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## The Problem of the Function of African Art

The theme of function, meaning and source of inspiration of African art takes us right into the core of African culture and thought-systems. We tend to take the subject lightly, assuming that we know what the various basic functions of African art really are. This is a grave assumption which has caused much stagnation and confusion in this field of inquiry. M. Griaule once remarked that « various studies on the art of Negro-Africa were almost all characterized by a constant preoccupation with the avoidance of precise details ». This statement would still largely hold today. How little we know about the rich and variegated functions of African art is clearly evidenced by museum labels and in the general writings on this subject.

The reasons that underly this lack of true knowledge about function and meaning are quite obvious and may be briefly summarized as follows.

a. There is great scarcity of comprehensive, well-balanced *descriptive and analytical* studies on the function and meaning of single arts. I am referring here to studies which place the art objects in their total setting of culture and

society, which view them in their inter-relationships with one another and with other types of material objects.

b. There is a total lack of truly *comparative* studies on function and meaning. What we have are accumulations and compilations of disparate data, which are too general and too uneven to permit any kind of valid conclusions.

c. There is an equal lack of *distributional* studies in which the geographical spread of particular functions or of clusters of functions would be mapped out and interpreted.

d. The concept *tribe* constitutes an inadequate framework for the study of function. Let us first remember that there does not exist in the entire anthropological literature a cross-culturally valid definition of the concept *tribe*. The use of the concept sets certain methodological limitations to our studies and is further based on various assumptions concerning local cultural homogeneity, cultural cohesiveness and evenness or concomitance in the distribution of given cultural traits. The famous figurines and masks of the Lega in the Kivu area of the Congo Republic cannot just be qualified as the art of the Lega *tribe*. They are essentially the privileged possession of the members, male and female, of the two highest grades of the Bwami Association. But this association has a wider distribution than what we have mapped out as the area occupied by the Lega *tribe*, since it is also found among sections of the Bembe, Nyintu, Kano, Kumu, Nyanga, Songola and Bangobango populations, who all inhabit geographically adjoining regions in Kivu Province. Furthermore, some of the ways in which, and purposes for which, these statues and masks are used as didactic devices found in a context of initiations are typical for a much larger area which extends across Lake Tanganyika among several populations, not necessarily in geographical contiguity, in Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Angola and South-Eastern South Africa. Finally, some of the ultimate messages brought by this art are not just typical of a tribal society but reflect common human values.

It would therefore be preferable if the notion of « culture-bearing unit », which is an elastic and flexible concept and can be defined in specific terms for specific categories of objects and of functions, be used.



e. When speaking about function, we have to ask ourselves what a given object (or groups of objects) does for the members of a defined culture-bearing unit, what people expect from it and how they use it. The totality of function performed by a specific object must be viewed at different levels and from several viewpoints. These include the total society, the specialized sub-group within it, the specific situational contexts in which the object normally occurs or may occur; the maker of the object, its owner and its user. As far as the user is concerned, nuances in function may be found according to whether he is an expert preceptor or a common man who has no special knowledge but has the privilege of using the art object. Again, many of the functions are closely imbricated with one another or occur in chains and the analysis of the sum total of functions may afford deeper perspective on the matter. It is clear that very few studies have adopted this kaleidoscopic approach; therefore we are all too often dealing with segments or fractions of function rather than with total configurations. Consequently, existing literature visibly tends to emphasize certain kinds of functions to the detriment or exclusion of others. For example, one reads constantly about religious, ceremonial, symbolic functions of African art which certainly are significant but are often analyzed either in frustratingly simplistic terms or in terms of confusingly sophisticated periphrases. But clearly Africa's art does not merely speak about man's relationships with the gods and with the forces of nature. It is deeply concerned with relationships between human beings, taken as individuals or as groups. It thus reflects functions which are associated with economics, leadership, social and political cohesion, prestige and status and with the moral and legal principles that govern ordered life.

Much African art apparently sustains and reflects an ethical code, represents positively or negatively in its associations with oral literature the fundamentals of that code, and stands out as a kind of *aide-mémoire* of that code. Most significantly, this ethical code does not, of course, merely express *tribal* principles, but rules of conduct which are universal and which regulate the perennial problems of preserving normal ordered life in society, such as the rules of solidarity and co-operation, love and respect, etc.

The famous statues and masks made in wood, ivory,

bone, soapstone and resin by the Lega, whatever their forms or specific meanings, are *ultimately* all reflections of the supreme value (*busoga*). This is a concept which does not simply mean beauty and goodness (two notions which the Lega rather tend to express in very concrete terms), but which refers to virtue (*virtus* or *arête*). This means that all the Lega carvings tend to prove what virtue is and what it is not. This is done with a great sense of realism and flexibility in interpretation in hundreds of ways and with subtle nuances. Thus the proverbs associated with this art deal with the aspects of friendship and co-operation (*busikila*), with the sense of duty and responsibility (*katati*), with the qualities of restraint and moderation (*ubonga*), or they are concerned with the detrimental effects resulting from quarrel and fight, adultery and sorcery, bad temper and slander, etc.

f. We are often led to believe that particular African art objects have only one single function which rigidly determines their interpretation and meaning. A multifaceted and comprehensive approach to function and meaning of African art reveals that single objects, or specific categories of objects, exercise simultaneously multiple and multivalent functions. The past and present insistence on monofunction constitutes one of the most serious deficiencies in our studies of the functions of African art.

To illustrate this point, let us further examine the Lega case. We have already mentioned the fact that the figurines and masks made by these people are connected with the two highest grades of the Bwami Association : in other words, they are emblems and badges reflecting rank and status. We have also emphasized that they represent an iconic system which elucidates in hundreds of ways the basis notion of virtue (*busoga*). In this connection they are used as a kind of didactic device by means of which concrete knowledge about the ethical code is conferred upon the initiates. Moreover, they are items of prestige : to possess many of these art objects is not proof of one's wealth, but rather of one's virtue, since only those initiates who are recognized for their moral and intellectual qualities will be constantly invited to act as sponsors and tutors for the initiation of new members — a function which is the main channel through which an individual can acquire more and more objects. There is keen



emotional and ethical response by the members of the association towards these objects, which are rubbed with castor oil, polished and perfumed and are constantly compared with the beauty of white mushrooms and the beauty of the Bongo antelope. All objects are further considered to be expressions of continuity and perennity of the values and principles held by the members of the association and by all Lega at large (since, in principle, everybody can become a member of the association and move up through the hierarchy of its grades and levels).

These objects, however, are not part of a cult or of veneration but they are sacred and dangerous (*isengo*) things : the Lega often expressed for me the idea that in some way they represented the totality of the unending succession of generations of initiates. Some categories of objects have, beyond the above-mentioned series of general functions, specific functions to fulfil. Some statues and masks are symbols of the unity and cohesiveness of local kinship groupings or of local ritual communities : no higher initiation can be held within the given group without the presence and participation of these objects and, additionally, a given group manifests its social and ritual autonomy by legally possessing such art objects. Finally, the individual preceptors who are responsible for the organization of initiations have considerable freedom of choice in the use and interpretation of specific objects : they can make many decisions concerning the sequences or associations in which objects occur, they can also produce them in situations and rites where, theoretically, they should not be used.

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