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Art of Cameroon

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ART of CAMEROON

PAUL GEBAUER

All objects pictured in this article are from the collection of Paul Gebauer.

The Republic of Cameroon (federation of East and West Cameroon) is the crossroads of West Africa. It is the great divide where nature and nations, races and cultures meet and mingle. For the art historian, Cameroon, with its wealth of art, is an inadequately studied region between the styles of the Guinea Coast and the northbound Congo complex. It is the land between the Cross River and Ogowe cultures, between Sudanic influence along the Benue and the cultures of the Chad basin. The art of Cameroon reflects the vitality and life of peoples at the crossroads and can best be understood in this frame of reference.

Nature had a hand in this. From the heartland of Cameroon flow the rivers which help form the basins of Niger, Chad, Congo and Atlantic. A chain of formidable mountain ranges stretches from the Atlantic border to the north-northeast into the plains of Lake Chad. This chain offers not only a natural boundary between Nigeria and Cameroon of today but is the ancient barrier between north and south, east and west. Between it and the equator thrives the tropical rain forest, reaching a hundred miles inland from the coast. With the rising elevation of the hinterland appear the grasslands—waves of rolling highlands and a thousand streams. North, beyond the central plateau, lies the savannah country of the Chad region.

The 183,381 square miles of Cameroon have been a battleground of Africa's races and cultures. The largest tool site of stone age man is found near Marua in the north. Evidences of Bushman culture have been claimed. Remnants of Pygmies still dwell in the forests of the south west and Arabs thrive south of the Chad. The purest of the Fulani, the nomadic Bororo, roam the highlands with their herds. Sudanic cultures have left their mark on the peoples of the grasslands. Bantu-speaking tribes populate the forest areas. Among the present five million Cameroonians, every racial characteristic of black Africa is observable. The official statistics for 1969 group about 150 distinct ethnic groups into the broad classification of "Bantus, Semi-Bantus, Sudanese Negroes, Fulani." (*Abbia*, Yaounde, No. 22, p. 7).

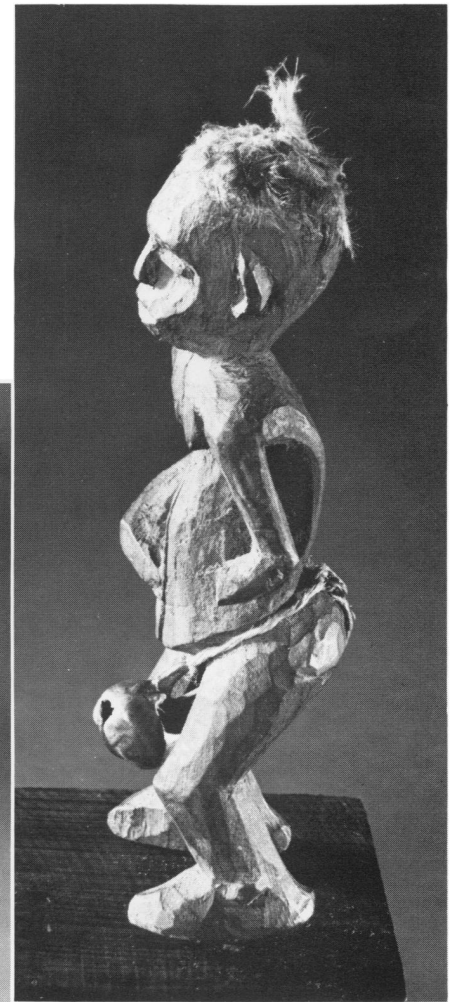
In the arts and crafts the same delightful multiplicity exists. Tribal styles of the coast show foreign innovations. Penetration of Congo culture is evident in the art styles of Southwest Cameroon. In West Cameroon the impact of Nigeria's Ekoi (Ejaghem) culture is obvious. Further north along the border we trace evidences of Tiv, Jukun, and Chamba traditions from Northern Nigeria. The grasslands complex represents old Sudanic elements. French anthropologists have given a definite date, the 10th century, to finds of the so-called Sao culture of the

1. HELMET MASK, WOOD. HT. 16 IN. BAMUM ART AREA. ►





2. STOOL, COASTAL REGION/DUALA, WOOD. 11¼ IN. HIGH, ACQUIRED IN 1899.

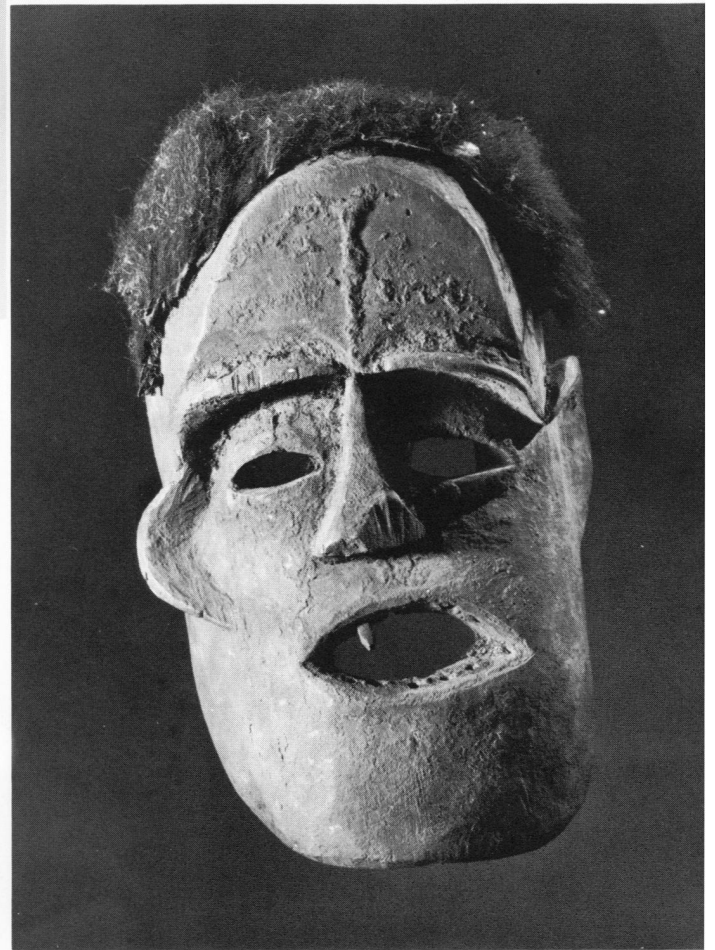


3. CURATIVE FIGURINE, GWOFON PREFECTURATE/MONEMO, WOOD, FEATHERS, BRASS BELL, 6½ IN. HIGH.

banks of the Chad. In light of all this, there is some question as to the justification for maintaining the geographical approach of treating Cameroon as one major art area: historical developments, past usage, and present political preference leave us no choice but to do so. Subdivisions into complexes, clusters or subareas become a necessity, however, for divisions do exist. But how many subdivisions? William Fagg's decision as to the grasslands complex—dealing with 1,300,000 people—has its justification. Aware of the differences of art forms within the eastern and western grasslands, he states: "I shall for convenience treat them as though they formed one large tribe, while stating for each piece the available evidence as to provenance." (*African Tribal Images*, par. 166). The approach of Roy Sieber and Arnold Rubin in the catalog of the Paul Tishman Collection (*Sculpture of Black Africa*, Los Angeles, 1968, pp. 92-97) allows the Tikar—a term of convenience as well as that of an existing tribe—to have the lead in the grasslands complex. These attempts at clarification are welcomed. The presentation given here is based on the vexing problem of the local viewpoint, which will remain of value until the future Cameroonian art historians present their own solutions.



4. FACE MASK, GWOFON PREFECTURE/NGEMBA,
WOOD, HAIR, 19 IN. HIGH.

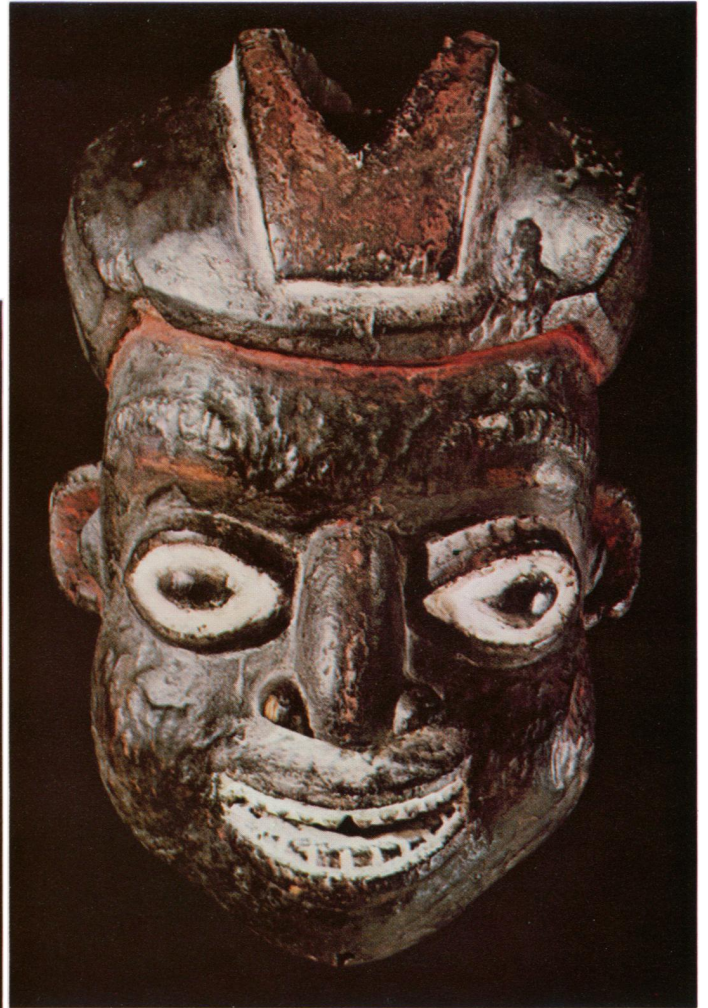
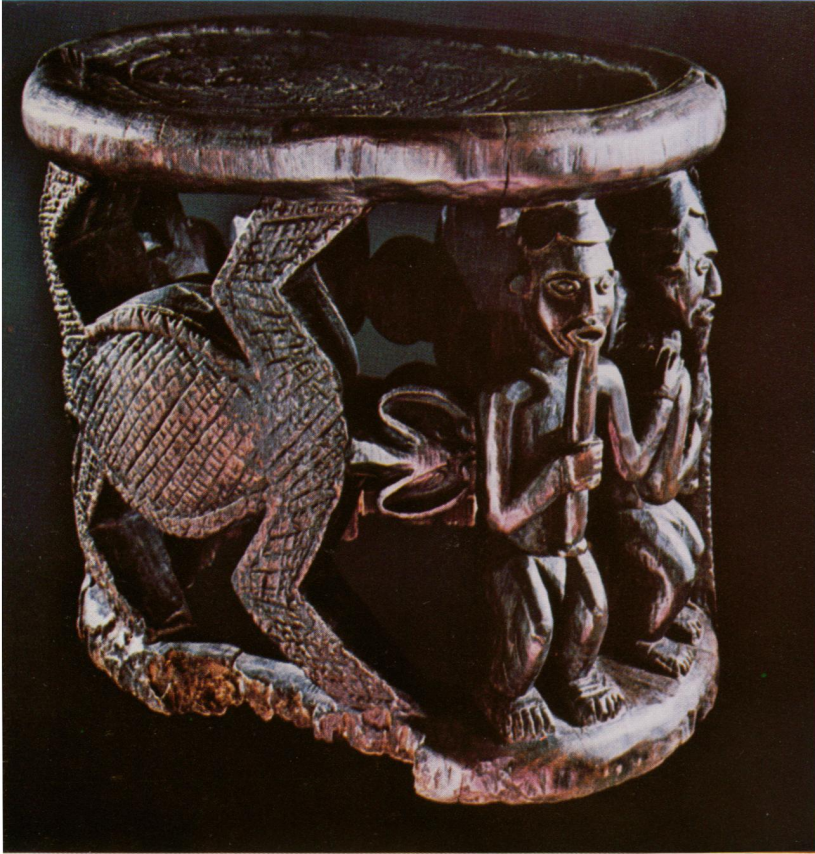


5. FACE MASK, RAIN FOREST COMPLEX/BANYANG,
WOOD, SKIN WITH HAIR, 14 IN. HIGH.



6. HELMET MASK, GWOFON PREFECTURE/MAGHAMO
WOOD, 22 IN. HIGH.

7. HELMET MASK. WESTERN GRASSLANDS, FUNGOM AREA
WOOD, POLYCHROME. 15 IN. HIGH



8. CHIEF'S STOOL, WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BABANKI KEJEM,
WOOD, 15½ IN. HIGH.
FOUR FLUTE PLAYERS, TWO STYLIZED LEOPARDS.



9. ANCESTRAL FIGURINES, PITH ASSEMBLAGE, POLYCHROME, MALE. HT. 6 IN. MAMBILLA ART AREA, WAR WAR GROUP.

The coastal complex has its well known Duala objects in the museums of the western world. The Duala stool in our collection (Fig. 2) illustrates the Duala preference for openwork sculpture, the combination of curvilinear and angular forms, a preference for animal figures of reality and mythology, a taste for smooth surfaces and, at the same time, utilitarianism. The Duala were not the only craftsmen. George Grenfell visited the Abo, north-east of the Duala, where in 1875 he reported that "wooden stool making formed a most important industry" (Hawker, *The Life of George Grenfell*, London 1909, p. 67). Less known are the figures carved by the Ngumba and Mabea tribes (Drost, *Ornament and Sculpture in Primitive Society*, Leipzig, 1966, plates 40, 41). The Ngumba mask in Fagg's *Tribes and Forms in African Art* (New York 1965, plate 74) is a beautiful example of simplicity and vitality. A small boatman, carved by a Batanga man, and a canoe carved in ebony by a Bota man exist as reminders of former coastal styles.

The southwest art cluster, bounded on the north by the Sanaga River, has suffered much under changing terminology. Its late overlay of Fang culture from Gabon, with its famous reliquary figures, helped hide the fact that the tribes of this area had styles of their own. The Bulu once carved interesting masks. Dorst's publication (Leipzig, 1966, plate 1) offers a good example of Bulu sculpture. The Yaounde carved masks and figures (see Fagg, 1965, plate 75) the coming of the Germans in 1884 harmed local art expression by introducing in 1886 the plantation system, road building, forced labor and, later, German tools, goods, and western education. Indigenous efforts terminated around 1900.

The rain forest complex met the same fate at approximately the same time. European museums preserve the evidences of former activity among the Bassa, Bafo, Bakundu and Banyang. The mask of Fig. 5 was acquired in a southern Banyang settlement thirty-six years ago. Its almond-shaped eyes, the dislocated mouth and the use of natural hair documents the influence of Ekoi (Ejaghem) tradition. Alfred Mansfeld's photographs from the years of 1904 to 1915 (Mansfeld, *Westafrika*, Munich 1928) record the widespread diffusion of Ekoi (Ejaghem) art.

The recently organized Prefecture of Gwofon in West Cameroon has within its boundaries unique combinations of rain forest and grasslands styles. Former colonial reports refer to the tribes concerned as members of the Widekum migrations. Art literature labels their objects under local names of origin or acquisition. These style combinations deserve a special category. Credit should be given to their originators, many of them members of ancient splinter groups that sought refuge in the difficult terrain. The mask of Fig. 4 shows affinity to Banyang tradition, however the skin covering is missing. The eyes and mouth have become rectangular shapes. The marks on the forehead reveal grassland influence. The mask of Fig. 6 bears some resemblance to the zoomorphic forms of the rain forest. The strong lines of nose and nostrils are typical of an art tradition in the heart of the western grasslands. The curvative figure (Fig. 3) has the curved back seen in a larger figure credited to the Bafum tribe

in the north (Fagg, *Tribes and Forms*, 1965, plate 64). The head follows local tradition, while its limbs are reminders of the Bafo style to the south.

The grasslands complex required division into eastern and western sectors. As stated previously, subdivisions of these two sectors appear necessary to minimize the existing confusion in the art literature of the white man. Among the Cameroonian no such confusion exists; they know their art styles. We follow them by subdividing the eastern grassland into Bamileke and Bamum subareas. For the western grasslands, we distinguish between the elements of the so-called Tikar traditions and the objects produced by splinter groups of the northeast border of West Cameroon. These subdivisions by no means deny the fact that an all-pervading unity is apparent in the forms and styles of the Bamileke, Bamum, and Tikar. It cannot be otherwise, for all three trace their ethnic origin to common mythological ancestors or to sacred sites in their migration routes.

The Bamileke art area includes about 800,000 inhabitants, many languages, and numerous basic cultural traits which support an appearance of unity. Achievements in sculpture are admirably documented by Raymond Lecoq in his *Les Bamiléké* (Présence Africaine, Paris 1953). His account is of great value, for the revolt of the years 1956 to 1960 destroyed much of the evidence of an art which stood without parallel.

African Arts/Arts d'Afrique (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 2 and 64, and Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 94 and 95) directs attention to the famous Bamileke masks. The sculptor's individualism overcomes the strength of the traditional design as is evident in the four pipes (Fig. 10). Emphasis of the head at the body's expense is clear, with the artist's dualism observable in the headdresses, the arms and leg positions, and the choice of stem.



10. FOUR TOBACCO PIPES, BAMILEKE COMPLEX/BANGAW, TERRA COTTA, WOOD, METAL, AVERAGE HEIGHT OF BOWL CA. 7 IN.



12. ROUNDTABLE, WESTERN GRASSLANDS/TUNGO. WOOD, 28½ IN. HIGH.



11. KOLA NUT RECEPTACLE
WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAFUT
WOOD, 22 IN. HIGH.

13. MAIZEBEER BREWERS, BAMUM/FUMBAN
BRASS CASTING ASSEMBLY.
APPR. 8½ BY 8½ BY 6 IN.





14. BUFFALO HELMET MASK, BAMUM/BAMUM. WOOD, 24 IN. LONG.

The art of the Bamum has received wide publicity ever since the Germans encountered Sultan Njoya around the turn of the century. This most enlightened ruler had a private museum in his Fumban palace, where yet another museum stood at the highest point of the capitol's avenue of craftshops. The best of Bamum arts and crafts were displayed there for the benefit of both apprentices and visitors. In 1931 the palace's museum possessed an enviable collection of objects from the Sultanate and other parts of Cameroon. The ruler's love of things beautiful was shared by his 60,000 subjects. Bamum sculpture reduces traditional lines to the barest essentials. The mask (Fig. 14) is a triumph of simplicity and force. Figures, stools, houseposts and metal castings (Fig. 13) emphasize essentials. Islam and Hausa trade goods directed Bamum artists in another direction, that of geometric patterns, as seen in the bead-covered gourd in *African Arts/Arts d'Afrique* (Vol. 1, No. 2, page 37). The old skill of tie-dyeing bark-cloth with local dyes in traditional patterns transferred successfully to Njoya's cotton industry. Anna Rein-Wuhrmann tells in her *Mein Bamumvolk* (Basel, 1925) of six dye vats in the palace grounds and of 310 weavers' looms under the care of the royal treasurer. Picturesque gowns give the statuesque Bamum a note of distinctiveness. The great king is dead, but the influence of royal art at its best lives on under his successor, Sultan Saidu.



15. FOOD BOWL, WESTERN GRASSLANDS/BAMESSI
TERRA COTTA, 8½ IN. HIGH.



16. FIGURE, WESTERN GRASSLANDS/KAKA WOOD, POLYCHROME TRACES, 21 IN. HIGH.

In the western grasslands (Bamenda Highlands) the arts of the so-called Tikar groups predominate. We are here limiting the use of the confusing misnomer "Tikar" to the 450,000 people in West Cameroon's northern prefectures who claim some common ethnic origin. The local history admits to some relationship with the Bamum nation and the Bamileke complex in matters of beliefs, rulership, social structure, and basic art concepts. It exults in its own localized diversions. In 1933 we had occasion to view the treasures of Fon Ndi in his palace at Laikom. There was displayed the evidence of the ancient royal practice of exchanging art objects, cult properties, and craftsmen. The Fon's appreciation of art was conveyed in his remark, "Truly wonderful is the handwork of the grassland people." One must agree when viewing the collection now displayed at the Portland Art Museum (Figs. 8, 11, 12, 15).

Along the northern and northeastern fringes of the western grasslands dwell splinter groups of disputed origin—large, small, and very small. They have little or nothing in common with Tikar traditions, being refugees from the Hausa slave raids of the dim past, from the Fulani conquest of the last century, and from the tax collectors of recent decades. They have mingled with the aborigines. Official research has established many theories, many terms, and much confusion about these splinters. Certain echoes of the Tiv, Jukun, and Chamba traditions of Northern Nigeria can be detected in their art. For the present, it is preferable to label the examples of these splinter groups (Fig. 16 and 19) as Western Grasslands/local provenance. The latter term can be an accepted nickname or a lineage designation, a tribe or a spot on the map.

Northward, at the upper Donga, and off to the east of an isolated plateau live the Mambilla, about 30,000 in number. Until 1960 all of them belonged to Cameroon as part of the former Lamidate of Adamawa. Several peculiarities set their art apart. Their appealing guardian figurines, carved from the soft pith of the raffia palm cane, are placed against the walls of ancestor shrines. Out of the same material they make assemblages of many parts (Fig. 9) often in pairs of male and female, and attach them to shrines or sacred enclosures. The unique quality of their bird masks can be seen in Fig. 18. Also distinctive is the annual application of the three-color scheme to all functioning objects.

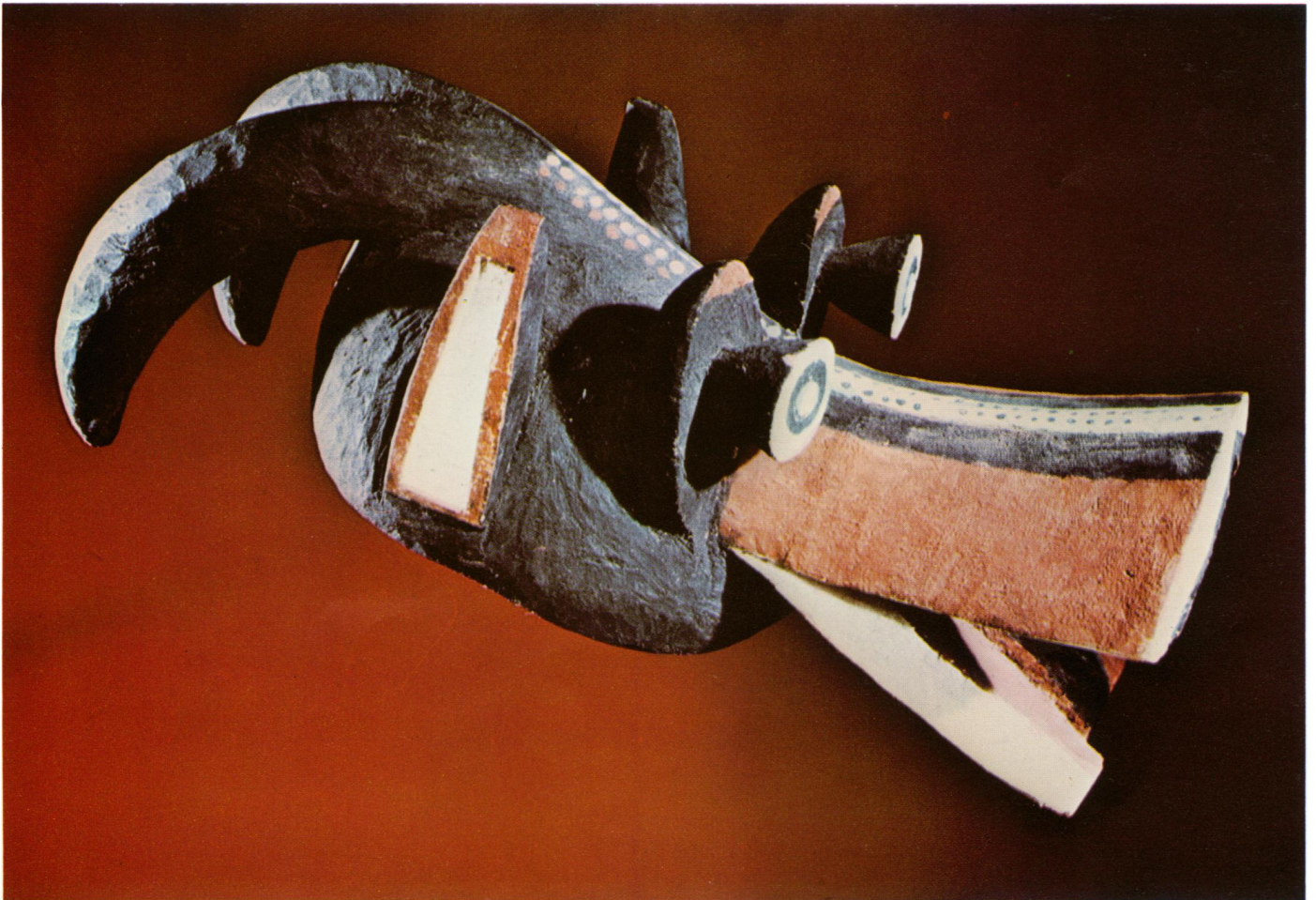
The earliest explorers have little to say about art among the warlike Wute (Babute, Vute), the Mbum and the Lakka. The inhabitants in the Mandarra hill country have likewise received scant attention. French research has added somewhat to our knowledge of an early civilization around Lake Chad, and the official yearbook (*Annuaire National*, Yaounde 1970) offers an interesting comment about this so-called Sao culture of the 10th century:

"A brilliant civilization developed there, characterized by many different objects: receptacles, funeral urns, masks, statuettes, coins, and all made of baked clay."

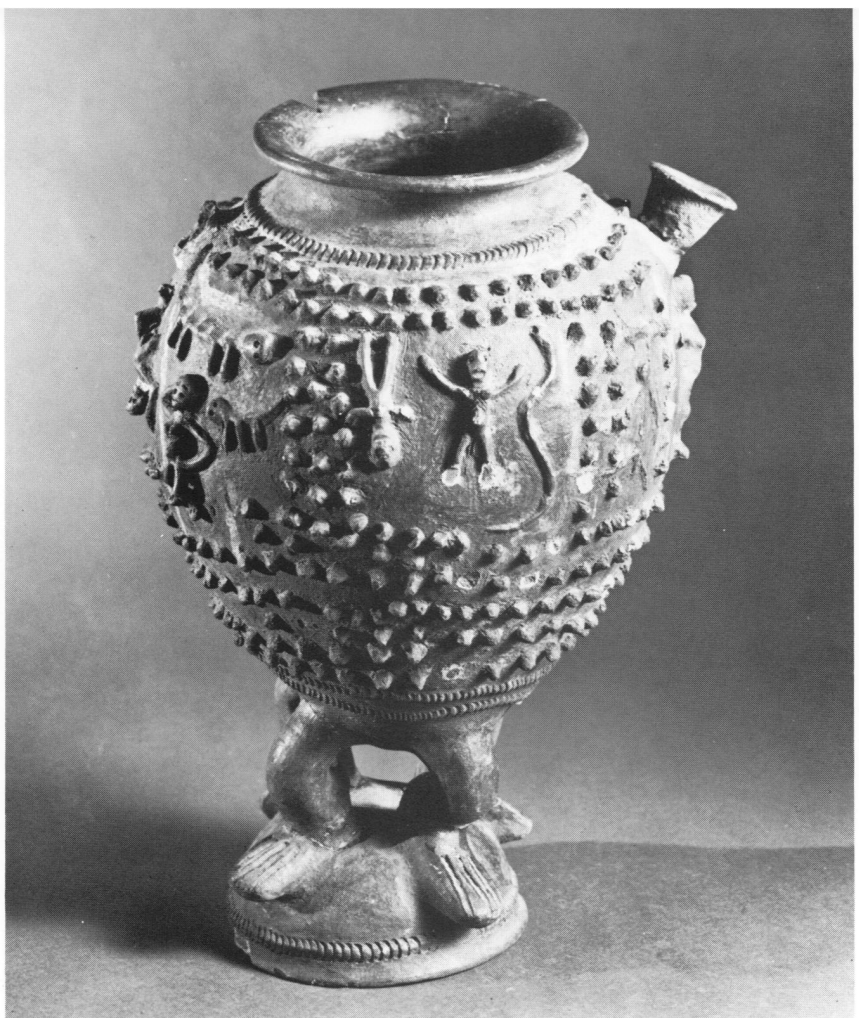
Among the Mandarra hill tribes French specialists are now engaged in tracing a possible style flow of the Sao civilization. There is some question as to the baked clay figures (Figs. 20-22). The previous owners regarded these objects as foreign to their traditions. Stored as useless alongside local cult paraphernalia, they gathered dust and accidental evidences of libations.



17. FOUR GUARDIAN FIGURES, MAMBILLA/BARR. PITH, POLYCHROME, 7½ TO 12 IN. HIGH.



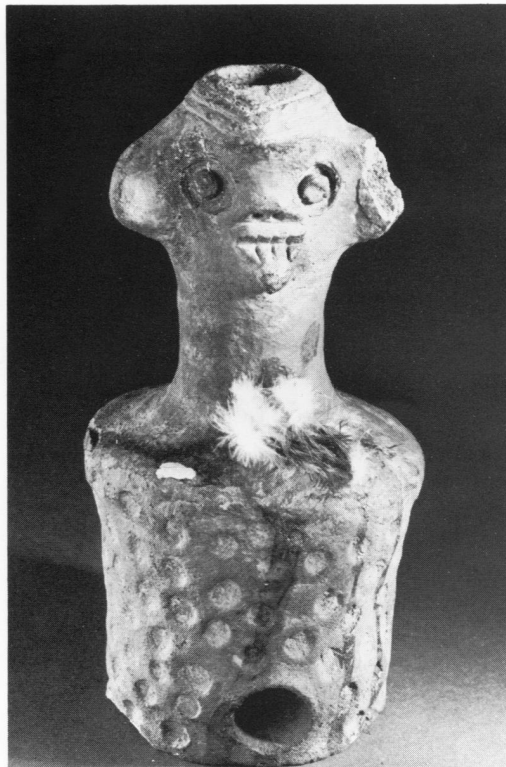
18. HELMET MASK, WOOD, POLYCHROME. HT. 20 IN. MAMBILLA. CALLED "SUAH DUA." COLL. 1937.



19. PALMWINE JUG, WESTERN GRASSLANDS/LUS. TERRA COTTA, 16½ IN. HIGH.

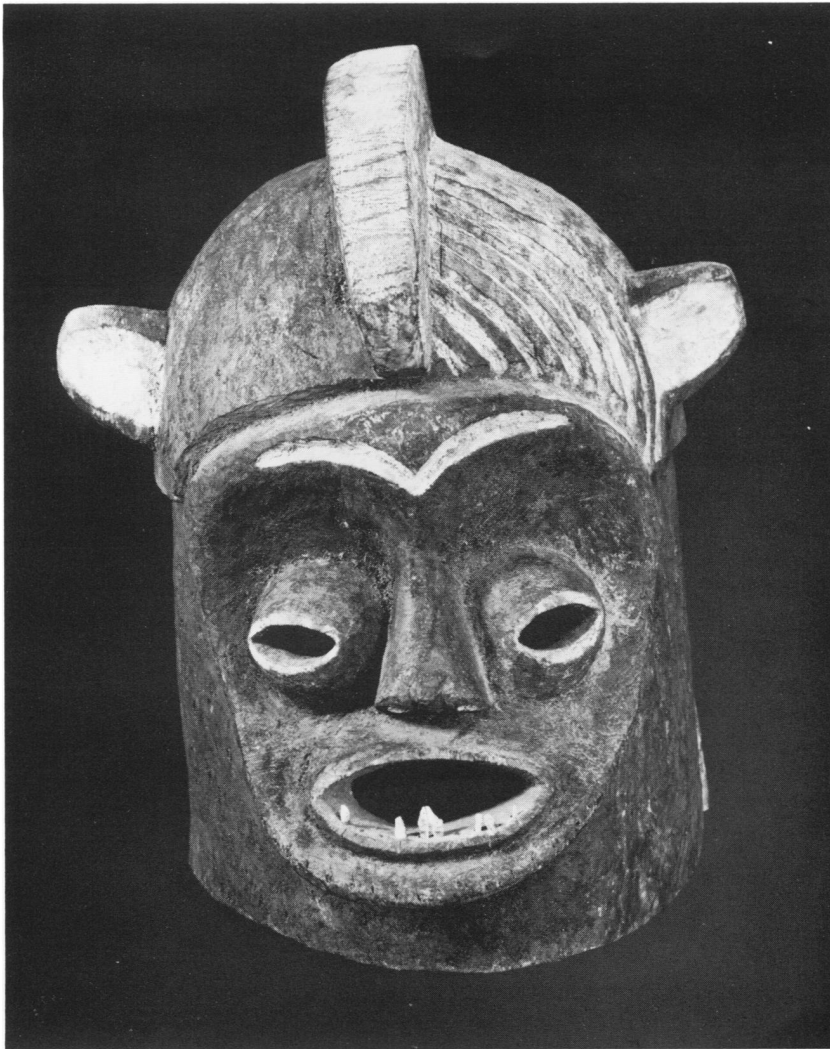


20. GUARDIAN FIGURE, MAMBILLA/MBAMGA, BAKED CLAY, 9½ IN. HIGH. (FERTILITY/CIRCUMCISION RITES USE.)



22. GUARDIAN FIGURE, NORTH/ANTERRE, BAKED CLAY, 8 IN. HIGH.

21. LIBATION RECEPTACLE, NORTH/SAAM, BAKED CLAY, KAOLINE, 9½ IN. HIGH.

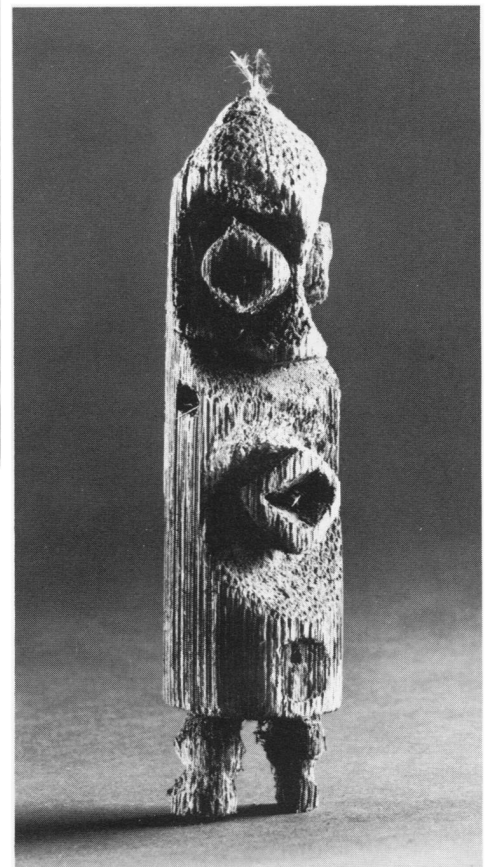


23. HELMET MASK, MAMBILLA/MBURI. WOOD, POLYCHROME, 14 IN. HIGH.

It is difficult to fully explain the pleasant variety of Cameroon art expressions and vitality. The keen mind of the Deputy Keeper of Ethnology at the British Museum, William Fagg, suggests a possible relationship between vital sculpture and the abundance of palmwine and palmoil. In the case of Cameroon, no doubt exists that the abundance of palmwine, palmoil and cornbeer – symbols of peace and prosperity – stimulated art and artists. Other influences need to be mentioned: intelligent leadership of long standing, the beneficial patronage of the arts in feudal systems, the elevated position of artists in society, and the development of folk art into a lovely system of inter-communication. Woven into this fabric of measurable influences are spiritual concepts and values which are not measurable by us. They permeate all functioning objects. Without them objects become useless things. With them they acquire spiritual meaning and spiritual function. Form follows them. To overlook this aspect is to miss the mark. To call it “religious art” or “religious imagery” still falls short. To understand it fully is beyond Western man who left these ancient moorings of the spirit long, long ago.

It is hoped that Portland’s permanent display of Cameroon art will awaken in Americans of African descent a justifiable pride in their rich heritage. And may pride lead to inspiration, useful to their share in the making of America. It is not enough to say that black is beautiful. ■

Notes, page 80



24. GUARDIAN FIGURE, MAMBILLA
PITH, FEATHERS, POLYCHROME.
10½ IN. HIGH.

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

(Signed) Paul O. Proehl, Editor.

ART OF CAMEROON, notes from page 35

A substantial grant by the Social Science Research Council to the writer made possible the photography of the entire Cameroon collection in the Portland Art Museum, from which the illustrations for this article were selected.

The bilingual policy of the present national government accepts the latest English usage for West Cameroon terms and the French orthography of 1960 for East Cameroon. This article follows closely the official policy as observed in the 1970 edition of *ANNUAIRE NATIONAL* (Réalisé par le Ministère de L'Information, Yaoundé). Official terminology for prefectures, subdivisions, areas, and tribes have been brought up to date.

Acknowledgments

page

11

Photograph: A. Finger

14

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24-33

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36

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39, 40, 43

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41, 42

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48-53

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55

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56 (l.), 59 (r.)

Photographs: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren

57

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58 (l.)

Photograph: Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin

58 (r.)

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59 (l.)

Photograph: British Museum

74

Photographs: Renée Poussaint

77

Photograph: Brigitte Menzel

78

Photographs: Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin

ZAMBIA PICTORIAL ART, notes from page 37

1. Herskovits, M. J. (1950) *Man and his Works* Knopf, New York.
2. Brelsford, V. (1937) "Some Reflections on Bantu Geometric Art," *Bantu Studies*, 11, 37-45.
3. Powdermaker, H. (1962) *Copper Town: Changing Africa; the human situation on the Rhodesian Copperbelt* Harper & Row, New York.

OGBONI EDAN, Notes, from page 53

1. *The City of Ibadan*, Editor P. C. Lloyd, "The Ijebu," by A. L. Maboqunje, p. 85, Cambridge University Press, 1967.
2. "An Outline of the Cosmology and Cult Organization of the Oyo Yoruba" by P. Morton-Williams, Africa, Vol. 34, 1964.
3. "The Ogboni and Other Secret Societies" by R. E. Dennett, Journal of the African Society, Vol. 16, 1916-17.
4. *The Yoruba Speaking Peoples of Southwestern Nigeria*, D. Fonde, London, 1951, Human Relations Area File, Smithsonian Institute.
5. "The Iconology of the Yoruba Edan Ogboni," Denis Williams, Africa, Vol. 34, 1964.
6. R. E. Dennett, op. cit., p. 20.
7. D. Morton-Williams, op. cit.
8. *West African Religion*, G. Parrinder, The Epworth Press, London, 1949, p. 141.
9. "The Traditional Political System of the Yoruba," P. C. Lloyd, Southwestern Journal of Anthropology, Vol. 10, pp. 378-379.
10. Denis Williams, op. cit.
11. Ibid, p. 143.
12. "The Sign of the Divine King," R. F. Thompson, African Arts, Spring, 1970.

BALUBA CARYATID STOOLS,

Notes, from page 59

1. See for example R. P. Colle, *Les BaLuba (Congo Belge)*, Bruxelles, 1913, 1, pp. 75ff, 137; Elsy Leuzinger, *Africa: The Art of the Negro Peoples*, New York, 1960, p. 188.
2. W. F. P. Burton, *Luba Religion and Magic in Custom and Belief*, Tervuren, 1961, p. 24.
3. Verney Lovett Cameron, *Across Africa*, New York, 1877, pp. 306-307.
4. Frans M. Olbrechts, *Les arts plastiques du Congo Belge*, Bruxelles, 1959, p. 32.
5. Leuzinger, p. 188.
6. Olbrechts, p. 116; Burton, p. 31, also describes the stool as part of the chief's regalia.
7. Olbrechts, p. 107.
8. Olbrechts, p. 115.
9. Cameron, p. 307.
10. Cameron, p. 275.
11. "Le servi di sgabello." Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, *Istoria de' Regni del Congo, Matamba et Angola*, etc., Bologna, 1687, p. 605.
12. Endre Sík, *The History of Black Africa* (trans. Sándor Simon), Budapest, 1966, p. 65.
13. Leon Kochnitzky, *Negro Art in Belgian Congo*, New York, 1948, p. 29; Olbrechts, p. 95, also refers to the caryatid concept being related to that of slavery.
14. Burton, p. 23.
15. Emphasis mine. Burton, p. 22.

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16. Cameron, p. 333.
17. George Peter Murdock, *Africa: Its Peoples and Their Culture History*, New York-Toronto-London, 1959, pp. 287-289.
18. Murdock, pp. 287-289.
19. E. g., the Early Christian "Christ as the Good Shepherd" simultaneously recalls archaic Greek ram-bearers, Orpheus, and King David.
20. See Olbrechts, pp. 71-75, figs. 121-137.
21. Although the terms "prime objects" and "replications" (George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, New Haven, 1962, pp. 39-53, 63-77) were originally designed to deal with chronological sequences, they can be transposed into a non-chronological situation, such as that of BaLuba sculpture.
22. Joseph Vansina, *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, London, 1964, p. 373.
23. Victor Turner (*The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, New York, 1967, pp. 3-4) describes Ndembu village structure in a way that parallels such object-types as BaLuba caryatid stools: "Although the majority of local groups in Ndembu society are relatively transient and unstable, the organizational principles on which they are formed and reformed are persistent and enduring. . . . If we look at a large sample of particular Ndembu villages, we can abstract from their concrete variations a general or normal form?"
24. Burton's description of the appointment of the BaLuba chief (pp. 19-31) and the use of the stool or throne (pp. 22ff) in the ritual seems to support this contention. Turner's description of ritual symbolism (p. 20), seems relevant here as a parallel: "The symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means, whether these are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observed behavior. The structure and properties of a symbol become those of a dynamic entity, at least within its appropriate context of action."

AYEE MY LUCK, Notes from page 65

1. Woizero is the equivalent of Mrs.
2. Shermuta is derogatorily used to mean prostitute.
3. *Araqe* (or *qando*-brand name) is a hard liquor.
4. Chulo is the nickname given to children who go around selling tickets, shining shoes, or running errands for people.
5. Clerk refers to a person who has made a profession of sitting in a corner of a court writing appeals, applications, etc., for the illiterate litigants.

Cootje van Oven (*Music of Sierra Leone*, Vol. III, No. 4) has drawn our attention to the fact that during editing changes we inadvertently gave the impression that it is normal for the kondi to be tuned to a straightforward five-note scale. The first kondi she examined happened to have this simple tuning, but different kondi vary as much in their tuning as different balangi.