

## THE SIBYLLINE BOOKS OF TRIBAL ART

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IT is a charge commonly levelled by administrators against anthropologists—and by the more materialistic and revolutionary anthropologists against their more conservative colleagues (among whom I count myself)—that they advocate the preservation of primitive peoples as ‘museum pieces’, sheltered from the harmful influences of civilisation. There is a grain of truth in the taunt—for many an anthropologist must have wondered at times whether this tribe or that was not better off and happier before the introduction of corrugated iron and political ‘aspirations’—but it is really a gross over-simplification; it is, in truth, not change so much as revolution that is deplored. For the anthropologist has been trained to observe more clearly than most men how a tribal culture may be not merely disrupted but even completely destroyed by the opening of a mine or a plantation or the prohibition of initiation or polygamy; how, for example, the advent of the metal roof may lead not merely to the decay of the thatcher’s skill, but perhaps also to the collapse of a co-operative labour system. Far from being absolutely opposed to change, he understands that there are ways—if we are willing to look for them—of making changes rather as a graft upon the tree of tribal culture than by ruthlessly extirpating it, or inadvertently ringing the bark. So it is that he will sometimes be found seeking, however hopelessly, to retard changes threatened from outside until their promoters are ready, both in their own and in the tribal interest, to take account of research in human nature and institutions; he would be more than human in these days if he did not point to the East African Groundnuts Scheme as a classical and grandiose example of revolution unnecessarily applied to tribal cultures with an utter disregard of the very existence of human problems. By comparison, the anthropologist may well seem to be the true progressive. And with him I class the enlightened missionary, administrator and trader who are prepared to study and use the processes of evolution: who, in a word, approach their task with a true humility.

What is the relevance of these observations to our particular

theme? The same principle—that change should be evolutionary if valuable elements of culture are not to be lost—must be applied. But art (as distinct from technical skill in wielding the artist's tools) is so fragile, so ethereal a growth that the dangers inherent in any conscious attempt to alter its methods or mould it to new purposes are many times greater than with other branches of culture or with the social structure. And, like these other branches, it may easily be debased (in an aesthetic sense), or even suffer extinction, as a result of some chance infiltration of Western ways; for example, when carvers in some parts of Yorubaland in Nigeria began to use European oil paints instead of the traditional earth colours to enhance the surface of their wood-carvings, the bold primary colours seem to have made such striking effects that the delicate balance between form and colour, established over centuries of artistic development, was completely upset, and the sense of sculptural form for which these artists had been famous rapidly atrophied. It is true that no amount of foresight on the part of Europeans can avert situations of this kind; yet there lies upon them an obligation, all too seldom recognised, not to 'give scandal', in an artistic sense, and so contribute to loss of tribal values to the world and to Christianity.

If I seem to labour somewhat these introductory remarks, it is in order to establish that I write from the point of view of an anthropologist and not as one well versed in the field of Christian art. If in consequence I seem unduly critical, by implication, of some who are authorities in this latter field, I hope that I may at least be granted the licence of the *advocatus diaboli*. But my purpose is indeed to urge that tribal art is among the most beautiful and impressive of God's works through man, and that it can and should be turned to account in his honour. I believe not only that Christianity needs tribal art, but that tribal art itself is dependent on Christianity for its only chance of survival, as its old sustaining faiths disappear.

Anthropology is 'the whole study of man', and the anthropologist, unless he has been attracted too far along the modern path of specialisation, tries to see his special study in the light of all else that he knows about the peoples concerned. In particular, he will not attain to an understanding of tribal art in any but its most material aspects unless he appreciates its place in the religious, moral and social life of the people, and the extent to which not

only their ideas of art, but his own also, are moulded by habits of thought which are largely unconscious and of ancient derivation. All of us begin to be influenced by the collective representations of our society, on this above all other matters, from the earliest days of our lives, and for most of us the principles of design and aesthetics which underlie our man-made environment are elevated into unacknowledged axioms which largely condition our aesthetic judgments for the rest of our lives. Since there is no reason to suppose that they have any absolute validity, it is clearly useless and wrong to make use of them, whether consciously or not, in assessing the merits of works conditioned by an entirely different set of collective representations. And the canons of the European tradition in art are almost wholly inapplicable in the study of African art.

The essential philosophical differences between European and African art may be conveniently, if over-simply, suggested in terms of the presence or absence of the straight line. The importance of this concept—for it is clearly an intellectual abstraction rather than something to be met with on any considerable scale in the environment and experience of pre-industrial man—dates in Europe from about the sixth century before Christ, although it had already been applied for many hundreds of years in the great industrial civilisations of the Near East. It is mainly to the Ionian philosophers that we owe the acceptance of mensuration as something good and desirable in itself, without which the erection of large systems whether in stone or in ideas was unthinkable. So were the foundations of materialism laid: the Olympians had been progressively humanised since Homer's time and man was now, he supposed, self-sufficient. A revolution of ideas was taking place, and the builders of the Periclean Acropolis did not hesitate to break up for rubble the old-fashioned stylised figures carved at the apogee of Greek art. By virtue of perpendicular coordinates, the most lifelike figures henceforth could, and therefore should, be produced: and until this century only the Middle Ages have interrupted the Praxitelean hegemony.

If we turn to tribal Africa and its art, we are at once struck by the contrast with the uniformity, based on mensurational naturalism, which has been the mark of European art, sacred and profane, for two and a half millennia. Africa, having never undergone the revolution, remained free from any *a priori* assumption of the

rightness of naturalism and from restriction to a single style; moreover, the whole African way of life continued to be based on adaptation to nature rather than on mastery over it, and perfection, so far from being sought after, is often carefully avoided as impious. Lines are drawn no straighter and surfaces no more highly polished than is necessary for the purpose in hand, and so the craftsman's natural sense of line and form is given full play. The bulldozer mentality of the old Roman road-builders is far removed indeed from the beautiful bush paths of Africa.

Over very large tracts of Africa the artistic impulse expressed itself more through music and the dance than in visual forms; and it was only in the great basins of the Niger and the Congo that sculpture, with which I am chiefly concerned, flourished. Within that region, however, some thousands of distinctive styles were developed and can still be identified in museums and in the field; some are more important than others, but nearly all have produced some masterpieces fit to rank with the finest works of other continents, and they are all distinguished by an artistic vitality and conviction which are sadly lacking in most European art today, whether it be 'academic' or of the *avant-garde*.

I do not know how far authorities on European art would agree with me, but I suggest that the African artist starts with one great advantage over the European: the classical tradition is based on description, but the *purely* descriptive excludes the poetic, and equally the artistic, so that the artist, having painfully learnt how to describe, must transcend description—as all the great masters of Europe have done—in order to produce art; the African carver, on the other hand, learns his craft in a medium whose forms are by their very nature evocative and poetic. They are intended to suggest and symbolise rather than to portray the person or object concerned, and at the same time to produce in the observer certain feelings which it is desired to associate with him or it. The distortions of the human body for which African sculpture is famous are, therefore, entirely purposeful and not at all due to any incapacity on the part of Africans for naturalistic representation—for which they show all too depressing an aptitude once they begin to carve for the curio trade.

It is difficult to formulate useful general statements about African art, since its styles range all the way from abstraction to quasi-classical naturalism; but in all of them—even in the idealised

portrait heads in brass and copper of ancient Ife—the artists seem to have set out to bring the viewer's centres of association into play by means of stylisation or generalisation of the features of his subject. Such use of analogy and metaphor is surely of the essence of true art; and it is doubtful whether any people has ever developed it so intensely as the Africans have done.

It is probably to this that we must attribute the 'direct' qualities of African art, which have so impressed European artists. The planes, curves, masses and spaces of the carving produce emotion by means that are nearer to those used in music than to the curiously indirect method of European naturalistic art—in which the desired expression of emotion is represented by the artist in the face and gestures of his subject in the hope of producing a sympathetic or imitative response in the spectator. For the same reason, narrative art is comparatively rare in Africa, and seldom if ever designed to convey deep emotion of the kind which is beyond words.

Again, association of ideas may dictate not merely the detailed features of a carving but also the choice of subject matter itself; this seems to be true of both the examples illustrated with this article, for in each case the artist has represented not specific personages, either divine or human, but a scene designed to suggest a general idea.

Now it would doubtless be generally agreed that it is the function of Christian as of any other religious art to play upon our noblest and deepest feelings and to associate them with our service to God (or, among pagans, to the gods or the spirits). If it fails to evoke these feelings, it fails altogether. And by this standard, we must look hard and long to find any true religious *art* produced in Europe in the last two centuries; except in our older cathedrals and churches, almost all is superficial and sentimental and calculated to depress rather than to uplift the soul at the moment of worship. For us Europeans, it is the great artists of the Renaissance and the anonymous masons of the Middle Ages who chiefly have the power of stirring religious emotion. Yet even their works would have no particular meaning for non-Europeans; African and other tribal peoples have each their own established ways, founded in their own historic life and culture, of producing similar emotional responses, and it is only by understanding and making use of these that Christian arts worthy of the name can be

developed among the Africans according to the principles laid down by Pope Pius XII. I must say unequivocally that, applying as fairly as I can the standards of quality which have formed in my mind in the course of studying the pagan arts of Africa, I have been unable to find a single piece of art (religious or secular) produced by Africans under missionary influence which I could honestly regard as approaching in quality the best traditional sculpture of the tribe from which it came; the great majority seem to me without artistic merit either by European or by African standards.

Assuredly the Christian faith is not at fault; but it is disconcerting that it cannot yet stimulate its converts to artistic creations comparable to those with which their brothers worship Shango and Ala. The difficulty, it seems to me, though far from insuperable, can only be overcome by a conscious and sustained effort on the part of all who must deal with the problem to put aside the preconceptions accumulated in 2500 years of European art. But how is one to convince the young missionary (whose training in art criticism can hardly be equal to his capacity for the cure of souls) that by the simple act of calling upon African carvers who have no tradition of narrative art to execute a Crib he may be in danger of killing outright an art tradition of a thousand years' standing—and that such an act may be *uncatholic*?

I should feel despondent indeed but for two things. First, I have been deeply impressed and moved by reading the issue of *L'Art Sacré* for March-April, 1951, in which appear articles by Father M. A. Couturier and Father Pie-Raymond Régamey, both concerned with 'le douloureux problème des arts missionnaires'. Both, and especially the latter, show a profound appreciation of the nature of the problem and of the psychological and other difficulties lying in the way of its solution. Father Régamey shows very clearly that the sole restrictions placed by the Popes on the use of traditional native arts in the Christian faith are negative ones and provide only that they shall not be contrary to the essentials of that faith.

But it is in the field that the problem will be finally solved, and I am convinced that it can be done only through experimental research such as that which is being carried on by Father Kevin Carroll and his helpers at Oye-Ekiti in the north-eastern Yoruba country of South-West Nigeria. In this area, which I visited

briefly in 1950, traditional carving is still alive, including the carving of large works such as Bamgboye's masterly Epa mask and also of narrative scenes. Other arts besides sculpture also flourish there, and it would seem altogether a most favourable site for such an experiment, far more favourable, for example, than the Fon country of Dahomey, where Mlle Barnager is working. At Oye, great emphasis is laid on understanding and maintaining the traditional economic basis of the carver's livelihood (no work being undertaken for Europeans); on the use and development of the ancient apprenticeship system in preference to any form of school tuition (the cause of many failures elsewhere); on the avoidance of all but traditional materials (and some great missionary enterprises, such as that of Buta in the northern Belgian Congo, have put themselves out of court by using ebony, which is utterly alien to African carving technique and has never been used except on European instructions); and on the encouragement of a secular side-by-side with a religious art, so that both may be economically viable. If this experiment succeeds, as I believe that it will, I hope that Father Carroll may be induced to describe it in a book, in full detail and without delay. For every year lost sees the irrevocable disappearance of priceless traditions.

Unfortunately, it is often the African faithful who (knowing nothing of St Augustine) object most strongly to the use of anything which reminds them of the old religion. And this leads me to a question which I certainly could not presume to answer: whether a method of conversion which, whatever its other merits, allows the converted to become iconoclasts, destroying beautiful works of art as 'works of the devil', is sufficiently far-sighted.

#### NOTICE

The February number of BLACKFRIARS will include the text of the first of two Third Programme talks on 'The Dying God' by Fr Victor White, O.P. There will also be contributions by Douglas Hyde (author of *I Believed*) and R. P. Walsh (Editor of *The Catholic Worker*).



1. Mask carved about 1934 by Bangboye of Odo-Owa for the Epa Festival of the Yoruba of eastern Ilorin Province, Northern Nigeria. The religious content of the festival—in which young men dance and leap in these great masks (often four or five feet high and weighing up to 80lb.) to promote the well-being and increase of the community and its crops—is nowadays much overshadowed by its recreative aspects. Though the whole is carved from one block of wood, there is a marked contrast of style and feeling between the mask proper, a grotesque Janus head, and the broadly naturalistic figures of the superstructure; this represents in a generalised way the pleasures of motherhood and the happiness and prestige of large families. Bangboye was later employed as teacher of carving at a Government school, but his work lost all originality and feeling, and he now carves only for Europeans.



Photograph: William Fagg, 1950. By courtesy of H.M. Stationery Office.





2. Pottery group made about 1880 for the cult of the Yam Spirit (Ifijioku) at Osisa village of the Kivale Ibo tribe near the right bank of the lower Niger. Such groups were placed in small enclosures outside the houses with other cult objects and sacrifices were made before them to ensure the success of the Yam harvest. The custom has now fallen into disuse (perhaps because the Government will come to the rescue in the case of famine) and it is many years since such groups were made; only three broken figures in this style now survive at Osisa. The group does not represent particular persons or spirits but rather a general idea of service by the whole family to the spirit world: a family head is seated before the altar of his own good luck (ikenga); his two wives, one pregnant, the other suckling a child, are seated beside him, and in front are his son, striking an iron gong, and a sacrificial fowl. It may be that this representation of sacrifice was thought to please the spirits even when actual sacrifice was not being made.

Photograph: British Museum. By courtesy of the Trustees and of H.M. Stationery Office.