

appendix representing a beard, the eyes are small — but the most characteristic feature of this mask is the enormous, bulging forehead. The ethnologists consider the *Bombo* as "negritomorphic," that is to say, the stylization of the Negritillo's head. Today Pygmies are only to be found in the Equatorial Forest. Two hundred years ago, they were still heard of near the West coast.<sup>(9)</sup> The land, writes George Hardy<sup>(10)</sup>, was considered to be the inalienable property of its first possessors, the Pygmies. In the minds of the Bantu invaders, these aborigines had been changed into earthly geni, somewhat comparable to the Germanic Nibelungen. Hence the part played by the *Bombo* mask in the mysteries of the initiation.

With the passing of centuries, the mask has, in certain cases, lost its religious character, becoming a military accessory or even a dance ornament. In fact, any attempt to classify the African masks is vague and delusive. We can catalogue them only according to their local origin. This has been done very accurately by Joseph Maes.<sup>(11)</sup> But a scientific classification of this kind does not bring us closer to an aesthetic judgment, or to an artistic appreciation.

Why are African masks — especially those carved many centuries ago in Gabun, the French Ivory Coast and the Belgian Congo — so impressive that they provoke in the onlooker an unforgettable emotion? In none of them do we find a desire to portray the human being, dead or alive. They are not distorted portraits, neither are they pure abstraction. Each of them bears a resemblance to a human or animal type, but the likeness is merely an illusion, sometimes an illusion. In making a mask, the sculptor cannot go very far from the natural size, for the mask is generally intended to be worn.<sup>(12)</sup>

As Roger Fry puts it, "there is no doubt that the mask creates in us the idea of a human spirit, though one the like of which we have never seen."<sup>(13)</sup> The sense of overwhelming panic that pervades us in the presence of these objects has little to do with any information that has been handed down to us by the ethnologists. What was the aim of the sculptor, with what sort of feeling (terror, love, hatred, mourning or contemplation), did he accomplish his work? All that we have been told by the investigations of these learned men concerning ancestor worship, propitiation of the dead, rites of initiation, etc., cannot answer

these simple questions. The spirit that animated the primitive sculptor has died away without betraying its secret. Neither can we imagine the feelings that stirred the mask-bearer (was he himself afraid while trying to frighten his fellowman, or did he consider himself a religious intercessor, when he assumed a new aspect in order to protect and safeguard his people?) Still greater is our inability to realize the impression produced on the community at the sudden appearance of this terrifying image.

*Primus in orbe Deos fecit timor . . . (STATIUS)*  
 (Fear was first to create Gods in the world)

Although the African mask was by no means a fetish, neither was it an image of a god; it was born in fear, and in fear it has existed for centuries. Fear of the geni, fear of the forces of nature, fear of the dead, of wild animals in jungle ambush, and of their vengeance after they were killed by the hunter; fear of one's fellow-man who kills, rapes and even devours his victims . . . and, above all: fear of the unknown, of all that precedes and follows the short life of man. This essential terror confronts us — in the same degree as it did the primitives — with the fundamental mystery of mankind: what are we, where do we come from and where are we going?

Some masks (especially those carved in a later period with more or less skill by sceptical craftsmen), are little more to us than picturesque puppets, interesting in their exoticism and strangeness. Many others reflect the metaphysical pang of the human race. Their mysterious shapes, carved by "savages", some two or three centuries ago, retain in the eyes of the "civilized" onlooker all their transcendental grandeur. Art of the past and present has no higher goal than this direct appeal to life's mystery. For this very reason, the beauty of the best African masks exists forever, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

*Eine fixierte Ekstase* (the fixation of an ecstasy) — in 1915, the German art historian Carl Einstein (who in 1943 chose suicide when trapped on the Spanish border by Gestapo agents), gave this perfect definition of the African mask.<sup>(14)</sup> The incitement towards ecstasy through fear, adoration or worship can be considered the original cause, not only of the existence of masks, but of all Negro art. This opinion, however, is not accepted by all. According to Father Aupiais, a learned French missionary, three sources of African art can be traced: first, the use of metaphor in the language, which would tend to assimilate the work of art

long and difficult apprenticeship in the school of a reputed master ere he can attain his goal. To be admitted to this school, the candidate must show a serious disposition for carving and prove a particular skill.<sup>(16)</sup>

According to Father Colle, each BALUBA village of five hundred inhabitants possesses at least one or two sculptors who carve wood and ivory. The art tradition of the BALUBA is similar to that practiced by BAKETE and BENA LULUBA sculptors.<sup>(17)</sup>

Even now, among the BAPENDE, mask sculptors are kept very busy in producing the dance masks of their tribe.<sup>(18)</sup> The present writer saw the sculptor Kalunga at work, in the village of Munga, near Kilimbe (Kwango). He was helped by six assistants and the entrance of the small garden which he used as a studio was strictly prohibited to women. In another village of the same region, an elderly ivory carver named Kabamba devoted himself exclusively to the making of tiny amulets that are worn

suspended on a string round the neck.

It would be an error to imagine these sculptors working in the fashion of European or American artists. They belong to a culture where things can be superlatively beautiful and utilitarian at the same time.<sup>(19)</sup> Every utensil is material for decoration:<sup>(20)</sup>

drums and tom-toms that were used in the jungle to transmit news; figures: make-up boxes and spoons, bobbins; musical instruments, mounted with geometrical patterns; chief-staves and chairs adorned with historical scenes; headrests and stools supported by sculptured cups and goblets carved in the shape of human heads or ornaments with geometric patterns; chief-staves and chairs adorned with historical scenes; headrests and stools supported by sculptured figures: make-up boxes and spoons, bobbins; musical instruments, drums and tom-toms that were used in the jungle to transmit news from village to village by a process very similar to the Morse code.

These are some of the objects made by the Negro artisans. Besides these, there are amulets and talismans chiseled in wood or ivory, and minor objects used in magic practices; some of these, employed by the witch doctor to detect the seat of a disease, are shaped like animals and skillfully carved. Perhaps we should also consider the so-called "nailed-fetishes." They are found in the region of the lower Congo. But they are generally of a very poor quality and from a purely aesthetic point of view have little interest.

The reader might ask how we can reconcile the existence of such objects with the statement that "what we commonly call a fetish does not exist in Africa." The answer is very simple: these things are either medical instruments or else have some other im-

to a poem; second, a desire to record history; and third, the creation of fictive personages by means of alteration.

Assuredly, the desire to record history has played a very great part in the creation of sculptured objects among the tribes that had a settled political organization. The tattooings that are so general among the Bantus are, in fact, records of their ancestry, their station in life and their affiliation with secret societies. These tattooings are in reality clarifications of wounds. The design is cut into the skin and the wounds treated so as to raise scarred ridges above the surface.

The staves of chiefs carved minutely into designs that symbolize the chief's genealogy and accomplishments are part of similar records.

The most striking examples of these "history books in relief"

are the two carved thrones of the BATSHIOKO chiefs now at Tervuren. Around the more recent of the two, scenes of pastoral and tribal life unfold their pagantry: the domestication of the buffalo, the cultivation of the cassava plant, the ceremonies of the circumcission and finally the arrival of the white people in the jungle. Historical recording may have been a source of inspiration to the native artist, but it is less frequently met with than the ritual and religious inspiration. The poetical metaphor is but a form of these ritual practices. What we have said concerning the masks justifies the spirit of alteration noted by Father Aupiais, but does not necessarily imply the creation of fictive personages. We are more inclined to agree with the opinion of the late Paul Guillaume, who, as a pioneer among art dealers, was the first to draw out attention to the beauty of African art. He wrote: "the partly human face may well be the bridge which leads the observer from his every-day attitude to the awed contemplation of the supernatural."<sup>(21)</sup>

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The art of the sculptor has been and still is of an extreme importance among the two ethnic groups, BAKUBA and BALUBA, whose artistic production has the greatest significance. Joseph Maes relates that the privilege of being a sculptor is not given to all. In the Katanga, only members of the aristocracy have the right to carve the objects and insignia of dignity. They alone may wear on their shoulder the ornamental hatchet, the emblem of their high station in life. The BALUBA sculptor must go through a

mediate practical function (protection of the crops, removal of evil influence, etc.). Even the "nailed-fetish" is not considered as a god nor worshipped at such.

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Negro art has not been produced in the same abundance in all regions of the Belgian Congo. It was largely the tribes in the southern and western parts of the country who created the beautiful works that have come down to us.

In his outstanding work, *Plastiek van Kongo* (Antwerp 1946),

Frans M. Oibrechts has named four different artistic regions: Lower Congo, Bakuba, Baluba, and the northern part of Belgian Congo divided in Northwest and Northeast regions. This classification appears to be logical, and we shall quote Mr. Goldwater's remark that "continual movements of peoples make the determination of influences and origins difficult as does the uncertainty of provenance of objects." (21)

Glory is capricious towards nations as well as towards individuals. Among the diverse cultures that blossomed through the ages in tropical Africa, the BUSHONGO culture alone has had the privilege of keeping its own records and transmitting them almost intact to modern research.

Both oral tradition and chance played a part in the rescue

of these records. For many centuries, a high dignitary of the BUSHONGO court, the *Moartdi*, has been an official historian, a kind of living handbook, who preserved in his prodigious memory the history of the hundred and twenty *Nyims*, the political and religious chiefs of the nation. But all the skill of the *Moartdis* and their disciples was not enough to bring us the account of their history. Chance, in this case, was incarnated in a man, Emil Torday (1875-1931), a Hungarian ethnologist who spent several years in the region of the Sankuru-Kasai basin, won the friendship of the natives, learned their language and discovered the hidden marvels of their art. What Garcilaso de la Vega did for the Inca civilization in the XVIIth century, Torday renewed in the beginning of the XXth century for the BUSHONGO culture.

He had been sent to Africa to discover and bring back objects of interest to the British Museum. This he performed with the greatest success. Not only did he find the most splendid artistic production of Central Africa, but he wrote, in collaboration with a British Museum ethnologist, T. A. Joyce, an exhaustive ethno-

logical study describing the people he had lived with for years. (22) Moreover, Emil Torday left us a charming book, containing his personal recollections, recounting the story of his discoveries and telling how he persuaded the native king and his council to give up some of their most precious sculptures to the British Museum. (23)

Nowadays, the BUSHONGO are called BAKUBA by the surrounding tribes. Travellers, tourists and art students generally use the same appellation, BAKUBA to describe the peoples living along the pattern of BUSHONGO culture, and not only the original BUSHONGO clans.

In Mushenge, the present capital, situated in the Sankuru-Kasai region, lives the *Nyimi*, the sovereign of divine origin, surrounded by a crowd of officials and ministers whose functions are as strictly ritualized as were those of the Byzantine court. One of them is the *Moartdi*, whom we have already mentioned; another is the *Nyibina*, the head of the sculptors of graven images, who occupies an exalted position at court.

The history of the BUSHONGO nation is most fascinating. After relating the origin of the world and creation, achieved by a unique God, the narrator proceeds to recount the deeds and records of his people: The BUSHONGO came from the shores of a great sea (probably Lake Tchad). (A) Before they could settle on their present land, they had to cross four large rivers (the Ubangui, the Bassiri and the Lukenye). (24)

Each reign is described with its characteristic events. Under Torday to fix a landmark in BUSHONGO history. A total eclipse, visible in that part of the world, had been recorded by European observatories on March 30, 1680. Torday's computation of dates is entirely based on this event. At 1500 or thereabouts, he fixes the reign of Miele, a famous blacksmith who introduced the use of iron among his people. Shamba Bolongongo, the 93rd *Nyimi* (circa 1600) is remembered as the greatest and wisest of all the BUSHONGO rulers. To acquire wisdom, he wandered among

(A) The deductions of Torday are no longer admitted by the new generation of ethnologists. According to them, the BAKUBA kingdom appears to have been founded by BAKONGO conquerors that came from the North-east. They subdued ethnic elements of disparate origin, whose influence was deeply felt in their later development.

Renkin, first Belgian Minister of Colonies. Ten more are listed by Prof. Olbrechts, all of them belonging to Belgian private collectors. Seventeen of these eighteen statues were exhibited in Antwerp in December 1937 and are reproduced in *Palstiek van Kongo*. The names of twelve of the BAKUBA rulers represented are known. Three or four of the remaining statues represent, according to Olbrechts, the same unidentified ruler.<sup>(26)</sup>

Although these statues belong to very different periods, they are similar both in attitude and stylization. The BAKUBA rulers are seated on their haunches, with the emblem of their reign in front of them (anvil, table of the *Lela*, etc.)<sup>(27)</sup> On their bodies we see belts of fibre and shoulder, arm and wrist bracelets of threaded beads. The disproportion that we find between the upper and lower parts of the body, characteristic of Negro statues, is still more striking in these exquisite works of art because of their very perfection.

This curious angle of vision, which is so general, can be explained by the fact that the artist, when carving his subjects, works seated on the ground, and therefore sees the log he is carving with that particular aspect which modern painters of our time call *perspective descendante*. These statues, being designed to be placed directly on the soil and not on a socle, present themselves in the same manner to the spectator.

It is generally admitted that the statues of the BUSHONGO kings represent the highest peak of Negro art. We find, especially in the image of Shamba, harmonious synthesis between style and reality, idealization and resemblance, expression and technique.

These statues are of rather small dimensions. The biggest is slightly less than three feet high. However they are not mere portraits; neither are they statues of a personal nature like so many other Negro works, equivalent to the Roman *lares*. They are veritable monuments, invested with a civil and lay significance. We may say that they are official portraits, tending to inspire civic feelings in the onlooker and to increase the glory of the rulers.

For all these reasons, and despite the extraordinary skill of the carvers and the material perfection attained, these famous statues of the BUSHONGO kings are not the most striking examples of Negro art. Their inspiration derives from hero-worship, a feeling we know all too well in European art, and the fact

the neighboring tribes for many years, like the young Buddha. When he assumed power, he introduced several political, social and moral reforms that have been religiously kept by his successors. He reorganized his court, giving an important place to the representatives of the most honored crafts. He taught his subjects the weaving of cloth from raffia fibre. He was a peaceful sovereign, and he prohibited the use of the *shongo* ("the lightning"), the throwing-knife that is still in use among the tribes of the Ubangi and Tchad regions. This throwing-knife had been the traditional weapon of the BUSHONGO (the men with the *shongo*). Shamba Bolongongo also instituted the custom of carving a wooden image of the ruler. This Solomon of the jungle used to say: *Kill neither man, woman nor child. Are they not the children of Chembe (God), and have they not the right to live?* Shamba likewise brought to his people some of the agreeable pastimes that alleviate the tediousness of life: the use of tobacco and the game of *Lela*, a sort of draughts, still very popular in most African countries.

Torday, after having gained the *Nyimi's* friendship, was admitted to the royal house, where he saw the statues of Shamba and his successors. One of the most recent was the image of Mikope Mbua, who had reigned in the beginning of the XIXth century; in 1908, a daughter of this chief was still alive, a very old woman, who told Torday how her father had abolished the law that prevented kings and noblemen from marrying slave girls. Mikope himself had married a slave and at the foot of his statue, a small feminine figure represented the woman he had loved above everything on earth.<sup>(28)</sup> Torday also tells us of the long series of intrigues which took place between the *Nyimi* and the grandees before they could make up their minds that the image of their former rulers would have a more secure and more illustrious abode in the British Museum than they had in the fragile shelters of Mushenge.

Not all the statues seen by Torday were taken from their legitimate possessors for the enjoyment of white scholars and artists. Seven of them belong now to European museums. Three of them, including the image of Shamba Bolongongo, are in the British Museum; three more are in the Royal Museum of the Belgian Congo, in Tervuren, and one in the National Museum of Copenhagen. Still another belongs to the family of the late Mr.

that their creators were also courtiers, officially appointed sculptors, heirs and depositaries of a tradition handed down through hundreds of years, invests them with an unavoidable academic character.

Academism in Negro art? The expression may seem strange.

But it also corresponds to a strange reality. As Torday puts it: "The BUSHONGO form a wedge driven into a solid mass of people who by whatever name they may be called, belong to the Luba family."<sup>(28)</sup> Now, if we compare any production of BAKUBA art to a similar creation of the BALUBA or any other tribe of the Belgian Congo, we can easily establish, on a purely aesthetic ground, some essential differences in the spirit that pervades these works. The statues of the BUSHONGO kings represent the achievements of a delicate technique. Only a well-established artistic tradition could produce these masterpieces. The men who created them were professional artists, in the European sense of the word. This appears also when we examine the other BAKUBA statues, their decorative production (bowls, carved boxes, instruments of magic therapeutics, drums, woven materials), which Mr. Oibrechts assigns to a popular BAKUBA style, distinct from the court-style which inspired the king statues, and also their masks. All expressionism is banned form BAKUBA art.

An exquisite sense of style and decorative art inspired the linear patterns transported from the woven tapestries of raffia fibre to the carved surface of goblets and boxes. These patterns, writes Paul Guillaume,<sup>(29)</sup> highly conventional and geometrical, are handed down through the generations and designated by particular names. BUSHONGO children are taught at an early age to make them with thumb and finger in the sand. Some of them take their shape from animals, others from basketwork, showing the plating of straw, over and under. Other elements borrowed from the vegetable, animal or astronomical world are also frequently employed by the BAKUBA carvers. The moon and the sun, the palm-leaf, the snake, the antelope, the leopard and the crocodile are represented in a more or less stylized form.

The so-called head-cups are another remarkable feature of BAKUBA art. Whatever may have been the symbolic significance of these strange wooden goblets in form of a human head, they constitute a characteristic achievement of the BAKUBA carvers. A great variety of style is to be found in the rendering of the

human face. Sometimes, we are confronted with a mysterious, hieratic, almost superhuman expression, while in other examples, the features are so vivid and realistic as to suggest that the intention of the sculptor was to create a real portrait of a given human being.

A detail, often reproduced on drums and goblets, is the human hand. Joseph Maes has given an interesting interpretation of this symbol.<sup>(30)</sup> The BAKUBA warrior, before becoming a member of the caste of Yolo, had to show his courage and valor by killing an enemy of the tribe. To prove his exploit, he had to present to the council of this high military clan the left hand of the doomed enemy, which was solemnly burned on a pyre during the ceremony of admission. It may be that the carver commemorated this event by reproducing the cut-off hand on an object which was awarded on this occasion to the new Yolo.

This emblem of blood and murder is exceptional in the decorative art of the BAKUBA. As a matter of fact, all scholars agree in praising the peaceful and intimate character of BUSHONGO art, its natural grace and innate style. Even in their masks, the BAKUBA artists strove to avoid the awesome and fearful impression produced by so many other African masks. We also know that their masks were not — or in any case, are no longer — exclusively reserved for ritualistic ceremonies. Some are worn by itinerant clowns, some by dancers. Joseph Maes observes that the BAKUBA masks have probably lost their ancient meaning — the inevitable consequence of the decadence of ancestral customs. He adds that such "decay of masks," such an evolution in the mask's role and significance are to be found among the BAKUBA.<sup>(31)</sup> This confirms what BAKUBA art has taught us of its aesthetic character, its highly developed sense of decorative splendor and also its tepid approach to the things of religion and ancestor worship.

The *Nyinti's* prime minister once implored Torday to use his influence with the king in persuading him to re-establish the rites of initiation. On another occasion, the same dignitary complained that the ancient language which was formerly understood and spoken by the BUSHONGO aristocracy had fallen into disuse. Alluding to the difficult political situation of the *Nyinti* and his government, the prime minister informed Torday that the disaster he dreaded was not the collapse of his country . . . but the