found only in the hands of young boys and girls during

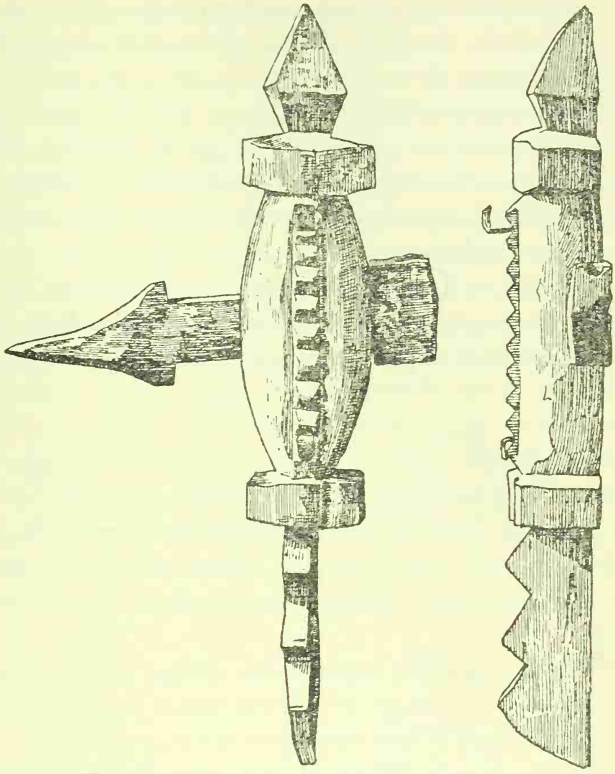


Fig. 5. Lock. Sudan, *Malinke*. Ht.: 37 cm.

the retreats of initiation. They serve to indicate the presence of the young people from whom the common herd must keep its distance.

Close kinsmen of the Bambara, the MALINKE are nearly all converts to Islam. In spite of this, they own some statuettes, and also zoomorphic masks in very high relief. In style, these are mid-way between that of Bambara and Senoufo sculpture.

The DOGON (sometimes called *Habbe*, sing. *Kaddo* – 'pagan' in the language of their Peul neighbours) are today one of the best-known tribes of West Africa. For some centuries they have entrenched themselves in the centre of the bend of the Niger, on the fringe of an immense rock plateau. They built their village, a strange huddle of 'terraced' houses and granaries, all with thatched and pointed roofs, from the debris of the cliff's rock-falls and landslides. Looking down from above, from the brink of the plateau, is to see a fantastic lunar landscape. All colour has vanished, and even contours are obliterated in waves of heat. Beyond, stretching away as far as the horizon itself, there is nothing visible but a plain of sand, dotted sparsely with bushes. The first impression is unforgettable.

The Dogon live by the cultivation of millet. Their fields are situated in the tiny valleys which divide the plateau into furrows or cling to the cliff-slopes. Only a few yards long, and smaller still in width, some of these 'fields', supported by walls of sun-bleached stones, can only be reached by means of a rope-ladder. The burial-grounds consist of horizontal 'faults' or breaks in the rock-face; ruined buildings, now inaccessible, appear to have been ancient granaries. Many of the dwelling-houses of the village back on to the rock, and a notched pole allows access by means of a 'chimney' to the terrace which forms the lower floor of another dwelling.

Sheltered within their impregnable refuge, the Dogon have preserved intact a heritage which elsewhere has been debased. Dogon society may at first sight give the impression of a closed world. In fact, outside influences have been absorbed, but these are so deeply embedded that today one would hesitate to class them as foreign.

The rich mythology of the Dogon rests on a ritual of extraordinary detail and precision. All its sculpture is inspired by religion. Anthropomorphic statues are linked to the cult of ancestor worship. These statues are of personages who may be either seated or standing; their aspect is severe, their contours elongated and angular. Arms and knees are bent; sometimes the arms may be raised, imploring rain. The statuettes are kept in

the granaries or under the rock porch-roofs, side by side with the small articles of pottery used in the libations offered to the deified souls of departed ancestors. After long exposure to the elements, the statues have a greyish surface and a characteristically rough and clotted appearance. The same effect is to be found on doors or granary shutters, which are decorated with several rows of people standing in line. The Dogon locks are of the same style as those of Bambara. They are designed with either two 'personages' (the ancestral couple), or with a single individual, or occasionally with a simple head complete with a beard which is so stylized that it is no more than a triangle or in some instances, a square. Sometimes the two 'personages' are simplified into horns; in which case the surround of the lock will carry a zoomorphic décor in *champ-levé*. The Dogon also produce cylindrical wooden goblets, with covers surmounted by a horseman or a seated figure, also boxes (in which the women preserve the vegetable fat in

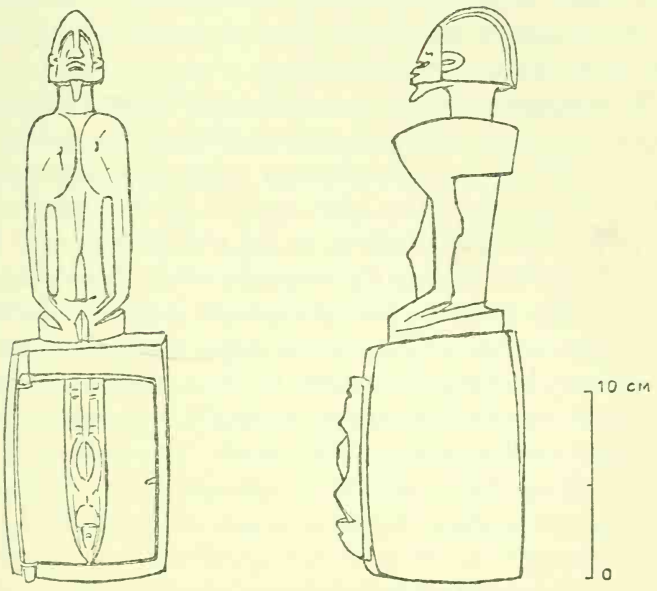


Fig. 6. Butter-dish. Sudan, *Dogon*. Men and women smear their bodies with vegetable butter during festivals. Ht.: 30 cm.

which they soak their hair and sometimes the whole of their bodies on feast days) and, most important of all, masks.

Masks are an essential factor in the societies to which all the adult males of the village belong. Today they appear only during male funerals and at the remembrance services which are held every two or three years for really important men. They no longer play a part in the rituals of seed-time and harvest, though they may be used as a warning to preserve the crops and fruit from possible marauders. The masks are normally kept outside the village, away from female eyes, together with the costumes which also play a part in the ritual, and with the giant 'mother of masks' – an enormous human face, set on a sinuous plank, thirty feet or more in length. A new specimen of 'the mother of masks' is carved for the great feast of *sigi*, formerly celebrated every sixty years. The mask used to pass from one village to the next amidst feasting of such abundance that the villagers were fit for nothing for a long time to come. The 'mother of masks' is a sacred object; and it is never worn. At the death of an old man who is also a great initiate, the mask is mounted on the dead man's terrace for a nocturnal sacrifice.

In the beginning, says a Dogon myth, man did not know death: all who reached an advanced age transformed themselves into serpents or demons and entered a new world where an unknown language was spoken. One day, amazed to find that he was undergoing this transformation, an old man so far forgot himself to abuse the living in the language which should have remained foreign to them. The infringement caused his death: he was the first corpse. To appease the anger of the dead towards the survivors, his kinsmen sculpted the first 'mother of masks' – the wooden image of the serpent he should have become. They also carved – still according to the myth – the mask of an old man, and prepared fibre skirts and hoods and an iron *rhomb* (bull-roarer) – this as an effigy of 'the clacking tongue of tired old men'. When all was ready, everyone took up an iron *crosse-siège* (*dolaba*) and a rectangular calabash and made their way towards the wooden serpent and the new High Elder, head of the tribe. Dances and chanting furnished an historical account of the events which had

inspired this, the first *sigi*, the first great commemorative feast. Bull-roarers in wood and iron, *crosses-sièges* in the same materials, *sigi* calabashes – these objects are of the same ritual importance, are charged with the same terrible powers, as the masks and fibre skirts which accompany their ceremonies. (Another version, as we have already seen, attributes the invention of the mask to a woman who stole the disguises of evil spirits, and attributes to another woman the invention of death, which God had offered for sale at the price of a white cow: the men refused the bargain, but the woman accepted.)

Masks are made of three materials. Firstly, of bark – and these of a single design. This is the most ancient of all masks; it does not appear at funeral ceremonies, but in normal times it protects the crops. Then there is the mask made of plaited fibres and trimmed with cowrie shells (as are the hoods worn by virgins and Peul women); and, finally, the mask carved from wood. (See Pl. II.) The wooden masks of the Dogon are of an easily recognizable style. They are carved on a vertical plane and are painted with either a speckled design or one consisting of black, red and white triangles: a design which has been effaced from the very earliest works. A havelock, or neck-cover of plaited fibre is fixed on to the periphery of the mask, the rear part of which remains open. Triangular apertures are contrived for the eyes; the nose forms a thin, vertical ridge which cuts the face in two; while the mouth juts aggressively forward – that is, when it is not absent altogether. When in use, the mask is held in place by a thin wooden stick which is fixed inside and gripped between the teeth of the wearer. These masks represent social types, such as the old man and woman, the hunter, the magician and the shoemaker, the young girl and the brigand. Animals are also featured: the black monkey, the white monkey, the crocodile, numerous species of antelope, the hyena, the hare and the lion. So are demons. The performance is held in the village square, where each variety of mask has its special dance to a rhythm dictated by the beat of drums. One of the most extraordinary of these masks is known as the 'house of tiers', a comparatively recent example which brings to mind certain structures in use at various

points in the Islam world. This mask is carved from a single trunk, and is over fifteen feet high. The face is rectangular and is surmounted by a long board which is grooved and latticed and adorned with triangles. The wearer, who is also an athlete, performs a repertory of acrobatic dances. In one such dance, the mask being lowered until it is quite horizontal, the dancer then proceeds to spin around on himself; in another, the dancer kneels and lowers his head, first forward, then back, to a point where he touches the ground with the top of the mask. The best-known mask is the *kanaga*, which is shaped like the Cross of Lorraine. Face and forehead are carved with great hollows for the eyes; a crest of red and yellow fibres extends from one cheek to the other by way of the crown of the head; and from here rises the flat staff of a Cross of Lorraine. The transverse pieces of the 'cross' are made of two small bars of equal size, joined and bound with string; while the top of the staff is often completed by the addition of two anthropomorphic figurines. The dance is a violent whirling of head and shoulders which has the effect of bringing the mask downwards to scrape the ground, and always in the same direction. The right hand holds a fly-swat, the left a sword.

After the feast, the masks are deposited in a rocky shelter on the outskirts of the village area. White ants and worms are quick to attack them: a Dogon mask is never very old.

Finally, painted stones or paintings on the rock-faces must be considered together with the masks which they represent and near which they are found. Their purpose is to conserve the spiritual force of death which the mask is unable to retain without danger to those who wear it. Sometimes these paintings are explained by the natives as being first sketches of the mask which it is proposed to carve; sometimes, again, as illustrations which assist the teaching of art by the experts of the tribe. The paintings are executed by tribal elders, either with a stick to which a wad of cloth is attached or with a feather, or sometimes only with a finger dipped in colour. The black paint has a base of powdered coal, the red a base of iron-oxide, while the white is made from pulped millet. Masks apart, the only other motif is that of the money-bag, which plays an indispensable part in *sigi* ceremonies.

These paintings are symbolic rather than figurative, and the meaning of certain of them is hard to state precisely. Their age is impossible to determine, for the paintings are renewed from time to time, and those which may appear the most recent are often the oldest.

Dogon masks and statues of good quality are rare. The *Musée de l'Homme* has a practically complete collection, as well as holding the only known examples of the 'mother of masks'. The Dogon continue to carve masks, but their recent work shows a marked decline. They are visited by many tourists nowadays, and a great number of masks are designed to be sold to them. This industry has produced nothing artistically comparable to the old sculptures.

The Mossi, who number more than a million and a half, are grouped together in two feudal states whose capitals are Ouahigouya and Ouagadougou. A despot who inspires in his subjects a quasi-religious veneration, the *mogho-naba*, assisted by his ministers, governs a heterogeneous multitude. The aristocracy built up a network of officials and civil servants under whom exist a mass of peasants and hereditary artisans: blacksmiths whose wives are potters, jewellers, joiners, dyers and basket-makers and, finally, slaves. Outside the towns, which have fairly large Moslem populations, the Mossi have resisted Islam.

Mossi art lacks variety, and the general effect of its forms is uninspiring. It seems to derive quite as much from an earlier population as from neighbouring tribes. What has been borrowed from outside sources is easily detectable in the case of masks.

These masks, *wando* (sing. *waógo*) are only to be encountered in the villages where artisans – blacksmiths in particular – are living. The *wando* belong to an association of young villagers who come together to perform their dances at the funerals of the community's old men. The masks are always assumed in the shelter of fruit-trees, *karité* and *mpeku*. The farmer, descendant and delegate of the first occupants, is custodian of the masks and their accessories. We see here the survival of an agrarian cult, where masks play a

part comparable perhaps to that which still holds good today among the Bambara and the Bobo.

The mask itself is made from soft wood and is oval in shape. Two holes are pierced for eyes, and between them is a vertical, medial ridge. There is no mouth. The face is topped by a pair of horns and by a wooden blade more than six feet in height. This blade is cut out in a lattice pattern and carries a geometrical design in white, red and black. The horns are those of the great *Koba* antelope, and, depending on the sex of the mask, they are either perpendicular or curved. The *palette* is without any particular characteristics, or, alternatively, may be completed by a female figure to which it serves as a base.

The *Wando* dance to the music of flute and drum, accompanied by chants and panegyrics in a secret language. The dancer holds his arms close to his body, with the fore-arms stretched stiffly before him. The dance is performed with the upper part of the body – the head and shoulders – and with the legs. The mask is always surrounded by a circle of young people dressed in a thin strip of cotton decorated with cowries and carrying small bags at the sides. 'These young people perform head movements identical with those performed by circus horses.'[1] The foregoing would appear to bear a strong resemblance to what is to be observed among the Dogon people.

At Ouagadougou, the specialist artisans, using copper bars imported from the exterior, make figurines by means of the *cire perdue* technique which portray scenes from contemporary life. These figurines are intended solely for tourists, and are of small interest.

The rains are more violent, the winter season longer, in direct proportion to one's progress south. This gives birth to enormous graminaceae, which are promptly destroyed each year by the great fires caused by the *harmattan* – the hot and parching land-wind of these parts. *Erythrophleum guineense*, *Afzelia africana*,

[1] Dim Delobson, 'Les danses mossies et leur signification', *Revue anthropologique*, 1932, pp. 169–73.

Khaya senegalensis – the trees are magnificent, but survival is limited to those species capable of resisting the fire. The earth here is extremely friable, and the slightest incline encourages the rushing streams to erode a ferruginous slab of rock or the underlying laterite. Where humus exists it is of poor quality and is totally non-existent over great areas – from Casamance to the north of Dahomey. This is the domain of hunters of antelope, panther and buffalo; it is also a region in which the tse-tse fly abounds. Certain races from the south of the Upper Volta are among the most afflicted by sleeping-sickness in the whole of West Africa. It is both a waste-land and a no-man's-land between the kinder countries of Northern Sudan and the Guinea world. The people of this poverty-stricken region, half starving on a diet of millet and fonio (the latter, according to Richard-Molard, being 'perhaps the most miserable of the world's cereals'), were quite recently still exposed to the man-hunting raids of the North-Sudanese emperors and the petty rulers of South Guinea.

Straddled between French Sudan and the Upper Volta, the Bobo (a word which means 'stammerer' in Mande) form the bulk of the population in the towns of San, Bobo Dioulasso, Diébougou and Dédougou. They are divided into three groups: Bobo 'blacks' (*Bobo Fing*), Bobo 'whites' (*Bobo Gbe*) and Bobo 'reds' (*Bobo Oulé*). Not that these divisions are prompted either by the colour of their skins or the colour of their raiment: their function is purely discriminatory. The Bobo were already settled in their present lands at the time the Mossi appeared, a date which goes back to the eleventh century. The fact that they are loyally attached to their fields and villages, plus the political and natural conditions in which they found themselves, explains why they have scarcely advanced from their original village-community civilization.

The greater part of the known works of art have been produced by the Bobo 'blacks' (*Bobo Fing*) in the vicinity of Bobo Dioulasso – as, for example, the square or rectangular footstools furnished with handles of anthropomorphic design and decorated with human figures which sometimes take on animal characteristics.

We know very little indeed of Bobo masks (*do*). They appear at funerals and at the feasts which mark the end of a period of mourning, as do Dogon masks. They also appear at the feast of the dead, which is held every year in May – that is to say at the time when work is once more resumed in the fields. In addition, they may be used to exorcise the village. The young folk who personify the *do* ('guardian demons of the village') dress themselves in fibre costumes which are arranged around the legs, arms and body in tufts sufficiently thick to form a complete disguise. They arm themselves with two short sticks and a leafy bough, which is sometimes replaced by a whip. Their polychrome masks represent animals – a cock, a sparrow-hawk, a buffalo or an antelope – or, alternatively, they may depict certain human 'types' such as 'the Peul girl'. The decoration is stylized and geometrical. One kind of mask with a round flat face and a curved beak protruding from it, and surmounted by a board with an open-work chequered pattern, is strongly reminiscent of the Dogon 'house of tiers' (Pl. III).

The masks are carved by blacksmiths in soft wood; abandoned after use, they are soon the prey of white ants. All the same, if a mask should be broken in the course of its dance, it will be interred like a human being, and its wearer will be treated as a murderer. In the sacred grove, the retreat of the *do*, the guilty person will offer a hen, a goat or a dog as a sacrifice and expiation, to which is added a libation of millet beer.

The Bobo have also tried their hand at metal-work. Pedlars following their well-worn paths across country, moving from market to market, crying their wares, bring with them bars of copper bought from the coast, which they re-sell to the local blacksmiths. The blacksmiths manufacture jewellery – bracelets, ankle-rings, rings and pendants – by the *cire perdue* process. In addition, they cast small amulets and figurines which reproduce scenes from everyday life: a horseman, a set of twins or a male-and-female couple.

The populations of RAMEAU LOBI (Koulango, Dorossie, Gan Dian, Teguessie, Lobi itself, Birifor) are very scattered and total,

some 150,000 people who occupy the confines of the Upper Volta, the Ivory Coast and the Gold Coast.

Their sculpture is poor and only one object is known which is typically Lobi: the club-bench with three feet which the Birifor, the Lobi and the Teguessie carry on their shoulders when they move from one place to another. The elongated handle of the bench is often ornamented with a head bearing the helmeted coiffure favoured by these tribes. There are no masks. The small carvings which purport to be such are the result of the whim of a European who had a Baule mask copied by a Lobi artisan. The work was well-received and was reproduced in large numbers, but nevertheless these objects, apart from lacking in all artistic merit, have never formed part of the life of the community.

The metal jewellery of the Lobi scarcely differs from that worn by the Bobo and the Mossi. The artisan's inspiration often comes from a vegetable model, whether it be a bracelet made like woven grass or a ring set with a nut. Copper pendants have a prophylactic value: worn on the advice of a medicine-man or soothsayer, they may take the shape of a sheathed dagger, or that of the terrible horned viper or – a frequent motif – a chameleon. Finally, we should mention certain wooden whistles which carry an extremely stylized human profile.

The SENOUFA, who call themselves *Siena*, inhabit vast regions in the confines of French Sudan, Upper Volta and the Ivory Coast. Excellent agriculturists but mediocre warriors, they have found themselves placed at different times, to a greater or lesser extent under the domination of foreign races of Mande origin.

The region in which the character of this population has been best preserved is that of Korhogo on the Ivory Coast: it is here that we find the greatest number of objects in sculpted wood. Poorly formed, but exceedingly decorative, the Senoufa style is often used in the manufacture of African 'souvenirs'. The sculptors have a preference for *sun sun*, one of the ebony family (*Diospyros mespiliformes*), the wood of which, relatively soft when it is worked green, hardens and darkens as it ages. They finish masks

and statues by staining the surface with a dark dye applied to a red foundation.

Of the statuary, ancestral figures are quasi-obligatory: men and women with elongated faces and strongly emphasized projecting lower jaws. The hair forms a longitudinal crest, while the arms are set akimbo. The height varies, and the smallest of these sculptures are often the most accomplished. For funerals, two great statues, one masculine, the other feminine, are set up in the village square, and carry on their heads the bowls in which the offertory is placed.

The Senoufa occupying the east bank of the Bandama have sacred groves both on the outskirts of, and inside, the village. These contain talismans and ancestral relics, as well as masks and accessories of the cult – costumes, masks, musical instruments, etc. In these groves, the Senoufa, like all African societies, hold their schools of initiation. During the retreat period, which lasts at

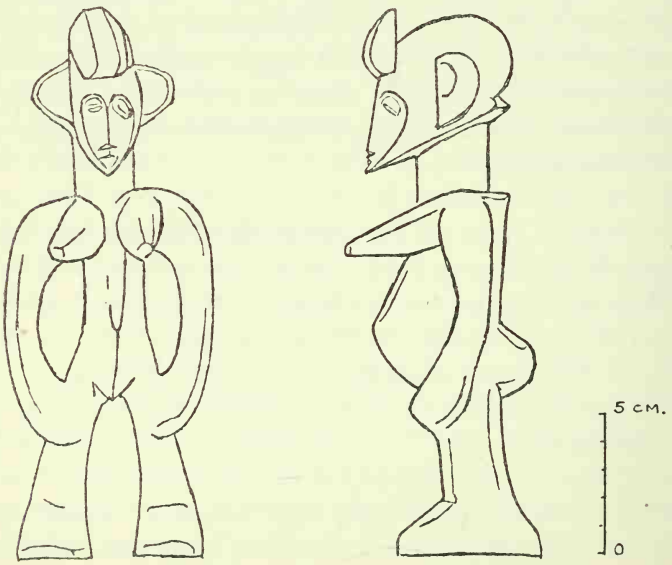


Fig. 7. Statuette of a woman in blackened wood. Ivory Coast (North), *Senoufo*. Ht.: 20 cm.

least a month, the neophytes never leave the place of instruction and wear no clothes. They are taught a special language in which they are made to repeat various litanies, and are exercised in the ceremonies of the cult. Only the initiates have the right to attend ritual funerals and – particularly – the dances held at night away from the presence of women. The dancers wear enormous wooden masks; these are horned, and as a general rule the entire head-piece represents the head of an animal. These *gbon* also make their appearance in the village on moonlit nights. The costume is contrived from a thick fringe of *da*, a species of hemp. It is arranged on two hoops, one being suspended from the mask and the other allowed to hang to hip length by braces. In his hand the *gbon* carries a whip. He dances to drum-beats, trumpets and chanting; and his task is to protect the village against the sorcerers for whom his music has an irresistible fascination. To encounter the mask by chance is a serious matter for the non-initiated, particularly for a woman. It is an offence that carries a heavy penalty. The *gbon* is gifted with superhuman faculties. He can with impunity seat himself on a brazier; he can mount a roof at a single bound; he can sprinkle with fire a sorcerer inside his house without setting fire to the thatch.[1] (Pl. v.)

A bird with a long beak surmounts the majority of masks vulgarized to suit export contracts. The same bird is to be found, in relief, on doors, and on the lids of boxes where women keep the *karite* butter with which they anoint their hair. It also forms the main motif of the pulleys of weaving-looms.

Ancestral statues and masks are carved by hereditary craftsmen, the *Koule*. The *lorho*, members of another caste, work the copper which comes chiefly from the exterior, and convert it into jewellery. The metal is softened in the fire, and then hammered on the anvil until the desired shape is achieved: the groovings and reliefs are obtained with a sharp-pointed tool while the metal is still soft. The *lorho* also practise a variant – crude though it is – of *cire perdue* casting. A wax model is prepared which is surrounded by clay. On the top of this they make an aperture in the shape of a

[1] Prouteaux, M., 'Note sur certains rites magico-religieux de la haute Côte d'Ivoire. Les Gbons', *L'Anthropologie*, 29, 1918–19, pp. 37–52.

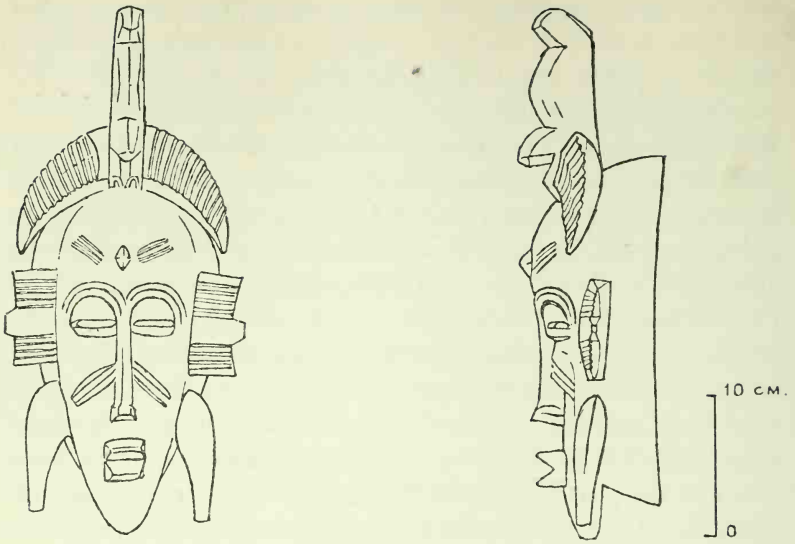


Fig. 8. Wooden mask, made for sale to foreigners. Ivory Coast (North), *Senoufo*. Ht.: 37 cm.

funnel. The melted copper is poured into this funnel by means of an earthenware crucible with a long handle of wood and iron, and the boiling metal melts and evaporates the wax whose place it takes.

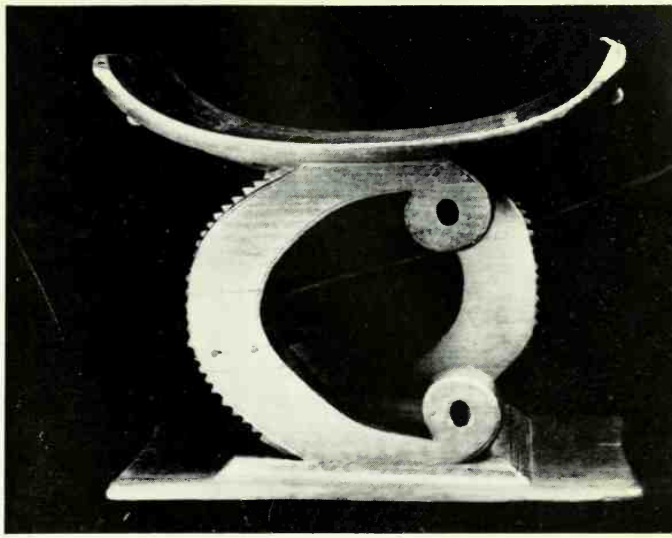
Sudan, *Bambara.*
Hair ornament, stylized male antelope.

Sudan, *Dogon*.
'Robber's' mask.

1. Ivory Coast,
Box for divination by mice.

2. Ivory Coast, *Baule*.
Gu mask.

Shana, *Ashanti*.
Black pottery.



1. Ghana, *Ashanti*.
Stool.

2. Dahomey, *Fon*.
Throne, showing the king under his parasol, surrounded by his wives. Below, soldiers surrounding chained prisoners.

PLATE XIV

1. Nigeria, *Ife*.
Bronze head, reputed to be of *Olokun*.

2. Nigeria, *Benin*
Bronze wall-plaque.

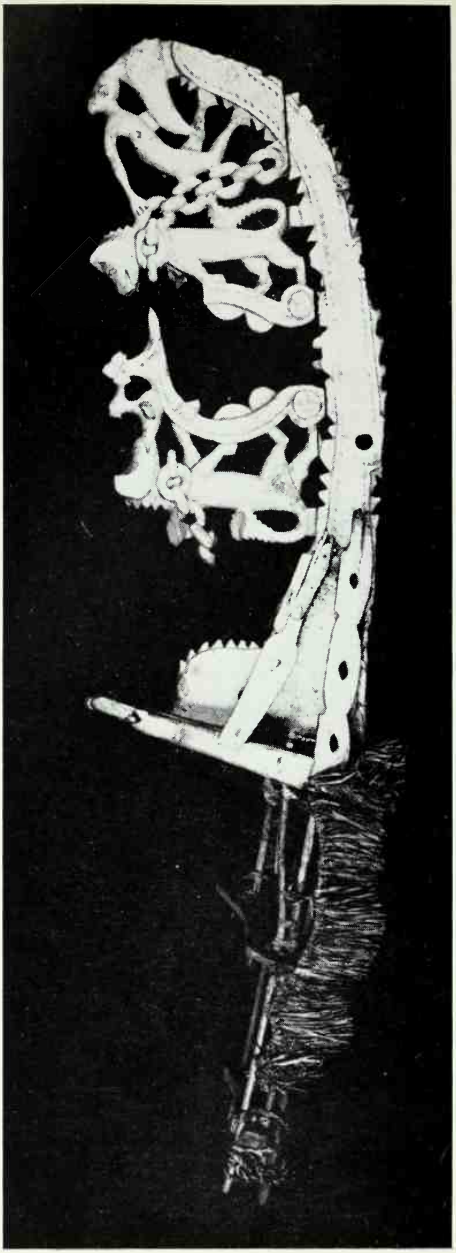
1. Chad pottery, *sao*.
Ancestral figure.

2. Chad pottery, *sao*.
Head.

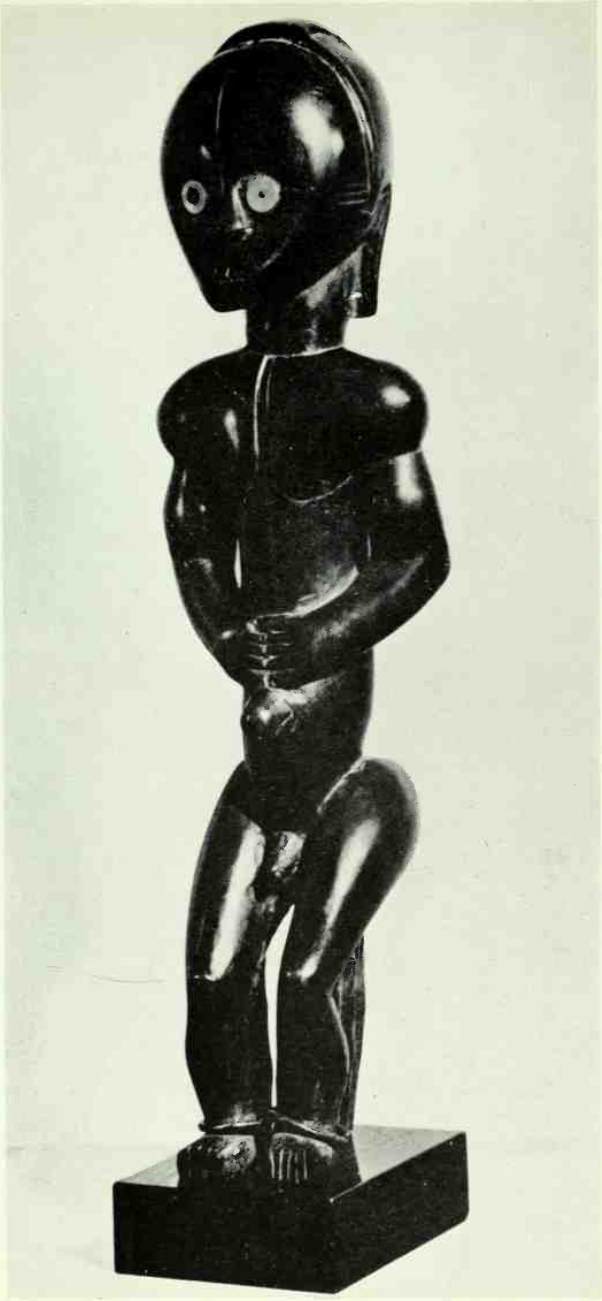
PLATE XVI

Southern Nigeria. *Ijo* masks
of the *Sakapu* Society
in black wood.

Cameroons, Batouffam district.
Bamileke architecture.



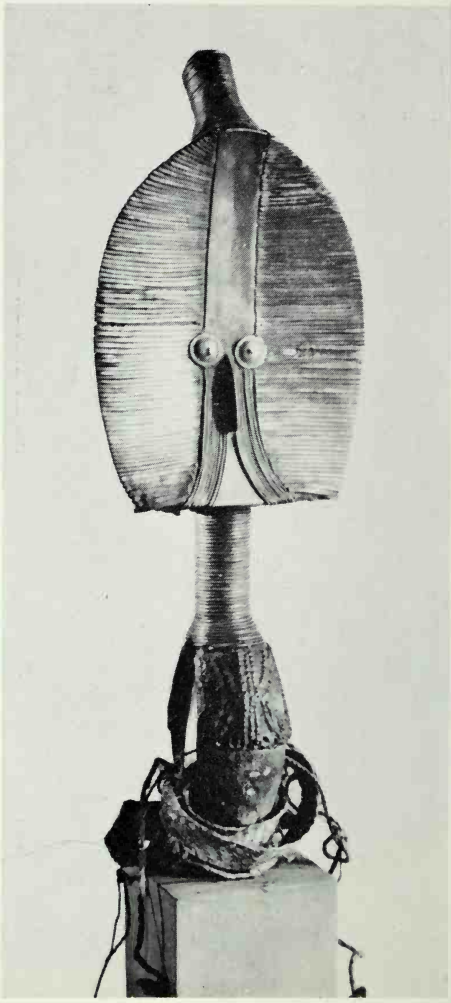
Cameroons, *Duala*.
Prow of a canoe.



Gaboon, *Fang*.
Byeri funeral statue.

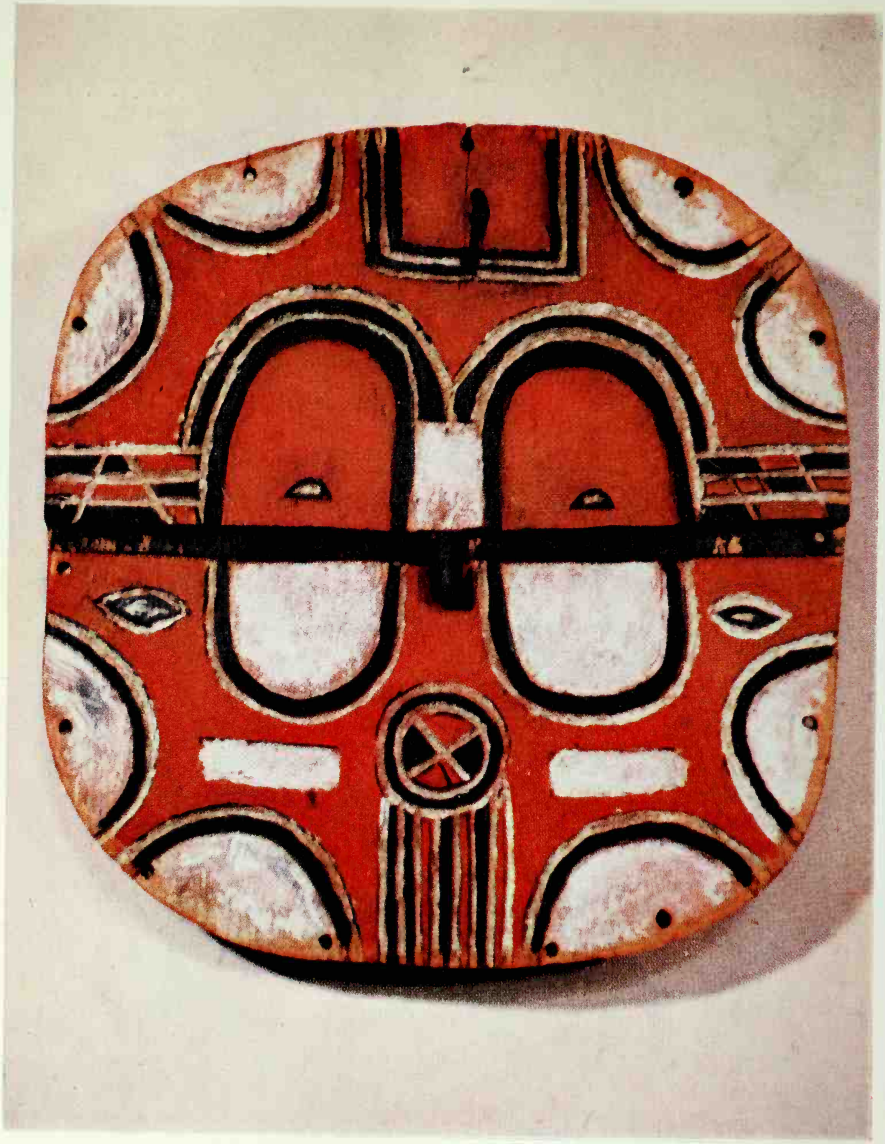
Gaboon funeral images, wood covered with copper leaf.

1. Bakota.

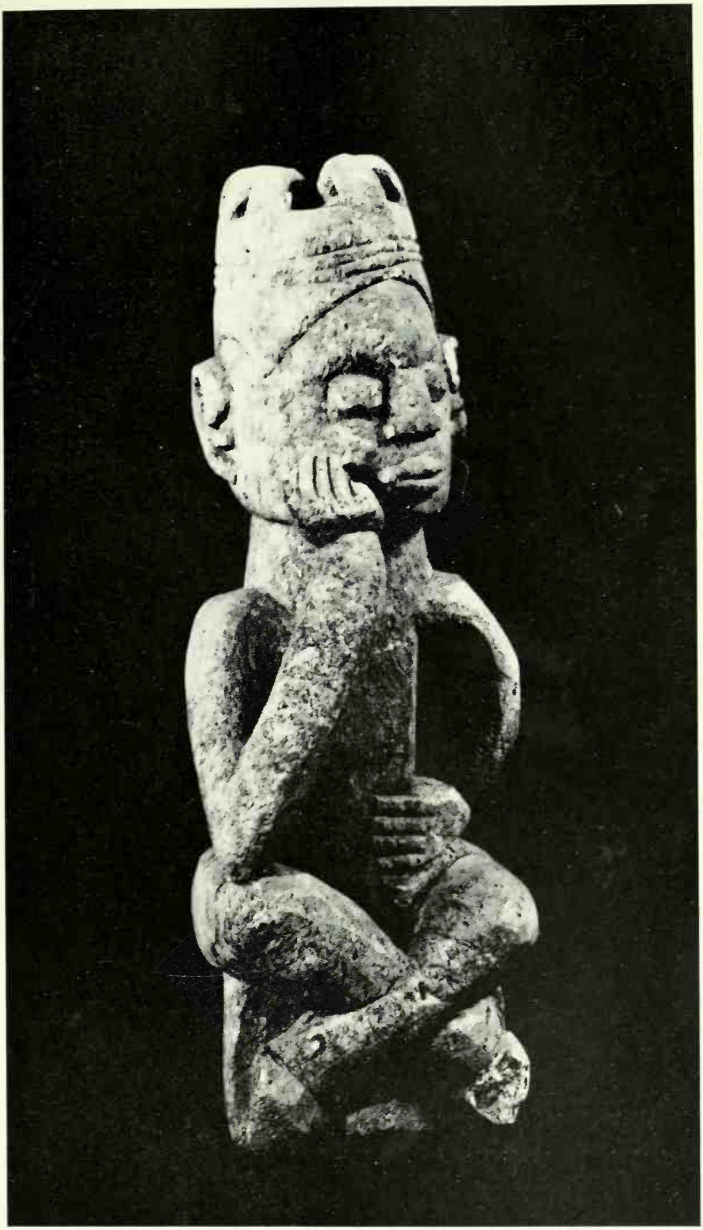


2. *Ossyeba.*

Gaboon, *Bakota* mask.



Middle Congo, *Bateke* mask.



Angola, *Bakongo*.
Stone statue found on a tomb.

Middle Congo, Bavili.
Reliquary statuette with nails, *nkisi nkonde*.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ATLANTIC COAST AND FOREST

(Portuguese Guinea, French Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, West Ivory Coast)

On following the sea-board from Dakar, one first encounters Islamic populations. These, while not comprising the whole, are numerous enough to proscribe very nearly all human or animal representation in art. However, the circumcised men of Casamance do wear basket-work masks decorated with red berries and crowned by antelope horns. The eyes are formed by two cylinders which project from the head; and these, too, are of basket-work. Fibres attached to the base of the mask hang down and disguise the wearer.

The Bissago Islands provide ancestral statuettes, as well as female statues in light wood with legs set wide apart and long, slender bodies. The woman sometimes carries a child. Their masks take the shape of the head of a hippopotamus or an ox. These islanders also carve the prows of boats, again in the shape of an enormous ox-head.

Originating in the north, the BAGA (including the *Landuman*, properly called *Nalu*) occupy the coast of French Guinea, a strange land where it is difficult to distinguish where the water ends and the land begins. Man exists only thanks to rice, which prospers in this amphibious region. The work is laborious, and is carried out by means of a long spade with an oar-shaped blade which bears an engraved design. The society is broken up into

small neighbouring – and enemy – groups. Each tribe – sometimes each village – tended formerly to isolate itself in the midst of an empty space; and intrusion here carried the risk of death. The only common bond between these people is the *Simô*, a secret society of a kind prevalent in Africa. Our most precise and rewarding information concerning the *Simô* dates back more than a hundred years, to the *Journal* of René Caillié:

'Among the peoples who live on the banks of the Rio Nuñez there exists a secret society which has certain affinities with Freemasonry. This society, which has a chief (who is also a magistrate) is known as the *Simô* . . . . This chief keeps to the woods and remains unknown to those who are strangers to his mysteries. His acolytes are young people who are only partially initiated into his secrets. He assumes various disguises: sometimes he adopts the guise of a pelican, sometimes he clothes himself in animal skins, sometimes he reveals himself only when covered from head to foot in leaves which make him appear shapeless.'[1]

The activities of the *Simô* become manifest in the dry season, and particularly after the rice harvest. The threshing of grain is followed by rejoicings in which the initiates appear in masks and dance around sculptures such as the *anok*. The *anok* is a bird with a great long beak and two small horns which are filled with magical powders. The *Simô*, in common with all African mask-societies, also plays a part at its members' funerals.

Linked with male initiations is the *Bansonyi* (a mask which the Baga have never allowed to be photographed), a painted, fret-worked board which may be up to twenty feet in height. It has a sinuous outline and is completed at the summit by two feathers or by a strip of material which floats in the wind. The wearer is invisible under a frame covered with palm leaves. This mask is inevitably to be compared with the great masks of the Sudan, of the Mossi, the Bobo and the Dogon.

In the Nalu country, the *Banda* is a stylized crocodile head in

[1] Caillié, René, *Journal d'un voyage à Temboctou . . .*, Paris, Impr. royale, 1830, 3 vol., I, p. 227.

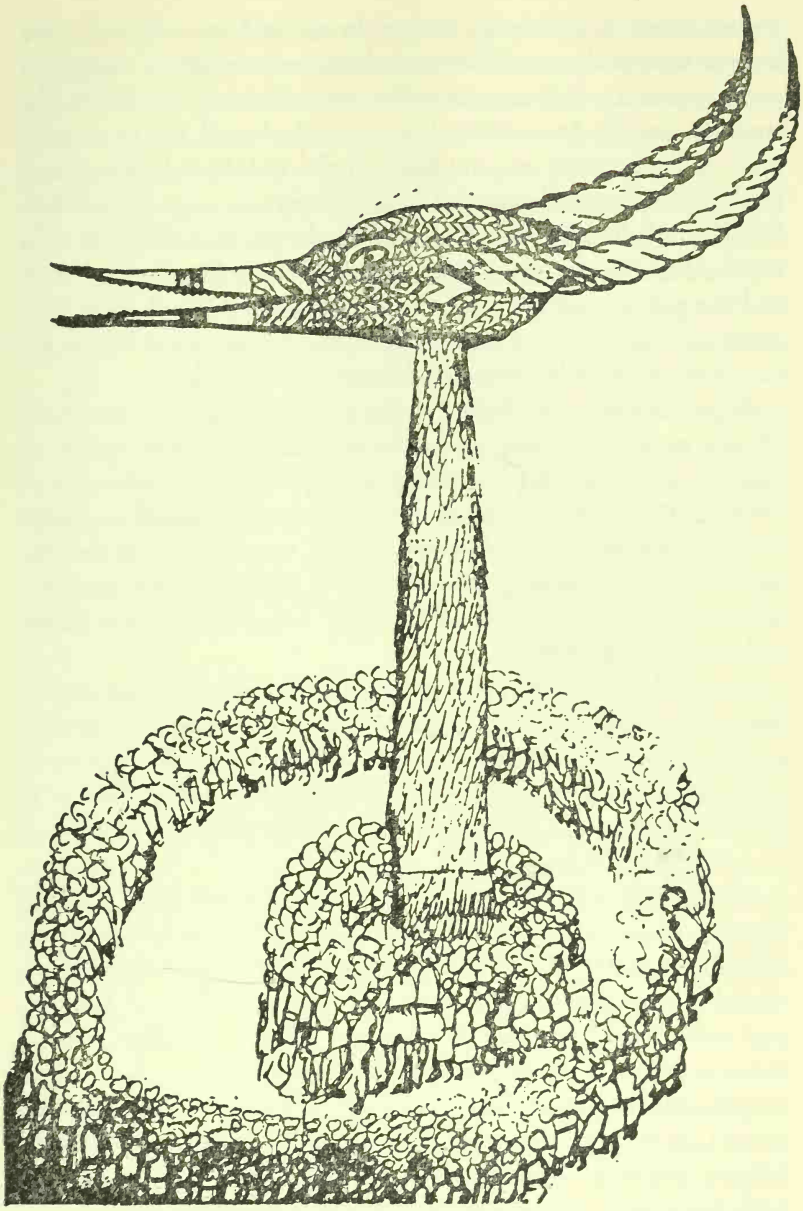


Fig. 9. *Baga* mask, Guinea. Drawn in 1954 by Moussa Bangoura, *Baga* from the village of Monchon, about 35 years of age.

polychrome; it has long, striped horns and is endowed with human nose and eyes. This mask links man with the two great complementary sources, water (the crocodile) and the forest (the antelope horns). At one time it was greatly feared, for to stumble upon it by accident meant death to the uninitiated. The *Banda* is placed horizontally on the head – its length may exceed five feet (Pl. IV). Finally, the *Nimba* is the larger-than-life bust of a woman, thin-faced and with a horizontal chin. The hooked nose, and the grooves which score the cheeks are typical. A long fibre costume conceals the wearer, whose eyes are on a level with the two holes pierced between the breasts of the model.

Baga sculpture – still linked to the *Simô* – also includes statuettes of men or women with squat, thick-set bodies, standing chin in hand on a pedestal; drums, which are supported by personages of the same style as the *Nimba*; the head-pieces of bird-masks in polychrome; sculptures in relief – or, lastly, wooden panels in fretwork which the young people keep in their bachelor quarters, where the theme prevails of the bird 'who lives in the marsh and eats the little fishes'.

On the lower coast, as in all areas where the Portuguese had formerly settled, the architecture retains a reflection of 'colonial' art. Steps made of crude earth are flanked by majestic banisters, while wooden lattice-gates seek to pass as wrought-iron: it is of little consequence that they enclose nothing!

The races of the interior (Sierra Leone, French High Guinea) are also, by reason of their traditions, backward races. Installed in a thickly-wooded country of heavy rains, their food is ample and varied and comprises mountain rice, roots of all sorts, bananas and colas. From the MENDI of Sierra Leone – totalling around 600,000 people – we have some statuettes in blackened wood of women standing, with slender bodies and long necks scored with several circles which may possibly represent necklaces. The high, bulging forehead overhangs a receding, small, triangular face with horizontal eyes and tight lips. These statuettes were at one time employed in divinatory rituals. The stylization of the coiffure, which includes several longitudinal ridges, recalls that of the

helmet-masks worn by the priestesses of *Bundo*, a feminine society which we shall consider later and which corresponds to the male *Poro*. Certain of these masks of black wood have two, or even four, facets. A fibre costume – also black – attached to the base completely conceals the woman who wears it.

When clearing the ground for ploughing, Mendi farmers find statuettes in soft stone, which they associate with a cult of vegetation. These *nomoli* are kept on cultivated ground and receive offerings after an abundant crop – but if the rain is too long delayed after the sowings, the master of the field will not hesitate to flog the statuette. These sculpted stones are distributed over all the region today occupied by the Mendi: they are to be found from the coast – the Sherbro Islands – right up to French High Guinea. Nowhere are these sculptures (human – rarely animal – figures, cylinders or small pestles with a chequered base) the work of the present-day occupants. Contemporary fakes in stone or clay, which has scarcely been allowed to bake, are of no interest: their creators know it and admit cheerfully to frauds easy to detect.

The age of these stone carvings remains uncertain, and a great diversity of styles may be observed even in a small collection, but for the most part they may be dated by the details of dress which is reminiscent of sixteenth-century Portuguese armour – a helmet, breast-plate and a round shield. But whoever the sculptors may be, it is clear that the art of carving statues has certainly been practised for a very long time. We note also that the specimens we have from the West (Sierra Leone) often reveal a strongly emphasized and aquiline nose with well-marked nostrils, and a grin which bares the upper lip to expose the teeth.

In the Kissi country (French High Guinea) stone statues are to be found on the domestic altars dedicated to ancestor worship in nearly every village. Their name here is *pɔmdo*, pl. *pɔmta*, 'dead, image of the dead'. The most precious of these are hidden in the huts, and the stone then bears the name of a forefather who appeared in a dream to one of his descendants, or whose identity has been revealed in the course of a divination ceremony. The

aspect of these *pɔmi'kandya* differs greatly from that presented by the nameless statuettes, which remain nude: '*pɔmdo*', they say, introducing you to a shapeless package covered with a blackish crust of dried blood – sacrificial blood. The statue – invisible – has been placed on its feet in a small container which also holds a miscellaneous selection of amulets. The whole is carefully bound with strips of cotton, and at the neck is affixed a stone 'pearl', or cowries, a brass ring, the canine teeth of a panther, or sometimes a brass bell – all objects of prophylactic value. We saw on one occasion a *pɔmdo* decorated with several pierced copper coins and a holy medal showing the image of the Virgin. Sometimes again the package containing the statue is placed inside a wooden, bottle-shaped container, the top of which is sculpted in the form of a human head: a cavity in the belly shelters the *pɔmdo*. On feast-days the ancestral statuette accepts the homage of its children; they offer up to him the first and last fruits of the harvest. The guardian is a descendant of him whose name the statue bears and whose presence manifests itself when solicited. For this purpose, the stone is set upon a litter which the guardian, now promoted soothsayer, puts on his head and supports with both hands. In response to questions from those present, the litter tilts violently either to right (a positive response: 'health', 'truth') or to left (a negative response). A native may agree to surrender one of the nameless, anonymous *pɔmdo*; but it is quite exceptional that he should consent to separate himself from a *pɔm'kandya*, image and

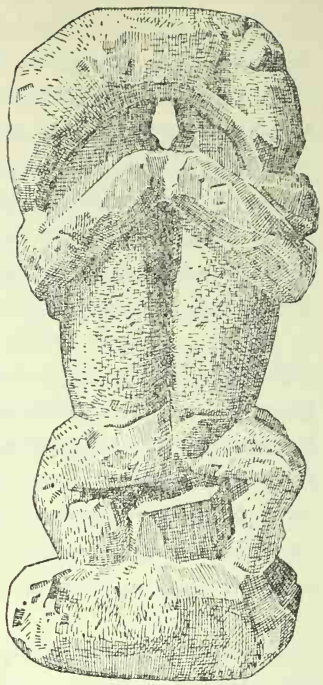


Fig. 10. Stone statuette. Two people back to back (apparently mourners). Found in the *kissi* country. (Guinea.) Ht.: 18 cm.

personification of his forefather. At his death, the statuette is buried with him.[1]

The KRA of Liberia give the term *gɛ* to a block of earth which is roughly in the shape of a conical body, with a monstrous human head, always dressed with feathers, and with eyes made of shells. It bears amulets of horn or the tusks of wild pigs. The protection of the *gɛ* is sought against sorcerers and in favour of the sick and the new-born. Its guardian once again performs the office of soothsayer: with the cone of clay set on his head, the guardian goes into a trance and responds to questions from the audience. The analogy of this function with that of the Kissi *pɔmdo* is, therefore, sufficiently evident. The *gɛ*, under a different name, is present in a number of tribes in the Liberian forest and as far afield as the Dan of the Ivory Coast.

We have seen that statuettes in stone preserve the memory of a Kissi ancestor. The Kissi, though first-rate agriculturists, are poor artisans. They nevertheless desire to preserve the image of their dead, and have adapted to this purpose the statuettes they discovered in the ground whose original use and significance has been lost. In the Mendi country and throughout the north-east of Liberia, the same role is entrusted to masks, which the Kra describe in the same term – *gɛ* – as their heads of clay.

These masks are linked to the institution of the *Poro*. Both secret society and male initiation-rite, the *Poro*, which is not without affiliations with the *Simô* of the Baga, covers nearly the whole of Liberia. It is found among the *Timne* and *Mendi* of Sierra Leone, and as far away as the Ivory Coast, among the *Dan*, the *Guere* and the *Wobe*; it reaches the borders of the savannah with the *Toma* and the *Guerze* of French High Guinea. The general conception remains the same as that of male societies in the Sudanese countries; but we are nevertheless aware of some local variations. Circumcision as initiatory ordeal is, for example, often replaced by the *Poro* with scarification of the body, which is interpreted as the claw marks of the monster who devours children and rejects adults. But in the Atlantic forest, above all else, the

[1] Paulme, D., *Les gens du riz, Kissi de Haute Guinée française*, Paris, 1954.

function of masks permeates all public life. In quite recent times, masks have intervened in village life to stop a brawl, to denounce an offence against public order, or simply as a means of communication or caution. Although in normal times the village chief was at the centre of civic life, during the whole duration of a forest initiation the *Poro* ruled quite openly and masked officials obeyed its commands. Political control, in fact, was shared between several high initiates who made their decisions in secret and ruled by terror. They were able to execute their sentences themselves under cover of the mask. Because the old men showed themselves only rarely and held themselves aloof from the rest of the people, a kind of confusion between the man and his disguise established itself: even the death of the old man was kept secret, intimated only by the arrival of a new mask bearing the name of the deceased.

The most important of the *Poro* masks are those which correspond to the most distant of their ancestors. Through the years the functions of these near god-like personages have become gradually more specialized, dictating to the wearer his role and his pantomime. The 'thunder-chief' controls the thunder, and he may order it to strike the harvest or a guilty person. The 'rice-eater' comes to extort from the women food for the boys undergoing initiation in the forest. The 'diviner' denounces the sorcerer, and the 'leopard' prowls round the village. It is generally held that the finest of all masks was that of the first sculptor. When his time came to die, his successor carved a mask in the image of the departed, and played the role of the 'sculptor' in public ceremonies: the repertory was enriched by a new personage.

Side by side with these masks which induce respect, if not terror, the sense of theatre and of the comic so prevalent in Africa has led to the perpetuation of the memory of such characters as 'the shaking old man', 'the over-welcoming young woman', and 'the stammerer'. Clowns in monkey-masks who interpret in a wrong sense the orders they are given and behave like grotesque boobies, still play a didactic role (demonstration by absurdity) in the education of young boys.

Lastly, there are certain individuals who must never be separated from their double, the *ma*, a small mask a few inches tall, a true likeness executed in their lifetime.[1]

These *Poro* masks are very numerous. The Peabody Museum of Harvard University owns 314 of them, all collected in Northern Nigeria, while the Belgian expedition to the Ivory Coast collected 260 in the single region of Haut Cavally. From a formal point of view they can be classified under a number of headings. All sorts of combinations are possible between them, but their diversity cannot be accounted for by their geographical distribution.

We distinguish first of all the portraits which seem more or less idealized (such as the 'Dan'), of great purity of line. The forehead is high and slightly bulging, and is cut by a median, vertical line which lengthens the nose. The eyes are represented by an empty circle, or indicated by a narrow, horizontal slit, and the mouth is tight-lipped. The general effect is that of a perfect balance of mass. The black wood is polished and lustrous. Its beautiful patina is secured by the application of leaves of *Physostigma venenosum*, boiled to the consistency of a paste. This, as well as effacing the surface roughness, also penetrates the pores of the wood. Once the coating is dry, the wood is rubbed and polished with the hand or a duster. The holes on the periphery are for attaching the material under which the wearer conceals himself (Pl. VIII, 1).

Some masks which, while owning certain affinities with the ones we have just discussed, yet reveal greater vigour of execution, often have their essential traits effaced under a thick crust of whitish earth, dried blood or disgorged cola-juice. These masks are among the most feared, and their offerings – colas or chickens – are in proportion to the importance of the ancestral figure. Certain other masks in the guise of a painting have a fragment of red material, andrinople, or a shred of felt from an old *tarboosh*, nailed to them. The eyes, indicated by oval or circular projections, are sometimes ringed with tin, and the prominent teeth are either of bone or metal.

[1] Harley, G. W., 'Masks as agents of social control in Northeast Liberia'. *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology*, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1950.

A third series includes a type of mask with a great curved nose which is so elongated as to form a beak. The jaws are strongly emphasized and the lower one is articulated. Moustache and beard are made from monkey hairs. The wood is polished red or black.

Lastly we should mention 'expressionist' masks (as the 'Guere Wobe'), in which all facial traits – forehead, cheek-bones, nose, eyes and protruding tongue – are exaggerated to the point of deformation. The same motif (the eyes, for example) may be repeated two or three times. The horns, which are sometimes on a horizontal plane (going from the temples towards the nose), sometimes on a vertical plane (beginning at the cheek-bones and inclining towards the lower part of the face), add to the fantastic effect, which is increased by the addition of a beard of plaited fibres interspersed with small copper bells (Pl. VIII, 2).

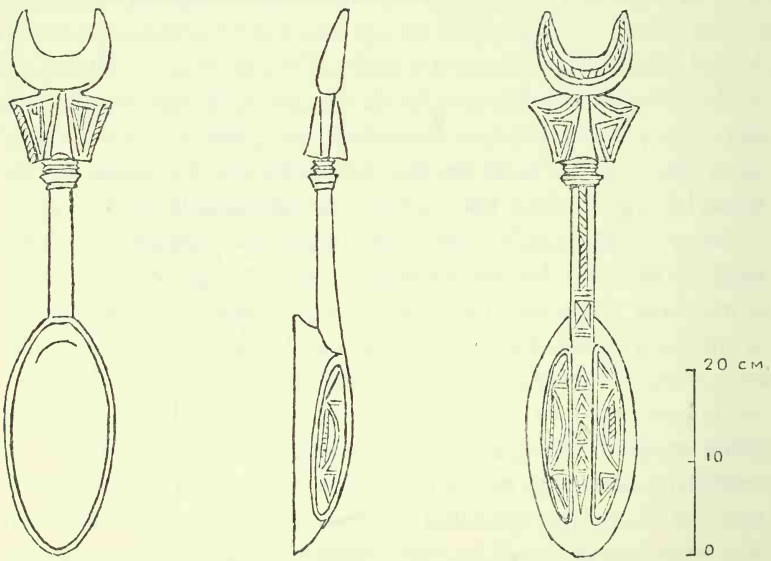


Fig. 11. Large rice spoon. Ivory Coast, *Dan*. Ht.: 60 cm.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CIVILIZATIONS OF GUINEA

(East Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Dahomey, Nigeria)

WITH the *Baule*, we enter the group of the Guinea civilizations whose territory extends almost uninterruptedly from the Baule and the Agni of the Ivory Coast up to the Yoruba bloc of Nigeria.

Without wishing to attach to its geographical situation more importance than it deserves, we would emphasize with J. Richard-Molard, that there is a coincidence – which cannot be fortuitous – between the fulfilment of what has sometimes been called the 'Benin civilization' (a term which embraces all the southern littoral of the Guinea coast) and the quite exceptional physical conditions existing there. The lower extremity of the Gulf is, in the first place, the start of the Benoue route as defined by the geographer E. F. Gautier – the route which leads, by way of Kauar and the Fezzan, to the Mediterranean. It is also the only opening between the Guinea forest bloc and the Central African bloc. Various reasons of a climatic nature ensure that while the rhythm of the seasons remains equatorial, the rains in these parts are moderate. The forest becomes less dense, and under a lighter sky, palm-trees, cereals and maize thrive impartially. Fishing in the lagoons helps the rural economy, and even cattle-raising reappears: 'in short, an equatorial country, where the jungle is excluded and which is compatible to the human way of life'.[1]

Today the Baule number about 400,000, and inhabit the outpost of the savannah which intersects the forest bloc of the Ivory

[1] Richard-Molard, J., *Afrique occidentale française*, Paris, 1949, p. 43.

Coast, below the meridian of Bouaké. Legend has it that they arrived from the east under the leadership of an heroic queen. Their eastern neighbours, the Agni, are installed in the heart of the forest, and although quite distinct from each other, the two tribes speak the same language, and their civilization is allied to that of the Ashanti.

We find here one of the rare African societies whose sculpture may be appreciated purely for its aesthetic merit. Objects in everyday use, all decoratively carved, are numerous: weaving-bobbins, spoons, combs, hairpins and round or rectangular stools – these last with concave seats. Doors are often decorated in bas-relief with human or animal figures: crocodiles, the head of an ox, fish, or a pair of wading-birds face to face.

The statuettes in polished wood depict slender human figures, usually standing, their arms adhering to the body. The features are fine and the hair-styles elegant; the eyes, under strongly-etched eyebrows, are almond-shaped. Scarifications on the face, neck and body are designed in relief, while a stylized beard lengthens the chin. The details of hands and feet are carefully delineated. Certain of these statuettes belong to young girls who name them, dress them, and adorn them with necklaces and bracelets. Others are sculpted in the likeness of a dead man. The corpse is laid in its tomb and its spirit is besought to inhabit the effigy. Offerings are donated to the statuette; and it is the statuette which is called to witness and which is invoked in prayer.

A wooden vase, which is frequently decorated in low or in high relief, is used for ritual divination by mice. The container in which the rodents are confined consists of two communicating floors. The shell of a tortoise, to which are attached bone or copper rods – the other ends of which are left quite loose – completes the apparatus. The diviner scatters flour on the row of rods, deposits the tortoise-shell on the upper floor and replaces the earthenware lid of the vase. The hungry mice rush to eat the flour, pawing and shifting the rods as they do so. The specialist will interpret the new disposition of the rods for the benefit of the questioner (Pl. XI, 1).

The little that we are able to glimpse of Baule society leaves us

with the thought that it is among the most complex of the African world. But we are ignorant of practically all its institutions and know nothing of its mythology – nothing, either, of the role which different masks play in public life. We scarcely know the names of any of the beings represented by the masks.

The *Gu* mask (Pl. XI, 2), in polished and glittering black wood, is a human face practically devoid of relief. Under the semi-circular arch of eyebrows the eyelids are half-closed. The nose is long and narrow, the small, jutting mouth is rectangular. On the temples are scarifications in relief. The coiffure is often three-cusped, indicated by incisions. By the intermediary of the breath of the *Gu*, the great god *Alurua* created a trinity – *Nyamye*, the sky; *Assye*, the earth; and their son, *Assasi-ua*.

Nyamye and his second wife, *Ago*, had two sons – *Kakagye* and *Gbekre*. The sight of *Kakagye* or *Guli*, represented by a stylized ox-mask painted red and white and wearing two or three horns, is prohibited to women. A man wearing the mask, dressed in pineapple fibres which conceal his body, dances on all fours, while a musician follows behind, blowing a horn and producing terrifying sounds, which the women believe to be the voice of Kakagye.

The Janus *Do* mask has two faces painted red and white, surmounted by the statuette of a leopard. *Do* protects the village against sorcerers.

At official ceremonies, each chief or notable arrives with one or more of the following attributes:

A ceremonial axe of wrought copper in the shape of a cross.

A small iron bell which is struck with a tiny hammer in carved wood. Each chief has his private chime which his people recognize.

A fly-switch made from the tail of an ox or elephant. The switch has a wooden handle covered with thin strips of gold which are affixed with flour.

A ceremonial sabre with a curved blade. Its handle, also, is of gilded wood. The chief receives oaths of allegiance on this sabre, and sometimes confides it to a messenger as pledge of his word.

Jewellery – rings, bracelets and ankle-straps – is of copper or bronze, or sometimes pure gold, cast by the *cire perdue* process. The small masks depicting the faces of slain or vanquished chiefs

were formerly attached to the sabres of the victorious kings. The horned masks would have been linked to the cult of the celestial god *Nyamye*, who was sometimes represented by a ram's head; the round or rectangular plaques were worn as pendants.

The small weights fashioned for the weighing of gold-dust differ scarcely at all from Ashanti weights (cf. Figs. 14 and 15).

The influence of the Baule has been so much exerted on neighbouring regions that it is at times hard to distinguish between a true Baule sculpture and one which has been inspired by a Baule model.

The GURO are a notable example. Settled over several centuries in the Zuénoula region, they appear to be akin to the Baule, yet we are unable to define the precise sense in which Baule influence has, in fact, revealed itself. From the Guro we have little more than weaving-bobbins and some types of mask (very few of these) in polished wood and often polychrome. The elongated face reveals sinuous features and is almost too delicate. A convex forehead overhangs eyes which extend towards the temples. The mask

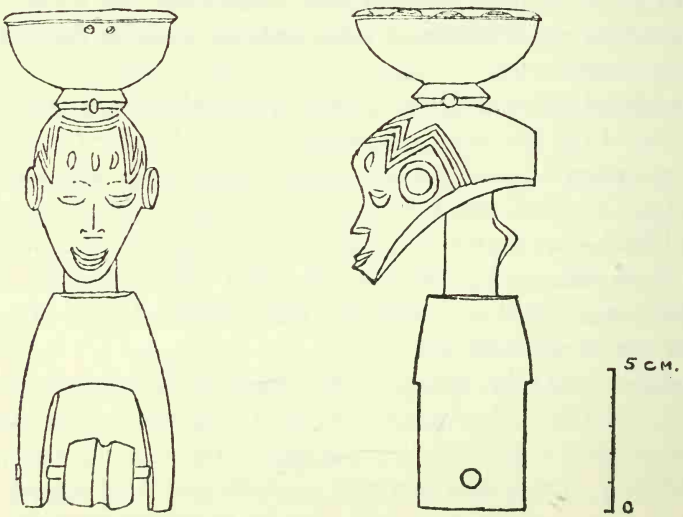


Fig. 12. Weaving spool. Ivory Coast, *Gouro* Ht.: 18 cm.

is adorned with horns or surmounted by a bird. The general effect is of an art refined at times to the point of affectation.

The AGNI are eastern neighbours and kinsmen of the Baule. Near abandoned tombs agglomerations of earthenware statuettes have been discovered. These represent either a king or an important personage (the privilege of being immortalized in this way was restricted to members of the seventeen leading families); the dead man sits on his stool (insignia of his dignity) surrounded by his near-relations. These 'portraits', which are very fragile, were the work of women, who modelled them in the death-chamber in the presence of the corpse, which reposed on a bed. The most ancient of these date back to the seventeenth century. These statuettes are rarely intact: their material is a whitish, friable clay with which are intermingled vegetable fibres. The work is covered with a coating of black varnish, and a wooden, central rod serves as an armature. The baking is very defective. The coiffure is always extremely elaborate and the face bears scarifications worked in relief. The protruding eyes are half-closed, while the long neck is adorned with many necklaces.

The descendants of the kingdom of ASHANTI – in number around 800,000 – occupy the area surrounding Kumasi, in Ghana. Ashanti appeared in history at the end of the seventeenth century, when a succession of belligerent kings established a supremacy which was maintained by continual raids on neighbouring territories – raids which had as their chief aim the taking of prisoners. These prisoners were largely destined for the Europeans who at the time were constructing a series of coastal forts. Portuguese, English, Dutch, Danes, Swedes and Brandenburgers contended both for gold-dust and slaves, offering in exchange firearms and manufactured articles. Evidence of these relations with the West is noticeable in Ashanti art, particularly in the carvings of weights and jewels.

Fantastic ceremonies, sumptuous funerals where countless human victims paid with their lives the sovereign's homage to his ancestors, made the Ashanti known as the most bloodthirsty

race of all West Africa. As a result of a series of conflicts between Africans and the Europeans based on the coast, the British in 1895 sent out a column which smashed the native military strength. The Ashanti accepted both defeat and the banishment of their sovereign, but a rebellion broke out some years later when the British, having learned of the existence of a certain 'gold stool', demanded its surrender and precipitated a general insurrection. The stool, in which they saw merely the emblem of political power, in fact represented much more than this. The gold stool is the symbol of unity and embodies the spirit of the Ashanti race. No one, not even the king, would ever dare to seat himself upon it. Legend has it that during a storm, and to the roll of thunder, the skies opened and the *sike gwa* (the stool) landed on this earth. The stool was plated with gold. It landed in the lap of the great sovereign, *Osai Tutu*, whose reign occurred at the beginning of the eighteenth century. At the time of the great ceremony, which was celebrated yearly in honour of his royal ancestors – the ceremony whose purpose was the purification of the whole tribe – the gold stool took pride of place. Gold bells were fixed to its sides, as well as tiny gold masks, portraits of vanquished enemies.

Stools of the same design, with a rectangular base and a curved seat supported by two or four stanchions, are used by the Ashanti as altars for their ancestor-cult. (This type of stool is to be found over an area extending from the Ivory Coast to the Cameroons.) In order to receive homage from his descendants, the spirit of the dead man returns and enters the stool upon which he used to sit in his lifetime. Each stool had its name, which indicated both its sex and the social standing or clan of its owner. The king on occasion made a present of a stool to a chief he wished to honour; but the stool supported by an elephant (which in turn was borne up by a lion), remained the prerogative of the sovereign (Pl. XIII).

The supreme Ashanti god – the god of the sky, to whom numerous altars are dedicated and who is possessor of a private priesthood – is called *Nyame*, similar to the Baule god. Like the ancestors, *Nyame* is never represented in art, nor is any one of the many sons to whom he delegated part of his powers. There

are neither masks nor statues. Figurines in light wood, which depict native types or scenes from village life, are manufactured to European order and have no importance.

The finest Ashanti sculptures, polished and glistening in black wood, are the *akua ba*, carried by pregnant women. For faces, these statuettes have completely flat discs. The neck is embellished with several circles, while the body is reduced to a simple cylinder. The arms are two short and horizontal appendages. 'The long neck and the beautiful face of the *akua ba* will help the expectant mother to give birth to a child who will also possess these attributes.' The presence of such statuettes in a society which forbids nearly all human representation poses a singular problem. The curious – and extremely localized – form of the *akua ba* (a disc on top of a cylinder) cannot fail to remind one of Egyptian mirrors of the New Empire period. These mirrors were made in copper or bronze, or sometimes of wood. A perfect disc was supported by a short cylinder representing a papyrus tree. The stylized 'leaves', which at the top became plumes, may possibly through a whole series of transformations have developed

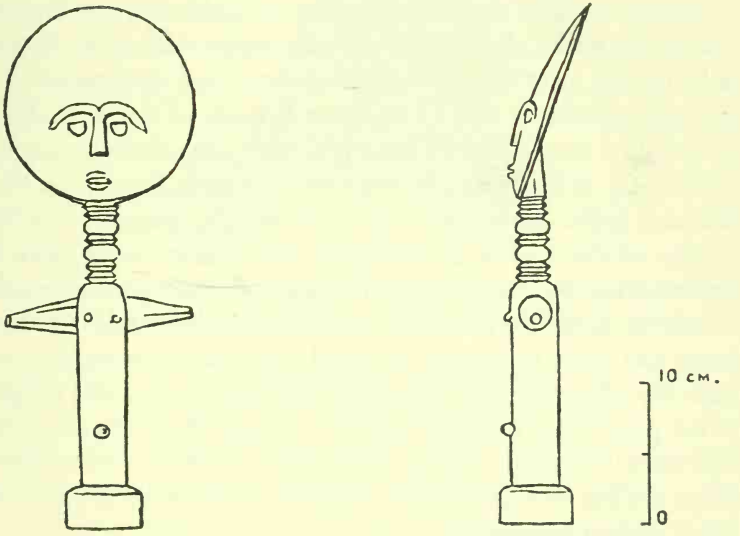


Fig. 13. Doll, *akua ba*. Ghana, *Ashanti*. Ht.: 38 cm.

into the 'arms' of the *akua ba*, their original significance having been long forgotten. It remains to be explained why the Egyptian mirror, modified in this way, should have lived on in this single part of the African world. This is not the only enigma presented by the societies of Guinea. Plating a wooden object with gold leaf, as practised quite recently by the Baule, reproduces a process followed in the Egypt of the Pharaohs. In fact, the whole of the lower stretches of the Gulf of Guinea, washed by the Atlantic, may be seen as an impasse where currents from north and east have arrived, bringing techniques and social institutions dating from some indeterminable period.

Though sculptors only in a restricted field, the Ashanti are excellent potters. The technique is guarded and passed on within certain families. The women, perhaps, from mother to daughter, will work the clay: but the men reserve for themselves the manufacture of any article which resembles a human or animal form. The pots are used as containers for liquids and for kitchen use, but the most handsome of them have a purely ritual function. Placed in a burial ground, the *abusua kuruwa* will contain the hair of a dead person (Pl. XII).

Ashanti weights for the weighing of gold-dust are famous. Cast in *cire perdue*, the designs of these trinkets seem to be dictated only by the artist's imagination. In fact, they correspond to a precisely calculated scale of weights. A study of this scale allows us to follow the use of certain seeds or their equivalents as weights, as far away as Indonesia, by way of the Sudan, Egypt, the Near East and India. To produce the exact weight assigned to it (the weight of the seed or its multiple), the figurine must often be made heavier by the addition of a piece of metal; sometimes also it may be necessary to cut it. Two figurines may bear the same name and may, in theory, be equal – yet one may weigh more than the other, for 'the weights of the chief are not the weights of the poor'. This does not indicate a simple abuse of power: the difference was used to pay the numerous officials with whom direct dealing was forbidden by etiquette – the trade in gold-dust being a royal monopoly.

The variety of motifs in Ashanti weights is infinite: fish,

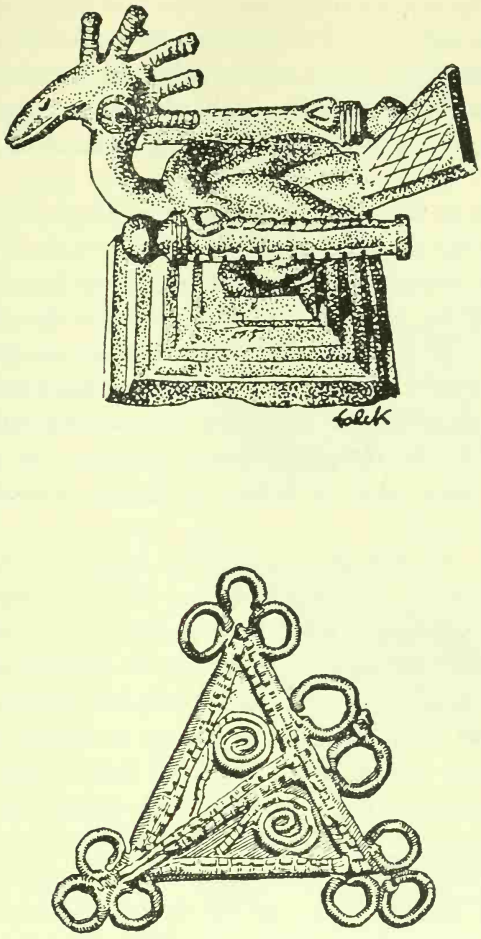


Fig. 14. Weights for weighing gold-dust. Ivory Coast, *Agui*. A bird guarded, above and below, by two cannons; a weight with geometric designs.

reptiles, more or less stylized birds, insects (these last sometimes being cast direct from the creature without recourse to a wax model), arms, musical instruments, stools – and also individual persons and scenes from daily life. One can only marvel at the vivacity and imaginativeness of execution, and at the balance and poise of these tiny objects, the height of which never exceeds an

inch or so. The geometrical designs (we find the swastika among them) are the oldest: we have little knowledge of their meaning.[1] Together with the weights we should study the tiny, beam-less scales, the small cylindrical or cubic boxes in which the gold-dust is kept, the scoops and the small sieves used to remove impurities.

In addition to business transactions, the weights had a judicial function, for the majority of offences were punished by a fine in gold-dust. A creditor could bring a settlement-date to the notice of his debtor by sending him a weight corresponding to the amount due. 'Weight-proverbs' were used for graphic allusion: the best-known example is perhaps that of the antelope whose horns were so elongated that they touched his tail, and who corresponds to the common saying *nim sa* – 'If I had only known . . .' (what went on behind my back) – and illustrates the futility of all regret.

The *kuduo* – small vases in copper or bronze provided with a lid – were formerly used in purification rites. The *kuduo* followed its owner to the tomb, filled with gold-dust and 'bitter pearls' (the term *agree*, *acree*, *aigri*, etc., designated a special sort of blueish coral before it was extended to include the ancient 'pearls' in polished stone, in glass or in porcelain to which the Ashanti attached a high value). Later, certain of these metal vases were used for preserving vegetable butter or as receptacles for the weights. The shape as well as the design of some of the oldest *kuduo* is of Arab inspiration: once again we detect here the influence of North Africa or of thirteenth-century Moslem Spain. More recent vases remind one of European shapes, perhaps of a sea-chest or of a specimen of the goldsmith's art; they bear witness to the continuity of African relations with the West.

The most beautiful of all Ashanti gold work is the mask in the Wallace Collection, in London. This mask – the largest known – measures seven inches and weighs over three pounds. A ring placed under the chin supports the hypothesis that the mask is

[1] An attempt to decipher these has been made by Abel, H., 'Les poids à peser l'or en Côte d'Ivoire', *Bull. de l'Ifan*, XVI, 1–2, 1954, pp. 55–82. *Journal of the Africanist Society*, XXII, 1952, pp. 95–114; XXIV, 1954, pp. 7–23.

the effigy of a rival which the victorious sovereign had ordered to be suspended from his throne, head downwards.

The Ashanti have also made jewellery from hammered and embossed gold. At the time of great feasts, disc-shaped pendants were worn at the neck and on the chest, attached to one or several strips of tissue slung across the back. Tiny, ornamental accessories, cut out from a very thin sheet of metal, embellished the openwork caps and other leather equipment worn by the men. The design is made up of reliefs, roses and stars. Sometimes small animal maskswere added; vegetable motifs are rarer.

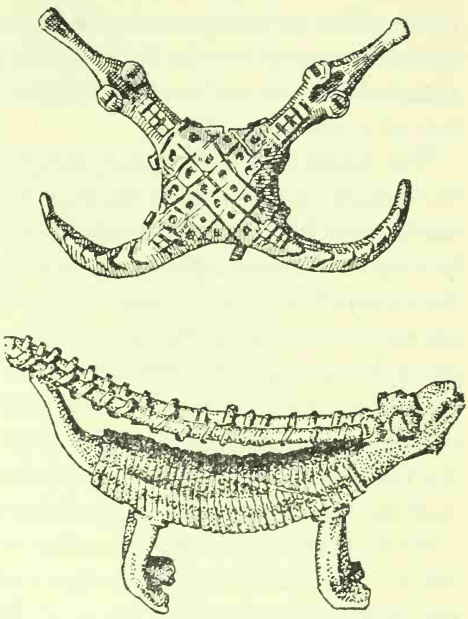


Fig. 15. Weights for weighing gold-dust. Ivory Coast, *Agui*. Two crocodiles with one stomach – a symbol of family unity; an antelope, its horns joined to its tail: 'If I had known . . .'

It is, finally, impossible to discuss Ashanti art without referring to their admirable fabrics, cotton or silk. They carry a striped motif which may embody a popular saying, or reveal the origin, social status or sex of the wearer. In the old days all new motifs became the property of the sovereign, who could either reserve them for himself or confer them on one of his dignitaries. The great men of the kingdom in this way acquired their 'colours' – rather in the manner in which a Scots clan retains its own, exclusive, tartan.

The ancient kingdom of DAHOMEY, with its capital Abomey, occupied the south of the territory which now bears its name.

The foundation of this warrior state goes back to the beginning of the seventeenth century. The *Fon*, kinsmen of the *Ewe* of the Togo, then forced themselves upon the Yoruba, whom they called Nago, and whose descendants still occupy the south-east of the country. In the north, the Yoruba went even farther than the Fon, for they reached the right bank of the River Mono on the outskirts of Atakpamé and conquered as far as the Togo. In the realm of art, Yoruba influence on the Fon country is so pronounced that it is sometimes difficult to make any exact identification of a piece of sculpture.

The zenith of the Dahomey kingdom coincided with that of the slave-trade – that is, at the end of the eighteenth century. Its decline and fall followed closely upon the suppression of slavery. In 1893, a military expedition made Dahomey a French colony. Survivals of what in the last century was called the Slave Coast are numerous among the coloured races of America, where – to cite only one instance – the word '*vodu*' is of Fon origin. In Africa itself, the town of Porto Novo, which harboured numerous traders, has retained a 'creole' society. Both the descendants of the first settlers and those of freed slaves, returned from Brazil, bear the surnames of old and well-known Portuguese families.

Artisans worked under the sway of the king or the nobility. Their works had the primary object of glorifying the sovereigns and their warlike exploits. These are the feats of arms evoked by the bas-reliefs of the palace of Abomey (palace of the Ghezo kings, 1819–58; Glele, 1858–89; Behanzin, 1889–94). Within a frame approximately three feet square, figures carved in unbaked clay and painted in bright colours stand out from a background which is recessed to wall-level. Sometimes the modeller has depicted an historic event, retaining only the bare essentials: the battle in which Fon warriors, armed with guns, overwhelm the Nago, armed only with bows, is restricted to two combatants. Elsewhere the bas-relief reproduces arms or armorial bearings. Here, the panther is a royal beast, while the shark evokes Behanzin and the lion represents King Glele, who, on mounting his throne, announced: 'I am the lion's whelp who has sown terror ever since his teeth sprouted.' The design may also translate an allegory

familiar to all: a colander-jar, upheld by two hands, represents what must be the unity of the Fon for the protection of the kingdom: close enough to prevent the wastage of a single drop!

On the wooden doors of the Abomey palace, the elephant, sculpted this time in high relief, alludes to the motto of the Ghezo Kings: 'all beasts touch the ground, but the elephant tramples it'. A toucan, with an enormous beak, chants his royal eulogy in a more subtle fashion: 'all birds have beaks, but mine is enormous' (i.e. 'I have enlarged my kingdom more than any one of my predecessors').

The king on naming a chief handed to him the insignia of his office: a parasol, a huge umbrella on which is superimposed a design reproducing the arms of its owner; a stool, which is of the same shape as the Ashanti stool, but its height indicates the importance of the chief (Pl. XIII, 2); and, finally, the baton of command, or *recade* (from a Portuguese word), which bears its owner's coat of arms and to which the same deference is due as to the chief in person. The significance of most of these *recades* is today lost. We may cite as example the *recade* of King Ghezo which represents a blacksmith's hammer and recalls one of the king's phrases: 'the anvil has its weight, as has the hammer'. Yet another *recade*, decorated with a chameleon, represents one of the devices of King Akaba (1680–1708) who was obliged to await his accession to power: 'the chameleon moves slowly, but he will arrive at the top of the tree'.

Dahomey art is known in particular for the trays and goblets in coloured wood used in *Fa* divination ceremonies: these are of Moslem origin and were introduced by the Yoruba at the start of the eighteenth century. The stems of these goblets are carved and coloured to represent birds, serpents, or a chief on horseback surrounded by his musicians, etc., and the goblets themselves contain the strings of beads, made from sixteen halved palm kernels, which the diviner throws down on the tray in order to obtain any one of the 256 possible combinations: *Fa*'s reply enables him to advise his client as to whether 'the way is clear' (Pl. IX).

A figure of destiny, *Fa* is endowed with sixteen eyes, which are

habitually closed: only *Legba*, messenger of the gods, can open them. At the summit of the Dahomey pantheon, a two-fold element, *Lisa-Mawu*, corresponds to the divisions east/west, sun/moon, man/woman, etc. Sometimes also *Lisa-Mawu* is regarded as an hermaphrodite. This Creator divided the Universe between his fourteen children, giving to each a special province: earth, sky, rain, thunder and so on. The first-generation gods themselves divided their powers between countless children, how were responsible for the fruitful rains, the sharp downpours, the continuous rolls of thunder, the sudden clap of thunder. . . . To these gods were linked those of the vassal tribes, such as *Dã*, the serpent, source of movement and life, and symbol of all that is flexible, sinuous and moist – and *Xevioso*, the lightning. Each group of gods, known as *vodũ*, possesses its own myths, its own individual ritual, its own temples; it has its initiates, also, who are known as 'wives of the *vodũ*'. But the Creator took precautions against his descendants uniting against him. Each *vodũ* was given a different language which, except for the initiates, was understood only by *Legba*, youngest son of the Creator. In a world in which *Mawu* is the controller of all destinies, there is nevertheless, the possibility of error in the transmission of a message: *Legba* represents the element of risk, luck – good and bad – and of hope. *Legba*, the most honoured of the gods, is present in each sanctuary; his altar is to be found at the approach

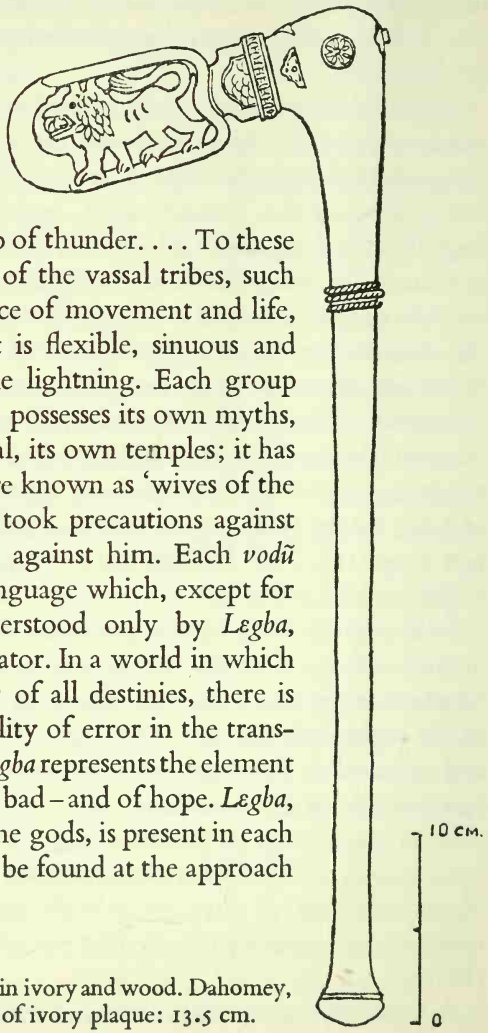


Fig. 16. Sceptre of King Glele in ivory and wood. Dahomey, *Fon*. Ht.: 38 cm. Length of ivory plaque: 13.5 cm.

to a collection of dwellings and at crossroads – sometimes in the shape of a human statue with huge sex-organs, at other times as a simple block of clay covered with sacrificial blood, manioc pulp, palm-oil and chicken feathers.

Metalwork was in the hands of a caste working under the direct supervision of the king or the great men of the court. One of the most celebrated specimens of negro art, one which has played a positive role in the revival of modern Western sculpture, is the iron statue of the war god, *Gu*, executed in part with European materials such as sheet-metal and iron bolts. The god wears the short tunic which was the uniform of Dahomey troops; his head-dress bristles with arrow-heads, knife-blades and spearheads; in one hand he brandishes a sabre, in the other he holds a war-bell.

Also worked in iron – or, more rarely, in brass – the *asen* accept on prescribed days the offerings dedicated to ancestors. Finally, the figurines in copper or brass, cast by the *cire perdue* process and depicting an important figure borne in a hammock (a chief and his train, etc.), are today manufactured for export and are of little importance.

In addition, Dahomey knows two pictographic arts: the incised calabash and fabric appliqué work.

The calabash is used throughout Africa, to such an extent that the word in current usage describes not only the fruit of the calabash-tree but the container made from it. Gathered when ripe, the gourds are immersed in a pond until their insides putrefy. They are then opened up, drained of their pulp and placed in the sun. The outer skin hardens as it dries and may then be worked like wood. Its natural colour is yellow, but on being rubbed with a decoction of millet leaves, a beautiful deep-red tint is obtained. The variety of their shapes and the fact that they are both firm and easy to work make calabashes well-suited to a multiplicity of uses: musical instruments, potter's tools, toys, amulets, etc. All households make use of calabashes, for storing fabrics as well as grain and liquids. The design, where it exists, is for the most part line-engraved; however, the Peul of the North Cameroons burn geometric designs into the calabashes in which the devotee will recognize, perhaps, here a tortoise, there a sun.

The Fon craftsman proceeds in a slightly different manner. By means of a simple knife he carves out his design, which stands out darkly against a lighter background. The design occupies one or more strips forming a crown, the centre of which would be that of the calabash itself – that is to say, where the stem occurs. The most important strip comprises three or four panels, representing, in most cases, animals with stylized bodies – deformed to comply with the shape of the calabash – in such a way as to fill up the entire panel. But whether the motif be an antelope, a lizard, a horse or a bird, the design evokes a carefully-chosen proverb whose meaning cannot escape the person for whom it is intended. A cock, for instance, refers to the adage 'a cock's comb only frightens a coward' – which may be translated: 'You hesitate, but your fears are groundless.' A fish followed by a cudgel might be the terms of a challenge: the sender (the fish) is not afraid of a beating.

Appliqué work on fabrics is mainly done by a caste of Abomey craftsmen. These brightly-coloured cut-out pieces constitute a virtual handwriting, which can render a complete text in pictorial images, making use, where necessary, of a riddle. Many of these hangings are prepared on the occasion of a death. The intimate friend of the deceased composes, as a last homage, a song and decorates a fabric with designs which match the words of his text. Two eyes seen from the front mean 'sight'; two withered tree-trunks, 'death'; and the proper noun, *Huha*, will be represented by a butcher's hook (*hu*) and a razor (*ha*). The general meaning could be expressed in this way: '(did I live so long) to see the death of *Huha*?' The author chants his eulogy of the departed friend throughout the funeral ceremony with the unrolled fabric hanging beside him.

Five million YORUBA inhabit a belt about a hundred and ninety miles wide, covering the whole of Southern Nigeria as far as the Niger delta.

Contrary to what one observes in other parts of Africa, the people here live in confined centres. Ibadan, with nearly four hundred thousand inhabitants, has the biggest concentration of

population in West Africa. Before the arrival of the English, very often the native dwellings, together with their cultures, were enclosed by a mud wall or a moat, which in itself was surrounded by virgin forest which was left intact in order to diminish the risk of surprise attack.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century we find all the Yoruba tribe gathered under the suzerainty, more nominal than real, of a chief or *alafin*, the Oyo, whose prestige was based on his divine origin. Ife was the religious centre, and is still today a Holy City. Decadence set in at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the country was divided into several little states and was enfeebled even further by continual wars. In 1861, Lagos was declared a British possession, and subsequently the English proceeded to occupy all the hinterland.

The Yoruba pantheon consists of no less than 400 gods or *orisha*, each having its own particular domain, priests and worshippers. *Olorun* the supreme, omniscient, omnipotent being is never represented and sacrifices are never offered to him. Amongst the principal *orisha*, *Obatala*, the creator god, is represented as a horseman, and his wife *Odudua*, the goddess of earth, is represented as a seated mother suckling her child. *Shango*, the god of thunder, who is more or less confused with one of the first sovereigns of Oyo, rides across the clouds mounted on a ram. Wooden statuettes represent him as an armed horseman sometimes surrounded by three female figures, his wives of the rivers *Oya* (the Niger), *Oshun*, and *Oba*. The polished stones, known throughout all Africa as 'thunder axes' or 'thunder stones' are associated with the cult of Shango. These stones are mounted on wooden hafts reminiscent of Aegean double axes, and are brandished by the faithful during their ritual dances when they seek to become possessed by the spirit of Shango. The messenger of the gods is known here as *Eshu* (*Legba* amongst the Fon); his character is always that of a malicious spirit or a practical joker whom it is necessary to placate. Thus one finds wherever one goes altars set up to *Eshu* at the doors of dwellings, which consist of a simple vase made out of a clay cone or statue in human shape which is always ithyphallic. Certain modern *Eshu* wear sun helmets,

spectacles and wrist-watches – all the insignia of social superiority. Finally, the Yoruba consult Ifa on all important occasions. The seers interpret the oracle's answer with the help of sixteen half palm kernels, using cups, plates and bells – the same procedure as is found amongst the *Fa* of Dahomey.

Yoruba masks are often polychrome and when they are designed to be worn horizontally they represent a human face with elongated features and a stretched-out neck. Other masks in the form of a helmet are surmounted by a group, in which the central figure, taller than the rest, dominates his servitors. All these masks belong to secret societies, notably to the *Egungun* ('the Ghosts') whose festivals usually take place in the spring, when the masks are supposed to come from the underground city of the dead, bringing messages to the living; plays are enacted in public places, in which singers and dancers join. The *Gelede* society, which is also found in Dahomey in the Ketou region, endeavours by its dances to promote the well-being of the community. In earlier times the *Ogboni* society exercised in particular political and judicial functions. It survives for reasons of prestige, and officiates at the funerals of its members, which the society likes to be sumptuous. Amongst the attributes of the society are big drums decorated with anthropomorphic designs.

Ibeji are wooden statues commissioned from a sculptor on the death of a twin; the mother accords the same care to the statue that she would to her child – she washes it (hence the defaced appearance of old *ibeji*), she adorns it, 'feeds it', without tiring, until she can pass on her task to the surviving twin, who will continue the ritual throughout the whole of his life.

The Yoruba still practise non-religious art – they carve the posts which support the verandas of their chiefs, doors and window frames and little ivory figurines.

The most characteristic Yoruba works come from the north. Nearer to the coast the style remains the same, but the soft woods are painted in hard, dry colours – blue, red and yellow – which cannot hide the crudity of the forms. Since 1895 the masks have been manufactured at Lagos, with an eye to European sales.

The modern *cire perdue* casts, representing human figures or

animals similar in style to those from South Dahomey, are manufactured for the exclusive use of tourists. In no way do they resemble the consummate bronze art of Ife so celebrated today.

Discovered for the most part about fifteen years ago, and preserved in the same place, these life-size IFE heads in bronze, or to be more exact, in brass, probably date back to before the last years of the thirteenth century. In fact, at that date, artisans from Ife introduced the technique of casting bronze in *cire perdue* into Benin. The static poise and the respect for proportion, amounting to an almost quasi-academic accuracy, and the absolute mastery of technique, both in pottery and in *cire perdue*, are proof that the art of Ife can only be the result of long tradition.

As early as 1910, Frobenius had discovered several little terracottas and a metal head to which he attributed a Mediterranean

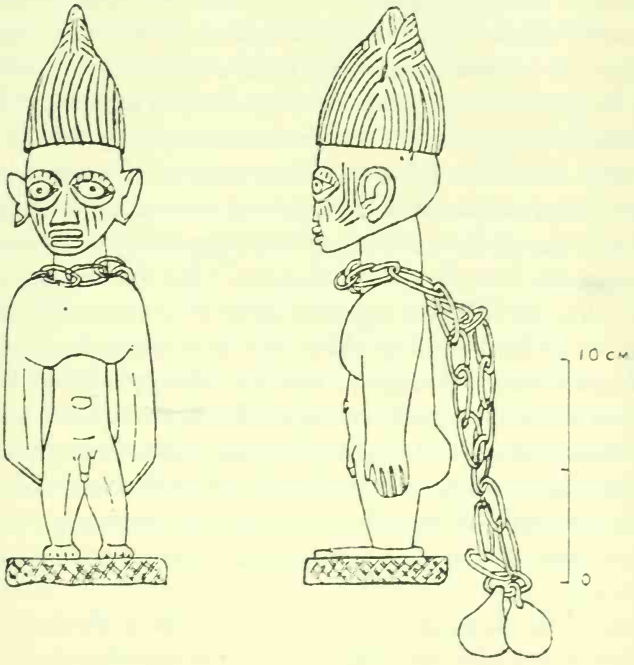


Fig. 17. *Ibeji*, statuette of twins. Nigeria, *Yoruba*. Ht.: 25 cm.

– perhaps an Etruscan – origin. The Egyptologist, W. M. Flinders Petrie, for his part, associated them with work found in Memphis dating from the fifth century B.C. But Frobenius' discovery remained an isolated one, and it was not until 1938 that about twenty pieces were brought to the light of day in the course of excavation.

Everything leads us to suppose that the Ife bronzes are more or less idealized portraits of chieftains or important personages, perhaps carried out after the death of the model, to play a part in funerary or commemorative ceremonies. On some of them, little holes can be noticed, arranged around the lips and chin; these, it is supposed, were for the purpose of fixing a false beard; other faces have parallel grooves engraved on them, a common tribal mark among the neighbouring populations.

An indication of the possible source of Ife art is furnished by the presence, on one head, of a diadem, surmounted by a vertical ornament. A similar head-dress was worn until quite recently by the warrior chiefs of the ancient kingdom of Kaffa in southern Abyssinia. Abyssinian head-dress, Yoruba diadem – both of these might be related to the crowns of the Nubian sovereigns found in the tombs dating back to the first centuries A.D., but in what exact way, we do not know. These crowns of massive silver, studded with precious stones, carry in their centre the likeness of a ram, the sacred animal both of the Egyptian god Amon, and of Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder. That the same tradition should have survived at opposite ends of a route which was perhaps more frequented in olden days than might be imagined, should not come as a surprise; we have already noticed the influence of classical antiquity amongst the Baule and the Ashanti. It is as though at the end of a long voyage, with the impossibility of continuing further, certain features of civilization had taken root on the shores of the Atlantic, to survive there forgotten, the last witnesses to a past civilization which has elsewhere disappeared.

Again, all the Ife bronzes have a cavity in the skull, the purpose of which is not obvious. This same detail may be observed in terra-cottas of ancient Greece and Magna Graecia, where its

purpose must have been to avoid cracking in the baking. If the Ife *cire perdue* process has its far origin in Greek-inspired pottery, one can imagine the African founder slavishly copying, out of respect for his original model, a technical detail which is in fact unnecessary.

At Ife there exists today a ram's head in granite, almost life-size, standing stones, ceremonial seats hewn out of single blocks of quartz, and stone statues of men and animals. All are as imposing as they are enigmatic.

BENIN remained for a long time under the political and religious domination of the Yoruba, its neighbours. On the election of each Oba of Benin, a Maltese cross and a bronze head were sent to him by the *Oni*, or religious chief of the Ife. This domination extended to the realms of art, and it was an Ife artisan who in 1280 introduced the technique of *cire perdue* casting into Benin. Bronze sculpture always remained an art of the court, the foundries were installed in a wing of the palace, and the most able metal founders were ennobled.

The Portuguese arrived at the town in 1472. Immediately links were established between Lisbon, which the envoys of the African potentate visited frequently, and the city of Benin, where a Portuguese Minister had his residence. The negro kingdom imported cloth, saddles and Spanish wines, and exported pepper, cotton and, above all, slaves. In 1620, Michael Praetorius, a musician living at the court of the Duke of Brunswick, reproduced in his *Syntagma Musicum* an ivory trumpet from Benin. A Dutchman who saw the city in 1668 described the splendour of the Royal Palace, 'as big as the City of Haarlem', its rectangular pillars covered with decorated bronze plaques. During the course of the eighteenth century, Benin prospered once more, but the city never regained its ancient splendour. The English military expedition sent to carry out reprisals in 1897, found the roads filled with mutilated corpses; the stench of blood was so strong that many soldiers fainted. It can be well understood that members of the expedition who discovered statues, plaques and bronze heads left abandoned in a shed and covered with dust, were

unable to believe that these works had been executed on the site. Following their example, historians and art critics attributed the origin of the Benin bronzes to Egyptian, Moslem, and more often, European influence. Today it has been firmly established that these works were those of local artisans, working solely to the glory of their sovereign, a veritable living god. In this respect also Benin art is an African art. But the difference in material entails a difference in technique: the bronze, the original of which was moulded in soft clay, will not be of the same form as a statue which has been hacked with a knife from a trunk or a branch, and which still shows its original outline.

The Benin bronzes are either plaques or reliefs, showing subjects which include life-size human heads on which are represented the traditional ornaments in red jasper, still worn today by the local chiefs, isolated figures or groups, or animals such as cocks and leopards. The plaques which in former times covered the pillars, represent battles or commemorate royal exploits.

The ivories consist of either little human masks, bracelets, goblets and cups, inspired by Western Renaissance forms; or, most important, elephant tusks carved throughout their whole length, and, lastly, horns for summoning the tribe together.

By relying on local tradition and reckoning that each sovereign ruled for an average of thirty years, it is possible to trace back the chronology of the kings of Benin to the twelfth century. The chronological order of the works of art can be computed by historical events and by the evolution and decline of the kingdom.

The Archaic Period begins in the middle of the twelfth century, and continues up to the middle of the fourteenth century. Very few pieces can be attributed with certainty to this period, with the exception perhaps of the beautiful round bells with thin sides. The Ancient Period (1350–1500) has given us the celebrated portrait heads, equally delicately cast. Most of the known objects belong to the Great Period (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). They include plaques representing scenes inspired by court festivities, where grand dignitaries in sumptuous dress are surrounded by naked young boys, heavy bronze heads, statues of trumpeters and the best of the attempts at sculptures of Europeans.

Decadence sets in at the end of the seventeenth century. The Late Period covers the whole of the eighteenth century – wooden heads, sometimes plated with brass, then took the place of the bronze heads. Most of the carved wooden heads and the lightly decorated ivory objects come from the Modern Period. It seems that after 1820 the art of bronze casting fell into complete decay.

Astonishing metal statues have still come to light over the past few years at various places in Western Nigeria. The first, discovered in a fisherman's village on the Niger, resembles most closely the naturalist school of Ife. One and a half feet tall, it represents a man seated on the ground with his left leg bent and the right stretched out straight. More akin to the school of Benin is another standing figure, about four feet high, wearing a tunic which resembles a Nubian or Egyptian costume dating from the beginning of the Christian era. Another large nude, found together with the statue of a warrior, should also be mentioned. There is nothing to suggest that we have come to the end of our discoveries.

Equally mysterious are hundreds of stone carvings – statues and heads – found in a clearing at the immediate approaches to Esie, sixty-three miles north-east of Ife. Most of these figures are depicted in a seated position, their height varying from sixteen to twenty inches. The origin and age of these figures remain unknown. Their style would suggest that they are not very ancient, only three hundred years old, perhaps. Local tradition has it that they are petrified human beings discovered in this place far from human habitation. Held in reverence as protectors of the community, these statues are associated with the great festival which is held each year in March to mark the beginning of agricultural work.

The Benin bronzes, known for the last fifty years, and the Ife bronzes and terra-cottas discovered twenty years ago, testify to an art whose greatness we are only beginning to suspect.

There are other pointers. On the plateau of Bauchi, in the interior of Nigeria, the most ancient of all native African art was found in a seam of tin workings – little earthenware sculptures,

both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic. These are really accomplished works, impossible to classify as 'savage art'. They belong to the so-called *Nok* civilization, and date from the second half of the first millennium B.C.

Further to the east, not far from Lake Chad, the SAO, who disappeared in the sixteenth century under the onslaught of Islam – legend has it that they were giants – interred their dead in a squatting position in immense jars which were buried vertically and surmounted by earthenware objects placed upside-down, of which only the bottom emerges above the surface of the ground. Toys, receptacles, ornaments, ancestral figures and masked personages, all these were made by the Sao in a clay which became rose-coloured in baking. The amount of these pieces which have been recovered number more than fifteen thousand. In the statuettes of ancestors, which vary in height up to about fifteen inches, the head is in high relief with protruding eyes and enormous lips, surmounting a flat torso clad in a tunic and cut off at hip level (Pl. xv). The heads with animal masks (which J.-P. Lebeuf regarded as representations of masked dancers), are of less pure clay, coarser in consistency, but are very powerfully modelled. Bronze (actually brass) jewellery has been found on the same sites. The designs, which have been perpetuated right up to the present day, show an absolute mastery of technique.

Thus the region situated to the west of Chad must have been the centre of a civilization which over the course of two thousand years was able to imbue itself with fresh vigour on several occasions.

To the east of the lower course of the Niger, Southern Nigeria is inhabited by numerous sub-tribes which adjoin one another, but which have no political unity and often no common language. One can distinguish, nevertheless, four large groups – the *Ibo*, *Ijo*, *Ibibio* and the *Ekoi* – each of which, with the help of basic communal traits, has developed a particular style, sometimes even several.

The first, and most apparent common trait of the whole of this

region is a strong sense of drama; designs, motifs, colours all contribute to this. There is no purely decorative element, but an arrangement of masses; the artist hews human or animal forms out of a block and simplifies them to the point of abstraction.

There are a large number of masks, either masks in the proper sense of the term, which cover only the face, or helmets enclosing the whole head, or a carving placed horizontally on the skull of the wearer who is hidden by a hood.

These masks make their appearance chiefly during the course of feasts given by secret societies, similar in type to those met with among the Yoruba. Whether it be masculine or feminine, each society fulfils a pre-determined function: one celebrates the cult of river spirits, another sings of victory, either in the hunt or against their enemies, and all officiate at the funerals of important members.

One last feature, common to all Southern Nigeria, is the presentation by the secret society of one or more sacred plays, which are its own property. These dramas are performed either by masked actors who assume the personality of supernatural beings, or by marionettes.

The IBO number more than three million, with a density of population that can amount to about six hundred inhabitants per square mile. They comprise more than thirty sub-tribes, often without common links between them. Beyond the marshy delta of the Niger, the Ibo occupy the gentle slopes of a plateau with a relatively fertile soil. Today the inhabitants sell the produce of their palm groves and the trade in palm nuts has already given rise to a new class of middleman.

The Ibo have never attained the same technical mastery of metalwork as their neighbours of Benin, but their carving is skilful. They also have good carpenters, who today copy European furniture; the diversity of styles is disconcerting.

The *ikenga* is a wooden statue painted in bright colours – yellow, black, white, red – a seated man with long horns, smoking a pipe and holding between his hands a knife and a human head. Sometimes also the *ikenga* is arranged in tiers with several human

figures and animals. This carving protects the household; each dwelling possesses its own. The statues can be bought in the market, and no ceremony is attached to their installation, but the master of the house consults his *ikenga* each time he has to make a decision.

The Ibo attach, perhaps, even more importance to funerals than do their neighbours. A man's first task is to see that the obsequies of his father are as sumptuous as possible so that the deceased may bear his survivors no malice. The *Maw* society, composed entirely of males, hold ceremonies at funerals and the end of the mourning period. Like the Yoruba *Egungun*, the *Maw* masks incarnate the dead returned to earth, announcing their arrival in the other world to the sound of a trumpet, whence they have come to reassure, or if need be, to punish their survivors. In appearance the mask is reminiscent of a death's head, with its empty eye sockets, emaciated features and fleshless face painted white. The complicated coiffure is picked out in black and the eye sockets and mouth in red. The *Maw* speaks with a disguised voice, effected by means of a reed whistle. The masks run all over the village, enter houses and allow small gifts to be offered to them. Women and children flee at their approach. Ceremonies of initiation take place at night; the novitiates, with their faces to the ground, are trampled upon by the masks, and are finally led to the country of the dead. In other regions of the Ibo country, the masks manifest themselves during the weeks when the yams are planted. Here again, we find the link already noted in the Sudan, between funerary and agrarian rites, at which masks personifying ancestors or tutelary genii make their appearance. This association between masks, funerary and agrarian rites appears constantly among agricultural communities. Similar occurrences have been noticed in other parts of the globe, notably in Melanesia.

Apart from these specialized masks, the Ibo possess others, akin to those used by their neighbours, the Ijo, in their water-spirit cult. This cult is practised in the Ibo territory by the *Obukele* society whose object is to promote fertility in all parts of the country – to assure themselves of abundant children and food.

The masks represent the spirits of water, the most common being a fish, so stylized as to be almost abstract (Pl. XVI, 1).

Lastly, from the Ibo come statues in painted clay, representing different gods of their pantheon, which are sheltered in the sacred *mbari* huts constructed and decorated by a group of specialists. Many of these statues, modelled on an armature of palm fibres, are larger than life-size. The torso is a narrow and long cylinder, the head surmounts a neck which is almost as large as the torso; arms and legs are short and bent. Details are painted red, brown and black on a white background. We only possess photographs or drawings of these statues since their fragility, as also their sacred nature, prevent them from being moved.

The IJO or *Iwa*, who number about 150,000, regard themselves as autochthonous. Perhaps the arrival of new occupants, the Yoruba and the Ibo, drove them to the extreme edge of the Niger delta, the only region where they are found today.

The Ijo sculptors only work in wood, to which, cylinder or cube, they give strictly geometric forms. Their art gives the impressions of being one of the boldest and most perfect of all African sculpture.

The *nduen fobara* (faces of the dead) are altars consecrated to ancestor worship. Against a background made of raffia surrounded by a frame (a recollection of the Benin plaques?) a central full-length figure stands out, flanked by servitors, whose smaller scale is indicative of their lower status. The limbs and trunk are not carved from the same block but are tied together. Below the projecting forehead are two cylinders which are the eyes. The square mouth, open in a grin, disclose teeth filed to a point. When a new ancestor joins the family pantheon, a head in high relief is added to the top of the frame. The height of these screens can be as much as five feet.

We find ourselves here among head hunters, former cannibals. As soon as an enemy was killed, the corpse was taken to the village, cut up, cooked and eaten by the warriors and the oldest of the women. A little while later, the Peri society would hold a feast, at which each man who had killed at least one enemy, danced,

holding a skull in one hand and a knife in the other. The same ceremony was held when a leopard or an elephant had been killed, and also at the funeral of a chieftain.

The festivities of the *Sakapu* society were given in honour of water spirits, the *Owu*. They followed each other in a given order until the end of a cycle which lasted about twenty-five years. A new cycle started seven years later. The first of these feasts was offered in honour of ancestors who lived at the bottom of the sea and who were invited to assist at the ensuing ceremonies, each of which was consecrated to some particular spirit. During the dances the mask, representing the spirit, as it had first been seen in a dream or in an ecstatic vision, intervened. A robe, with two holes pierced in it for the eyes, hid the wearer. The mask is sewn on to the robe and worn horizontally. The top represents a simplified human face, very elongated, or else a fantastic being combining human features with those of a fish, an alligator or a hippopotamus. Sometimes Janus masks are made (Pl. XVI, 1).

To the east of the Ijo and south of the Ibo, the provinces of *Calabar* and *Owerri* contain more than a million IBIBIO, grouped into a dozen sub-tribes, whose language and institutions have come under the influence of their neighbours and which sometimes reveal considerable differences one from another.

The Ibibio, like their neighbours, are planters. Certain among them, such as the *Efik*, who live at the mouth of the Cross River, appear to be excellent merchants, and specialize in trading in fish and palm oil to such an extent that they despise the cultivation of the soil.

Ibibio art comprises several types of masks and wooden statues with articulated jaws and limbs, representing ancestors or tutelary genii. Masks and statues are the property of male associations which, in each group, hold all the power in their hands. Thus, until quite recently, the right to harvest palm nuts, the principal source of riches in the country, was the perquisite only of members of the most important of these societies, the *Ekpo*.

The *Ekpo* protects the community. By honouring their ancestors, the association were assured of their good will, essential for

an abundant harvest and a numerous progeny. The rules admit of several grades, the acquisition of which, at very heavy cost, confer a high social standing. The *Ekpo* – that is to say, the masks personifying the ancestors – show themselves twice a year, at the planting and harvesting of yams. The ceremonies continue for several days; the final ceremony must chase away any ancestral spirit still remaining in the vicinity who might be a nuisance to the living. Formerly, human sacrifices were offered, during the feasts, before large wooden statues representing the protecting divinities, the principal one being *Eka Ekpo*, the mother of *Ekpos*. The masks are of black wood, sometimes in the form of a skull. The wearer is hidden under a costume made of fibre which is also black; his feet are rubbed with chalk. The masks appear again at the funerals of chieftains or to punish an infringement of the rules of the society. Formerly, at the cry of the *Ekpo*, the masks leapt into the air, each brandishing a knife and chasing away intruders; the house of the guilty party – thief, adulterer or insolvent debtor – was pillaged.

The *Ekong* society (from the name of the god of war) used to be, in former days, a society of head-hunters. Right of entry to the society entailed the sacrifice of a slave strangled in a sacred grove who was then impaled facing the altar. Today the society bases its recruitment entirely on wealth, its members appear at funerals and give performances with masks and statues.

The *Idiong* society groups together all the richest men, who are also seers and magicians. The wearing of a diadem of plaited liana, sprinkled with the blood of a victim, is the distinguishing mask of a member. This diadem is often represented on the masks.

The best Ibibio sculptors come from the west (*Anang*), but the old black *Ekpo* masks have here given place to more recent ones in brilliant colours, sometimes covered with varnish. These masks combine animal characteristics (notably horns) with human features, or represent faces ravaged by illness. There is no forehead curve, and the eyes are indicated only by two cavities. Full lips hide the teeth. The nose, which is strongly modelled, is represented by an inverted triangle within another triangle

bounded by the eyes and mouth. There are tribal scars on each temple and at the base of the nose.

The *Oron* of the south possess statues of ancestors called *Ekpu* measuring between three and four feet, many of which are more than a century old. Their very individual style is distinguished by a long pointed beard, and the diversity of faces leads to the supposition that they are portraits.

The little comedies of the Ibo and Ibibio which are enacted by marionettes have no other purpose than to amuse the spectators. The characters are all familiar types – the grandfather, the grandmother, the father, the mother, the children and the beggar. There is no plot; each character in turn makes its appearance during the course of the dialogue. Blankets hide the manipulator from view, who disguises his voice with the help of a reed pipe; the women are supposed to be unaware of his presence. It is already obvious from this fiction that the origin of these performances is based on the recollection of some sacred rite. The play may have referred to a journey to the land of the dead made by some hero, who had been sworn to secrecy, but who subsequently breaks his word and lets his companions into the secret; because of this indiscretion, he forfeits his life.

The Ekoi, who number perhaps 100,000, live on the upper reaches of the Cross River, upstream from the Ibibio. The secret *Egbo* society, which we find under different names (*Ekpu*, *Ekpo*, etc.) throughout the whole of Southern Nigeria, would be of Ekoi origin. It consists here of seven grades, each having its own particular dances and 'image', a human head carved in wood and covered with an antelope skin – perhaps formerly with human skin, that of an enemy or slave. These heads, conceived in a very naturalistic art form, with wooden or metal teeth, surmount a wicker-work armature fixed to a net or on to a hood which hides the wearer's face. There are numerous Janus heads, with one black (masculine) face and the other white (feminine). Another interpretation of these is that the two faces are representations of the Father-of-the-Heavens and the Mother-of-the-Heavens, or of the Past and Future. The carving may be surmounted either by

immense horns, or a human or animal statuette. In the case of the human statues the arms and legs are mobile.

An Ekoi myth describes the origin of these masks in the following terms:

'*Nki*, the dormouse, went into the forest to gather palm nuts. As he was cutting a cluster, a nut fell and rolled underground as far as the City of the Dead, where the son of the chief picked it up and ate it. Running after his nut, the dormouse arrived at the home of the Dead, saw the young man and understood what had happened. He went to seek the father of the young man, and said to him, "Give me back the nut which your son has eaten." Then the old man gave him a drum saying, "This will take the place of what you have lost." *Nki* took the drum and returned home. Each time he played on his instrument a calabash filled with fruit appeared. In this way he became very rich. But one day *Ngbo*, the leopard, surprised his secret and stole the drum. *Nki*, very sad, returned to the home of the Dead and bewailed his loss. He was then given the *Ngyuk*, the huge drum used during the masked dances, which he brought back to the land of the Living. The first time he beat it, it was not food that appeared, but a mask which rose up and dealt him a thrashing. *Nki* continued to play and the mask went back into the drum. Encouraged by his first theft, the leopard stole *Ngyuk*, but he beat it so furiously that seven masks emerged simultaneously from the drum. The terrified leopard smashed the instrument and threw away the pieces. The masks, finding themselves without shelter, invaded the village and thrashed all the inhabitants – just as they continue to do today on their excursions.'[1]

[1] Talbot, P. A., *In the Shadow of the Bush*, London, 1912, p. 46 ff.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CAMEROONS

THE Cameroons, in the east of Nigeria, is administered under mandate by the English and, to a greater extent, by France. The territory, which is arbitrarily divided, possesses no physical unity. The same succession of climatic zones noticeable in West Africa are also found here, extending from north to south, from the desert to the great forest.

To the north, the Sudanese zone extends as far as Lake Chad. The rains here are very rare, but the abundant flood-waters of the rivers oblige the riparian population to build their homes on piles. The society is a composite one: a Peul aristocracy coming from the west adjoins the 'pagan' refugees of the mountains. The Peul society is feudal, the ruling class priding itself on its adherence to Islam, and for this reason all representation of human beings or animals is forbidden. The houses of noblemen, the wide embroidered costumes, the calabashes decorated with poker work, and the stamped leather work are the products of the artisan caste.

From the point of view of the plastic arts, the Cameroons, apart from the north, may be regarded as being divided into two main regions, the Centre and the Coast. The centre is occupied by high plateaux with savannah vegetation. The inhabitants, agriculturalists and cattle breeders living on the mountain slopes, have resisted the inroads of Peul warriors. To the south, the forest covers everything. Floods of rain fall equally on both sides of the Atlantic and Congolese watersheds, leaving only just a few weeks of relative dryness in December and January – as, for example, at Duala.

The resemblance between the different groups of the savannah,

the *Bamileke*, *Bangwa*, *Bafoum*, *Bali*, *Bamum*, etc. of the French Cameroons and the *Bekom*, *Babanki*, etc., of the British Cameroons is such that no satisfactory classification of them has yet been made. In each case, a chief, assisted by counsellors, governs the region. His orders are carried out by different societies, more or less secret in nature, in which may be found, grouped in strict hierarchic order, princes, high-ranking followers, notables and palace functionaries.

Large receptacles of carved wood used for storing provisions or cooked food are found everywhere. Their decorative motifs consist of bloated human faces wearing the local headgear, stylized toads and spiders, and geometric designs borrowed from the technique of basket-work. Their surprising homogeneity is due, at least in part, to the fact that the art of working in wood, metal and pottery is in the hands of professionals who transmit the secrets of their craft from father to son. Wood-carving here achieves monumental proportions – carved window frames, life-size statues, stools and gigantic masks show a sense of the dramatic, in which all the accent is on movement. These same qualities are found in the metal-work and pottery.

In the over-populated areas of *Bandjoun*, *Bamende* and *Dschang*, the BAMILEKE mountain people, greedy for gain, have turned pedlar. Either on foot or in lorries they traverse the whole of the central and eastern Cameroons. It is reckoned that 500,000 Bamileke are under French trusteeship and that 200,000 are in the British Cameroons. The river *Noun* separates them in the west from the BAMUM, with whom they have many traits in common. Numbering about 80,000, the Bamum are able sculptors who know how to exploit hard wood as well as soft. Our knowledge of Bamum art is largely due to *Njoya*, the Sultan of Foumban, who reigned at the beginning of this century. Aware of the artistic interest evinced in the works of his people, Njoya, alone among all the African sovereigns, took the initiative of creating a museum adjoining his palace, where examples of Bamum statuary are preserved.

Among all the people of the savannah lands, it is the custom for

an agglomeration of wives' and servants' dwellings, store-rooms and the premises of secret societies to be grouped round the chief's dwelling. The chief's house is enormous (about twenty-four feet square at the base and twenty-four feet high). Its immense thatched roof appears to be suppported by carved posts which sometimes form a colonnade. The rectangular entrance is framed at the corners by four timbers, the space in between corresponding to the thickness of the wall; the lintel and threshold project beyond. Whether it be a noble's dwelling or the premises of a secret society, the design on these timbers nearly always represents the chief and his wife, seen front view, surrounded by animals – a tortoise (the tortoise plays a part in the initiatory ordeals), a spider, a serpent, everything that lives in water (since these are symbols of fecundity) and, finally, the panther, the royal beast (Pl. XVII).

Stools in the form of mushrooms are used by the secret societies. Entrusted with the duty of carrying out the orders of the chief, these associations admit of several degrees of rank, and the rank of each member can be recognized by the stool to which he is entitled. Initiates of the lowest rank seat themselves on the ground, their immediate superiors have the right to a cylindrical stool with a hole on the side of it. After this come seats with three legs, then four, and finally a stool made of solid bamboo, the prerogative of grand dignitaries. The seat reserved for the master is the only one decorated with the motif of the panther.

As soon as a chief has been elected, he orders a throne to be made, covered with embroideries made from imported pearls. The thrones of the ancient sovereigns are kept in a storage room of the palace from which they are taken out for the great festivals. They are then placed in a row in the market-place enclosure, where they stand next to the long-necked calabashes, decorated with pearls, which are held by the wives of the chief and in which are preserved the heads of ancestors.

Their earthenware pipes of enormous size are not designed for smoking. The sovereign and members of his family and notables have these objects carried before them by young boys in their employ. Very often the lower part of the pipe represents a head

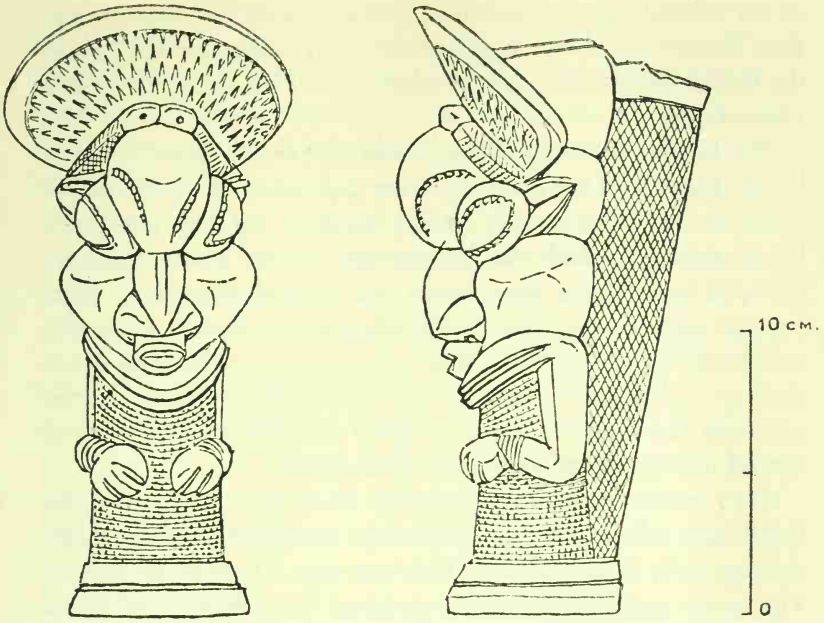


Fig. 18. Pipe bowl, black pottery. Cameroons, *Bamileke*. Ht.: 20 cm.

with chubby cheeks. The sides are decorated with stylized toads or with the spider motif. In some metal pipes and in the handles of fly-switches, as also in little bronze masks cast by the *cire-perdue* process, there exist the last echoes of the art of Benin.

Our knowledge of the sculpture of the South Cameroons is very incomplete. The people gathered together here come from all corners; none of them knows the art of writing. In some places a few historical traditions have survived to keep alive the memory of local wars, but in others often the fear of slave hunters (a fresh cause for migrations and mixed populations), has effaced everything.

The Duala migration (*Duala*, *Pongo*, *Wuri*, *Mungo*) dates from about two centuries ago. Leaving the low valley of the Sanaga – the country of the Bakota, according to their tradition – and moving westward, the ancestors of the present-day inhabitants

of the coastal region came into collision with the Bakoko and Basa. Proceeding up the length of the coast, they infiltrated among the Bakundu, who now live in what is today known as the British Cameroons.

The Duala region itself lies in the 'Cameroon basin', formed by the mouths of the Mungo, Wuri and Dibamba rivers, which make an enormous muddy estuary bordered by dark mangrove forests through which run innumerable canals. The villages are grouped high on the river banks, and behind them lies a plain covered with palm-groves. The inhabitants live mainly on manioc and dried fish. At one time their principal occupation was slave-trading; today most of them work as middlemen between the port and the interior. Some of them are fishermen and spend several months of the year away from home.

After contact with Europeans for more than a century, the Duala have fallen under their influence, noticeably in their motifs and especially in the colour of their carvings. There are no statues. The masks mostly represent an ox-head, the colouring of which follows a geometric design in white, black, red and blue. These masks, called *Nyati*, belong to the Ekongolo society and make their appearance during funerals. One finds them again among the *Bajong*, the *Bodiman* and the *Wuri*. Their most noteworthy artistic contribution is the prows of their canoes. These great boats, the pride of the country, which may be as long as seventy-five feet and carry a hundred men, are ornamented with a mosaic-like design in carved polychrome wood, fixed to an extension of the prow. The design terminates with a bird holding a serpent in its beak. Very often, behind the bird and to one side of it, a standing man is flanked by two animals. Frobenius, who as early as 1897 had studied the art of the Cameroons, saw in the serpent a representation of the soul which the bird messenger from the beyond was bearing away to the Land of the Dead.[1] A delightful explanation, but which, unfortunately, is confirmed by nothing in mythology. The link may have existed, but the memory of it

[1] Frobenius, L., 'Der Kameruner Schiffsschnabel und seine Motive', *Nova Acta. Abb. der Kaiserl.*, Leop. Carol. Deutschen Akademie der Naturforscher, bd., LXX, n. 1, Halle, 1897.

has been lost. One cannot help noticing a family resemblance between the arrangement of the design of African prows and the bows of Malayan Dyak pirogues. On the other hand, European influence explains the appearance, in certain cases, of a ship's clock or stylized dolphins. The sculptor's imagination serves to give a unity of the whole.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EQUATORIAL FOREST

(Gaboon, Middle Congo)

To the south of the Ubangi and the sources of the Sanga, the forest, with its immense trees, domain of shadow and humidity, imposes a similar way of life on all its inhabitants. Each morning the sun sucks up the vapours which rise from the sodden earth; each afternoon the sky is filled with clouds, which burst at twilight, more often than not, in storm. There is no livestock, except for goats. The forest houses are rectangular, with very steep roofs, covered with leaves, and consisting of two sides and a gable-end. The walls are made of bark or boughs. The houses, in two continuous rows, line the side of a road running parallel to the river, the extremities of which are closed by two communal dwellings; these are the houses of the men, where they take their meals and welcome strangers.

It rains all the year round, with two periods of maximum rainfall in March and October. The temperature oscillates without respite between 80° and 85°F. There are no defined seasons, no defined harvest-time. The gathering of root plants (manioc, sweet potatoes and yams) occurs according to daily need. But soon the less fertile soil becomes exhausted and it is necessary to go farther afield and open up new clearings. A time comes when all the land within a certain area is no longer cultivable. It is then that the village itself moves on: the houses are abandoned and in a few years vegetation will have covered everything. Ten or twenty miles away another village rises, whose years are already numbered. Naturally it does not contain all the inhabitants of the former village, certain of whom have preferred to move to

another site or have gone to rejoin their parents living farther away.

This constant nomadic movement explains the fluidity of human communities in the forest: no fixed establishment, no important communal centre, only families and clans in perpetual movement. The borrowed customs which have resulted from these continual changes of location, make it difficult to attribute exclusively to such and such a society or region, any particular institution or style.

Generally speaking, the movements of the population are from east to west, from the interior towards the coast. Men descended river courses, the only means of communication, but sometimes this descent has led them from south to north. In the case of the *Mpongwe* and the *Orungu*, who followed the Ngounie, it led them south-east, and they occupied the banks of the tributaries to the right of the Congo. Sometimes also, the newcomers came up against earlier settlers and were forced to take another course. In this way, the *Fangs*, under pressure from the Peuls of the Cameroons, were diverted to the south-west, and in turn drove the Bakota towards the south.

The FANG or *Pangwe*, assessed at 800,000 in number, are spread over an area from the Sanaga to the Ogooué, from the coast to the thirteenth degree longitude in the east. A strange people, coming from the upper Sanga, they are endowed with what amounts to nomadic mania. We only know about their last migration, whose advance was made in successive 'bounds'; family groups (*ayong*) overtaking each other on their continual march. The Fang first appeared in the Ogooué basin about five hundred years ago and reached the coast in about 1870. They continue to expand and P. Trilles cites an example of a village in the neighbourhood of Libreville which was moved to a location about two hundred miles away under the direction of the same chief. Recent inhabitants of the forest, to which they are ill adapted, a dispersed people who have lost their social cohesion and sense of political unity, borrowing easily (at least superficially) from their neighbours and from Europeans, the Fang group tend to become

merged into the rest of the population. Unmistakably significant is the almost total disappearance of their art, which once included some of the masterpieces of African sculpture.

Very much sought after (they were the first to attract attention of Western art lovers), Fang statues are homogeneous in style and of great simplicity; their balance is derived from their curved surfaces. There exists no engraved or carved decoration (Pl. XIX). Heads, busts and complete statues of this same type are known. Oval faces with concave profiles under a rounded forehead; eyebrows and nose described by a continuous projection, accentuating the fluidity of the forms. A calm dignity, a way of catching the expression, sometimes an open mouth, sometimes aggressive. The tresses of hair are joined to the face, the eyes are indicated by horizontal protuberances ('coffee grain' eyes), or by brass discs. Very elongated cylindrical bodies with arms detached from the trunk; hands joined together over the chest in an act of offering or else resting against the thighs. Legs, generally short. Certain examples reveal a vertical support under the buttocks which served to fix the statue to the lid of a cylindrical box made of a strip of sewn bark, closed by a base and lid made of wood. These boxes, *byeri*, contain the skulls of ancestors, and the family treasure: antelope horns containing magic powders, seeds possessing symbolic value, huge snail shells . . . It is not known whether the statue itself represented an ancestor or was simply meant to drive away importunate persons. The *byeri*, the altar of the ancestors, was guarded by an elder, but nevertheless, from time to time, different groups from the same village put all their *byeri* together in a single lodging, where the statues and boxes stood in a row on a shelf. But wherever they might be placed, the sight of them was forbidden to women.

Unrelated to the ancestor statues and very inferior in artistic worth, the Fang masks represent very diverse styles: round, flat or oblong faces, it seems that each tribe possesses its own particular type, perhaps copied from a local model. In the coastal regions of Gaboon, the mask is a helmet made of light wood worn on the shoulders, often with two faces and ornamented with plumes, horns and garnished with hair and a beard made from raffia.

Sometimes it is surmounted by a smaller figure. The face is whitened, and mirrors stuck on to the wood shine in the light of torches. The mask goes out at night and proclaims its presence in a voice of which the timbre is disguised by inserting spider's webs into the nostrils. The women, thus warned, avoid meeting it and go to dance at the other end of the village or remain at home behind closed doors.

There are also immense statues in clay. They attain a height of about ten feet. These huge figures are associated with more or less secret cults, notably the *Ngil* cult, whose principal aim is to detect criminals. After a suspicious death, all the inhabitants of the village file past the statue proclaiming the formula 'May I die if I am the murderer', at the same time plunging an assegai into the figure. He who trembles admits his guilt. These huge statues, or so-called witnesses, are only of mediocre interest.[1]

At the opposite pole to this monumental art are the counters carved out of the kernel of a fruit called *elang* (*Mimosops Congolensis*) which are used for the game of *abia*, a form of 'heads or tails'. For this purpose each counter bears a motif cut out with a knife – a hunted panther, a slaughtered antelope, a large nocturnal bird, scenes of dancing or of war. The subtlety of the inscription and the complexity of certain motifs, lead one to suppose that *abia* must have formerly been associated with something much more important than a simple game of chance.[2]

Coming from the north, the BAKOTA or *Kuta*, a forest people, have infiltrated from the region of the upper Ivindo as far as the valley of the Kuilu. This infiltration is partly the result of pressure from the Fang. The Bakota do not constitute a people, but rather a group of related tribes, speaking closely related languages and observing, more or less, the same customs and the same rites.

Like the Fang – in fact, like nearly all the people of the Ogooué – the *Bakota* preserve the bones of their dead in baskets which figure in the commemorative ceremonies, and over which a

[1] Tessmann, G., *Die Pangwe*, Berlin, 1913. Leroux, L. C., 'Etude sur le "Ngil"', *Bull. de la Société des Recherches congolaises*, 6, 1925.

[2] Reche, O., *Das* Abia *Glückspiel der Jaunde und die Darstellung auf den Spielmarken*, Hamburg, 1924.

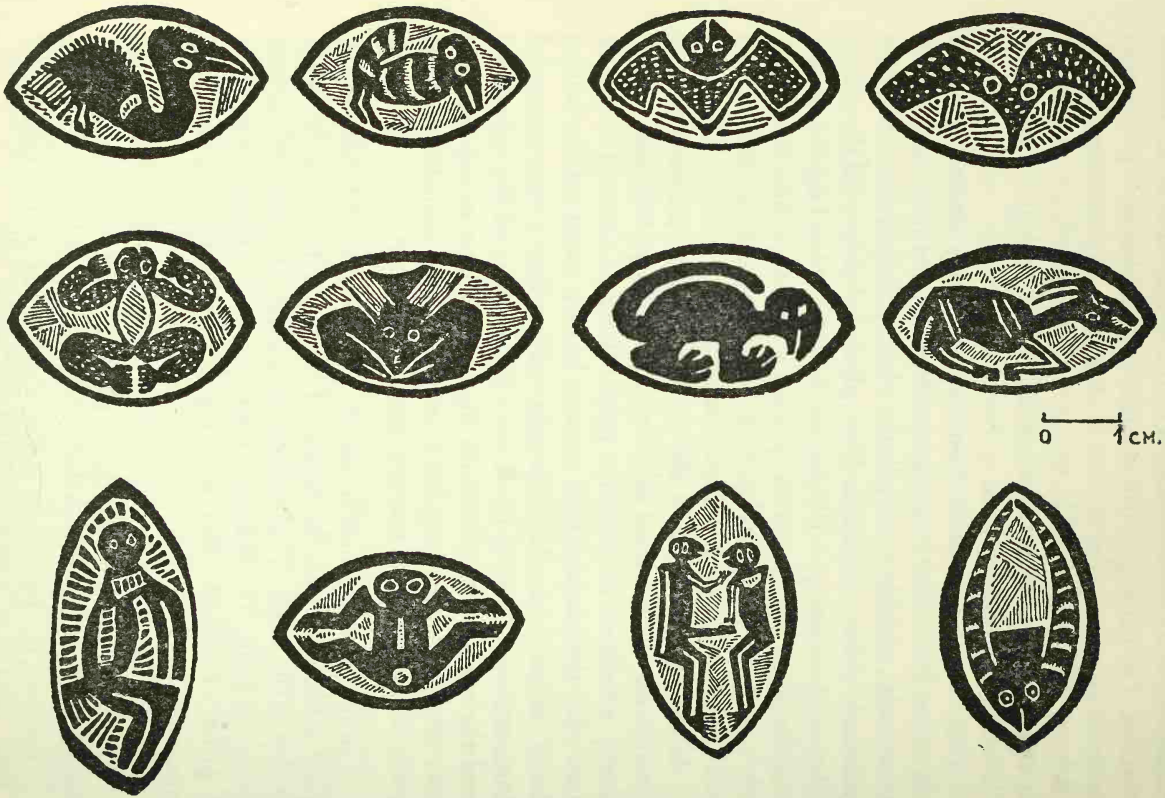


Fig. 19. Counters for the game of *abia*. Gaboon, *Fang*. Average length: 4 cm.

guardian keeps watch, as is the case with the Fang *byeri*. The analogy is only applicable to the function: the decorative style of the Bakota images is almost abstract. Why do two neighbouring peoples, both leading more or less the same way of life, employ for the same use, forms of expressions so entirely different? The question remains unanswered. In the Bakota images, a wooden armature – a simple frame cut out in the shape of a lozenge – takes the place of arms and legs. Above a cylinder representing the neck, a wooden oval disc represents the face, to which are nailed leaves of brass, or, on the older examples, narrow bands of iron or bronze arranged in parallel lines. Eyes and nose are stylized in relief, and sometimes there is no mouth. The face is surmounted by a horizontally placed crescent, the so-called *ntsuo*, the moon, which is flanked by two wings (*baa*, the cheeks, Pl. XX,). The process of flattening forms avoids the problem of depth, which is merely suggested. The Bakota themselves, distinguish between the *mbulu ngula* with one face and the *mbulu viti* with two (Janus), which are the most ancient representations of their art. If the *mbulu viti* has two faces, it is, they say, in order 'that it may eat different foods'. The theory which is sometimes advanced that images with bulging foreheads represent a male figure and those with concave foreheads, a woman, find no echo among the natives.[1] The delicate treatment of the metal, its very individual chasing – perhaps derived from a Northern Cameroon technique – the contrasts between plain and striated surfaces and sometimes between red bronze, brass or iron, add to the enigmatic character of these images.

Analogous figures fulfil the same function among other Gaboon and Congolese forest dwellers – the Ondumbo, Aduma, Obamba, Okanda and Ambete. The Ossyeba push stylization to an extreme: hair is absent, or is indicated by a single extension above the face. Two cones, close to each other in the centre of a concave surface, suggest eyes; a thin ridge, the nose; the mouth has disappeared (Pl. XX, 2).

There are many masks throughout this region, but the institutions to which these masks are related, and whose role we

[1] Andersson, E., *Contribution à l'étude des Kuta*, I, Uppsala, 1953.

have observed in the Sudanese and Guinea societies, have, in the forest region, 'exploded'. The secret societies have multiplied without a thought to their respective functions; many have two functions which overlap one another. One type of mask is abandoned, another is taken over according to the need of the moment or individual whim, without taking into consideration the role assumed by the disguised actor. It is the appearance alone that counts, its significance is discounted.

The *Mungala* is the most widespread male association in the Bakota country. The name Mungala denotes a person who appears during the initiation of boys, where his role is to confer virility on the novices. Mungala honours with his presence the funerals of old men; he brings peace to the village, protects the plantations and to this end imposes and collects fines – all of which roles are already held by the masks in the Sudan and on the Ivory coast. On the frontier of the Gaboon and Middle Congo, the *Mungala*, about six-feet long, resembles the silhouette of an animal. A light framework, carried by two initiates, supports straw matting bleached with clay, a spray of palms represents the head and neck, another bunch of leaves simulates the tail. Elsewhere, the actor does not wear a mask, the man himself is merely painted red and speaks in a disguised voice. Farther away *Mungala* disappears and the mask is merely a pretext for entertainment. *Yoyo* bursts into the village on the eve of circumcision. The actor, without make-up, is dressed in a cloak of banana leaves or raffia fibre. Before the village assembly, and in the presence of the novices, a mask is placed on his face: a combat then takes place with an adversary, who is not disguised, and who wins easily. *Yoyo* collapses, 'Yoyo is dead.' He is carried into the banana grove where he recovers to receive gifts of food. Elsewhere, initiation and mask exist side by side but are unaware of the fact. The mask and its dance are the property of their 'inventor', who, inspired by a dream, carved the wood and prepared the costume. He passes on to his son, or cedes to a third party, the right to carve and wear the disguise carrying such and such a name, and to mime his dance.

Many different aspects, one function; one actor playing different parts with no general rules attached to them – this confused state

of affairs can be stressed by one example. In about 1925, on the middle reaches of the Ogooué, in the Okanda country, a crew of canoe paddlers from the Bahumbu tribe took part in *Mvuru* dances, the function of which is comparable to those of the *Mungala* described above. Highly impressed by the performance, they took back with them to their native village a disguise and introduced the *Mvuru* dance into the upper Ogooué. They themselves regarded this performance as nothing more than an ordinary entertainment.[1] A mask of the same type, bearing another name, has been found very far from there, amongst the *Mbeti* of upper Likouala. *Angolangola* – that is its name – was carved in obedience to a dream. Its master exhibits himself at popular festivals and during the official festivities on the 14th July and 11th November.[2] These two masks, *Mvuru* and *Angolangola*, resemble strongly the grotesque *Yoyo* which M. Andersson acquired in the Sibiti region much farther to the south.[3] All three are made of soft wood; an over life-size vertical face, deeply hollowed below the forehead which is prolonged by the ridge of the nose; eyes and mouth are depicted by a horizontal cut; the colours are applied in large squares; the white is composed of clay, the red of pounded earth and the black from charcoal. The crest is formed from calao plumes and chicken feathers, the beard is made of raffia, while a monkey's skin, nailed to the figure, serves as a collar. The costume is made of raffia fibres fixed on to squares of *rabane*.

To the south of the Ogooué, along the length of the coast and especially in the loop of the river (formed by the Ngoumé, the Ogooué and the tributary of the Passa), the confusion of populations seems inextricable; it is a hotch-potch of tribes, none of which wishes to owe any allegiance to a larger group. Here the traffic in slaves, which continued far into the nineteenth century, occasioned irreparable harm, since the Portuguese refused to observe, south of the Equator, the laws promulgated at the Congress of Vienna, prohibiting war-like expeditions engaged on man-hunts. Thus the origin of a certain type of mask, usually

[1] Mask and information collected by M. A. Even (M. de l'H., 35.80.41).

[2] Mask and information collected by M. Claude Millet (M. de l'H., 51.96.40).

[3] Andersson, E., *op cit.*, Pl. I, p. 120.

attributed to the MPONGWE (the latter, established on the coast since the end of the seventeenth century, had come, like the Bakota, from the Upper Ivindo) is ascribed equally to the *Balumbo*, the *Mashango*, the *Eshira* and the *Galoa*. One of these 'white' masks was recently found in the middle of the Bakota country.[1] We know very little of these works in soft woods, so delicately graceful, in which the human face is surmounted by a crest of hair painted black, sometimes separated in three longitudinal ridges, the central ridge being the highest. The face is painted white, the eyebrows are indicated by a semi-circular line and the eyes by a slit; the mouth is painted red. Certain examples have scarifications in relief on their temples and at the base of the nose. In the Mashango country, these masks represent the spirit of the dead and are carried by dancers mounted on stilts. Elsewhere they belong to feminine societies. Their appearance, so 'un-negro like', caused the first connoisseurs of African art to hesitate in assigning an origin to these sculptures. Was it not possible that here was the work of an artist from the Far East, perhaps some pieces of theatrical property, which by some incomprehensible chance had been thrown up on the shores of Africa? It was, however, necessary to abandon this hypothesis – these masks were too numerous and were in use far into the interior. But the Mpongwe were slave dealers; it was possible that an oriental mask from some bazaar might have been slipped into the baggage carried by one of these negroes. Perhaps also the whim of some 'creole' returned from Brazil, or perhaps the sons of Mpongwe chiefs on a visit, might have dictated to a local craftsman a work inspired by memories which were in no way connected with Africa. Thereafter copies would have gone from place to place, and become adapted each time to local needs. Unaware of our perplexity, the faces of these masks, with closed eyes, smile and keep their secret (Pl. XXI).

The KUYU occupy the banks of the river of the same name, a little to the north of the confluence of the Sanga and the Congo. Their social structure seems to have been ordained in former days

[1] Andersson, E., *op. cit.*, Pl. II, p. 346.

by a principle of bipartition, which placed the country to the east under the protection of the serpent, and that of the west under the guardianship of the panther.[1] In the course of very complicated ceremonies, the head of the clan initiated his people into the mysteries of the cult; thus they would find themselves admitted into the company of the great ancestor, the father both of men and of their animal allies. The 'panther' was represented by a drum painted with colours imitating the coat of the wild beast and enclosing the remains of a leopard. For the ceremony, the chief himself bespeckled his body and clothed himself in a panther skin. The 'serpent' was a cylinder of soft wood in low relief, brilliantly coloured, representing a human head, on the end of a handle. An initiate, invisible under a raffia cloak which simulated the body of the reptile, brandished the head. The dance, known as Kebe-Kebe, consisted of several movements, in which the snake-men, Euya, stretched themselves, undulated and squirmed on the ground. Then followed the two parents, Ebotita, the mother, represented by a similar sculpture and the father, Djoku, crowned with an iguana whose body is detached from its head (to which its paws are joined). The great serpent, Ebongo, is the last to appear: he wears the same disguise, but the head, which is smaller, is carried fifteen or twenty feet above the ground, on the top of some material forming a cone. This fabulous being sways slowly, stretches itself and leans against trees which it appears to wish to entwine. When the dance is finished, the head-man takes off his dress and discloses to the neophyte the man hidden beneath the material – 'now you know'. Today all symbolism has been forgotten, the dance is nothing more than a show, the actor advances or withdraws, hidden under the ample cloak, his head wagging like a huge marionette, to the plaudits of the crowd, who throw him presents (Pl. XXII).

The rare examples of statuettes of the same type as the 'club-heads' probably represent the ancestors of the great serpent Ebongo. Comparable sculptures have been collected amongst the Bochi, or Bambochi, the southerly neighbours of the Kuyu.

[1] Poupon, A., 'Etude ethnographique de la tribu Kouyou', *L'Anthropologie*, XXIX, 1918–19, pp. 53–88, pp. 197–335.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CONGOLESE CIVILIZATIONS

SINCE the limits assigned to this work do not permit of an exhaustive study, we shall pass in silence over the whole of the northern Congo, where the Mangbetu on the frontiers of the Egyptian Sudan possess anthropomorphic vases with elongated skulls reminiscent of Egypt, and where the Warega (Balega) from the valleys of the Elila and the Elindi preserve precious ivories, masks, statuettes, head-rests with worn contours, whose fine patina varies from dark red to a clear honey-colour.

Once across the Equator, the farther one proceeds towards the south, the less it rains. To the south of the Kasai, between the dry and rainy season there is a template period. Along the banks of the rivers the forest remains dense; on the plateau, which forms the limit of the Congo basin, the trees thin out and soon one reaches the tall grasses of the savannah. Rectangular houses with pyramidal roofs are the most common; formerly materials were made of raffia fibre. In the valleys the basic food is manioc, on the plateau it is millet and maize.

The whole of the region which extends from the mouth of the Congo to the great lakes has known vast empires with disparate populations administered by a pyramid of functionaries, at the apex of which were five or six provincial kings who surrounded the person of the sovereign. The court was the image of the world, its master, a living god. He was not allowed to touch the ground lest his contact should set it on fire, nor was he allowed to uncover himself; women were not allowed to see him eat; he lived enclosed. At his death, massacred slaves escorted him to the other world and his skull became a relic, a protector of the royal

cult. The resemblance between these great feudal systems is undeniable – in Loango, Kongo, Cuba, Luba, everywhere the influence of the invaders, mostly from the east and north-east, on the original inhabitants can be seen. Everywhere also artistic activity reached a high level. The number and diversity of masks (representing complex rites or male initiation ceremonies) are related to the cult of ancestors and to beliefs appertaining to the spirits of the Bush, which are common to peasants all the world over. Besides these traditional works, the master caste, together with myths relating to the founders of their dynasties, inspired a courtly art of which the Bakuba royal statues remain the very finest examples.

In 1482, the Portuguese traveller Diego Cao reached the mouth of an enormous river and informed Europe of the existence of a state bearing the name of its ruler: *Kongo* or *Manikongo*. Its territory stretched from the south bank of the river as far as its tributaries, the Kwango to the east, and the Kwanza to the south. The coastal kingdom of Loango and the neighbouring kingdoms of the Kakongo and Ngoyo were more or less enfeoffed to the kings by dynastic marriages. Ndongo retained a greater independence, its ruler, the Ngola, bequeathing his name to the present Angola.

Once converted to Christianity, the Manikongo, baptized Alfonso I, welcomed missionaries to his country. His son, Henry, was to die Bishop of Utica. Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, Capuchins, built monasteries and chapels there, introducing a style of architecture, church furnishings, reliquaries, crucifixes, a whole gamut of pious iconography. In those days, the kingdom of Kongo consisted of six provinces, the chiefs of which were all brothers or nephews of the sovereign. As right of succession descended through the female line, sons on the whole did not inherit. It was not long, however, before invasions weakened the central power. For the Congo, as for Benin, the seventeenth century was a period of decline. In 1717, as a result of protracted conflicts, all relations with Portugal were severed, Christianity was repudiated, and the last missionaries driven out. Once they had gone, the more striking aspects of Catholic ceremonial were

grafted on to earlier religious beliefs, to produce a proliferation of cults in which magic played the dominant part: crucifixes became talismans, statuettes, bereft of their Christian relics, housed lumps of resin, clay or congealed blood instead, which gave them the power to transmit or cure diseases. The word *nkisi*, which the Portuguese translated as *fecticio*, fetish, embraces horns, shells, statuettes, in fact anything containing a charm propounded by a magician; if sprinkled with chicken-blood, one charm will confer fertility on the barren, another will inflict smallpox. The most dangerous of all are *nkisi nkondo*, invoked to punish the guilty or to kill an enemy, by piercing the figurine with a knife, an arrow or a lance; the same procedure serves for an assurance of faith: 'May I die if I have willed ill-health to the chief, or if I have poisoned my father or my husband.' Travellers observing these customs have often attached more importance to them than Africans themselves; above all they have overlooked the secondary importance of the *nkisi* in relation to the supreme being *Nzambi*. This last is never portrayed, since he is for ever inaccessible; but his justice lets no crime go unpunished: thunder, snakebite, accidents, when not produced by ill-wishers, are punishments from *Nzambi*.

It would be wrong to suppose that in the Congo, any more than in Benin, Portuguese influence alone was responsible for the realism of the sculptures of the *Bavili* (or *Fiot*), of Loango or *Ka-Kongo* tribes (who occupied the Portuguese enclave of Cabinda) or of the *Bayombe* and the *Bakongo*, former subjects of the Manikongo. The latter, who number some 200,000, live south of the river, between Matadi and Stanley Pool. Art inspired by Catholicism can only have confirmed an already existing naturalist tendency. A convincing argument to this effect is provided by the recent discovery in abandoned burial grounds in Angola, of stone statues which predate the coming of the missionaries, portraying the same subjects as more recent wooden sculptures, such as the figure of an absent chief, a cross-legged man sitting in reflective mood, his head resting on his hand; a standing man holding a staff; a mother, seated or kneeling, suckling her child (Pl. XXV). The patina of the stone, shallow or deep, thin or thick, or a higher relief, indicate

the relative age of the sculpture. In recent work the form is poorly conceived, with withered arms barely distinct from a formless trunk, treated in low relief. In recently revived funerary art the modern statues are made of cement.

The huge wooden images, bristling with nails, share in the general realism, particularly noticeable in the faces, with their prominent cheekbones, thick lips and occasionally in the hand brandishing a knife; the trunk, which is more conventionalized, serves as no more than a container for the 'medicine' – the malevolent or beneficent charms which are sometimes enclosed under a fragment of mirror (Pl. XXVI).

Until the end of the nineteenth century, when the Congo Free State was founded under the aegis of King Leopold, slave-gangs laden with ivory on the outward journey, and with shoddy European goods on the return, plied ceaselessly between Sao Paulo on the coast, where the Portuguese still maintained their trading stations, and distant San Salvador, the capital of the Kongo: the journey both ways lasted three months. Elephant tusks and slaves, of which Sao Paulo exported more than ten thousand in 'good' years, were bartered against glass-ware, flintlocks, and copper and pottery kitchen utensils. The importance of the trade explains the rarity of old ivories; the tusks were exported whole, without having been worked on. Apart from some large horns, almost all ivories are of recent date, produced for commercial purposes. This is particularly true of tusks, decorated in light relief with scenes of everyday life.

The BATEKE, sometimes called *Bakono*, and their neighbours the BABEMBE, subjects in the sixteenth century of the kingdom of Loango, occupy the plateaux west of Brazzaville, which lie between the Ogooué, Alima and other rivers. As well as being good farmers, these people are travelling traders – they cross the river Congo – and have widely disseminated their *biteke* charged with magical properties.

In comparison with Bavili or Bakongo statuettes, Bateke work looks cruder in execution, the finished article being not far removed from the original block from which it was carved –

cylindrical trunk, arms close against the torso and folded at right angles, legs half-bent, cylindrical head, topped with a crest, two slits for eyes, another for the mouth; cheeks striped vertically with tribal tattoo marks; often bearded. The statuette, made ready at the birth of a boy will protect the child. It carries, either in a cavity hollowed out of the belly, or fixed on with a dab of pitch, a scrap

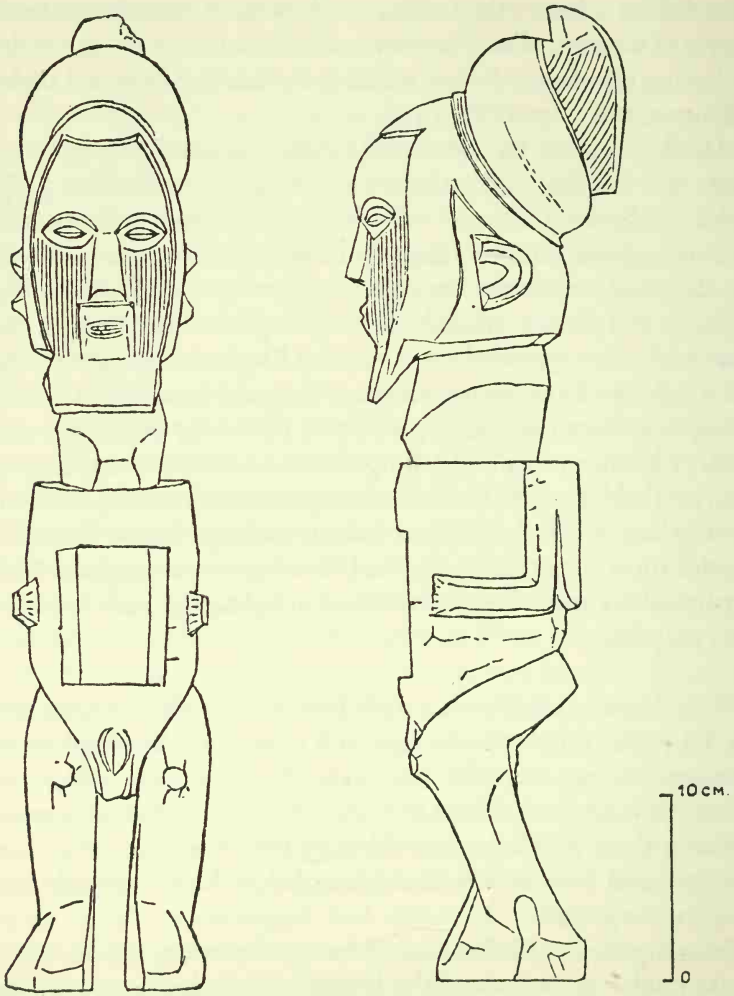


Fig. 20. Middle Congo, *Bateke*. Ht.: 51 cm.

of afterbirth (placenta) mixed with red *tukula* powder. For twins, the statuette will be two-headed. The statuette ceases to be efficacious when the age of puberty has been reached and the owner then throws it away or sells it.

Through their neighbours, the *Bawumbu* and *Bamfumungu*, the Bateke maintain relations with the peoples of the region lying between the two tributaries of the Congo, the Kwango and the Kasai. Here conditions are typical of peasant societies living outside the sphere of great feudal states. With the exception of the Bayaka, the political organization barely goes beyond that of the village governed by a headman. The initiation ceremonies are of peculiarly elaborate type, involving an unusual variety of masks.

The BAMBALA occupy, in groups of varying sizes, the territory bounded by the same two rivers between latitudes 4° and 6° South. One finds in their statuary poses reminiscent of the realism of the coast: 'Thinkers', crouching figures, drummers, mothers and children, but the more angular shapes and triangular faces are indicative of Bayaka sculpture.

South-west of the Bambala, the BAYAKA tribe overflows into Angola: there are about 80,000 in the Congo itself. This warrior people made war on the Manikongo from the end of the sixteenth century onwards. The latter was obliged to call on the Portuguese to drive them out of his capital. The aesthetic activities of the Bayaka, as is common throughout Africa, are almost entirely concerned with male initiation, 'retreats' and public ceremonies. The young men undergo their ordeal in huts specially built for the purpose; inside these huts, panels of wood painted red, white, black and blue, bear carvings in high relief of men and beasts, illustrating a training of which we know very little. These panels are flanked by two large statues in high-relief, of a man and woman. In the centre of the hut a hole dug in the earth marks the exact place for circumcision to take place. After a retreat lasting several months, the release of the initiates is celebrated with masked dances.

The Bayaka masks – possibly the strangest in all Africa – have relatively small faces standing out in high relief against a round or

oval frame. The nose is out of all proportion, exaggerated into a trunk that may even curl round to rejoin the forehead; the open mouth reveals the two central incisors filed down into the form of an inverted V, according to customary Bayaka usage. The top of the mask tapers into a cone made of pieces of palm-leaf covered with palm-fibre painted blue, yellow, white or maroon; the head-dress, surrounded with superimposed rings, ends in a tuft of feathers, or in a figurine. Sometimes, also, it may represent a complete mythological episode such as the vain pursuit of the *Yemba*-Bird by the snake *Mudumba* in the presence of four other birds, or a scene of childbirth. The mask is surrounded by a wide fibre collar. The dancer holds it by a handle under the chin. The wearer of the mask also wears a shift made of net to which he attaches a fibre skirt; in his hand he holds a rattle and carries a *nsilu*, a talisman made of a tortoise-shell and containing magical substances.

The masks made entirely of wood are probably of more recent date; they may represent a realistic human face surmounted by a bird, a buffalo or antelope, the hair painted black, and the face red and white.

The Tervueren museum contains a few other Bayaka masks showing no affinity with the two types above mentioned. These have a huge human face (perhaps as much as three feet long) with a protuberant forehead, puffed-out cheeks, and heavy eyelids; with their detached expression, these masks painted red and white, achieve a grandeur which is by no means due only to their great size.

The Bayaka also use the theme of a mask with a turned-up nose for decorating their statuettes, head-rests, sticks and staffs used in dances, fly-switches, and hair pins, which mostly strike us as grotesque. The same theme is used in the decoration of wooden, stem-less cups, formerly used in marriage rites, the betrothed sealing their union by drinking from opposite sides of the vessel.

Astride the two provinces of Leopoldville and Kasai, live the BAPENDE or *Bapindi*, numbering something like 270,000. They fall into two groups, the more western of which adjoins the Bayaka.

Among this tribe of farmers and hunters, the carving of masks, invariably connected with their initiation ceremonies, remains in high esteem to this day. The Bapende masks have a characteristically triangular face: under a domed forehead receding sharply at the temples, are prominent cheekbones marked with tribal scars; the nose is in fairly light relief with wide base; the mouth is open with filed teeth, or closed and drooping at the corners, terminating in a pointed chin (Pl. XXVII, 2). Masks which were carved as portraits of chiefs have wooden beards, long and rectangular, and decorated with triangular patterns. In cases where only the face, not the whole skull, is made of wood, the hair is made of a net, or of a raffia material, decorated in the Bakuba manner and dyed black; two or three conical appendages are placed above it. The face is red, with white or yellow bands crossing the forehead. In another series, the mask forms a helmet. The base, enlarged into a supporting collar, rests on the wearer's shoulders.

The Bapende also produce little masks, carved on one side only, or which are only a few inches in length. These are made of wood, bone or, nowadays, copper or lead; the rarest and most valuable are of yellow, polished ivory, the carving almost worn away by the patina. These little images are worn as pendants; when blessed by a qualified wizard, they ward off, or cure diseases.

Father Olbrechts has pointed out a relationship between a number of Bapende and Bambala figures, and the latter bear marked similarity to Bayaka sculpture.[1] Precise attribution is sometimes difficult, but the unbroken line of the eyebrows meeting at the base of the nose, and the triangular eyelids and ears would seem to be characteristic of Bapende work.

Continuing towards the south, we come to the BADJOK (*Batshioko*, *Tchokwe*, *Tyivokwe*, in Portuguese: *Kioko*), who today occupy all north-eastern Angola. Moving down from the upper reaches of the Kasai, the Badjok have absorbed or driven out tribe after tribe, west of the river. They have thus replaced the *Balunda* (sing. *Lunda*) whose aristocracy, originally from the east,

[1] Olbrechts, F., *Plastiek van Congo*, Anvers, 1946, p. 39 ff.

dominated the region until the end of the last century. The Badjok are hunters and planters; they probably number about one million, and are still moving westward and south. The sculpture of these intrepid warriors impresses by its realism, and by a forcefulness amounting almost to cruelty. It is difficult to distinguish their art from that of the earlier masters of the country, but the quality of their modern work is vastly inferior; hence the postulate of a court art of the *Lunda* disappearing with the collapse of their empire.[1] In modern work, there is practically no relief, the face is flat, the arms are tight against the body. But old ancestral statuettes are male persons with taut muscles, and ferocious faces, with vast edifices on their heads; some clasp a cup in both hands, and these have huge fingers with carefully incised

[1] Lavachery, H., *Statuaire de l'Afrique noire*, Neuchâtel, 1954, p. 120.

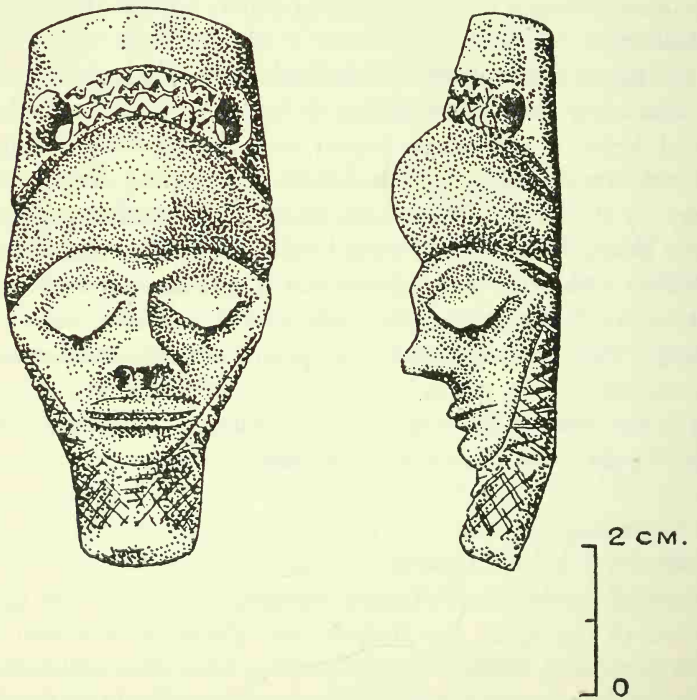
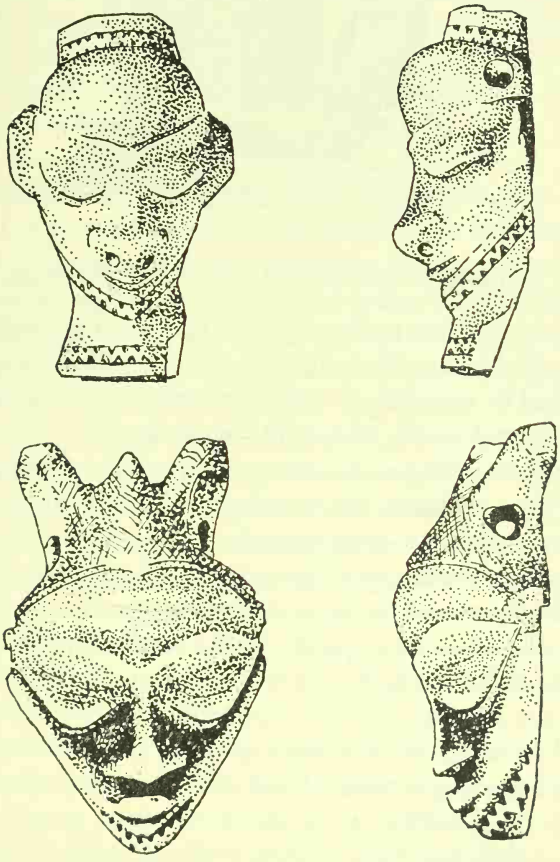


Fig. 21. Small ivory pendants in the form of masks.

fingernails. Figures of the same type, always carved in hard, polished wood, adorn seats, sceptres and fly-whisks.

European influence can be detected in the large number of copper nails with big heads which decorate these sculptures, sometimes even covering them completely. The same influence was presumably responsible for the making of chairs with rectangular seats and backs; the cross-pieces are covered with little figures in high relief, representing the chief's court or the caravan of some high dignitary who is shown as being carried in a



Congo, *Bapende*. Ht.: 5 cm., 6 cm., 7 cm.

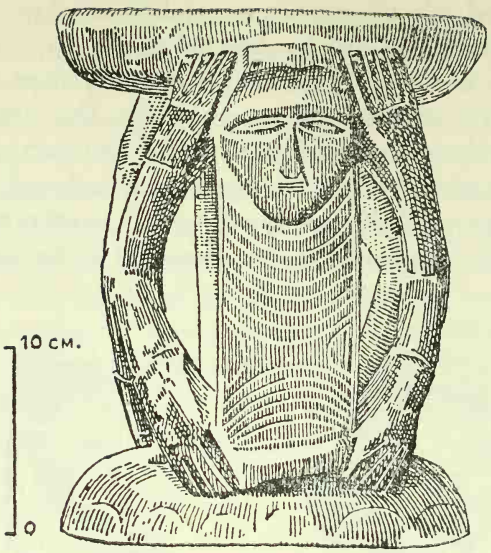


Fig. 22. Carved wooden stool. Angola, *Badjok*. Ht. 28 cm.

hammock. In contrast to these formal thrones, the small round stool, a familiar piece of furniture throughout Africa, is supported by an animal or seated figure; the somewhat higher, cylindrical stool is decorated on the sides with human faces.

In some Kasai villages, the circumcised youths celebrate their remission from seclusion by wearing fibre skirts falling to the knee, and a bark head-dress reminiscent of a sixteenth-century helmet; the face remains bare, though painted with red and white patterns like the rest of the body; the mask is in fact the wearer's face itself. Elsewhere, the quality of the masks is poor and disappointing; all the strength manifest in the ancestral statuary has gone. This makes the initiation costumes imported from other regions all the more effective and surprising. They are confections of preposterous design, made of bark stretched over a framework of reeds or twigs resting on the shoulders of the wearer, who is dressed in a shift and tight trousers made of netting. The ornamentation is weird, with bold red, black and white motifs,

enormous half-closed eyes, distended mouth and gigantic headdress. There is nothing human here, instead we are reminded of monstrous insects. These alarming figures are reminiscent of Melanesian forms, in which bark plays an identical role. The part covering the face is sometimes of painted bark; sometimes of resin modelled on a bark base or on imported calico; sometimes of net, like the rest of the costume, with eyes represented by huge fruit husks. The beings thus created are social types (the old man, the maiden, the witch-hunter), spirits ('little cloud', harbinger of rain, 'the pestle' which pounds the novices , or obscenely gesturing clowns. The oldest, *Tshikusa*, wears a fantastically elongated hood; he is the 'father' of the initiates, the dispenser of food; the *Tshikusa* image appears on hunter's charms, women's wooden spoons and even as a decorative element on ceremonial chairs.

The territory of the BAKUBA (sing. *Kuba*) occupies the angle formed by the confluence of the Kasai with its tributary the Sankuru. The name *Bushongo*, applied by Torday to the seventeen sub-tribes, belongs in fact to the royal group alone: *Shongo* means the four-bladed throwing-knife, a traditional weapon abandoned at the beginning of the seventeenth century; some have seen a hint here of a northern origin for the *Bakuba*, 'People of the Lightning' (a name given by the Baluba), who may have come from the banks of the Ubangi. Numerous characteristics of this refined civilization link it none the less to the neighbouring monarchies of Kongo, Lunda and Luba. Torday described the form of government as he saw it still in 1908.[1] The king, *Nyimi*, presided over a cabinet consisting of a prime minister, a war minister, representatives of the four provinces composing the kingdom, and two women, the sisters or daughters of the *Nyimi*. At meetings of this grand council, the king sat on a dais, with his ministers about him; the queen-mother sat beside him on a higher throne. More important even than a temporal ruler, the sovereign

[1] Torday, E., and Joyce, T. A., 'Notes ethnographiques sur les peuples communément appelés Bakubá ainsi que sur les peuplades apparentées les Bushongs', *Annales du Musée du Congo belge*, Brussels, 1910.

was the *Chembe Kunji*, God-on-Earth, incarnating the soul of the founder-hero, *Bumba*, and responsible for providing sun, rain and harvests. In former times the king was never allowed to touch the ground; a servant carried him on his shoulders. If the king fell ill, or merely felt out of sorts, the portent spelled danger to the whole community.

Here, as in Benin, the structure of the court and the existence of a caste of master craftsmen, each having his own patrons, permitted a remarkable flowering of the arts. Each guild had its own representative in the monarch's entourage, the chief of these officials being the *Nybina*, who spoke for the wood sculptors. The most famous of the Bakuba works are the royal statues, made of wood: seventeen examples are known, almost all of them identified. These statuettes (average height twenty inches) show the sovereign seated cross-legged on a square plinth, expressionless, with half-closed eyelids; the head is large, the legs are almost non-existent; the left hand holds a knife, the right rests on his thigh. Though Bakuba craftsmen continued to carve these statuettes over several centuries, they have so strong a resemblance to each other that they might well seem to be the work of a single artist. The only distinguishing feature between them is the emblem appropriate to each king's innovations or interests. The first is *Shamba Bolongolongo* (1600–20?), ninety-third in the line of one hundred and twenty kings, who is said to have had his portrait sculpted 'so that his successors should remember him'. The statuette is now in the British Museum. It shows the king seated before a *lela* game (a game played all over Africa, and played by means of a cupped board); *Shamba* had been a great traveller before acceding to the throne, and to him his subjects owed the knowledge and use of manioc (tapioca), palm-oil, the weaving of raffia fibre, and a kind of embroidery which makes the material look like velvet. The second statue, in a private collection in Brussels, probably represents *Bom Bosh* (mid-seventeenth century); next come three rulers from the end of the eighteenth century, whose portraits may perhaps be from the hand of one and the same artist; *Misha Pelenge Che* (British Museum), and *Kata Mbula* (Musée du Congo belge) (Pl. XXVIII) are each seated in front of

a drum; *Bope Pelenge* (British Museum) is seated in front of an anvil. *Mikope Mbula* reigned from 1810 to 1840 or thereabouts. Having fallen in love with a young slave-girl, he authorized marriage between persons of different rank, which had previously been forbidden; the incident is commemorated by the presence of a little slave-girl in front of the king's figure (Musée du Congo belge). As distinct from his predecessors, this sculptor has taken pains to achieve realism in his proportions: the effect is disappointing. The statue of *Bope Kena*, the hundred-and-nineteenth king who died in 1895 (Antwerp private collection) is in the same style as that of *Mikope Mbula*.

The Bakuba start learning the decorative arts at a very early age. Their children spend many happy hours drawing in the sand with their fingers. Door posts, chairs, cups and boxes, blocks of red shredded bark modelled and baked (the possession of which is a sign of wealth), pipes, drinking horns, drums, *itombwa* used for divination (a moistened disc is rubbed against the back of the figurine which is usually carved in the form of an animal. The answer is in the affirmative if the disc adheres to it): nothing escapes being carved in the image of man, or beast, or crescent moon, basket or gabled house; nothing susceptible of ornamentation is exempt. A horror of plain surfaces, Torday writes, is a marked characteristic of Bakuba art; but the sense of proportion, the boldness and sureness of design are such that the ornamentation never seems overdone. Their motifs are borrowed from the human form (a head surrounded by rays, a hand holding a shaft), and from the animal world (a tortoise, a scarab in relief on a cooking-pot lid) and above all from the technique of weaving. Analysis of these decorations leads to surprising results, for a Kuba never thinks of the overall effect, he isolates one motif and names the whole from this part. Such a procedure may well lead him to call two apparently quite different overall designs by the same name. And by the same token, a given design may be read quite differently by a man or a woman, by a sculptor or an embroideress whose own techniques govern her interpretation.

Details may be modified from tribe to tribe; here a sharper nose, elsewhere an ear reduced to a simple curve. But the same

quest for forms and ornament, the same style is found among all the Bakuba. Their influence is visible even in the work of neighbouring peoples. The *Dengese*, particularly to the west of the Bakuba, sculpt large funerary figures, of Bakuba inspiration; but these have very long torsos, the arms stand away from the trunk and are covered in geometrical patterns in light relief; huge hands are clasped below the navel; they have no legs.

Besides the court art which, thanks to the balance of its proportions achieves the rating of great art, the masks seem poor in comparison, their wealth of decoration notwithstanding. The most ancient type is probably the comb, *Esapula*, worn as a vizor by the young men of the western tribes during their initiatory retreat; this curious form may have been adopted in the reign of *Shamba Bolongolongo* by members of the *Babende* association, whose responsibility it was to arrest wrong-doers; the comb is made of pieces of rattan or raffia stalks plaited flat across raffia fibres; only noblemen, the sons of chieftains, have the right to wear combs of iron or brass. The *Bombo*, made of wood, is a helmet shaped like a human head; its huge forehead juts out above a flattened face, forming an acute angle; the nose of some *bombo* carries a triangular ornament, while the mouth is sealed with a copper plate. Of more recent origin, the *mokenge*, or *mukenge*, is made of cloth, mounted on rattan and covered with imported cowrie shells and pearls, showing no nose or ears. The most impressive examples are elongated into forward-curving cones, topped by a crest of feathers or by little bells; the beard and collar are of fibre. The *mokenge* is a professional dancer who performs in market-places; his arrival at a village is the signal for general rejoicings in which the women take part. Here, in fact, the mask has lost its primary function; the institution with which it is normally associated, to wit, a society of men or a secret society, has only vestigial importance in the social organization of the Bakuba.

The BENA LULUA, the result of the merging of earlier inhabitants with the Baluba who came from the east three centuries ago, occupy the two banks of the Lulua. Neighbours of the Badjok to the south-west, and the Bakuba to the north, their

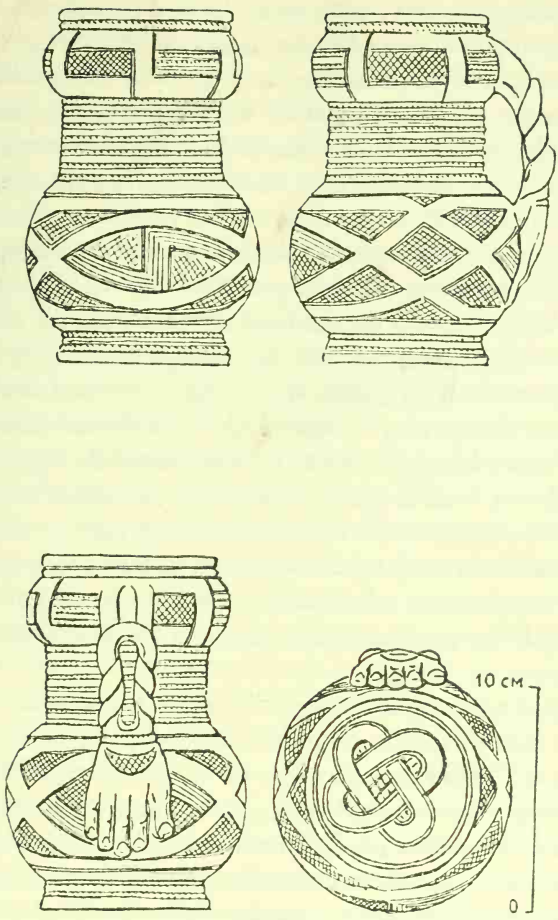


Fig. 23. Wooden goblet Congo, *Bakuba*. Ht.: 16 cm.

territory extends from Kasai to Sankuru. The *Bashilange*, in the south, are related to them.

Although they live next to large kingdoms, the *Bena Lulua* have retained a village society, with local chiefs. Their statues occupy a very special position in African sculpture, by virtue of their complicated head-dresses, and above all the wealth of scarification, now no longer practised. In older works, the whole body disappears under a network of dots, arabesques, concentric circles and spirals in relief. Helmeted and bearded, the men are represented with lance and shield, sometimes with a sceptre or a bowl. We know nothing of the purpose of these statuettes; by analogy with what occurs elsewhere, the chief probably ordered his portrait to be carved before leaving for the hunt or for war, in the hope that his effigy would watch over his belongings in his absence. The female statuettes carry a child in their arms, or a mortar and pestle. The faces are always very elongated, the head-dresses culminating in one or more horns (Pl. XXX, 1). Sometimes the figure is bent double, elbows braced against knees and the hands supporting the chin, also found with the ribs showing very prominently. Drums, head-rests and tobacco-mortars are in the same style. There is an obvious relationship with certain Baluba work, particularly in the treatment of the face and the general elongation of line.

Many masks have been collected from the Bena Lulua, covered like some Bakuba masks, with embroidered palm fibre, cowries and pearls. The front is decorated with an arrangement of parallel lines forming superimposed triangles of alternating red, white, black and yellow. The masks which come from the north-west possess the same general characteristics, but the eyes are treated in a different manner; these are represented by two cones, the bases of which are surrounded with small hollowed-out circles. The head-dress is made of skin or raffia and the face is polychrome.

The BASONGE, eastward neighbours of the Bena Lulua, also depict the eyes on their masks by cylindrical protuberances, possibly connected with a pattern of concentric circles which they carve on the anthropomorphic bodies of their little ivory whistles. This motif of two concentric circles also occurs in the west, on

Bapende ivories, as also on Warega ivories in the north. It is also found on ivory knife handles and head-pins from the Ubangi, and even on Benin bronzes and ivories. How can one avoid postulating the possibility of a common source of inspiration, when it is realized that all lines of communication terminate in the Nile Valley, and when a bronze statuette of Osiris, among other significant objects, has been found in the mud of a river, one hundred and eighty miles south of Kongolo, in the heart of Baluba territory?

The eastern neighbours of the Bakuba, the BALUBA (sing. *Luba*, *Wuluba*, *Urua* on old maps) occupy the south-east of the Congo, from the north of Lake Tanganyika to the Upper Zambesi. Several peoples grouped under this name speak a common language and have developed a common civilization, while each keeping its individual consciousness.

This most eastward of the major Congolese civilizations is probably the product of the interaction of two successive waves of invaders: tradition has it that the first Luba state was the creation of a man of the Basonge tribe, called Kongolo; and that his lands, annexed by a rival at the end of the sixteenth century, were added to a kingdom reaching as far north as Tanganyika. As well as these two invasions from the north-east, slaves, escaping from the caravans of Arab traders endlessly plying towards the Indian Ocean, also contributed to forming the Luba nation, which numbers about 500,000 souls. Class distinction, still observable in 1913, reflected these mixed origins: the chief and his family occupied one end of the principal street running through any settlement; the nobility, consisting of at least three dignitaries and six inferior officials, each with his own entourage, resided on either side of the main thoroughfare; whole slave households were scattered on the outskirts of the settlement, under the supervision of a freedman nominated by the chief.[1] The hierarchy of Baluba officials is reminiscent of the administrative organization practised by their neighbours, the Bakuba; the same political and social structure, presumably derived from the kingdoms of East

[1] Colle, R. P., *Les Baluba*, Brussels, 1913.

Africa (e.g. Uganda, Unyoro and Ruanda) must have influenced one neighbouring country after another as far as the Atlantic coastline; the Lunda Empire, as a case in point, was probably founded in the seventeenth century by the son of a Luba king.

The Baluba region is one of the wealthiest, from the point of view of art production, in all Africa, and the one where the human form is most frequently represented. The most accomplished of the works available originated in the eastern region: during the last century the western part of the country was ravaged by war and suffered the almost total destruction of its sculpture, which was considered blasphemous by each invading force in turn.

Magic and ancestor-worship, the two great pre-occupations common to all Africans, flourish among the Baluba. Here too, the ancestors are jealous protectors whose support must be won and whose ever-imminent anger must be appeased. When the image of a dead man pursues a living man in his dreams, the latter procures a 'portrait of the dead' (*mukusi mukasi*) which he enshrines on the household altar and to which he offers prayers and sacrifices as to his own family spirits. The statuettes, made of rare wood and polished, without any magical trappings, represent the ancestor standing with his hands folded across his chest; female images have much tattooing on the belly, which is invariably represented with protuberant navel, and an elaborate head-dress, carefully worked.

Mikisi mihake are charms blessed by the witch-doctor – hollowed fruit, horns of small animals, wooden or ivory figurines in human shape. The man who makes them understands the secret properties of 'medicines', the formula that protects against snake-bite, or confers invulnerability to disease, ill-fortune or black-magic. This requires a specialized training lasting some years. The amulet in human form has a cavity hollowed out in the upper part of the stomach to contain the magic substance, an unmentionable compound of leaves, roots, barks, viscera or human bones conglomerated in a paste mixed with charcoal, oil, urine or blood. The sculptures are about a foot high and show a standing figure with arms tight to the body, hands on stomach.

Apart from their accessories of feathers, hair, teeth, claws, scraps of cloth, pearls or nails, these figures are virtually indistinguishable one from the other.

As well as ancestral statuary and talismans, Luba sculpture includes seats supported on one or more caryatids and sitting or kneeling female cup-bearers. In the old days, the head of every family owned a stool, the stand of which was carved in the form of a standing woman, or a pair of them. The use of female statues of the same type, holding a vase, *kabila ka vilye*, is still uncertain: these little figures have been found in the hands of fortune-tellers; sometimes a *kabila* was put at the door of a dwelling-house when a woman was in labour, and this received the offerings of passers-by. In these, naturalistic representation has been sacrificed to the function of the object. As far as the caryatids are concerned, the length of the neck and of the arms supporting the seat is emphasized, and the legs are shortened to a point where the figure appears to be squatting. In the statuettes of seated women bearing a cup, the artist has, on the contrary, placed emphasis on the legs, stretched out on a horizontal plane, parallel to that of the arms. No distortion, however, is visible in the treatment of the round head with its prominent forehead and eyes with drooping eyelids; the hair, swept back and kept in position by a plaited head-band, is arranged crosswise over the occiput, or divided into plaits.

The Buli 'sub-style', quite recently classified, numbers a dozen carvings, all of which are admirable, and whose resemblance to each other suggests that they are the work of the same artist.[1] The only two examples about which we know anything come from the same village, Buli, on the Lualaba. The known works include stools supported by a woman, or by two persons side by side, and sometimes also by caryatids placed back to back. There is also a very fine statue of a woman kneeling holding a bowl, and two little statuettes, one male and the other female. In the caryatids, the artist has chosen to develop the head and the hands rather than the legs and arms. This allows him to emphasize the face, which has prominent cheekbones, a straight nose and tapering chin; two large hands, with the palms scarcely modelled, balance

[1] Olbrechts, F. M., *Plastiek van Congo*, Anvers, 1946, pp. 71–5.

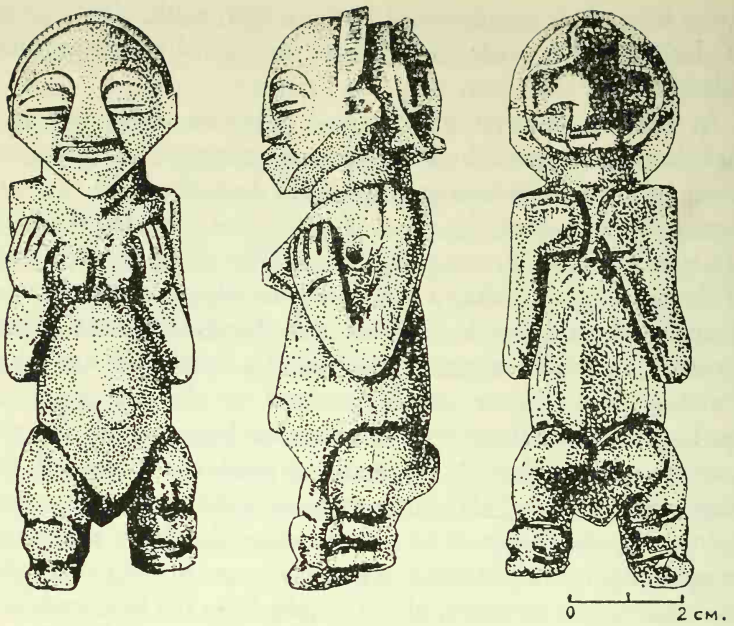


Fig. 24. Ivory statuette. Congo, *Baluba*. Ht.: 10 cm.

arms which are too thin. In the kneeling figures the thigh is exactly the same length as the shin and the whole body rests on the heel of a very elongated foot; only the knees and the tips of the toes touch the ground, or are joined to the circular base of the seat. The name of the artist is unknown, but his sense of rhythm and balance and the delicacy of his modelling, make the 'master of Buli' one of the great sculptors of all time (Pl. XXX, 2). The Baluba also make little ivory statuettes; these are ancestor portraits which are hung on the arm or under the arm-pit. Regularly rubbed with oil, the little figures acquire a magnificent patina. A double figure evokes the memory of twins. A chief may fix such an ancestor image to the top of his staff. Wooden, or ivory head-rests are supported in the same way as stools, that is to say, by one or two figures either standing or kneeling. Finally there are the Katatora, or Katatola, used for purposes of divination. The word designates a wooden or ivory cylinder with a large opening in it surmounted

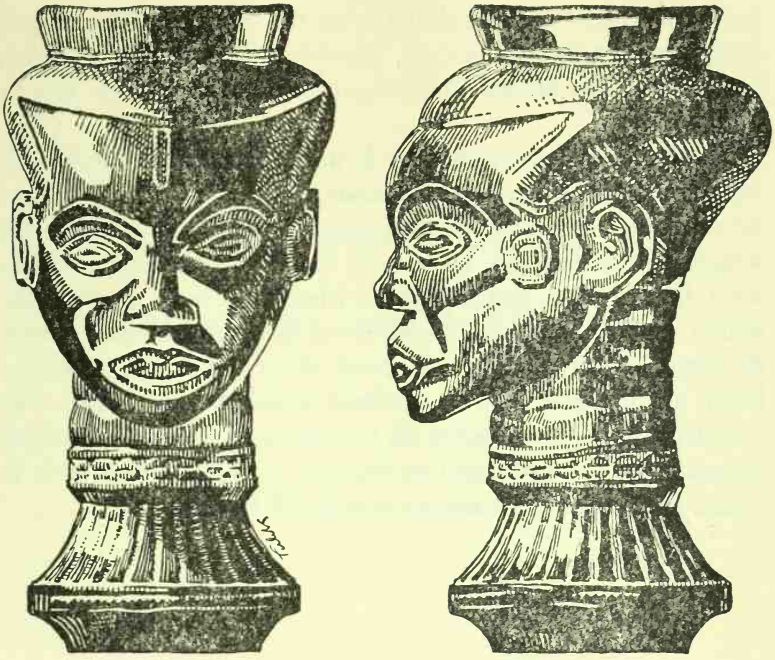


Fig. 25. Wooden goblet. Congo, *Bakuba*, Ht.: 18 cm.

by a human head. The man consulting it, takes in his left hand the Katatora, which the diviner offers him with his right, and stares fixedly at the latter. Communication thus established, the diviner quickly falls into a trance and begins to shout. The object whose base rests on the ground answers by swaying to and fro. If the lower surface is much worn, it indicates that the Katatora has been often used.

Kifwebe masks (pl. *Bifwebe*), once attributed only to the Basonge, were in fact in use among all the people related to, or under the domination of, the Baluba. Whether circular or elongated, these masks can be recognized by the linear decoration which covers the whole face with the exception of the eyes, which are sometimes indicated as receding under a forehead like a visor, and by the mouth, represented by a rectangular protuberance. The mask appears on the death of a chief or notable personage, or when a

new chief enters upon his duties or on the occasion of the visit of an important person (Pl. XXIX). The other types of masks, which are more or less related to the figurines of ancestors, are few in number.

The works under review here do not exhaust the list of African sculptures. All of them possess some qualities which should not be neglected. In contemplating what remains today of an art which is now doomed, let us give thanks to those connoisseurs who discovered it, and to the specialists who have specified the nature of these examples in such a way that we can better realize the intention of the artist who made them; let us not forget the latter, nor the debt that the civilized world owes to Africa. The African sculptor will henceforth turn to other horizons. Without repudiating the past it will be for him to create a new style in which the genius of his forebears will still be apparent.

Part III

Collections and Collectors

COLLECTIONS AND COLLECTORS

It is seldom that we can establish the exact age of an African carving. The older examples, or those which date from some extinct civilization, have nearly always been found in the hands of inhabitants who, ignorant of their first use, have assigned new functions to them. Certain works, in terra-cotta, stone or metal, may date back several centuries, it is impossible to be more exact than this. There are two exceptions: the Benin bronzes, whose chronology it has been able to establish precisely enough, since the sixteenth century; and the royal Bakuba statues from the models identified by Torday.

The study of African archaeology is just beginning. Apart from the prejudice which for so long has caused a continent 'without history' to be neglected, there are material difficulties in the way of excavation. Sand, humus and laterite preserve the secrets of Africa. How does one determine the position of sites which are mentioned in no text and which are indicated in no way? The Africans have seldom hewn stone. Their houses, lacking foundations and constructed to last only a few years, are made of crude earth mixed with handfuls of straw. Abandoned after one or two seasons of rain, they become nothing but a pile of mud. Even the palace of a sovereign was often abandoned on the death of a prince, his successor constructing a new residence. The capital of the Ghana Empire and that of the Mali changed their location several times. Whole towns have thus completely disappeared.

Researches into African pre-history from one end of the continent to the other have, however, revealed a recognizable succession of techniques, as have been defined in Europe by specialists. Prospecting, mostly carried out on the surface, has revealed immense layers of strata. The recent enormous increase

in paleontological discoveries is well known. Africa is perhaps the site from which Man emerged to spread across the world at the very beginning of the most archaic period. There is no doubt that Africa has some surprises in store for us.

Whether it is a statue or a mask, African wood is very seldom older than a century or a century and a half. In a tropical climate, the humid heat, ants and worms quickly accomplish their work. These are not the sole agents of destruction. Carved for a ceremony, and the preparation of which often demanded several months of work, a number of masks and dancing accessories were formerly broken up during the course of the performance for which they were designed or thrown away immediately afterwards; they were never used twice. A statuette with magical properties which did not fulfil its function with sufficient efficacy was destroyed. A number of masks, representing ancestors or spirits, were also burnt through the zeal of neophyte Christians, Muslim 'holy men', or suddenly inspired local prophets. In one or two cases, statues with a religious purpose or which were used for divination, were saved by strangers as they were about to disappear with their keeper, to be buried in his tomb or thrown on to the rubbish heap. And finally, the hunting down of witch doctors has led to the destruction of many. In February, 1951, a Nigerian administrator learnt that as a result of an anti-sorcery campaign, a large amount of religious material including statues, had been accumulated in the villages. On their arrival in a locality where their services were required, manifestants started by offering a sacrifice. This was followed by a dance, during the course of which several among them fell into a trance and denounced the 'sorcerers'. These latter had to make a public confession and bring out and repudiate their material, otherwise they were put to torture. The movement soon attacked certain religious sects whose adepts, willy-nilly, were forced to empty their sanctuaries and to put all the accessories of their cult in a public place – wooden sculpture, pottery and metal objects. Warned in time, the Keeper of Antiquities was able to go through the piles prepared for burning and in this way saved nearly eight hundred sculptures which are now in local museums.

Officials, merchants and especially ethnologists have still been able to discover ancient pieces during the last few years. However, their limited number and their relatively high price, indicates that the African source is practically dried up. Anxious to preserve the heritage of Africa, the local powers have instituted a control and forbidden the export of works which are regarded as antiques. Museums have been established and a museum of the *Institut Français d'Afrique noire* thus exists in each local centre – at Saint-Louis, Dakar, Bamako, Conakry, Abidjan, Ouagadougou, Porto Novo. Ghana, the Cameroons, the Congo, Angola – all African territories today have their museums. Nigeria, anxious to own the ancient works of Benin, has been forced to buy back from Europe the ivories and bronzes destined for its public collections.

If exact dating cannot be established, one can at least distinguish two periods of African sculpture – before and after the colonization.

Up to the arrival of Europeans there were no tools perfected, there was very little exterior influence, only a self-perpetuating tradition. But at the end of the nineteenth century, local wars, partly occasioned by the demands of the slave merchants, ruined vast regions. The period which begins with the occupation of the country by the western powers is first of all marked by peace being established and it is too often forgotten that this occupation put an end to centuries of insecurity and pillage. With the return of calm, institutions were not only able to survive but to expand. This was a transitory period. Africa was not able to remain long in a state of semi-isolation and the Second World War only precipitated inevitable evolution. For the last ten years the demand for agricultural products has put African farmers at the mercies of the fluctuations of the economic market. Big construction works and the opening up of new agricultural lands employing labour have led to displacements of population. Profound changes are taking place. Religious beliefs are becoming weaker, and magic is re-asserting itself.

European influence was first felt along the coast where artistic activity had attained a high level. The isolation favourable to the continuity of artistic tradition, could not be maintained. This art

has degenerated and veritable studios have been opened to meet the demand of tourists. All that was good in African sculpture has disappeared in these examples conceived solely for sale. A few official institutions have established schools to encourage native artisans, but their efforts have been mainly directed towards the applied arts.

Most modern work can be classed as objects in every-day use, either decorated or not, or copies of traditional sculpture, or else new creations.

Movable objects which are still made on the spot, such as spoons, wooden vases, stools, pottery and calabashes are usually honestly manufactured, the work of artisans without artistic pretensions. Statues and masks executed in the local style are simply reproductions, less carefully worked out in detail, of earlier models. Here and there secret societies still preserve their function, notably in the interior of Liberia, where the masks in use still have real artistic merit. Elsewhere, whether it be in the Yoruba country, Baule or Dogon territories, the sculptures perpetuate tradition. Certain of them even bring something fresh to bear, as in the case of a sculptor from the Ivory Coast, who instead of adding, according to custom, a belt made of cloth to his finished statue, carved the belt out of the block, making it one with the personage. Well received, this innovation was soon copied. But the sculptures in which European influence is apparent, are generally ugly and all sense of rhythm has disappeared. These are figures in European costume, painted in chemical colours and provided with a helmet, walking stick or a gun; the white wood is waxed or engraved with a red-hot iron.

Contemporary works are far from having the same value as the older ones which were made at leisure, without any consideration for monetary profit. A Dogon mask sold on site to the numerous tourists today, will fetch about ten francs, a considerable sum for its maker, who is not unaware of the profit he can get for his work. Here it is individual talent that counts and this is the sole basis on which these works should be judged. Already in 1933, after interrogating some sculptors on the Ivory Coast, the traveller Himmelhaber reported that the natives were now working for

money; they were endeavouring to get themselves known in order to get higher prices. Sculpture seemed to them an arduous task, much harder than cultivating the soil because it demands undivided attention. Assiduity seemed to count more than talent and they were copying ancient models without cease.

But even today, throughout the whole of Africa, it is the magician who prescribes such-and-such a medicament to his client or such-and-such a statuette in wood or terra-cotta demanded by some particular ritual. A tropical helmet and spectacles has replaced the ancient attributes of power, but still the blood of a victim remains indispensable, certain essences judged to have evil qualities are still avoided; others, on the contrary, are much in demand because they make the finished work much more efficacious.

Very few carvings are completely pure in style. Most of them display influences which are due to various causes; the proximity of another neighbouring society with different artistic talents, the result of journeys made by the sculptor or the presence of non-indigenous work in the region, and sometimes also, due to memories of a former home. It is for this reason that the statues of some Badjok tribes established in the Bakuba country, have preserved the characteristic Badjok expression and head-dress, while at the same time the proportions of the body resemble Bakuba statuary. Elsewhere the sculptor introduces innovations which makes his work a hybrid too often thrown out of balance by the juxtaposition of differing elements. Elsewhere again the traditional style may have its elements exaggerated to the point of caricature. The effect may be striking, but it is rarely happy.

An authentic piece can be recognized straight away because of its artistic unity. Achieved by a balance of plains and masses, the internal rhythm is the surest criterion of a work of art. The art lover's sensibility, developed by his visual memory, will immediately inform him of its worth.

Other aids to appreciation are of a technical order. First there is the condition of the wood; many ancient carvings are spoiled, gnawed by insects and attacked by damp. The wood when drying has cracked, but the crack may be almost obliterated by a mixture

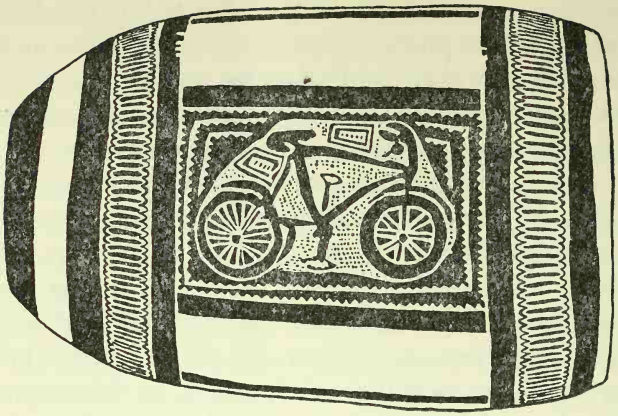


Fig. 26. Engraved gourd. Dahomey. Length: 20 cm.

of grease, soot and earth, or by substances with magical properties which form a coating. As a general rule, the wood of sculptures at least thirty years old has a closer grain than those of modern works, which are often carved out of *fromager* which is essentially friable. Very difficult to work, ebony has only recently been used for pieces made for sale or especially commissioned. A second criterion, the colour of the older sculptures is derived from a basis of vegetable juices or earth (kaolin, ochre); the colouring may be mixed with the blood of a victim or kneaded with vegetable powders. Often, works will have been repainted several times, giving an appearance of being covered with little cracks. The uniform and dry colour of more recent works is often obtained with the help of chemical colourings – aniline blue and red ink which produce a crude effect.

In their centre of origin, African sculptures, especially those in wood, had only a limited existence. How is it possible to preserve them? Disinfecting them by putting them in a drying room to release toxic gases is never a superfluous precaution. It kills gnawing insects and worms. But it so happens that the well-protected larvae survive to manifest themselves only after a certain time, sometimes long after. The presence of parasites is made obvious by the appearance of little heaps of dust on the edge of

even old holes. In this case, a glycerine bath is recommended, but in default of this, cellulose injections must be made into each hole so long as it remains necessary, that is to say, until saturation point has been reached. This work of patience may demand several months, but it is indispensable. Without proper care the object, reduced to a thin film, will fall to dust.

The ritual use of a mask or of a statue, or one which has been periodically rubbed with grease or oil as well as with the blood of victims, leads, after a certain time, to the formation of a layer which covers the object completely – planes are effaced and contours melt one into another. To decide to what depth this coating should be removed can be a very delicate choice, for a complete cleaning will give a completely new appearance to the work and deprive it of all interest. The proper treatment will give it back its contours without spoiling too much of the patina resulting from age and use. It is this point of view which has been followed, particularly in the restoration of the bronzes found on the altars in the city of Benin, where plaques, heads and figures had become unrecognizable under a thick crust of earth and coagulated blood.

Objects covered in metal and bronzes are not washed or polished; green, black or brown, their patina is an intrinsic part of the work. For the treatment of wood the use of all varnish or polish is proscribed, a light coating of polish and very careful brushing will suffice.

Plinths are indispensable: they assure the stability of the sculpture and give it a better appearance. Masks may be mounted on a board, but it is preferable not to do this because they were conceived in volume and designed to be seen from several different angles.

Despite the artistic qualities of certain carvings and the fact that they belong to the distant past, their market value remains relatively small. Only a few collectors are aware of the beauty, strength and delicacy of a Baule or Fang statue. Thus, it still remains possible to find good examples at reasonable prices. In public sale-rooms, a wooden statue or a mask of excellent quality will fetch £35–£150. A rare example of bronze, ivory or gold

will fetch more than £350. During the sale of the André Derain collection, which took place at the Hotel Drouot in March, 1955, a Benin statue of a man, in bronze, was sold for £1,300, and a cock of the same origin, also in bronze, fetched £650; figures which had never previously been reached for a native African carving.

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The reader is thus presented with a fascinating and well-documented picture of the life of the African tribes together with a critical examination of their art forms. A final section discusses the present-day collections of African sculpture.

Denise Paulme, Director of the African section at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, is the author of Organisation social des Dogon (Soudan français), *Paris, 1940;* Les civilisations africaines, *Paris, 1955; and* Les gens du riz: Kissi de Haute Guinée française, *Paris, 1954.*

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