

The Sculptor in African Society

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One of a pair of elongated figures, originally painted white, for deceased ancestors. Belgian Congo of indeterminate tribe. H. 32".

Initiation Mask from French Sudan (Bambara)



Bronze head
Africa, British Nigeria
16th century
Montreal Museum
of Fine Arts.

THE SCULPTOR IN AFRICAN SOCIETY

by Léon LIPPEL

Fertility Doll (AKUA-BA) carried in waist-band by pregnant women, showing features desired in the coming child. ASHANTI. H. 10".

It is only since the turn of this century that Europeans discovered the arts of Africa. Although there had been many expeditions in the past, and explorations of the coastal regions of West Africa, the interior remained virtually unknown.

The prevalent religion of these areas was animism, and despite the influence of Islam, which had spread from the East since the XIth. Century, the cult of ancestor worship and the belief in the spiritual power of inanimate objects persisted strongly throughout the myriad tribes and kingdoms, from Senegal in the North, to Angola, and into the vast interior up to the great lake region.

Possessing no written language, culture and tradition was handed down by the elders of each tribe, together with the laws and taboos, which, not subjected greatly to outside influence, remained constant from one generation to the next.

We have every reason to believe that although most of the wooden sculpture in our museums dates back only to the XIXth. Century, the figures and masks of each tribe have changed little, traditionally, in the passing centuries. It would seem that the discovery, some decades ago, of the great primitive art of Africa, has caused it to decline rapidly, and there is little reason to believe that despite efforts to keep it



BAMBARA
(French Sudan)
Head-piece used at
harvest time in the
CHIWARA dances, in
connection with the
fertility of the soil.

alive, it will ever again attain the power and sincerity of the ancient art. There is, in fact, no reason for its continuance. The ancients were deeply religious, believing sincerely, for example, that an ancestor figure actually contained the soul of the departed one, and that the sculpture was the means whereby the spirit could dwell among the living. That one fetish could ward off evil, and another bring fruitful crops. Expectant mothers carried small dolls, such as the Akva-ba of the Ashanti, stylised to accentuate the points of beauty they desired in their children,

Wooden male Figure of
BAMILEKE tribe (Came-
roons) with feet formed into
base. H. 20".

Fertility Fetish in dark pa-
tinated wood. Senulo. H.
10½".

Ivory Tusk heavily carved into zones, with inter-
twined ribbons at base, and depicting execu-
tioners and warriors. These tusks were used
with the large bronze heads, before altars.
Benin, 18th century. H. 30".

and a fetish was believed to be able to make a statue so powerful that it could cause the death of a designated person. This belief, in fact, still continues, and has an echo in other lands in various forms. However, Western thought has opened a window on a different world, and the religious fervour of the past is fading fast, and giving place to a new nationalism and political consciousness.

The great arts of the ancients, with the magnificent stone sculpture of the life, the bronzes of Benin, and the fantastic sculptural strength of the wooden statues of the Congo, can never flourish again. In the past, the position of the sculptor in African society, and the demands made on his services, indicated the economic security prevailing among those kingdoms and tribes. Very often the sculptor was second only to the king or chief, and his art was zealously guarded. Youths showing promise were put into apprenticeship, in much the same way as with

the Guilds in Europe in the Middle Ages, and the first years of the pupil were spent solely in acquiring the art of making the tools of his craft. He was not allowed to produce carvings until he had mastered the art of tool-making to perfection. He was then allowed to try his hand at the many embellishments of the everyday articles used in the village, such as spoons, paddles, and eating bowls.

The carving of masks and effigies was a special occasion for the whole tribe. The spirit of the tree from which the wood was cut was supplicated for forgiveness and special rites assured the community of pardon. The form which the sculpture took was, in part, a carrying-on of the traditional concept of the tribe, with such deviation as the sculptor was inspired to add. It was not based on a deliberate distortion of natural human and animal forms, but rather evolved from an inward conception of the purpose the sculpture was to serve. Detail and embellish-

Bayaka Small fetishes, usually placed in the household shrine.



Bayaka Ancestor Figure with typical crested coiffure and traces of red pigmentation. Apertures in the ears were for magical substances, without which the Nyama had no power. H. 19".





Wooden Box with deeply carved figures of two Oba (Kings) feet to feet and floral and hind-fish designs on sides. BENIN. L. 17".

ment was kept to a minimum in order not to distract from the emotional impact of the whole work. The sculptor had no fear that his people would reject his work, or fail to understand it, as he worked within the philosophical ideas of his tribe, and was encouraged to deviate from the traditional. At times, the proximity of another tribe would influence his work, but the traditional was so well rooted that despite the great variety of styles prevailing among the different tribes, most may be recognised as the work of a specific people. The fetish of the tribe would be the first person to handle the finished work, in a special ceremony, substances believed to possess magical powers, such as certain roots, sacrificial blood, or birds' feathers, were attached to the sculpture or smeared over it. Other tribes, such as the Bayaka in the Congo, would place magical substances in the ears and other orifices made in the figure by the sculptor for this purpose. Incantations persuade the spirit to take up its abode in the sculpture. Henceforth, this will be put in a place of honour, and daily offerings of food left before it.

It is of note, that the fetish, or ancestor figure, was not worshiped as an idol. It served as a visible means of identifying the spirit dwelling within and as focal point for the veneration of

Male Ancestor Figure with hands raised to breast; traces of polychrome. The ridged "spectacles" are typical of this tribe. BAYAKA. H. 17".



that spirit, or for appeals for assistance of one kind or another. These appeals were many, and the calls made on the services of the sculptor varied greatly. A powerful amulet for the hunter, a fetish to keep evil spirits from entering a house, in fact, almost every function of life from prebirth to burial was in some way connected with the spirit world. Masks of different forms and uses, especially significant of the occasion, enabled the sculptor his ingenuity and imagination in the fullest way, still, however, keeping within the bounds of the traditions connected with his tribe. We have today, many examples of these masks, used in dance rituals and by secret societies, and ranging from the "classical" Dan masks with their beautiful symmetry and form, to the grotesque variations on the human and animal forms of the Bayaka. Such masks, seen in a museum showcase, convey little of the power and awe they inspire under the conditions in which they were originally used. Dancers, taught the intricacies of the dance from childhood, would be robed and disguised in garments of raffia, and with the surmounting masks, assumed the visible form of the spirit evoked. With the chanting and beating of drums, the illusion was complete, and the dancing figures were no longer connected with any living member of the tribe.

Bambara Mask with figure of woman in center.



BABEMBE (Belgian Congo) House Fetish, powerfully carved, with high black patination and traces of colours. (The desintegrating action of termites is shown here in the partly-eaten arm). H. 17½".



Study of the arts of the African negro, from the despoiled palaces of the Benin to the wall paintings of the Bushman in the Kalahari desert, are greatly rewarding, and throw much light on the civilisations existing in this rich continent before the arrival of the white man. If it were ever a "dark continent" it is surely only on account of our complete ignorance of the culture of its peoples, and their deeply religious beliefs.

In the absence of a written language, the long history of the African peoples has had to be pieced together from writings of ancient voyagers and explorers. What has been recovered of the sculpture and other forms of art in its many kingdoms, has thrown much light on the culture which has flourished there since pre-history, and excavation in the Sahara and Nigeria is still continuing today.

Indeed, sculpture and pottery is about all we have left of many other ancient civilisations, and it would seem that these once powerful nations, full of the glory of battle and conquest, have to rely on the patient work of an artist in order that we may even recall their name from the past.



*North Congo
Ancestor Figure.*



Male Figure. One of a pair (see page 18)