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Art as a Didactic Device in African Initiation Systems

The available literature on art clearly establishes the fact that our knowledge of the function and meaning of African sculptures is scanty and superficial. It is striking that the majority of functions and meanings ascribed to African carvings place the emphasis—sometimes exclusively—on religious and magical factors, subsumed under such broad and imprecise labels as ceremonial, ritual, ancestral, fetishistic. There is no question of denying the strength and significance of the religious motivations that underlie many of the African sculptures, indeed the entire way of traditional life in Africa. But it is erroneous to think of the African as an *homo religiosus*—a term that the distinguished French anthropologist M. Mauss used to apply indiscriminately to tribal man in general.

Africans, like all other men, are concerned with man-man and man-nature relationships, with moral codes that are not necessarily upheld by divinities, with the training and education of their people, with a search for wisdom, and with practical day-to-day affairs. Therefore, there is no reason to underestimate the political, legal, moral, and didactic dimensions within which the arts develop and operate.

Art objects are frequently monopolized by specific groups (villages, lineages, larger political entities, associations, age-sets, cult groups) or by specialized social personalities (chiefs or headmen, elders, members of certain grades, or initiatory experiences within closed associations). Certain groups of art objects are insignia, emblems, and prestige items of these persons and groups. As privileged and unique possessions of certain groups or persons, some art objects are expressions of the corporate unity and of the politico-ritual autonomy of specific groups; they also sanction certain offices. Art objects are further known to serve as media for the administration of law, for the maintenance of order, and

for the regulation of conduct. Sculptures frequently occur in a context of so-called initiations, which, in fact, are special methods of teaching and of transmitting knowledge in such varied situations as puberty, nubility, and enthronement rites, or the accession to associations, corporations, and cults.

Our failure to fully analyze these other functional dimensions of African works of art has many causes. Principally, I find them in a widespread tendency to isolate the *objets d'art* from the wider associations of artifacts and contexts of drama, dance, and song in which they occur. I also detect them in our failure to recognize that any single work of art may have several functions and meaning depending on specific instances of usage. The arbitrary isolation of art objects from their cultural matrix has certainly hampered our full understanding of the many functional attributes of African art. However paradoxical it may seem, it is frequently easier to acquire some general idea about the religious content of a work of art than to grasp, for example, its role in sociopolitical integration or in visual learning and mnemonics. Some religious practices are readily observable, but other usages of the art require a deep insight into social structure, thought systems, and initiatory procedures.

Initiation systems of different scope and character are widespread throughout Africa. They are concerned with the solution of various crises in the life cycle of individuals and occur at such critical stages as social puberty, nubility, investiture and enthronement, adoption into age- or cult-grouping, accession to and promotion in associations, acquisition of specialized skills. Various functions are performed by the groups of individuals constituted through these initiations, which, regardless of other characteristics, involve a process of systematic teaching and learning (duties, skills, moral code of behavior, rights and obligations, supporting texts, objects, rhythms). There are, of course, different degrees of elaboration and formalization and differences in periodicity, participation, and secrecy.

It would be an error to think that the knowledge communicated during these initiations—whether or not they are held in seclusion—is necessarily esoteric in character. Although a certain esoteric element is present, at least in the more elaborate and more exclusive initiations, the main goal is to improve the moral and intellectual qualities of the initiates and to prepare them for their new position in society by giving them the neces-

sary skills and wisdom. Some of the initiations aim at providing the initiate with an encyclopedic knowledge of things that are significant and relevant to his environment. One can refer, for example, to the *kala ni* in the *korè* initiations among the Bambara of West Africa¹—a stick on which 240 different objects are displayed that represent the Bambara universe in miniature. A similar practice is known under the names *mutanga* and *mukunga* among the Lega of the eastern Congo. Scores of miniature items—natural and manufactured objects—are tied to a long liana and then systematically explained through proverbs while the young initiates listen and memorize. The proverbs associated with the objects explain in symbolic form facts of the Lega mode of life and together form a systematic code of activities, ethics, and world view.²

In these and so many other cases, the initiations involve not merely verbal communication, song, music, dance, and gesture but also the display and eventually the manipulation of a great variety of objects, manufactured and natural. The natural objects may range from shells, scales, and carapaces to claws, beaks, and tails; from feathers to animal hides; from leaves to pieces of wood or fiber. The manufactured objects consist of simple artifacts—a basket, a pot, a knife, a spear—or richly carved masks, statues, scepters. In other words, the *objets d'art* represent only a minute portion of the totality of meaningful items that sustain a system of teaching that is simultaneously visual (display of objects and movement), auditive (music, song, recitation), tactile (manipulation of the objects), and kinetic (the objects are moved around, in a dance, for example). Obviously, therefore, from many points of view, the art objects are not more important or more charged with meaning than any of the other non-artistic items with which they are used. They simply add something to the totality of the initiatory experience, and, therefore, they lose much of their meaning when they are arbitrarily isolated from the various configurations of assorted objects, gestures, songs, and dances in which they occur.

Some of the most significant information on the use of art objects in a didactic context is available for various Bantu-speaking populations in east-central and southern Africa and from the Bantu-speaking Lega in the Congo. More specifically, I am referring to those initiations in which a variety of pottery sculptures, beaded so-called dolls, and figurines in wood, bark, and wickerwood are displayed and interpreted. They have been described for select societies of Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique,

Angola, and South Africa by such authors as E. J. Krige, A. T. Culwick, A. I. Richards, H. Cory, H. Tönjes, T. H. Delachaux, E. M. Shaw, H. S. Stannus, H. Stayt, I. Schapera, and J. Roumeuguère.

The sculptures used in these areas range over a large number of morphological types and depict commonly used objects, animals, men and women involved in daily activities. Each figurine is associated with one or more proverbs that reflect moral and legal obligations, social activities, and that bear on the secrecy of the rites themselves. Although the objects can be used in more than one context (with differently assorted proverbs), their basic functions are linked with puberty and nubility rites that aim at a systematic training in values (fertility, procreation, motherhood, continuity, cleanliness). However simple some of the objects may be—few of them have appealed to the Western collector and art historian and are therefore rarely documented in the art books—they are, for the users, of extreme significance. One Lemba informant, talking to Roumeuguère about a small clay figurine, said that it belonged to "*la connaissance profonde*." Some other authors have also stressed the fact that nothing is as secret as these simple figurines.

Although our documentation on the place of sculptures in initiations (that is, in didactic systems) is weak for other parts of Africa, there are hints here and there in the literature that permit us to think that the occurrence of iconic devices in educational systems is a widespread one. Niangorah-Bouah³ has made it clear that the teaching of proverbs associated with some of the goldweights in the Akan-speaking areas of West Africa coincides with the time period when adults receive the knowledge of the highly complex drum language. He has indicated that the so-called proverb-weights constitute an encyclopedia of zoological, botanical, philosophical, economic, historical, and ritual knowledge. Zahan, for the Bambara of West Africa, has similarly discussed the vital role played by statues and masks in the instruction process that operates through the initiation societies.⁴ Some of the art works used in Poro are not just symbols of social control or representations of supernatural beings but are presented and explained to the initiates in a system of "revelations," as Bochet calls them.⁵ It is evident that many of us have judged the function and meaning of the African works of art by their more manifest and overt usages. We can observe what the full-fledged members of a specialized group do with their sculptures on certain public occasions, but we ignore what they do with them when new members are inducted

into their ranks, when they move up to higher grades, or, indeed, when they die.

Most handbooks on African art give illustrations of some ivory and wooden figurines and masks from the Lega (variously mentioned as Balega, Warega, Barega).⁶ This is a highly distinctive art. It shows a strong preference for smaller figurines and masks (the majority of pieces fall between two inches and seven inches); it excels in the simple abstraction of forms and in the magnificent patination of the ivories. The types of sculptures range from human to animal figurines, from masks to small heads, from spoons to miniature billhooks, knives, axe blades, and dice—all carved in wood or ivory or elephant bone, sometimes made in other materials such as clay, resin, and soapstone. All these objects are monopolized by the male and female members of a graded association called *bwami*. Some can be owned by any male initiate of appropriate rank; others are owned only by expert initiators or particular status-holders; still others are held in collective ownership by lineages or ritual communities. The totality of objects used by the members of the *bwami* association ranges from the forementioned artistic sculptures to many other categories of artifacts (some exquisitely made, others negligible as far as their formal qualities are concerned) and natural objects (scales, claws, beaks, feathers, leaves, wood, lianas, skulls, carapaces).

Depending on the material of which they are made, their size, and eventually their form—but most of all on the symbolic associations that their users are willing to give them—these sculptures are many things at the same time. They are distinctive emblems connected with certain grades and positions in the association, thus serving as a means of identification. They are prestige items, and the higher initiates strive to accumulate many carvings by acting as tutors and sponsors for younger initiates. Some are symbols of social integration, with specific carvings owned collectively and exclusively by each ritually autonomous lineage or community. From certain points of view the objects have a funerary function, for when their owner dies some are temporarily exposed on the tomb. Some carvings are also considered as vehicles of the soul of the *bwami* and thus to express the continuity and perennity of the association. From another point of view, the objects have curative functions: Dust removed from the ivory carvings serves as an ultimate remedy in cases of sickness or weakness. Beyond all this, however, the objects play a

vital role in the initiations that lead to the various grades. In other words, they are devices in a didactic system, they sustain a message, they are part of Lega mnemonics.

It is particularly relevant to our topic to examine how the carvings are used as pedagogical and mnemonic devices in the initiation system. There are various phases and different methods in the display of the objects, but the most frequently used procedure is as follows: When a particular rite in which carvings are to be used is about to begin (there are many rites where natural objects, not carvings, are used), a preceptor (also called "the thinker"), a member of appropriate rank in the *bwami* association, orders the objects to be taken out. Depending on the rite, one initiate then removes a set of objects from a collectively held basket or every participating initiate produces one or more objects from his personal shoulderbag. These objects are placed on the ground in front of each initiate, or put together in a row, a pile, or disposed in an intricate order in what is called a *ziko* (literally "hearth"). Most of this action is accompanied by the singing of proverbs and by drumming. Eventually there is dancing, during which the preceptor, in dance pace, receives the objects from each initiate and places them together. In the highest initiations, where principally ivories are used, the display of the objects is immediately followed by *ubonga masengo*, "to bring in harmony the things of danger." This means that the objects are rubbed with castor oil and perfumed. Depending on the type of rite, these activities take place either in a closed initiation hut or in the middle of the village, from which all non-initiates have been removed or are kept at a distance. It should be pointed out that only in rare circumstances is the display comprised solely of art objects. Most commonly it includes such objects as shells, beaks, scales, skulls, leaves, along with the carvings. There is never a display of a single object.

The configuration in which carvings and other objects are arranged is particularly complex in the above-mentioned *ziko* displays, which are set up for select rites. One such example is found in the *mukumbi* rite, which forms an intricate part of the initiations leading to *lutumbo lwa yananio* (the second highest grade of the association). Briefly described, the arrangement made by the preceptor and his aides in a closed initiation hut is as follows: A small pit is made and a stuffed *mukumbi*-rodent skin is placed in it, together with a small raphia ball. These are covered with soil and then with a variety of as many as twenty-five species of

leaves, then with phrynium leaves. On top of all this a wooden mask and an ivory spoon are placed. To the left of this central set-up there is another pit, which is empty and merely covered with phrynium leaves. On one side of the second pit, facing the entrance door through which the initiand will be led by his tutor, there is a row of pangolin scales. On the opposing side of this pit three sets of objects are displayed: a hornbill beak, a *lwamba*-liana, and a wooden animal figure, in front of which lies a row of giant snail shells. Beyond these sets of objects there is another display of, on one side, some chimpanzee skulls and some small wooden masks and, on the other side, small knives with copper blades that are fixed in the ground and that carry on top of the handles either tufts of porcupine quills or tufts of red tail feathers from a parrot.

In the next phase the scantily dressed initiand is brought in by his tutor and slowly led around the displayed objects and the circle of seated initiates. The initiand is then invited to sit down, usually on the ground. He must not speak, laugh, move, or express any emotion whatsoever. His task is to watch, listen, and ponder.

The preceptor with his aides, accompanied by singing and drumming, now proceed with the systematic interpretation of the entire display, of groups of objects, and of single items. All this is done by means of sung proverbs. As the ceremony develops, single objects or several associated objects are picked up by the preceptor and his aides and danced with, while assorted proverbs are sung. The proverbs express moral and legal principles and patterns of etiquette and social conduct. They glorify the greatness, perennity, and beauty of the *bwami* association and its members; they eulogize the initiand and his tutors or warn and criticize them; they convey knowledge about certain animals, people, and procedures, but only rarely speak about ancestors. This method of teaching proceeds by a system of opposites: Some objects and proverbs emphasize the positive values (*bunene*) of the association; other objects and proverbs illustrate the nonvalues (*bwanya*). In other words, some categories of objects help to illustrate in many different ways the supreme value of goodness and beauty, conceived in terms of moderation, generosity, friendship, and piety. Other categories help to express the disastrous consequences of quarrelsomeness, greediness, disorders, arrogance; while still others emphasize the sources of true pleasure and enjoyment of life, prestige, power, and the greatness of *bwami*, the true sense of emulation. Each object not only has a meaning in itself but has additional ones

according to the associations in which it occurs and the oppositions in which it is situated. Finally, the total set-up of objects also conveys meaning of its own.

Thus, in the previously described example of the *mukumbi* display in the *lutumbo lwa yananio* initiations, the initiate is first confronted by the row of pangolin scales, which serve as reminders that the path of initiations to follow is long. The empty pit illustrates the fate of the non-initiate, who vanishes completely after death; the hornbill beak explains that everybody achieves exactly what he is able to. The contrast between the chimpanzee skulls and the wooden masks reminds him of the stupidity of the individual who wanted *bwami* but was unable to get it because of lack of "force," as opposed to the sense of fulfillment of the strong person who achieved *bwami* (expressed in this case by the masks). The knives with porcupine quills versus those with parrot feathers are reminders of the many evils that threaten the existence of the non-initiate in contrast to the person who is attracted by *bwami* and finds a safeguard in it. The *lwamba*-liana teaches that well-spoken words bring forth many good things; the snail shells illustrate the path followed by the initiate that leads to the wisdom characteristic of his father or of the initiate whom he now replaces (symbolized by the wooden animal figure). Finally, the pit itself, with its varied contents, symbolizes several things: First, it promises an outstanding burial for the high initiate (the pit is called *idumba*, which means grave). Second, it promises him continuity; that is, some form of eternal life in the memory of the living (symbolized by the raphia ball). Thirdly, it represents the strength of the high *mwami* (stuffed rodent skin) surrounded by all his people (the leaves). Fourthly, it depicts the high *mwami* as an arbiter, as a settler of disputes (among the leaves, all individually interpreted in proverbs, there are some that symbolize good and others that stand for evil; but on top of them all there is the *lubeketa*-leaf, which is a symbol of arbitration).

This example stresses the importance of studying the various objects within the entire context in which they are used, for it is clear that each item, in addition to its general meaning, expresses a number of subsidiary and specialized meanings that cannot be omitted if we want to fully understand this art. It also indicates that these art objects have several functions, some more overt, some more latent. Further, it indicates that some art works express negative aspects of the value system. Of equal

importance, it raises the question as to the occurrence of similar functions and meanings in other African arts. The connection between works of art and specialized associations and cult groups is widely acknowledged, but the exact function and meaning of these objects within the system of instruction is overshadowed in most cases by their more manifest usages in social control, magical procedures, cult and ritual practice. Further detailed investigations into the role of art objects in the actual initiation systems can shed new light on the ideological dimension of African culture, about which little information is as yet available.

FOOTNOTES

¹ D. Zahan, *Sociétés d'initiation Bambara* (Paris: Mouton, 1960), pp. 238-55.

² These and other notes on Lega art are derived from the author's field data on the Lega, collected in 1951-1953 and 1956, as research fellow of l'Institut pour la Recherche scientifique en Afrique centrale, Brussels.

³ Niangorah-Bouah, "Poids à peser l'or," *Présence Africaine*, No. 46 (1963), pp. 202-220.

⁴ D. Zahan, *op. cit.*, pp. 12, 14, and *passim*.

⁵ G. Bouchet, "Le Poro des Diéli," *Bulletin IFAW* (1959), pp. 67-76 and *passim*.

⁶ See, for example, W. Fagg and M. Plass, *African Sculpture: An Anthology* (New York: Dutton Vista Pictureback, 1964), pp. 37-38, 50, 82, 144, 151.