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# The Symbolic Structure of BALUBA CARYATID STOOLS

JACK D. FLAM

Although BaLuba caryatid stools have long appealed to European collectors, and are considered to be one of the finest as well as one of the most popular types of sub-Saharan sculpture, the precise nature of the form and the symbolic relationships implied in its structure have received little consideration.

The typical BaLuba caryatid stool (Figs. 1 and 2) has certain features which are common to almost all. The stool consists of a base and seat connected by a carved human figure, usually a single female in a kneeling position, which acts as an architectural or structural connection between the base and seat of the stool. The torso of the caryatid is generally rendered as a vertical cylindrical form. The lower part of the torso and legs touch the base of the stool, and the head is usually connected to the seat. The arms in most cases are bent so that the upper arm is at right angles to the torso while the forearm, which echoes the vertical direction of the torso, is connected to the seat. In some cases the hands are actually represented, in others they are not. In most cases the torso is large in relation to the legs, as the arms are in relation to the torso, and the head in relation to the arms. In other words, there is a hierarchy implied by the sizes of the forms in which the head is the most important form, the arms next, the torso next, and the feet least important. As will be seen, this hierarchy is integral to the meaning of the object-type. One of the most distinctive features of all of these forms is that they show no sense of actual physical exertion as they support the weight of the stool. While the caryatid performs the structural function of holding up the seat, and by implication a seated person, the figure is carved always with a serene countenance and with a body which shows absolutely no strain. Thus the pose of the BaLuba caryatid figure describes a symbolic rather than a literal physical act.

Two of the most consistent features of these caryatid figures are the scarification on the body and the elaborate coiffure, both of which have a definite correspondence to

actual BaLuba practice<sup>1</sup>. Scarification and coiffure serve the dual purpose of emblems of rank and features of beauty. Burton points out that women have been known to make a two-day journey to the stool of a chief at Nkulu in order to see the vogue in cicatrization, and that a stool carved one hundred and fifty years ago still sets the fashion for cicatrization.<sup>2</sup> It is known that at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, the ranks of the BaLuba have been well defined, and that superiors exacted great deference from those below them on the social scale<sup>3</sup>. Although cicatrization may vary by region (and thus be used as an indication of regional style),<sup>4</sup> it is also an indication of rank. Leuzinger further points out that the artist is impelled to carve coiffures and cicatrization with accuracy, since they are a distinguishing feature of the upper class.<sup>5</sup> It seems evident, therefore, that the scarification and coiffure are features which may be identified with actual BaLuba practice, particularly with people of high social position.

Although this information provides important background, it does not in itself answer the question of who is represented on the caryatid stool. Olbrechts points out that the seats supported by kneeling female caryatids are not the furniture of just anyone, but are the thrones of chiefs, and that female figures are represented for the same reasons that they are depicted on *cannes de chef*.<sup>6</sup> The *cannes de chef* are related to the cult of ancestors, and almost always have female figures represented on them; these female figures are generally representations of "les fondatrices de la tribu"<sup>7</sup> Olbrechts also notes that these objects have the symbolic character of "assuring the prestige of a prince, and the glory of his dynasty and of his ancestors."<sup>8</sup> It therefore seems that the figures represented on these stools represent female ancestors. It should further be noted that there is a dual reading to this symbol.

1. FEMALE CARYATID STOOL. BALUBA. UNIVERSITY MUSEUM, PHILADELPHIA. ►



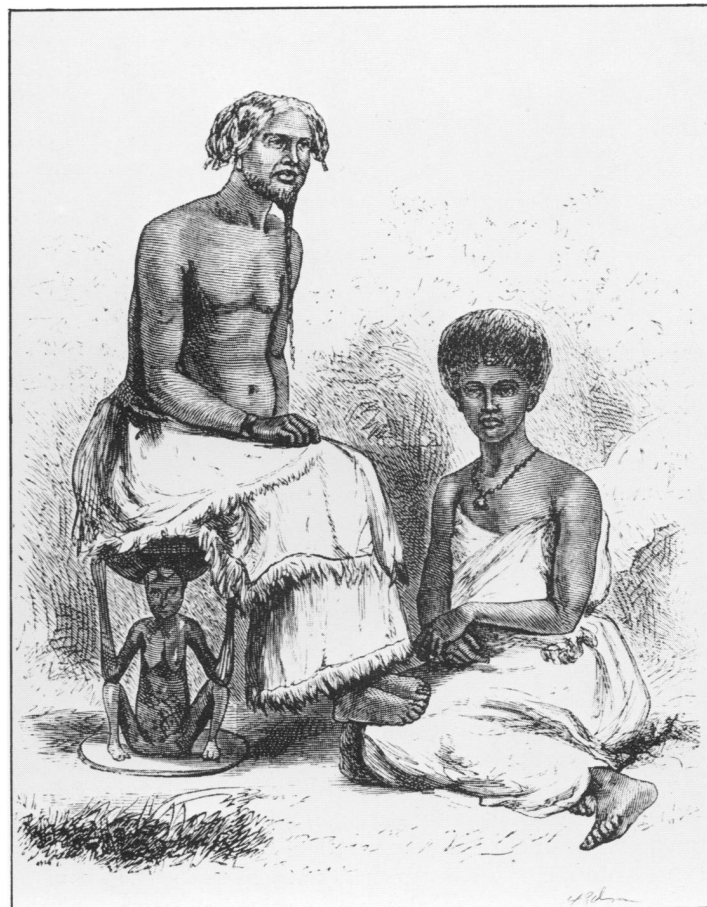
Cameron, while among the BaLuba in 1874-75, noted that when the king slept at home, his bedroom furniture consisted of his harem,<sup>9</sup> and records that when the chief "Russuna came to see me he brought a large and handsomely carved stool, upon which he sat, while he used the lap of one of his wives who was seated on the ground for his footstool"<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 3). The actual Congolese practice of using a human being for a seat has been reported as far back as the middle of the seventeenth century by Cavassi, who noted that Queen Djinga Bandi of Matamba had a female maid in attendance who "served as a stool" for her<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 4). In central African cultures it is the prerogative of the king to sit on a living throne or the back of a slave, as does the Nyimi of the Bushongo. Sik notes the antiquity of the Bushongo tradition whereby "it was unbecoming to the king to touch the ground with his feet,

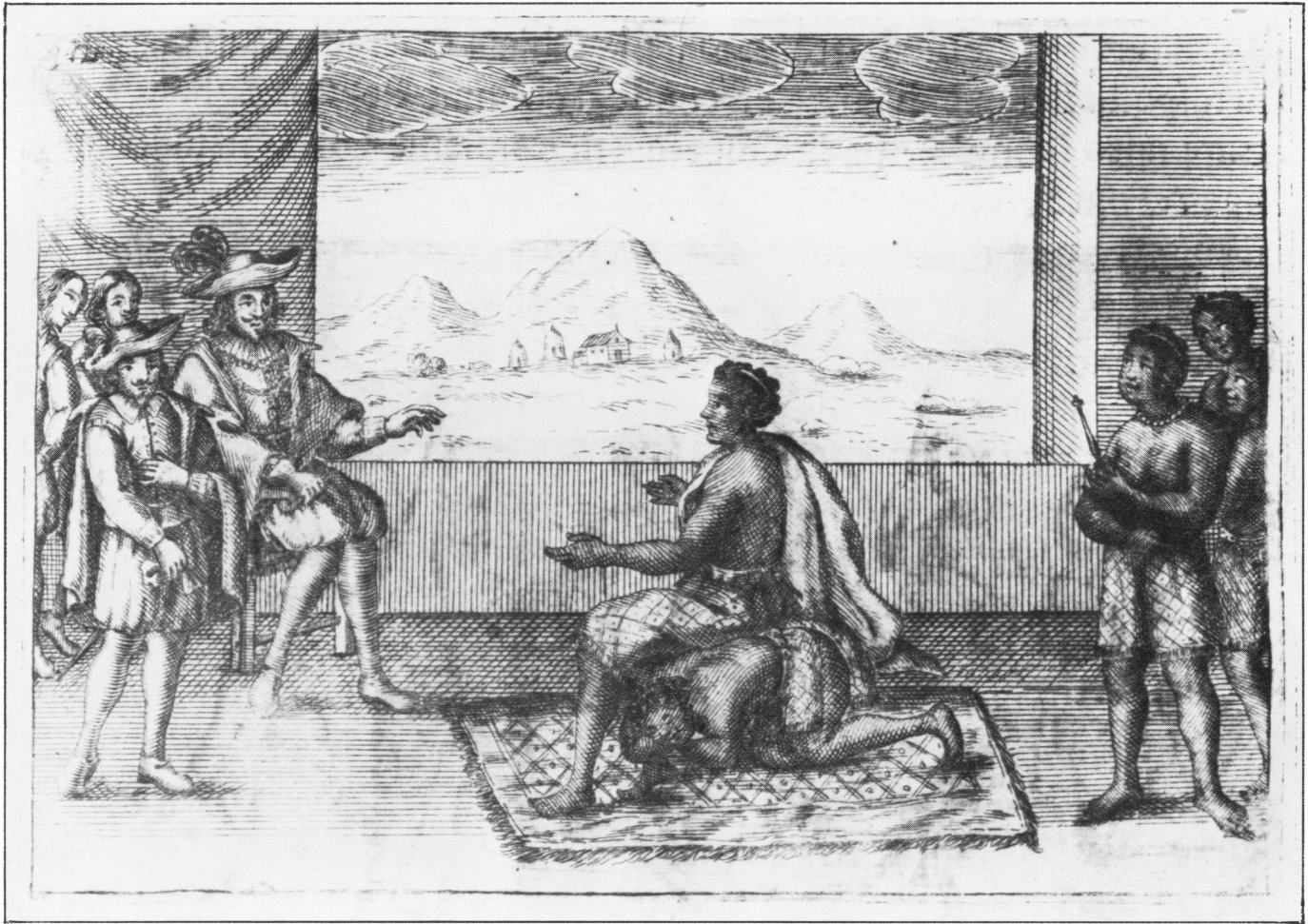
but he was carried on men's shoulders, and when he sat down it was on the back of a slave."<sup>12</sup> And Kochnitzky states that the BaLuba stools supported by figures are probably "but an artistic elaboration of this symbolical gesture."<sup>13</sup> Although Kochnitzky is correct in relating the caryatid figure to a symbolical gesture, it seems that the BaLuba caryatid stool is more than merely "an artistic elaboration" of an element of BaLuba practice, and that the caryatid image is part of a metaphorical symbol. Another aspect of the complex background of this symbol is suggested by descriptions of the appointment and burial of BaLuba chiefs. Burton relates that at the appointment ceremony the chair of the chief is *lifted* and carried by warriors. Upon his investiture he is given the seat of the *kioni* (counsellor) and told, "There is your throne. Take it."<sup>14</sup> The chief then sits between the *kioni* and the *mfinga* (his niece). Because of the symbolic coupling of the chief and his niece, a BaLuba saying goes, "A niece to sleep with, a grandchild to fondle, and a grandmother to *lean upon*."<sup>15</sup> Cameron, who gained his knowledge of a BaLuba chief's burial in April 1875, gives an account of that rite similar to Burton's of almost a century later, demonstrating the continuity of certain BaLuba traditions. He notes that when the chief dies, "a woman is placed on her hands and knees, and upon her back the dead chief, covered with his beads and other treasures, is seated, being



2. CARYATID STOOL. BALUBA. MUSEE ROYAL DE L'AFRIQUE CENTRALE, TERVUREN. (WALKER ART CENTER ART OF CONGO, P. 51.)

3. PRINCE RUSSUNA WITH WIFE AND STOOL. (ENGRAVING FROM CAMERON, ACROSS AFRICA, 1877.)





4. QUEEN DJINGA BANDI, RECEIVED BY THE PORTUGUESE GOVERNOR OF ANGOLA.  
(ENGRAVING FROM CAVAZZI, *ISTORICA DESCRIZIONE DE' TRE REGNI DEL CONGO*, 1687.)

supported on either side by one of his wives, while his second wife sits at his feet.”<sup>16</sup> Thus it seems that various ritual acts of support by slaves are an important part of the complex background of the BaLuba caryatid image.

The BaLuba caryatid stool is a symbol which operates on several levels. It alludes to the Congolese custom of sometimes using a slave as a seat, but paradoxically the figure which fulfills this function usually has attributes of rank. It seems therefore that the figure represented on the stools is not literally either a slave or a person of high rank, but is instead a compound symbol, which refers to a founder of a tribe or family. Among the matrilineally oriented BaLuba,<sup>17</sup> the function of the stool can be seen quite clearly to be that of a symbolic statement of the continuance of power. In a certain sense, the female ancestor represented on the stool supports, both literally and figuratively, the chief or headman who sits upon the stool. That this function is in fact meant to be symbolic can be seen by the rendering of the figures on the stools. The effortless grace with which they carry their burden, the serenity of their countenance (so close to other BaLuba ancestor figures), and the hierarchy of importance of their body parts, all infer that the caryatid image is meant to be interpreted primarily as a spiritual representation. The hierarchy of body parts seems to have a direct correlation to the symbolic role of the figure. The

head, which is the seat of intelligence and which carries the archetypal tribal face, is largest. The arms and torso, which make the gesture of support and which carry rank emblems (such as scarification), are next in importance. The legs in this context are least important to the symbolic function of the figure (which is static and symbolically “without place”), and thus are usually treated in a cursory fashion.

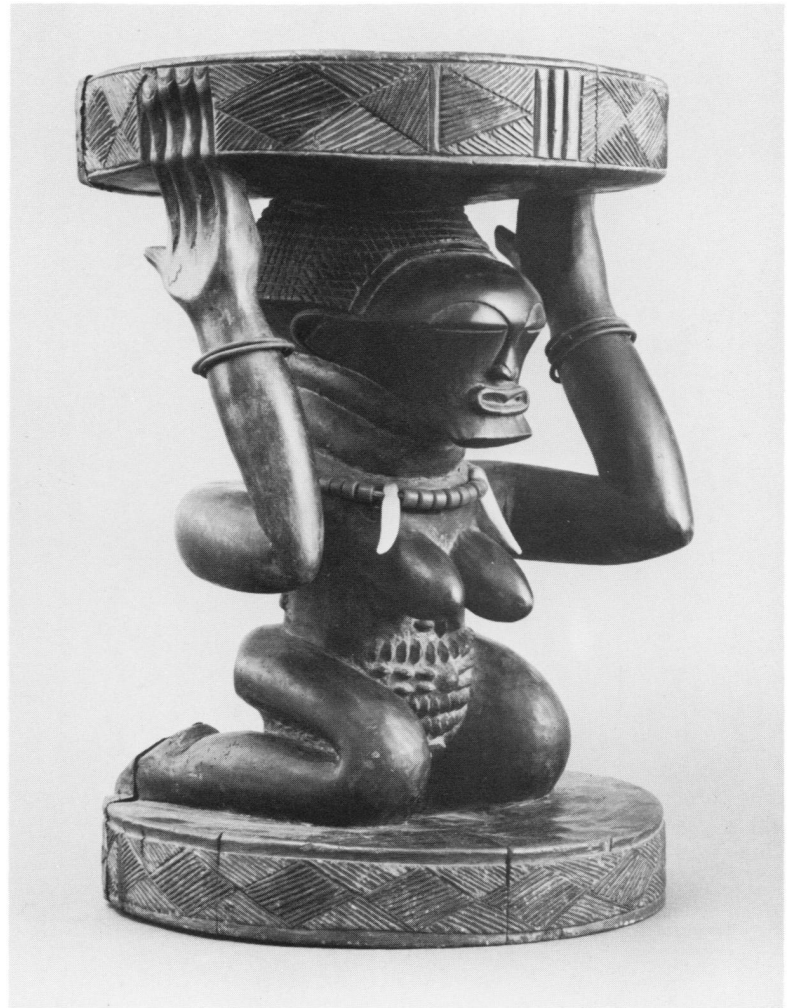
Another important consideration is the “artistic” role of the scarification and coiffure. In addition to their symbolic function, they also function as what might be called “elements of address.” In most ritual art forms there are certain devices which invite the beholder to mentally attune himself to the importance of the object, elements which “address” the beholder. In Byzantine painting, for example, the presence of gold leaf and ultramarine blue, which as physical substances are elements of prestige (wealth and power), function in this as well as in a metaphysical or symbolic fashion. The scarification and coiffure of BaLuba caryatids function in a similar way: they prepare the viewer for the extra-formal implications and importance of the object-type.

While this interpretation seems to hold for the usual caryatid stool, variations of the type must be also considered. In addition to the variants which result from regional substyles; in certain cases male rather than female



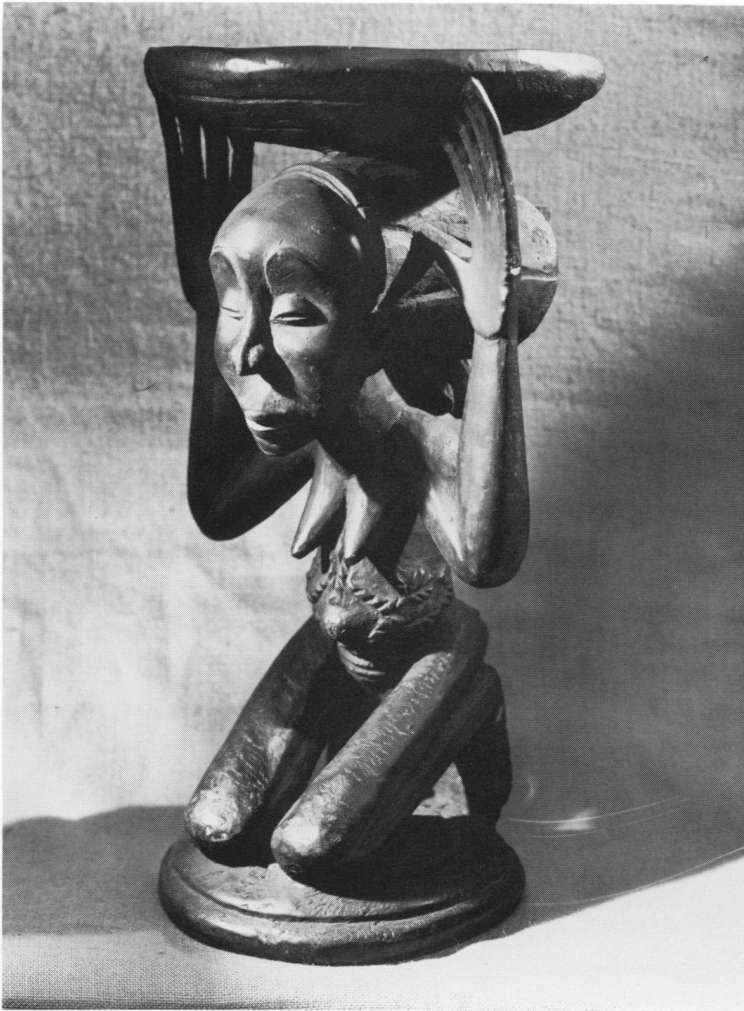
5. CARYATID STOOL, MUSEUM FÜR VOLKERKUNDE, BERLIN.  
(FAGG, *AFRICAN TRIBAL SCULPTURES*, II, P. 56.)

figures are used; and sometimes the caryatids are standing instead of kneeling (Fig. 5). There is also the problem of the diffusion of a similar image to neighboring tribes, such as the BaSonge (Fig. 6). This introduces a problem crucial to the historian of African art. The following question must be answered: If the BaLuba caryatid figure is in fact symbolic of matrilineal continuance of a family line and thereby of kingly power, how does one account for variations in pose, such as standing figures, and for the fact that in some cases the caryatids are male? To answer this question some basic problems of style in African art must be considered. In the art of most cultures, the historian is confronted with a chronological distribution of forms. It is therefore possible to see the



6. STOOL WITH FEMALE CARYATID, BASONGE.  
COLLECTION MR. AND MRS. E. CLARK STILLMAN, NEW YORK.

development of specific themes and motifs over a period of years, decades or centuries. In BaLuba art there are no such chronologies and therefore it is apparent that by the nineteenth century the BaLuba, who have a fairly long history, would have been producing art forms whose original impulses were varied. Because of the canonic nature of their art, types may be expected to have great longevity. In some cases the variation between single objects is stylistic in the regional sense; in other cases variation is simply the result of replications of an object-type in which the prototype for the object and replications of it are no longer produced by exactly the same impulses or to satisfy the same needs. Among the BaLuba, for example, there seems to have been a change from matrilineal to patrilineal descent,<sup>18</sup> which could produce a mutant iconographical type. The female figures on the stools should in this case be (and in some cases are) replaced by male figures. But since the female figure already has the sanctity of tradition and the convenient overlap with fertility symbolism, the form is usually retained even though the impulses which originally produced it have been altered. This phenomenon is common throughout the history of art.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, the greatest variation of caryatid types in BaLuba art seems to be that of the so-called "Buli" style (Figs. 5 and 7), which is



7. STOOL WITH FEMALE CARYATID. BALUBA, BULI STYLE.  
BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON.



8. STOOL WITH FEMALE CARYATID. BALUBA, BULI STYLE.  
MUSEE ROYAL DE L'AFRIQUE CENTRALE, Tervuren.

known to be a "late" mutant style, and which therefore is less strongly bound to both the iconographical as well as (in terms of rendering) the sculptural traditions of BaLuba carving.<sup>20</sup>

In dealing with the problems of "prime objects" and "replications" in the study of African art,<sup>21</sup> it must be kept in mind that "prime objects" may be determined in terms of a formal construction which articulates the symbolic principles and relationships behind the formulation of the style and/or object-type; replications repeat, more or less fully and accurately, the formulas expressed by prime objects. Therefore it may be said that the relationship between replications and prime objects is based upon an awareness of the degree to which an object realizes its "style." Whereas in arts with a steady chronological development, prime objects and replications have a direct relationship to their respective chronological entries into the sequence (with prime objects tending to enter earlier), in tribal arts, where there is no chronological sequence and where canonic forms are repeated, prime objects seem to imitate an ideal archetype and the replications move further away from that original archetype. The variants within the symbolic structure of the BaLuba caryatid stool may be seen as another example of what Vansina calls the integration of events into the structure

of "non-temporal archetypes" which deny their passage in time.<sup>22</sup> This aspect of the African thought process, wherein a significant event is absorbed, made into a metaphor and incorporated into a tradition, may be used by the art historian to gain insight into the impulses behind the creation of a form or type, just as the historian uses these impulses to reconstruct the history of a people, or the anthropologist to determine normal forms.<sup>23</sup>

It seems unquestionable that the BaLuba female caryatid figure is a symbolic ancestor figure which is conceived of as a link between the dead ancestors and the living chief, as an affirmation of the chief's power, and also as an affirmation of ancestral continuity.<sup>24</sup> While variations within the type exist, all variations have in common the general pose, the sense of removal from space and time (so necessary for an ancestor), the typical tribal face, and the symbolic gesture of support. The BaLuba caryatid stool is an example of a form which efficiently expresses the "interests and purposes" of the people who produced it; these ideas are structured into a canonic form that is continued indefinitely. In this sense, the symbolic meaning of the figure and the structure of the object-type and style fuse into a complex, multivocal symbol of continuity among the BaLuba. ■

*Notes, page 80*

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(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

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58 (l.)

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59 (l.)

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#### 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 Ogoni 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 Ogoni," 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.