

Introduction to the History of Classical African Art

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When writing about traditional African art it is customary to write in the present tense without repeatedly indicating that only one point in time is being described.
— Frank Willett¹

Various recent scientific methods have allowed us to obtain data useful for constructing a true history of African art. In order to describe the evolution of classical African art, some scholars have favored tribal classification, others a historical approach, and others, finally, functional analysis. William Fagg (1964) claims that in Africa, at an artistic level, each tribe makes up its own closed universe; its horizon stops at its own borders.² These are, he says, discrete and exclusive groups; for them, art expresses their internal solidarity and their autonomy, and in turn distinguishing them from each other. According to him, a tribe's borders are closed. Yet not all tribes possess a distinct border; a distinct, fixed border is the projection of modern European fact onto traditional boundaries. The borders of current African states are the result of colonization and often span multiple pre-existing ethnic regions.

This is not the only form for the territorial division of tribes and populations in Africa. A tribe can be scattered; it can be composed of two or more homogenous sub-groups separated by one or more other populations; it can also be mixed with different populations; or finally it can either be homogenous and concentrated or mixed. For instance, in certain regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, dispersion and mixing are the most frequent forms of arrangement. The Peul or Fulani, for example, live almost all across Africa: in Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Chad, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Guinea, and northern Cameroon. In the case of such an ethnic group, it is difficult or even impossible to draw distinct borders.

A historical approach uses time in order to distinguish artistic creations of the past from those of the present. But standard historical reference points do not take into account the continuity of African artistic creation or the rhythm of life as it is lived in Africa. They do not allow for the existence of plural identities in African artistic creation.

¹ *L'art africain: une introduction* (Paris: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 239.

² William Fagg, *Sculptures africaines* (Paris: Fernand Hazan Éditeur, 1965).

The functional analysis of objects that have become aesthetic objects also entails problems. In museums, such objects are the proof of different contexts, places, and times. But in this process of decontextualization and recontextualization, they take on new significance and lose their original meaning. Exhibited in a museum, the traditional object loses its “functional being” and becomes a “being that creates meaning”—meaning attributed by the collector or the curator.

All of this explains why, in what follows, if I refer to tribes or African ethnic groups, I invoke them only to follow conventional expressions and classifications. Following Cheik Anta Diop, however, I prefer to study classical African art starting from different *styles* of African plastic art. I approach classical art not from the point of view of the historical succession of forms, nor through the objects or materials used (terra cotta, wood, metal, leather, fabric, beading, etc.), nor through its utilitarian or decorative function, but from the point of view of style.

I know that the question of African styles is a complex one; there exists a multiplicity of African arts and a multiplicity of styles corresponding more or less to different ethnic groups or kingdoms. Each style takes place through particular forms. The history of African art is approached generally—and wrongly—starting from the ethnic origin of its objects. It has often been thought that African art represents tradition alone. But African artistic reality includes styles that largely exceed their ethnic origins and socio-religious traditions. It happens that much of this classical art does not stem from religious practices. This, for example, is the case in royal art that celebrates power—in portraits of kings that celebrate the ruler.

Classical African art is tremendously diverse. This essay aims to understand the diversity of classical African art by studying its various styles. My scope does not extend to contemporary African art, or in other words to artistic expressions that were born after World War II (1945), but focuses rather on precolonial African art, or artistic production that occurred prior to the sixteenth century—in other words, before the beginning of more widespread African contact with the West. The objects under study here have most often been uncovered through archaeology. If in the West the term “classical” refers to the styles of ancient Greece and Rome characterized by notions of elegance, harmony, composition, proportion, and perspective, in sub-Saharan Africa, it refers to what has commonly been called *l’art nègre*.

In my work here I distinguish two major trends: a realist or naturalist trend and an expressionist or geometric trend.

1. Archaeological Discoveries

Prolific archaeological research undertaken in the twentieth century has uncovered a vast quantity of stone, terra cotta, and bronze sculptures in different areas of central and western Africa. But it is in Nigeria that the oldest African statuary has been found. Nigerian artists produced beautiful works made from the most diverse materials: terra cotta, bronze, wood, stone, ivory, etc.

In 1943, Bernard Fagg’s excavations in a tin mine in the Jos region led to the discovery of the first evidence of a collection, the only one of its kind, of terra cotta sculptures

dating back 2000 to 2500 years. The first manifestations of this artistic expression were found not far from Nok, a village situated north of the confluence of the Niger and the Benue rivers in central Nigeria, which gave its name to a prehistoric culture of primary importance in the evolution of African statuary. (The culture was named by Fagg, who understood the historical significance of the discovery.) Nok art is known for the purity of its forms, its geometric treatment of eyes and eyebrows, and its technique of perforating eyes, nostrils, ears, and lips.

Nok statuary is made of terra cotta. The heads, in their near-natural grandeur, seem all to have belonged to statues representing the human body: "They are carefully smoothed; the temper, made with crushed stone, only appears where the surface has been worn down. There are also several animal figurines, including elephants and monkeys. The form of these statues is far from identical."³ The Nok terra cottas constitute the oldest African tradition **whose style approaches naturalism**. Their recovery allows for the study of the artistic traditions, schools, and movements that followed in this region of Africa. The great schools of the Ife, Benin, Owo, Ibo, and other indigenous Nigerian traditions of stone, ivory, metal, or clay of sculpture can, indeed, all link their genealogies to the Nok terra cotta, which constitute a legitimate, credible archetype. We will return to these other populations and their relation to Nok culture.

In general, these terra cotta figures represent human beings, animals, plants, etc. Human beings occupy a central place and assume different postures: standing, kneeling, genuflecting, or seated. They are often ritual objects or done in commemoration of kings, queens, and religious figures shown wearing religious attire.

The statues' decorative beads and delicate hairstyles attract the observer's attention and lead us to understand that this is an evolved art. Nok artists possessed the technical knowledge necessary to shape and to cure the clay. They knew the properties of their materials and they had the know-how and the dexterity necessary to create these terra cotta works with their great artistic value. The figures' gestures, postures, tools and hairstyles were determined according to norms established by determined codes.⁴

A terra cotta human head of 33.8 cm, dating from the fifth century B.C., is exhibited at the Nigerian National Museum. Discovered near Nok in 1954, at a depth of four meters, this human head

has an elongated form, protruding triangular eyes, large flattened nostrils, and an open mouth with wide lips. The hair is coiffed in the typical style for Nok heads, in knots that recall contemporary Nigerian hairstyles. The holes that go through the clay layer, pierced at the pupils and nostrils, beneath the eyes, and on the mouth and the knots of hair at the top of the head are integrated with great skill into the object's artistic style.⁵

³ Jaques Maquet, in *Encyclopædia Universalis*, corpus 11 (Paris: Encyclopædia Universalis, 1995), 383-384.

⁴ Ezio Bassani, Omotoaso Eluyemi, Violata I. Ekpo and Jean-Louis Paudrat, *Arts of Africa: 7000 Years of African Art* (Milan: Grimaldi Forum Monaco, 2005).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

All of this lets us see, again, that the Nok society practiced a sophisticated art: its artists possessed the technical knowledge to shape and cure clay. They had the facility necessary to create works with great artistic value.

In his excavations of 1959 and 1964, the English archaeologist Thurstan Shaw discovered artifacts from Ibo culture dating from the ninth through the tenth centuries. Omotoso Eluyemi⁶ guesses that these objects constitute the oldest bronzes realized in sub-Saharan Africa “with the help of the lost-wax technique.” These bronzes have natural forms and skillfully decorated surfaces. Their style indicates the Ibo’s high artistic level and a very sophisticated metalworking technique. These objects produced with “a sophisticated art, made of bronze, calabash, ceramics and beads⁷ and constituting arms, jewelry, insignia, ritual vessels or metal tools, attest to the Ibo’s rich and complex artistic activity. Among the masterpieces of Ibo art is a “Ceremonial Bowl” dating from the ninth to tenth centuries A.D. and on exhibition at the Nigerian National Museum. A bronze with a high percentage of lead, it measures 35 cm. The object is finely decorated with geometric motifs.⁸ The National Museum also holds a ceremonial vase in the form of a giant snail shell, dating from the ninth to tenth centuries A.D. as well. This is also a bronze with a high percentage of lead; it measures 29 cm and is decorated with geometric patterns.⁹

Numerous sculptures were discovered in 1933 in Esię, a Nigerian town on the west bank of the Niger; they depict men, women, and children, as well as animals. They are exhibited at the Esię Museum. A local myth relates that these sculptures represent the foreigners that divine forces turned to stone to punish them for having offended the king of Esię. These sculptures, made between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, are ornamented with beads and bracelets. The artistic style is varied.¹⁰

Excavations in the necropolis of Bura-Asinda-Sikka, northeast of Niamey, in Niger, brought to light one of the most important discoveries in African archaeology: buried skeletons topped with human figures or equestrians, dating from between the third and the eleventh centuries A.D. Two of these figures are preserved at the Institut de Recherche en Sciences Humaines (IRSH) in Niamey. They are both in terra cotta and depict equestrians. One, measuring 62 cm, is carefully decorated and suggests a surprising verticality due to the abnormal elevation of the animal’s head. The other, 28 cm, depicts a human figure whose body is covered in jewels.¹¹

Numerous ceramic and terra cotta objects were discovered in Calabar, at the far southeast end of Nigeria: vases and receptacles, human heads, statuettes, headrests, polished stone axes, bracelets, and shells, all magnificently decorated and dating from between the

⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁷ Ibid., 67.

⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰ Ibid., 147.

¹¹ Ibid., 156-159.

fifth to the tenth century A.D. In the late 1990s, Ekpo Eyo and his team from the University of Maryland discovered numerous terra cotta headrests, statuettes, and highly decorated vases. One of these headrests, shaped like a canoe and preserved in the National Museum of Calabar, dates from around 445 A.D. and measures 44.5 cm. Its configuration attests to the artist's mastery of a sophisticated technique. Another headrest, dating from 1100 A.D., is preserved at the same museum. Its cylindrical form and geometric motifs give it great aesthetic value.¹²

In Nigeria, the Nok civilization—the oldest known sub-Saharan civilization—dates from between 500 B.C. and 200 A.D. The set of objects found at a depth of 6-8 meters includes beaded jewelry, decorations, and most importantly, terra cotta statues, among them a fragment of a kneeling body, a head bearing a hairstyle with five knots, a bearded statue with a scarred face, and a monkey-like head. These figurative terra cotta works attest to a coherent style that is found nowhere else: the slightly geometric treatment of the head, sometimes spherical and sometimes in the form of a cone or a cylinder, and the perfection of the eyes, nostrils, and ears. At that time, contacts with foreigners were practically non-existent. But in the face of the technical perfection of the Nok artists, some other researchers have found no other explanation besides that these works must have been developed based on elements originating elsewhere. In the end, though, it must be admitted that these ancient works from Ghana, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, the savanna of Sudan, and the equatorial forest of central Africa are African.

The first signs of artistic activity in Africa occurred in the very distant past: many sites date from the Middle Paleolithic period (between 100000 and 3500 BC) and feature red ochre markings.¹³ This ochre probably served to paint decorations, instruments, and tombs. We often find tools and ornaments from utilitarian objects with such markings. In an even further past, still in Africa, on sites that date from 200000 and 500000 B.C., researchers have argued that symmetrical configurations of flint cuttings attest to a certain aesthetic sense.¹⁴

In their collective work *Arts of Africa: 7000 years of African Art*, Ezio Bassani, Omotoaso Eluyemi, Violata I. Ekpo, and Jean-Louis Paudrat (2005) set out to examine and to explain African artistic creation from past centuries, at least in part. The first section of the book begins by describing the works of Sudanese civilizations, which are situated halfway between ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁵ These include very old artistic productions in stone and terra cotta dating from the fifth to the fourth millennia B.C., as well as other stone objects from the Meroë civilization, second to third centuries A.D.

But it is in the case of Nigeria that the authors show the “richest and most convincing panorama of African art” (29): the Nok terra cotta (fifth century B.C. to fifth century A.D.), the Ibo bronzes (first to tenth centuries A.D.), the Ife bronzes and terra cottas (twelfth to fifteenth centuries A.D.), the Tada and Jebba bronze figures (fourteenth to sixteenth

¹² Ibid., 150-154.

¹³ *Sciences Humaines* 1:14 (March 2001), p. 42.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bassani et al., *Arts of Africa*, 27.

centuries A.D.), the works from the historical kingdom of Benin (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries A.D.), and the Owo terra cottas (fifteenth century A.D.).

In Niger, excavation campaigns unearthed the Bura-Asinda-Sikka terra cottas (third through eleventh centuries A.D.), soapstone figures in Sierra Leone (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries A.D.), and sculptures of soft stone in Zimbabwe (twelfth to fifteenth centuries A.D.).

In his research on the Tassili region of the Sahara, Henri Lhote discovered numerous cave paintings, certain of which include symbols and masks similar to those of western African tribes.¹⁶ The careful study of these works has confirmed the existence of different periods and styles based on, for example, the reproductions of animals that have since disappeared from the Sahara region, such as the elephant, the rhinoceros, and more specifically, a type of buffalo, *Bubalus antiquus* (around 5000 years B.C.). The scenes that depict domesticated animals such as cows, oxen, and goats are from a later era. There we see incisions, perforations, and scratches. Paintings are also present on sites that feature great walls of smooth rock.¹⁷ The oldest Tassili paintings date from around 5400 years B.C. The paintings, such as those where masked men mingle with buffalo and cows, date from 3500 B.C. The scenes showing cows and sheep would have been made around 2600 B.C., while those depicting riders come from around 1200 B.C. In the large region spanning from the extreme south of Africa to the Sambeze river, rock walls and ledges are decorated with images showing a variety of men and animals. They bear a strong similarity to those found in the Sahara region and those discovered in the center of Tanzania.

The production of this type of works, the oldest of which date back to the Neolithic era, has continued to the present day. We know with certainty that the most modern scenes were done by the San people, a Khoekhoen group of hunter-gatherers. In the nineteenth century, the San still painted the walls of their caves and huts; these pictorial accomplishments, with their magical character, were intended to aid in hunting the represented animals. In addition to painting new scenes, artists also retouched and repainted those that were done previously. The most vibrant of these scenes, such as those depicting animals caught in traps or men in motion, were completed between 1800 and 1600 B.C.; the older ones are probably situated between 3000 and 2500 years B.C.¹⁸

2. Ife and Benin Realism

The term “realism” here refers to all forms of representative art characterized by a search for the real, for quotidian life, and for the objective representation of the world. Realist artists, concerned with what is true, in general show the real without idealizing it. “The most typical realist school in Africa according to our current knowledge (outside of Egypt) is

¹⁶ *Histoire universelle de l'art*, vol. 3, *Afrique, Amérique, Asie* (Paris : Larousse, 1989), 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

certainly the school of Ife, which gave rise to the school of Benin. It is known for its works in terra cotta, stone, and bronze [...]. It is characterized by realism, serenity, and balance.”¹⁹

For the Yoruba, Ife (a city in Nigeria) is the world’s original cradle and its main center, where the first earth formed over the waters. It is also the religious capital, where the Oni, or the divine king, resided. The Yoruba formed their kingdoms starting from the beginning of the fifteenth century. Their religion is founded on the worship of a personified deity, who can be summoned and questioned through an oracle whose responses are interpreted by seers. It is in the representation of these deities that Yoruba art, which inherits the sculptural traditions of Ife and Benin, reaches its most beautiful expression. The goddess Oduduwa, symbolized by a woman giving her breast to her child, wears a royal crown. The god Olorun sometimes takes on the appearance of a marine deity, as certain representations show, in which a supplicant offers him a box containing items of divination. Shango, god of thunder and battles, appears as a rider armed with a lance.

The Yoruba also accord particular significance to twins. If one twin has just died, the mother orders the creation of a statue (ibeji) representing the dead child, which she cares for just as she does the living. At the mother’s death, the surviving child will in turn take care of the ibeji. If both twins die, the mother proceeds the same way with two statues, objects of devotion.

Ife and Benin art was expressed through the representation of more or less historical characters. Ife art includes works in terra cotta and bronze (heads and busts), as well as stone sculptures (stools and religious objects made of quartz, monumental granite monoliths, and human and animal statuettes).

This Ife civilization is an extension of the Yoruba civilization. The art that will later become renowned in Benin follows this art of bronze. This is an art whose practice, evolution, and finally decline are linked to the fate of royalty, its values, and the political and economic history of the state. The bronzes mounted on pillars in the interior courts of the palace form a chronicle depicting the most important events in the civil, religious, and military life of the king and his court. The production of Benin art was buttressed by political and social structures.

In their ritual practices, the Ife people continue to use the same objects. The tradition of bronze casting existed at Ife well before the first contacts with Europe at the end of the fifteenth century. With the help of scientific tests, the objects found by Leo Frobenius were dated back to the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.²⁰ Graham Conom’s excavations led to the determination that already in the thirteenth century, bronze bars were melted and worked into bracelets by Benin smiths.

“The school of Benin is known above all for its bronze figures: armed soldiers, portraits of kings with high coral collars, and members of the royal family; and also for its ivory sculptures, sculpted tusks telling the king’s story, or masks.”²¹ Historically, the Ife and Benin kingdoms were linked by political and artistic traditions. Around the thirteenth

¹⁹ Cheikh Anta Diop, *Nations nègres et culture*, 4th edition (Paris : Présence Africaine, 1979), 521.

²⁰ Bassani et al., *Arts of Africa*, 47.

²¹ Diop, *Nations nègres et culture*, 522.

century, Igueigha, the smelter who taught the Bini the art of Bronze, arrived from Ife.²² Bini artists produced various objects in ivory, iron, wood, and beading, but it is above all the statues, heads, and bronze plaques that attest to the evolution of their art. Until the end of the fourteenth century, Benin art was still dependent on the Ife. Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, artistic production in Benin was enriched by the appearance of new art forms in bronze and ivory: bronze plaques, on which were represented the life of the court and its military victories, bronze heads that commemorated deceased kings and queen-mothers, trophy heads also in bronze commemorating military victories, bronze figures of court functionaries that decorated the palace and its shrines, as well as precious insignia in bronze and ivory with which the aristocrats adorned themselves during state ceremonies.

Between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, works were dedicated to the glory of the royal figure. A beautiful bronze head, intended to ornament an altar to the royal ancestors and dating from the sixteenth century, is preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. *Une belle tete de la reine-mère* [Beautiful Queen-Mother Head], dating from the sixteenth century A.D., is exhibited in the Nigerian National Museum in Lagos. It is sculpted in bronze and measures 51.5 cm. This work is among the Benin's most famous bronze heads. Its tall conic hairstyle and its beaded necklace are part of the insignia belonging to the rank of the queen-mother (Iyoba). The characteristic facial scarring of the Benin people above the arches of the brows and the nose (two vertical lines) is practiced during specific religious ceremonies.

Un couple de leopards [Couple of Leopards] is shown in the same museum. One measures 50.5 cm and the other 49.3 cm. In their realism, the sculptures depict the leopard anatomy, the gracious ferocity of which is expressed especially through the representation of teeth and eyes. The *Oba* (king) had a monopoly on bronze casting, as well as on ivory working and coral. The palace's multiple shrines held commemorative busts and other figures intended to decorate altars, ritual stools, and vessels as well as animal figures evoking the king's power.

The decline of bronze arts began at the end of the seventeenth century with the English expedition in 1897. And since the perfection of the lost-wax molding technique in Benin is unusual, in his book *Les peuples et les civilisations d'Afrique* [African Tribes and Civilizations] Hermann Baumann seriously considered (as did many other experts elsewhere) that masters must have come from India or Europe. But he returned to these hypotheses after learning that the industry achieved a high degree of perfection in Benin and having also learned that the region had always had a population of bronzesmiths.²³ He therefore distanced himself from the idea that the Benin bronzes could have originated from foreign influences (European or Indian):

The majority of base materials used in melting, the series of patterns reproduced, and certain technical improvements could not have come from either

²² *Histoire universelle de l'art*, vol. 3, 54.

²³ Hermann Baumann and Diedrich Westermann, *Les peuples et les civilisations de l'Afrique* (Paris: Payot, 1962), 350.

Europe or the Indian region. The country of origin of the lost-wax technique, whose domain extended from the east of Liberia all the way to the land of the Bamum, is obviously to be found inside of Sudan and then farther north.²⁴

But this does not prevent him from claiming that that the Benin jugs with handles, which date from between 1500 and 1575, are copies of sixteenth-century western European models, and that Ibo, Idjo, and Eve marmite drums and probably also Ibo, Agnis, Akans and Gas calabash drums are Paleo-Mediterranean in origin. In sum, Baumann explains the small-scale details of African artistic creation through the intervention of the so-called “Hamites” and the Europeans.²⁵

Benin and Ghana are home to tribes whose cultures resemble those of Nigeria: the **Fon** and the **Ashanti**. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Fon formed the Dahomey kingdom (the contemporary republic of Benin). Yoruba art exercised such a profound influence on the Fon that it has sometimes proven difficult to differentiate a Fon mask from its Yoruba equivalent. The Ashanti, who occupy the center of Ghana, founded their republic in the seventeenth century. The profusion of gold in this kingdom gave rise to very beautiful goldsmithery, which is evident in small masks, statues, jewels, cups, and stools made in gold using the lost-wax technique. The Ashanti also possess remarkable skill in weaving, which they exercise in cotton and silk.

Regarding the perfection of these Ashanti art objects, in “À propos des Kuduo Ashanti” [“About Ashanti Kuduo”], Denise Paulme wonders “how the masterpieces of such a delicate technique could have been realized without the advice and influence of a foreign civilization—of Western civilization.” She cites R.S. Rattray, who, in his first book on Ashanti society wondered if such precious objects could have been developed in the country itself: “it is certain,” she writes, “that the form of certain vessels and the decoration of almost all of them contain reminders that are something other than a purely African art.”²⁶ She posits relationships with the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, English, French, and Spanish: “ultimately Ashanti artists were inspired by exterior forms and patterns, but these were reworked and integrated into their civilization to shape objects that we can definitively rank among their masterpieces.”²⁷ Such value judgments, which accompany each affirmation of the rich diversity of African artistic production, ultimately only attest to a state of intellectual disarray.

²⁴ Ibid., 352

²⁵ Ed. note: Hamites and Hamitic civilization are inventions of nineteenth-century European and U.S.-American racial scholarship, a discourse indebted in particular to Prussian linguist Karl Richard Lepsius. Deriving from the traditional Judeo-Christian account of Noah’s son Ham as the ancestor of dark-skinned peoples, terms associated with “Hamite” distinguished superior north African peoples from the Sub-Saharan African peoples, which were denoted by words now largely considered slurs and beginning with “negr-.”

²⁶ Denise Paulme, “À propos des Kuduo Ashanti,” in *L’art nègre*, Présence Africaine n°10-11 (Paris, Seuil: 1951), 157.

²⁷ Ibid., 160.

Other realist styles include those of the Owo and the Sapi, from between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Excavations undertaken at Owo, an ancient town situated on eastern border of Yoruba lands, halfway between Ife and Benin, show that “Owo art constitutes the missing link between Ife and Benin art.”²⁸ The objects found were dated from the period between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Owo technique for making terra cotta stems from the Ife tradition. The digs led by Ekpo Eyo in 1971 led to the discovery of

a considerable quantity of culturally valuable works depicting men and animals in terra cotta, axes of polished stone, cowries, palm nuts, and fragments of metal gongs. These remains constitute a sign of wealth that seems to indicate the presence of a royal dynasty. They are also seen in relation to the cult of Oronse and his worship. This cult was probably started around 1340, under the reign of the Olowo (king) Reregenjen. This king married the very beautiful Oronse in whom there cohabited, according to the myth, human and spiritual natures. From the spirit world, Oronse promised to protect Olowo and his people on the condition of copious human and animal sacrifices to her.²⁹

A very beautiful Owo *Pendentif* [chest pendant] is displayed at the Nigerian National Museum in Lagos. It dates from the fifteenth century A.D. and measures 28.4 cm. This is a “bronze chest-pendant in the shape of a ram’s head; the pupils are emphasized by iron inlays in keeping with Benin style.”³⁰ Ancient Owo art, in general, reproduces the themes of fourteenth century classical Ife style. Although they were produced in place, certain terra cotta works of Owo art evoke characteristics of Ife art, while others resemble Benin works on a formal and conceptual level. Owo art is characterized by works in terra cotta and ivory sculptures.

The Sapi, an ancient people living in Sierra Leone, produced figures and human and animal heads, modest in dimension but conceptually monumental. According to specialists, these objects pre-date the first contacts with Europeans. In the Mario Meneghini collection, we find a surprising figure of a Sapi chief: a soft stone (soapstone) figure measuring 27 cm and dating from the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries. This figure has an impressive monumentality; it is a symbolic effigy of a chief with his arms and signs of power. The dimensions and exceptional density of the form make the work even more striking, emphasizing the depicted individual’s authority. Two Sapi figures sitting back-to-back are also preserved in the same collection. They date from the fifteenth to sixteenth century, measure 23 cm, and are also made from soft stone (soapstone). The expert construction of the volume of the large heads and the two

²⁸ Ekpo in Bassani et al., *Arts of Africa*, 112.

²⁹ Ekpo in Bassani et al., *Arts of Africa*, 111.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

figures' bodies, connected at the back, give great value to this primordial couple, whose expressive force and majestic quality remain intact.

Faced with the perfection and heightened realism of these Ife works, certain researchers (such as Leo Frobenius) have been eager to identify their Greek origin. According to them, the Benin would not have been able to produce works with "classical" styles so different from the types of human figures characteristic of the art of sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the technique for casting bronze has been identified in Ife starting from the second millennium A.D. Terra cottas uncovered in 1963 date from 1060, which means that Ife art is "clearly anterior to the Portuguese arrival in Benin."³¹ (Jacques Maquet, 1995).

The heightened realism of human representation whose origin has been sought in Greece, Carthage, India, and Portugal is most probably explained by the necessity of glorifying local kings [...] Modeling was practiced in Nigeria starting from the first millennium B.C., as the 1943 discovery of the Nok civilization close to the mining center of Jos attests. Twenty or so sites, dating from the tenth to the third century B.C., gave us ceramic sculptures whose realism prefigures Ife styles. Moreover, certain details of Nok bodies are identified in Ife art. Finally, Nok ironworking was identified starting from the end of the third century B.C.

The Ife bronzes date most probably from the beginning of the second millennium A.D. Terra cottas uncovered in 1963 were able to be identified using charcoal carbon-dating. The resulting date was 1060, give or take one hundred years. This art is thus clearly anterior to the Portuguese arrival in Benin.

It would thus be absurd to seek the Mediterranean origins of works of art produced in Benin. After Frobenius's discoveries, in the following years researchers such as Frank Willet, Bernard Fagg, Ekpo Eyo, Peter Garlake, and Olivier Myers discovered bronzes and terra cotta sculptures that were funerary or religious objects, as well as ceramic tiling.³² The National Museum of Ife holds a *Tête d'Oni* (Oni Head) in brass and gold that measures 28 cm. It dates from the twelfth to fifteenth century A.D. The holes visible on the head serve to secure the king's crown; those around the mouth and on the cheeks were intended to "secure the beaded veils intended to hide the lower part of the king's face," and those around the neck "to secure the head on a wooden simulacrum when it was publicly exhibited during ceremonies."³³ In the same museum we can also see the upper half of a figurine of an Oni. Dating from the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries A.D., it is brass with a high lead percentage and measures 37.3 cm. Called "Oni Lafogido," it is one of the most beautiful pieces of Nigerian bronze.

³¹ Jaques Maquet, *Encyclopædia Universalis*, corpus 11.

³² Ekpo in Bassani et al., *Arts of Africa*, 77.

³³ *Ibid.*, 78.

All of these objects attest to the skill of the Ife kingdom's artists. These bronzes, all made using the lost-wax technique, are artistic feats. Before disappearing around the fourteenth century, this technique was transmitted to the kingdom of Benin.

3. Realist Bakula, Guro, Baule, Ibibio, Ekoi, Bijago, and Igbo Styles

A realism as pure as Benin and Ife realism also characterizes the wood objects made by the Bakuba school in central Congo. In central Africa, sculptures formed the origin for singularly beautiful works, including magnificent achievements by the Kuba (or Bakuba) in the Congo (formerly Zaire), who speak a Bantu language and live in the Kasai province, an area delimited by the Kasai river and its tributary, the Sankuru. According to their traditions, they came from the West and were expelled from Kwango in the sixteenth century by a Jaga invasion; previously they lived near the Atlantic Ocean. In the Congo's Bakuba kingdom, statues often bear the distinctive marks of royalty.

Kings are defined by objects or motifs unique to them, which are linked to events that happen under their reign or which belong to their biographies. These events are represented by a succinct image that is not so much related to an individual person as to the nation and its relationship to the king.

The Bakuba are known for their statuary art and their textiles. Their statues represent mythical values and place them in a line of historical succession; ideas gradually migrate into the domain of history. This change is striking in other areas of culture. The Bakuba accord great significance to their nation's history. Their sovereign is the keeper of all human and cosmic life. He is the cornerstone for the society and the universe, and the effigies personalize him.

Congolese artists have produced beautiful ivory works. A beautiful ivory horn with geometric decoration is preserved in Florence, in the Museo degli argenti e delle porcellane. The decoration, finely engraved on the instrument and masterfully spread over the space in a spiral form on its conical surface, indicates the hand of a virtuoso perfectly in control of their material. The motifs, which we also find on sculpture as well as in tattooing, belong to the figural heritage of the two Congos that dates back a long way, well before their contact with Europeans or Arabs.

In his article "L'art plastique chez les Bapende," however, Jean van den Bossche believes that ivory work constitutes an "important Arab importation into the Belgian Congo."³⁴ Commenting on this thesis, Cheikh Anta Diop remarks with irony: "central Africa, home of the elephant, would not even have the moral benefit of ivory work; this technique would have to be imported from the Arabian desert!"³⁵

The **Kuba** are renowned for their statuary. They sculpted beautiful portraits of their rulers, who are represented with their legs crossed and their eyelids half-closed in an impassive attitude. The oldest of these sculptures found today, which dates from the

³⁴ Jean Van den Bossche, "L'art plastique chez les Bapende," in *L'art nègre*, Présence Africaine, no. 10-11 (Paris: Seuil, 1951), 170.

³⁵ Diop, *Nations nègres et culture*, 518.

seventeenth century, is preserved in New York's Brooklyn Museum. Everyday objects are well made and ornamented with varied geometric forms. They have a special vessel for every type of dish, several categories of baskets for different uses, razor cases, hatboxes, and beautifully embroidered woven raffia skirts. The Kuba sculpted stools, chairs, cups, pipes and drums that they decorated with ornamental patterns. A beautiful wood sculpture, *Bom Bosh*, dates from around 1650 and also resides in the Brooklyn Museum.

The **Guro** are a tribe established in the center-west of the Côte d'Ivoire. They are known for brightly colorful masks used for ritual practices. "The Guro style is characterized by works showing narrow faces with sharp, delicate features. The head is sometimes topped by a bird. We find masks, pulleys for looms, and (more rarely) statues.³⁶" Guro statuary is commemorative and narrative. It is characterized by curved legs, straight chests and ample busts, a long neck beneath an oval head, round cheeks, oval eyes, high upper lids and brows in gentle arcs, cheloids in relief on the slits of the lips, forehead, neck and back, as well as scratched into the represented person.

The **Baule**, who live in Côte d'Ivoire on the border between the Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey), have produced weights in the form of statues and gold jewelry, as well as works in bronze or copper that are similar to those of the Ashanti. They also tend to ornament ritual objects and all sorts of furniture or architectural elements: pillars, door lintels, stools, cups, drums, spoons, combs, and spindles. The figures of Baule ancestors are also remarkable examples of African art.

The **Ibibio**, a tribe living in southeast Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea, have also produced fascinating effigies of their ancestors with mobile arms and legs, as well as hinged masks and jaws. Their very expressive masks are called Idiok and represent spirits. They are sculpted in hard brown wood and tinted entirely black.

The **Ekoi**, a tribe living in southern Nigeria and western Cameroon, are very close to the Ibibio. They formerly produced remarkable masks which would cover a dancer's entire head and fall onto the shoulders; these masks represented the human face, with enormous wide-open eyes, a large nose, and an open mouth that lets a set of wood or metal teeth be seen. Certain of their ancient masks rank among the most beautiful African art.

The **Bijago** are a tribe established on the islands of the Bijago archipelago, along the coast of Guinea-Bissau. Their artistic style is unique. It comprises numerous objects for quotidian use (fishing, agriculture), personal use (stools, basketry), and ritual practices (shrines for the ancestors, masks). Their masks, often used for age group initiation ceremonies, take the form of bovids, as well as sharks or fish.

For the **Igbo**, west of the Niger delta marshes, funerals are the occasion for the greatest ceremonies. The Igbo style is characterized by copper and bronze lost-wax work. Igbo bronzes discovered and dated back to the ninth century attest to a high level of technical mastery. During funeral rites, the Igbo wear white-painted masks topped with elaborate headgear. They also practice a number of fertility ceremonies during which they wear masks symbolizing the female sex. Sculptors work wood into masks,

³⁶ Ibid., 522.

statuettes, stools, and baskets. Statuettes made of clay over a framework of bamboo comprise a lesser-known art. The Igbos worshipped natural forces: sun, water, sky and over everything *Ale*, the earth, source of fecundity and thus the owner of all that lives and is lived. Jacques Maquet tells us that *Ale* ordered, through the voice of a god, the construction of a *mbari* house: square and open on all four sides, covered with a zinc roof, and often the only one in a village. The clay image of *Ale* holding his child stood at the center of the *mbari*. On its other side was *Amadi-Oha*, god of thunder, *Ale's* assistant. A third important figure was the water goddess with her delicate features. A boa constrictor, *Ale's* signature animal, was always found in the house. Igbo artists were free to imagine the making of all the other statuettes who filled the *mbari*.³⁷

4. Other Realist Styles: Mpongwe, Bena Lulua, Sao, Azande, Mangbetu, Kuyu, Bateke, Ibo

The **Mpongwe** are a central African population living in Gabon. In *Nations Nègres et culture*, Cheikh Anta Diop explains that “the Pongwe style is characterized by works that manifest a delicate realism, with special hairstyles and figures painted white at some relatively recent era.”³⁸ These works sometimes have oblique eyes.

The **Bena-Lulua**, who also live in the Congo (formerly Zaire), are known primarily by the surprising diversity of their figures and decorations, perfect illustrations of African art at its most powerful. A very beautiful *Mortier pour le chanvre [Hemp Mortar]*, sculpted in wood, is preserved in Paris's Musée de l'homme.

The **Sao** are an ancient central African population who lived in parts of present-day Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria. The Sao had a perfect mastery of clay and ceramics and excelled in domestic and religious furnishings such as vases in all shapes, ovens with ventilation holes, pots, jewels, toys, and monetary symbols. Copper was melted using lost-wax. A Sao terra cotta head dating from the ninth to eleventh century exists at the Natural History Museum of La Rochelle, France.

The **Azande** (or **Zande**) are a people who live in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and western South Sudan. For their socio-religious rituals, they use statues called “Yanda.” These anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statuettes are made of wood and terra cotta.

The **Mangbetu** are a tribe living in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of the Congo whose style is sophisticated and realist. This artistic production—demonstrated through architecture, furnishings, arms, tools, jewelry, body decorations, musical instruments such as the five-stringed harp, and flyswatters with wood or ivory handles enveloped in copper, brass, or iron wire—is principally an art of the court intended to be presented to royal families during ceremonies rather than an art for socio-religious rites. This also explains why masks (usually intended for socio-religious ceremonies) are rare for the Mangbetu. Children have their heads wrapped in raffia

³⁷ Maquet, *Encyclopedia universalis*, corpus 11, 906-907.

³⁸ Diop, *Nations nègres et culture*, 522.

ords, a practice intended to elevate intelligence and beauty and which goes back to ancient Egypt. Women wear body paint and scarring, as well as sophisticated hairstyles with a great variety of wood, ivory, iron, or copper pins. Mangbetu statues have an elongated head with a high headdress.

The **Kuyu** are a tribe living in central Africa west of Gabon, at the center of the Republic of the Congo and the west of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They have produced objects that are surprising and stunning in their use of many colors. In *L'Art des Kouyou-Mbochi de la République populaire du Congo: Tradition artistique et histoire: étude de cas en Afrique équatoriale* (1989), Anne-Marie Benezech studies the proliferation of Kuyu styles and motifs.³⁹ Their statues, whether feminine, masculine, asexual, or androgynous, often have scarred faces, parted lips, worn teeth, and prominent navels. They are part of *djo* (the serpent god and creator of the world) ceremonies.

The **Bateke** are a central African tribe living in the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and southeast Gabon. Their classical statues usually have a convex stomach. They have created a mask called the *kidoumou*, whose wooden section is in the form of a disk painted in vibrant colors.

The art of the **Baga** (Guinea) and the **Bamoun** (Cameroon) could also be classified as realist but has expressionist tendencies (the form of the nose).

5. African Expressionist Art

Opposed to realist art is expressionist or geometric art, greater in liberty and audacity. The merit of this kind of art is that it allows for valid representation of the human figure despite its lack of any anatomical truth. This trend encompasses three stylistic groups that Cheikh Anta Diop, in *Nations nègres et culture* (1954) classifies in the following way: styles with hollow form, styles with flat forms, and styles with cubist forms.

Styles with hollow forms include the Batoka (or Kota) and Makonde styles. The Kota (or Bakota) style: The **Kota**, or Bakota, are a central African population living in eastern Gabon and on the border of the Republic of the Congo. Kota art is celebrated for its ancestral figures and reliquary gardens, which are often reproduced. Bakota style takes concave forms. Works are made starting from copper or wood. For the Kota, ancestral effigies comprise stylized representations, oval structures beneath an inverted half-moon. The most surprising aspect of these figures is located in the fine brass plaques decorated with geometric pattern. A reliquary head in basketry and brass is held in a private collection in Milan, and an ancestral figure in wood and copper resides in the British Museum.

Other styles, including those of the M'Bete (Gabon), Bakouele (Congo), Makonde (East Africa) and Machona (Zambeze) are very close to the Bakota.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ph.D. thesis, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne.

⁴⁰ Diop, *Nations nègres et culture*, 522.

The **Makonde style**: The Makonde are a tribe in Mozambique. They are known for their sculpture, which is linked to ancestral worship. They make everyday tools such as spoons, decorative furnishings, kitchen utensils, etc., but also initiation masks for young circumcised boys sculpted in light wood and tinted different colors. On these masks, called Mapico (singular form, lipico), representing men's and women's faces, are attached human or animal hair, shells, or bones with labrets or scars. This lipico mask is found in museums across the globe: in the British Museum, Paris's Quai Branly museum, and the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, Canada.

Styles with flat forms include those of the Dogon, Bambara, Fang, and Sénoufo. The **Dogon** live in the southeast part of the Niger bend, in a mountainous region called the Bandiagara Escarpment; they are also known for the talent of their creators. According to tradition, they came from Mandé, the region situated southeast of their current location and the center of the Keita empire. The Dogon are said to have arrived in their current place, in Mali's Bandiagara Escarpment, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries A.D. They have produced a rich mythology and large stylized sculptures. Dogon sculpture, which includes masks and statuettes, is above all religious. The figurines kept in familial shrines are of ancestors or mythical beings. Dogon styles use flat forms. "The most typical style is the Dogon style (of the Bandiagara Escarpment) whose masks are rectangular, the nose jutting out of the face's vertical plane and the hair indicated by a round volume on the forehead."⁴¹ The diversity of configurations is considerable: a female ancestor done in an idealist fashion, without stiffness; the hermaphrodite *Nommo*, arms raised high and mounted on horseback; or an old man whose metamorphosis into a serpent is indicated by the wood chosen by the artist. A majority of Dogon masks are used in funeral rites. They are generally composed of "a very stylized face and topped with a wood strip with carved or perforated geometric patterns, making a sort of scaffolding."⁴² A pair of Dogon ancestors was exhibited in the former Museum of African and Oceanic Arts, as well as a wood dance mask at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. The Dogon have also developed a fascinating architecture in which each element of a home bears a symbolic character, as for example in the case of locks made of sculpted wood over which is a slender bird or a couple of twins, male and female. In addition to figures unique for their elevated level of stylization, the Dogon have produced works of rare quality whose antiquity has been affirmed that represent more recognizable anatomies, facial incisions, delicate hairstyles, decorations, and seams.

The **Bambara**, who live in present-day Mali, are recognized as the region's best sculptors. Their artistic production is characterized by "a stylization of forms, angular structures, and geometric ornamental motifs."⁴³ Like the Yoruba, they venerate twins and represent their ancestors through very expressive figures. However, the most striking Bambara masks are produced to guarantee the earth's fertility. These masks, called

⁴¹ Ibid., 524.

⁴² *Histoire universelle de l'art*, vol. 3, 67.

⁴³ Ibid., 64.

Tyi wara, an example of which is held in New York's Anspach collection, symbolize antelope, superbly sophisticated and equipped with long horns that require great skill; they are affixed to the head of a dancer dressed in ritual costume.

For the Mandé tribes, even if the artists do not depict signs of political power as in the Congo or characters of some degree of historical significance as in Ife and Benin, art is still linked to society. In general, it is based on mythological facts that are part of the tribes' cosmogony. Indeed, "the statuettes produced by the tribes from Mandé are sometimes genies, sometimes legendary heroes, but not historical figures."⁴⁴ This artistic production relates mythical facts that have to do with political and social organization and with the beliefs and myths that constitute their cosmogony, as well as with their demographics: "The goal of the work of art is to affirm permanence and to actualize the mythical system to which terrestrial life should conform."⁴⁵ In this way, as Jean Laude tells us, the work of art makes concrete "a philosophy in the pre-Socratic sense of the term."⁴⁶

The **Fang**, who live in Gabon, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea, are distinguished by their sculptures. Their religious universe is founded on ancestral worship centered around relics of the clan's illustrious dead. Their sculptures are remarkable; they

depict a concave profile, with a bulging forehead, a weak chin and a pointed goatee, and eyes half-closed into narrow slits. From these creations emanates an expression of profound contemplation, serenity, and concentration. The bodies take very elongated and almost cylindrical forms; the arms are folded, crossed over the chest, and holding a small object or pendant along the body. Fang sculptures are also characterized by the magnificent burnished colors obtained by successive treatments with smoke and applications of palm oil.⁴⁷

During ceremonies, members of the *ngil*, the ritual association for protecting the Fang against witches and bandits, wear severe white masks with a large round forehead above a triangular face with a small mouth that takes up its width; the bridge of the nose divides into two round brow arcs underneath which are the narrow slits of the eyes. They keep ancestral skulls in a cylindrical reliquary topped by a dark wood statuette or more simply by a sculpted head. The faces, carved in a triangle, often have more gentleness and serenity than the masks. A wood reliquary statuette was once in the National Museum of African and Oceanic Arts and a female ancestral statuette is in the Musée de l'homme in Paris. In Burkina Faso, the Bobo make masks that are similar

⁴⁴ Jean Laude, *Les arts d'Afrique noire* (Librairie Générale Française, 1966), 189.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁴⁷ *Histoire universelle de l'art*, vol. 3, 70.

to those of their Dogon neighbors. The sculptures over the masks are flat, decorated with geometric patterns in bright colors.

The **Senufo**, who live in Côte d'Ivoire, have a sculpture that in its most beautiful examples resembles that of the Baoule. Their masks are very decorative, with ornamental horns, mobile jaws, bird beaks, and geometric patterns. They are among the pieces the most reproduced by vendors of fake African art objects. A beautiful Senufo *Pilon [Pestle]* in the shape of a hornbill, used in funeral ceremonies to mark out dance steps, is preserved in the Musée de l'homme in Paris.

To this group of flat-form art, Cheika Anta Diop adds the art of the **Oubangui-Chari**. South of the Oubangui river stretches the tropical forest, a region populated little by little by Bantu-language tribes from the Great Lakes region.

Styles with Cubist forms include the Dan, Basonge, and Luba styles. We find the Cubist group principally with the Dan and the Basonge. The **Dan** are a tribe in the center-west of the Côte d'Ivoire and in northern Liberia. They are known for the quality of their sculptures. They create masks with beautiful burnished coloring. They also possess masks characterized by the exaggeration or modification of forms, with noses shaped like beaks or hollow cheeks from which emerge horns, while the eyes have cylindrical forms and the foreheads a pyramid structure. Dan art is characterized by the production of initiation masks for young boys. These masks incarnate the spiritual force of the forest, which the Dan call *glé*. Their statues represent famous married women.

The **Basonge** (Songye) are a people living in the southwest Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). They have created impressive statues, often covered with studded metal, with elongated faces, rounded foreheads and eyelids, and large eyes, as well as masculine or feminine Cubist masks called *Kifwebe*, used in rituals; these have powerful features, scars, parallel lines, a rectangular mouth, an elongated nose, and bulging eyes. Basonge sculptors also make seats, stools, mortars, cups, etc. Songye sculptures are stylistically very close to those of the Luba. "These two schools are characterized by a very pronounced Cubist expressionism. The eyes, mouth, nose, and even the cheeks are often expressed by jutting regular geometric volumes. The geometric aspect of these works, in particular, has influenced contemporary Western art starting from the Cubism of 1907."⁴⁸

Known **Luba** (or Baluba) sculpture dates from the beginning of the twentieth century, the older works having been destroyed in tribal wars. The Luba live in south-eastern Congo (formerly Zaire) and are among the most brilliant representatives of African art. A beautiful female ancestral figure in polished wood is kept in the Musée de l'homme in Paris. Stools in the form of a nude woman, kneeling and bearing the seat on her head, are also among these people's masterful works. Their headrests are true artistic inventions and their ancestral sculptures are of great delicacy.

The attitude of many early 20th century art historians, ethnologist, on all fronts and in the most complete way, was to question the African origin of sub-Saharan African arts.

⁴⁸ Diop, *Nations nègres et culture*, 524.

The deepest ambition of the ensemble of academic theses amounted to a desperate desire to deny the African origins of Africa's masks, sculptures, and frescos. Almost all of them assumed an African origin for Black African arts to be *a priori* impossible. Fruitlessly they endeavored to find an exterior origin for African art, and they embarked on subjective analyses of African artworks. In the end they, after a series of intellectual contortions as gratuitous as they were clever, they became mired in their own contradictions and glossed over the difficulties of the problem, believing they had thus demonstrated the exterior origin of African art in the eyes of all good-faith onlookers.

Speaking of traditional African architecture, in his work *La civilisation africaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936), Leo Frobenius posits that clay walls originate in western Asia; in his view, dwellings on stilts, gabled huts and their variations, and all houses with extended walls that are found in Ethiopian architecture are also found in the related styles of Southeast Asia and Melanesia, where we also encounter the same types of arched frames and shield handles. He even assumes that in Africa the conical roof and the migration hut were introduced into architecture starting with pressure from western Asian civilization (cf. p. 190). Similarly, M. Olbrechts asserts that eastern Ba-Louba art, represented by great begging figures or caryatids, is of "Hamitic" origin. In short, for these scholars, Africa created nothing.

In his book *Les peuples et les civilisations de l'Afrique* [African Tribes and Civilizations] (1948), Hermann Baumann demonstrates a similar tendency. According to him, the majority of types of rock paintings and engravings in Africa are linked to work by artists who made cave paintings in eastern Spain (43). According to Baumann, we find still living a type of ancient hunters and civilization in southern Congo and western Angola, in the center of eastern Africa, in the east with the Somalis, the Galla shepherds at the border of northern Congo, the interior of the Côte d'Ivoire, the Gold Coast, and in northern Togo. To this grouping he attributes many traits linked to the "Hamitic" civilization—which is understandable, he thinks, since Euro-African hunters followed the same migration routes and preferred the same environments as shepherds. Similarly, he asserts that work with leather, beads, and glass, as well artistic stone sculptures and the Yoruba terra cotta sculptures, are largely Paleo-Mediterranean in origin. He even agrees with Frobenius in connecting wandering African singers and their profession with a Mediterranean climatic cycle, and he also shares his opinion in connecting to the Mediterranean the frontal bow, the pointed arrow shaped like a spur and with an interlocking notch with a protective mechanism for the thumb and hand when shot (86). He even wonders whether the art of rock paintings, which is part of an uninterrupted tradition from the late Paleolithic all the way to modern times, is not rather related to work by southwest European Paleolithic artists (104).

In his view, it is from Shiraz, in Persia, that not only architectural arts like stoneworking and carpentry were introduced into the east coast of Africa, but also cotton weaving, clothes sewing, and the calculation of time. In this view, too, the "Hamites" were to have brought "shields made of animal hides, the bow model with an animal string and coiled fastenings, the lance with a sunken point, circumcision, and the leather belt attached with a square closing," leather clothing, the drying apron, and

basketry in twisted spirals. All of these objects seem to have been brought by men who were part of a first “Hamite” wave (cf. p. 242-243).

Similarly, “the richly embroidered Kanouri and Haoussa boubous are similar to oriental Byzantine models in their cut and decoration” (324). The round leather or untanned hide shields of central Sudan would have had the same origin, actually connected to the Asian shield (325). The clay marmite drum would represent an element that filtered down from the Mediterranean’s ancient clay civilization into central Sudan (326), and vases sold by Haoussa merchants resemble the everyday pottery of the Mediterranean in their painting and their twisted forms (326).

In the same line of thinking are Jean-Paul Leboeuf’s remarks in “L’art du delta du Chari” (“Chari Delta Art”).⁴⁹ After excavations in Lake Chad on the site of the ancient Sao civilization, he affirms that he was tempted, “seeing certain baked clay figurines, to think of the pre-Hellenic Mediterranean” (101) and he cites a mask discovered in Kadaba (Cameroon) that “recalls the strange style of terra cotta from Mount Phylakos (Crete)” (102).

In his article “L’art plastique chez les Bapende” (“Plastic Art of the Bapende”), Jean van den Bossche says essentially the same thing, stating: “According to R. P. Bittremieux, the Bapende’s ancestors would have come from the East, driven by ‘white-skinned’ men after disputes. It is possible [...] that this refers to Arabs. We will see if this hypothesis is tenable when we turn to Pende masks in ivory” (167).

Carl Einstein elaborates, at times, equally audacious reflections on the exterior influences that might have worked on an Africa that had “always Africanized all the imported styles.” Indeed, he uses the vocabulary of Western history and distinguishes a “medieval” style from a “renaissance” one; he refers to an African “classicism” or “baroque” period.⁵⁰

All of these theories are built on the same imaginative foundation; they are based on no objective study. On the contrary, the thinness of the arguments these authors give is stunning; their scantiness without sufficient proof and their gratuitous speculation are proven by their fragility. These theories all tend to destroy—voluntarily or involuntarily—African culture. The best way to dominate a people is to destroy its culture, making Africans believe that they are not responsible for having created it; in a word, they all tend to deny Africans of the “moral good”⁵¹ of the consciousness of their cultural tradition.

Such, then, are the views of the foreign origin of African art. They all assume that Africa has had no artistic creation of its own and that all creation is recent—that nothing in Africa is ancient. But this view leaves us wondering what, in such original artistic destitution, could explain the elevated degrees of civilization known in Africa.

⁴⁹ *Présence Africaine* 10-11 (1951), 96-112.

⁵⁰ Marine Degli and Marie Mauzé, *Arts premiers: Le temps de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

⁵¹ Diop, *Nations nègres et culture*, 518.

Many recent discoveries have now shed doubt on the idea that African civilizations are recent. And as Honorat Aguessy very rightly writes:

[I]t would be very easy, each time human societies show certain similarities, to return to a hypothesis dictated by current power relationships, crying, "But no! These objects cannot have been produced by Africans in the sixth century B.C.! Surely there has been the influence of European passage here!" We recognize in this exclamation the kind of reflection that Europeans have consistently undertaken when they hear of Nok art objects, for example, or more specifically Ife figurines.⁵²

⁵² Aguessy, *Introduction à la culture africaine* (Paris, Union Générale d'Édition, Unesco 1977), 141.