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AFRICAN AESTHETICS: MOVING TO SEE THE MASK

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The world is like a mask dancing,
if you want to see it well you do not stand in one place.

Chinua Achebe

1. *Introduction*

THE highland region of Northwest Province, Cameroon, known as the Grassfields, is a homogeneous culture area made up of many small polities headed by chiefs, or kings, known locally as fons. Although the languages spoken in the area are all semi-Bantu, and the various chiefdoms have been coexisting, trading and intermarrying for centuries, group identities and languages are upheld extremely conservatively. Oral historical accounts of the migrations of the various groups—Chamba, Tikar, Bamum, Bamileke—and their supposed cultural origins

This essay is a revised version of part of a pre-fieldwork Ph.D. proposal presented to University College, London, in 1991. As such, it represents reflections on the approach I intended to take in the field to the material in question. I am indebted to Sally Chilver, Jeremy Coote, Susanne Küchler, David Napier, Michael Rowlands, Buck Schieffelin and many others for their comments on the research proposal itself and on earlier drafts of this essay. Having now (April 1992) spent three months in the field I am pleased to say that, thanks to their help, the ideas presented here do not appear wholly wide of the mark.

are maintained as meticulously as are the genealogies of clan heads, which go back on average six generations or so.

One of the characteristics noticed by the first Europeans to reach the area in 1889, and much commented on ever since, is the abundance of material culture, and the elaboration of everything from household utensils and furniture to royal portrait sculptures, architecture, secret society masks and divination figures. These objects were enthusiastically and exhaustively collected, first by German, then by French and English colonial officers, missionaries, explorers and ethnographers, and later by an international body of patrons, buying either in Cameroon or on the European and US markets. This has resulted in an enormous stock of Grassfields artefacts in Western museums. Both these and those still *in situ* have been subjected to analysis by researchers interested in the possible meanings to be found in the rich iconography of the material.

Throughout the Grassfields, decoration of carved and/or beaded artefacts is characterized by geometric designs associated with certain animals, which in turn signify status ascriptions or other associations in the social structure. The major designs are those of the stylized frog, spider, lizard, python, bush cow, elephant and leopard. The last four are associated especially with the fon, while the frog is often spoken of as symbolizing fertility and the spider as symbolizing the supernatural (through its connection with the ancestor spirits in the ground). The spider, accordingly, is used in divination practice throughout the area. All of these associations between animals, motifs and social or cosmological categories form part of the informants' overt knowledge, and can be elicited readily in interviews. Over the past twenty years or so, these motifs have been researched by anthropologists interested in linking them to Grassfields social structure. For example, the American scholars Christraud Geary (1983, 1988), Paul Gebauer (1979) and Tamara Northern (1973, 1988) have set out detailed schemas of the symbols involved and the attributions that informants in the Grassfields gave them. In addition, Harter, a medical doctor who spent a lot of time in the area in the 1950s, has produced a large, well-researched and lavishly illustrated volume on the subject (1986), which takes an art-historical approach to the appreciation of the artefacts. Harter concentrates on formal appreciation of the works he presents. Objects are assessed on the basis of finesse of execution, quality of the medium, balance, proportion etc. In this type of analysis the overt, verbalized and relatively static meanings of the objects are focused upon.

Brain and Pollock (1971) likewise conducted very good field research, but went further than Harter in firmly setting their analysis in the local context, providing a rich social backdrop for their account of the production of artefacts amongst the Bangwa people. However, their approach was also beholden to the art-historical tradition. This means that although their work is to a large degree 'contextualized' in the manner of Baxandall's (1972) analysis of Quattrocento Italian painting, the presuppositions of their research were still by and large ethnocentric ones. Although the rituals during which pieces are displayed are well described, Brain and Pollock's appreciation of a sculpture is couched in terms of

the 'beauty' of the object, the accomplishment of the carver's style and so on. As I shall try to show, however, these factors are not paramount in how the informants attribute value to a piece, in spite of the verbal testimony they might sometimes give.

In her publications on the Bamum, Geary (1983, 1988) goes further than any of the other authors in avoiding Western-orientated interpretations of the material. Rather, she offers the alternative model of a symbolic system based on the expression of power. Her view of material culture as of greater communicative than 'decorative' value has suggested the direction taken in this essay. Like Brain and Pollock, she has elicited many verbal statements regarding the relation of objects of material culture to status and political power. In this essay, I intend to proceed from her theoretical position—that iconography serves to preserve or enhance the power of the élite—to examine how objects signify and how they remain significant in a dynamic socio-political setting.

Most of the works on Grassfields iconography mentioned above tend not to go beyond an exegesis of the representational or symbolic meanings of artefacts based on taxonomic identifications obtained from informants. While such research has advanced the understanding of objects taken as isolated entities, as well as of museum collections and photographs, it does not address the question of the interactive social significance of the artefacts, beyond making a few suggestions as to the functional roles the objects might have played.[1]

My aim in this essay is, therefore, a twofold one. On the one hand, I wish to show how the overt definitions and correspondences gathered in fieldwork can be used to examine a whole other set of associations and signifiers in a realm commonly represented as quite distinct from the aesthetic. On the other, I wish to suggest ways in which the prevalent views on African aesthetics, including the assumption that we are dealing with 'art', which is to be appreciated in 'aesthetic' terms, can be re-evaluated. The very concept of 'African aesthetics' is too often a transposition of Western aesthetic standards to non-Western artefacts, a concept born of the purely visual interest that European painters and sculptors working at the turn of the present century began to pay to this class of objects. As stated above, there have been some efforts at contextualization, but here too, once the material has been set in its geographical and social context it is too often assumed that it plays a similar or identical ideological role to that played by Western art in the analyst's own society.

1. One problem that this style of research does not elucidate, and which needs to be addressed, is that of the prevalence in museum collections of ambiguous representations (monkey/man, leopard/elephant) and of a number of exceptions to the norms of Grassfields iconography that would render the systems elaborated in many studies meaningless unless those exceptions are rejected out of hand as 'anomalies' atypical to the style. It is my opinion that such exceptions form part of a system of dissent from the *status quo* of Grassfields styles that could be examined (for example) in the light of the internal cultural differences between the Grassfields polities so emphasized by the people themselves (Warnier 1985).

It must be emphasized, however, that I do not intend to devalue Grassfields artefacts by reverting to pre-aesthetic, evolutionist models of non-Western artefacts as merely functional objects. The category of the aesthetic plays an important role in the model I shall use, but my purpose is to place the aesthetic in its social and political context. To this extent, I agree with Wolff's (1983: 21) timely exhortation that

> We need to rescue some concept of the aesthetic both from the imperialistic claims of the most radical sociology of art which would equate aesthetic value with political worth, and also from the total relativism and incapacity into which the self-reflexivity urged by the social history of the arts and of criticism might lead aesthetics.

2. *The Theoretical Background*

Until relatively recently, the vast majority of studies of the material culture of West and Central Africa were based in a popular Kantian tradition and essentialist in outlook, viewing 'art' as a universal category in which 'gifted' individuals expressed purely aesthetic categories with little or no relation to a wider social context. It was in reaction to this tendency in the subject that studies emphasizing context above form began to emerge. While many innovative sociological studies of aesthetics were produced in the 1970s, Flores Fratto (1985), amongst others, has called for a return to form—a move that need not entail the essentialism and reductionism of earlier analyses, and which would avoid the early sociological tendency to reduce the field of material culture to the status quo of a static social structure: it has the potential to react against as well as represent it.

A balanced analysis of non-Western aesthetics must, therefore, be founded on a solid grounding in the social context in which the artefacts are produced and/or consumed, but will also consider seriously iconographic and formal questions and their relevance for the significance of the objects. What is needed at this stage is a theory that distances itself from the reductionist interpretation of material culture as the objectification of verbal thought processes and addresses the relation between the objective historical conditions within which the individual operates and his *experience* of cultural objects and events (or objects as events).[2]

2. See Deliss (1990: 11) for a perceptive description of the origins of the reductionist tendency in Western criticism and its perpetuation in the 'primitive' art market. Her suggestion that 'the Western definition of art falls into disarray the moment it attempts to come to terms with transformations which have taken place in these cultures since the 1960s and decolonization' is applicable to later explanatory models, both objectivist and subjectivist, that are steeped in or influenced by the Western tradition.

Jules-Rosette's 'aesthetics of liberation' (1984: 230) may prove to be seminal in forging a move away from art-historical analysis, for which an emphasis on context and process over iconography in the construction of meaning is vital. Armed against adopting any overly subjectivist or essentialist models, thanks to Jules-Rosette's explanation of the importance of economic conditions, this essay examines the possibilities for a return from her concentration on structures and market forces, and their implications for an extreme relativism, to the artefact. Artefact production and stylistic variation in the Grassfields *is* largely an interactive process, and following Jules-Rosette we can pose the question of the extent to which economic, social and political factors in the area determine form and meaning in objects of material culture, in comparison with the degree of influence that objects have on these factors. This question of the ratio of the direction of causation between historical conditions and individual ingenuity, action/reaction, begs investigation.

The art historian Michael Baxandall (1985) sees the artefact, not as a symbol, or concatenation of symbols, the hidden meaning of which it is his job to reveal, but rather as a record of the events leading to its existence. In this sense, his approach is akin to Kopytoff's (1986), with its concentration on the biography of objects as constitutive of their significance. This diachronic approach is one of the positive contributions that traditional art history makes to the study of material culture—provided it is seen, not as an explanation of an object's 'meaning', but is used rather as a means of examining the processes that lead to the affective and politically significant loading of an artefact.

Paintings are seen by Baxandall as acts, efforts in problem-solving that embody the strategic intention of the maker in response to the context in which he lives and works in specific, observable formal qualities: 'the maker of a picture or other historical artefact is a man addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution' (1985: 14-15). This position suggests helpful ways in which to approach the analysis of artefacts in the field, through the elucidation of topical social problems, aspirations and goals, and their formal interpretation. Seeing the artefact occurring in time as the solution to a problem provides a means for acknowledging the maker's volition and intentionality in his particular response to a given set of circumstances. This view of the active position of the producer can be applied to the consumer in the Grassfields as well. In the case-studies below I try to point out how the movement (the process of acquisition, display and resale or gift) of artefacts is a complex, dynamic process of creative interaction in ways similar to the creation of artefacts. In both situations, what Wolff (1983: 19) calls the 'aesthetic disposition' is applied to socio-political ends, with respect both to the producer, and to what Eagleton calls the 'consumptional producer' (1976: 166-7) or active consumer. Seeing the work of a Grassfields sculptor, potter or weaver in terms of a 'pattern of intention', as Baxandall (1985: 70) does Piero della Francesca's painting, not only makes it possible to see innovation as dynamic response to the producer's environment, but also suggests that artefacts can supply

opportunities for performative constructions of meaning (or solutions) for subsequent owners and viewers, as well as for the original maker.

Objects signify in terms of the actors' experience, but this experience often reflects concerns that go beyond the aesthetic. In addressing the problem of why the aesthetic is especially suited to non-aesthetic roles, Baxandall goes beyond the maxim that objects are 'good to think with' to the suggestion that an artist's reactions to his aesthetic experiences can be translated into a coherent system of change in, or even subversion of, the status quo. I would stretch this proposition, with Kopytoff (1986) and Bourdieu (1972) in mind, and draw it into a properly anthropological theory, interpreting the stated goals of the actor in terms of his or her (partial) understanding of the objective historical conditions in which he or she operates.

This understanding is not of a literary or scientific nature, but rather an affective one, in which limitations are 'felt' rather than explicitly understood, in a way that could be achieved only through a process of aestheticization. A sense of the limitations of the sphere of possibilities, which Bourdieu (ibid.) terms 'habitus', is often expressed metaphorically in the material world, either as naturalized and self-evident, or as undesirable or risible and therefore contested. The case-studies below examine the ways in which the actor or interest group can or cannot reinterpret significant artefacts in a dynamic interaction with their own aspirations and historical situation. Küchler (1988) shows how this process occurred cross-culturally with respect to New Ireland *malangan* sculptures in the hands of Western art historians, dealers, collectors, curators and anthropologists. Even more significantly, however, she points out how the aesthetic plays an essential role in the creation of a memory that mediates the struggles for identity and land in northern New Ireland. The influence of this approach on my treatment of the case-studies that follow has been to demonstrate how undeniably aesthetic experiences can relate to social and political ends without losing their specificity in the process. Kopytoff (1986: 84) makes the related point that objects are not only ordered according to social rules, but are also constructed/reconstructed and defined/redefined by people, and that through this process people construct *themselves*.

Ever since the publication of *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* in 1972, Bourdieu's aim has been to transcend the objective/subjective, structuralist/ phenomenological dichotomy with his 'praxiological' position, according to which the significance of artefacts is examined in terms of internal systems of homology and differentiation that provide the context for the expression and justification of systems of social distinction. The praxiological approach interprets the spoken, overt understanding of naturalized, seemingly arbitrary practices as a misrecognit-ion of interested activity strongly influenced by forces in the agent's social environment, or *habitus*.

The aesthetic tastes and preferences of groups, as described by Bourdieu (1984), can be read as thrusts in a perpetual struggle to gain control of the social space within which relations of power are enacted. To this extent, Bourdieu's

study is very useful in getting at the heart of the social significance of art, yet without relinquishing a focus on the materiality of the artefact in question and on the strategic importance of perceptions and critical opinions in the ongoing formation of the social structure.

Bourdieu's real innovation resides in his moving away from abstract structuralist models without reverting to the political triviality implied in textual analyses of form and style as more or less self-referential systems (see e.g. Geertz 1983). Bourdieu achieves this by drawing attention to the process whereby objective historical realities are *felt* rather than thought, by being embodied or aestheticized as lived experience (and, therefore, made natural, self-evident) through patterns of behaviour and, by the same process, the aestheticization of material culture; that is to say, the creation of the impression that their social significance actually inheres in them, rather than being expressed merely through the systems of distinction that operate through them (1984: 29). This focus on the social relations underlying the creation of meaning, and the means by which Bourdieu transcends the subjective/objective opposition, neither alternative of which is finally satisfactory in accounting for the emotional and political value of material culture in West Africa, is the most important aspect of his theory for the problem at hand.

Bourdieu's aversion to 'subjectivist' aesthetic analyses pushes him too far along his continuum to take seriously into consideration individual strategies. However, a focus on such strategies makes it possible to examine—without necessarily falling prey to phenomenological description—the construction of social practice and political realities and their emergence from the fundamental level of individual discourse about, and use of, artefacts; i.e. the constant invention and creation of the habitus through the created world rather than its reproduction.

Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital (1972) is also very useful for building an anthropological understanding of material culture. It sets the aesthetic sphere firmly within the grasp of anthropological enquiry by revealing the vital importance of that which is usually misrecognized in Western academia, and in the West more generally, as distanced from necessity when, in fact, it is so often at the crux of the struggle of groups and individuals for self-representation and self-definition.[3] In fact, the social drive to maximize symbolic capital, whether

3. The present situation in the British art world is a good example. Private companies are negotiating for greater involvement; a situation in which they would not only sponsor independently produced works and exhibitions but actually be included in planning them from the earliest stages of production and design. According to a report in the *Independent* newspaper, the audience at a BBC Radio 4 debate on the arts gasped when John Owens, director-general of the Building Employers' Federation and a member of the council of the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts, addressed them in the following terms: 'Sponsorship is not a charitable activity; it is a marketing activity. But the arts organisations are producer-led. They think first of an exhibition...and then they go to the sponsor. If they went to the people who provide the sponsorship at an early stage and discussed with them how to meet their marketing needs, there would be more sponsorship' (quoted in Lister 1992). The strong emotive reaction

'conscious or unconscious' (1972: 81), permits Bourdieu to see behaviour as under the control of the agent while at the same time emphasizing the directed and directing nature of practice. Furthermore, the notion of symbolic capital as misrecognized, or only partially apprehended, by the actor-in-time addresses the question of why the sphere of material culture should be chosen over a verbal medium: he/she can move within it according to implicit or ambiguous feelings or preferences, which are not thought out explicitly enough to be verbalized but which nevertheless can form the basis of a rational, working system of practices that are made all the more effective through their aestheticized self-evidence.

The specificity of aesthetic experience that Bourdieu shies away from recognizing can actually be reconciled with the sociological significance of aesthetic objects. In Wolff's words, 'the experience and evaluation of art are socially and ideologically situated and constructed, and at the same time irreducible to the social or the ideological' (1983: 84). With respect to the contemporary use of material culture artefacts in West Africa, it need not be idealistic or essentialist to acknowledge the power for social change of the maker and consumer of art 'as a kind of rhetoric, a mechanism by which people may influence, persuade, define or redefine the social world around them' (Flores Fratto 1985: 32). Picton exemplifies this point in a study of the connotations of the hoe for the Ebira: 'a simple "utilitarian" thing turns out to have wide-ranging "symbolic" connotations. We see the hoe transformed thereby, though it would be difficult to talk in this way in Ebira for our "seeing" is so taken for granted as to render such discourse meaningless' (Picton 1990: 56).

Meaning, or rather significance, lies not in the objective historical conditions of an artefact, nor in a set of supposedly disinterested aesthetic considerations of the maker's, but rather in the *relations between* the object, the maker, the consumer and their ever-changing socio-political conditions. This is not a structuralist theory of meaning, arising from the relations of parts to each other in an aesthetic system, but rather a reconstruction of the social significance of the artefact, and those involved with it, from the way individuals interact with and succeed in causing others to react to it for specific ends. The aim of the present essay is to show how this reconstruction can address 'humanity's most basic work of invention and freedom' (Flores Fratto 1985: 38) in relation to the influence of the 'structured and structuring environment' (Bourdieu 1972: 174-5; 1990: 55-6).

While acknowledging Deliss's attack (1990: 5) on the fetishization of the individual that runs through the art-historical tradition, I should stress that my emphasis on the importance of acknowledging the individual does not stem from

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of the public to these sallies from the corporate world reveals well the prevalent notion in the West that aesthetics is, or ought to be, a quasi-sacred field separate from economics. Although the marriage of the two categories of art and socio-economic relations is seldom so gross as this example implies, the hermetic separation of the two is a culturally specific ideal that even in the West only emerged in the nineteenth century.

a wish to fetishize his or her material production as imbued with a perfectly self-contained 'gift' or mark of 'genius', but rather to emphasize the formative relation between the affective potential of artefacts and the historical conditions in which they operate. It is only by concentrating on the individual's embodied understanding of the historical conditions (his experience of them, or, more exactly, his sense of the self-evidence of the restrictions they place on his activities), in this case evinced in his or her material production and form of consumption, that the dual current of formative influence running between the actor and his or her social structure is to be understood. The field of aesthetic statements and interactions thus built up forms a discourse that is both enriching and enriched by its affinity to separate social and political fields of discourse.

Grassfields iconography represents a rich field for interpretation, but the most significant 'meanings' to be drawn from it are not those that the ethnographer will initially elicit by questioning informants. The apparent banality of single-stranded ascriptions of signifying relations between certain geometric designs and their equivalents in the animal kingdom needs to be reconciled with the very real fear, respect and strong emotion with which the people of the Grassfields respond to the sudden appearance of a mask or a 'thing of the palace'. These single-stranded ascriptions, although they certainly exist as normative ideas, do not suffice to explain the changes that occur regularly in Grassfields art—changes that emphasize the appropriation of 'foreign' objects, whether from the West or from other parts of West Africa. The ascription of unilineal correlations between the iconography and certain animal species is not an end in itself, but rather instrumental in the creation of a structure of greater significance. In other words, the verbal statements regarding the material elicited by ethnographers to date are only markers, instrumental as labels for identifying designs and placing them in a cosmological schema for future reference.

The failure of the meaning-centred approach to account for the emotive value and immediacy of aesthetic objects—what Wolff (1983: 84) and Fuller (1980) refer to as the 'specificity' of art—or for their dynamic movement and transformation in the Grassfields, points to the need for a theory that will account for these shortcomings. In the next section I shall try to show how the immediacy of the aesthetic and its dynamism make it an optimal field of discourse in which to represent and affect the socio-political field. In this manner, with the help of material from Brain and Pollock's *Bangwa Funerary Sculpture* (1972) and an article by Eugenia Shanklin on the Afo-a-Kom (1990), I hope to show that the material culture of the Grassfields is still more versatile and sophisticated than previous analyses have suggested; and perhaps to point the way to a more generalizable approach to West African material culture. The example from *Bangwa Funerary Sculpture* illustrates the point that 'meanings' elicited through verbal statements and Western art-historical exegesis furnish only the markers upon which an aesthetics of interaction is based. Eugenia Shanklin's article is then referred to in order to illustrate how these markers are used in strategies serving political ends.

3. *Bangwa Sculpture*

In *Bangwa Funerary Sculpture*, Brain and Pollock offer a good example of the disjunction that results from analysing non-Western artefacts according to Western values. For example, the statement that 'some Bangwa pieces in European museums are no more distinguished than rough-hewn carvings made by youths to pass away a few minutes' (1972: 60) may be true from the sculptor's point of view but it is not pertinent in social terms since it is not its execution that lends a piece its importance. Again, in a comparison between two sculptures (ibid.: 61, plates 31 and 32) the authors describe how one of them is badly carved, 'an example of uncertain, unskilled workmanship' (ibid.: 60). The authors realize that this does not have anything to do with the age of the object or declining standards, since the thing in question is 'a highly valued old work' (ibid.), but they go on to describe the nefarious effect of European interest in old-looking carvings as the root of the problem of alleged shoddy workmanship. Their acceptance of European standards at face value does not sit comfortably next to their own admission that aesthetic criteria are not pertinent in assessing a piece's value in the Grassfields. This is evident in the statement, which the authors themselves supply (ibid.: 64), that

> to many Bangwa what the European is buying is not an object of aesthetic interest; they do not believe that a night mask is really going to sit in a museum for people to stare at. For them, the huge prices are being paid for their supernatural powers, which the ancient ritual experts gave them and which will be used to their advantage by the Europeans.

What is needed for a sociological analysis of West African artefacts is not an assessment of quality based upon Western standards, but a contextualized exegesis of the dynamic creation of significance—both evaluative and strategic, or socio-political—in a diachronic model.

This accords with my view that Grassfields sculpture is not judged indigenously on aesthetic criteria in the conventional sense of the term. Rather, there is an alternative interpretation of value, linked to the maximization of symbolic capital on several levels, that is often expressed in the literature on the Grassfields, and by informants themselves, as power. Power in the Grassfields is strongly associated with masks, divination figures and other objects. It is not conceptualized in an abstracted, politico-theoretical form, but *experienced* as the fear of certain objects that have undergone ritual processes and interdictions, and embodied in ways of acting, social choreography, and so on. The examples that follow are attempts at interpreting Grassfields aesthetic notions as objectifications of social, political and cosmological categories and values in the production, display and movement between owners of artefacts.

Ceremonies and rituals are not inherently empowering (although they may be spoken of as such). Nor is the carver's product inherently powerful, although it is experienced as such through processes of aestheticization and objectification. The respect in which a secret society sculpture or royal portrait eventually comes

to be held is derived from, and serves as shorthand for, its strategic significance (defined as the opportunities for the accumulation of symbolic capital or changes in the social structure to which an object can be applied). The experience of this power, embodied as fear and respect, emphasizes the particularization of the artefact, which is singled out as extraordinary in its treatment from then on. It is customarily hidden from the sight of all but a few powerful initiates for most of the year and only taken out for certain rituals, or in such exceptional circumstances as war or regulatory society activities. This exceptional treatment is likely to lend a further significance to the object, or to validate its original status, through its individualization in the creation of a biography (Kopytoff 1986).

These ceremonies, like the objects displayed during them, are not significant individually, but form part of a process of signification. They provide the site for a field of reasoning that is quite separate from the sphere of oral communication, and which is not generally understood through consecutive reasoning but emotionally experienced by the association of the artefact with the experiences of the individual, for example, of his or her subordination to and/or implementation of power. This means that when assessing the value of a piece, a Bangwa informant will be less concerned with its execution than with its biography. It is not aesthetic standards that will constitute the pertinent criteria for the elaboration of its significance, but, on the one hand, the biographical details concerning whether or not the piece has been sacralized, which secret society it belongs to, which rituals it has been displayed in, how many times it has proved its efficacy, and, on the other hand, formal questions regarding its 'fit' in the style category in which it is placed and how conformist or subversive of the dominant style it is. Biography and form are two fields regarding which a social and political discourse can be engaged in through artefacts.

The distinction between what the maker and the consumers see in a single artefact is best examined by qualifying the distinction between these two categories. The formal elements of an artefact comprise the sphere in which the maker exercises his will *vis-à-vis* the social structure, while his critical success or failure in the eyes of the dominant culture, his social career and the biography elaborated around his product after it leaves his ownership are the points at which the consumer takes over the creative stance in relation to the artefact and becomes a producer in his or her own right—the points at which production and consumption merge in a single creative process.[4] Secrecy and regularized ritual help to form the framework within which objects become emotionally loaded for their viewers. The exceptionality of revelation, the brief glimpse of the mask or royal figure controlled by a few individuals, mark those objects that have been sacralized over those that have not and help to sustain or challenge the existing tradition. Within the category of those that have, secrecy also marks those that are more effective, and thus more powerful.

4. This idea is analogous to Barthes' active reader (1970) who structures the text as much as the text affects him; the signification flows in both directions.

If we accept this view of things, for the time being at least, many of the statements that Brain and Pollock make come to fit more neatly into place. It becomes understandable, for example, that the only people assessing sculptural work on purely formal grounds are the sculptors themselves—from whom much of the authors' data in fact came. The sculptors are the only ones concerned with producing the raw material that is seen by the rest of the society as unfinished until consecrated by the ritual experts, at which stage supplementary decoration and colour is often added. Only at this stage does the object assume its full identity and integrity. Before this, all sculptures form part of the historically undifferentiated production of the sculptor. Furthermore, we can easily understand how the formally awkward piece in Brain and Pollock's plate 32 (1972: 61) could be valued more highly than its more finely carved counterpart in their plate 31 (ibid.). When biography is the main criterion of significance, the question of value depends upon the history or historicization of the piece. This, rather than its formal characteristics, is what will dictate the way it is perceived.

The greater value of the rougher piece can also be explained formally, in terms of its liminality in relation to the accepted category of such works. The carver's behaviour is definitely extraordinary according to the authors' informants (ibid.: 43). Although Brain and Pollock interpret this according to the modern Western perception of artists as Bohemian types, all these (selective) details add up to a social construction of the carver Atem as a liminal character, outside the bounds of ordinary Bangwa behaviour. Similarly, Ben, another well-known Bangwa carver, 'like many other artists...is considered odd by his friends and relatives' (ibid.: 44). This liminality is emphasized by the fact that most carvers are of noble birth. Indeed, carving is one of the few occupations that a noble can be involved in without adversely affecting his status (which leads to questions outside the scope of this essay regarding the occult power of the nobles of the Grassfields). This liminality is not surprising when the artisan is considered in terms of the extraordinariness of his production. He whose role it is to produce the raw material of what will become objects of such arresting strategic and emotional salience is bound to be set apart to some degree.

The evidence that Brain and Pollock supply concerning the constant innovation of Bangwa carvers is also interesting in this vein. Atem is reportedly 'apt to be swept up by any fad' (ibid.: 43) and 'new ideas and foreign paints and ornaments may be added [to the artefacts] without upsetting traditions' (ibid.: 59). This liberal attitude extends even to the post-modernist 'bricolage' of using industrially produced plastic dolls and guardsmen's bearskins in dances. Considering the generally conservative self-representation of the Grassfields people, however, and their emphasis on tradition and ancestry, the carver finds himself trapped between the horns of a dilemma: to provide a conservative society with a liberal, dynamic interpretation of what 'good sculpture' is, yet without transgressing the stylistic norms to such an extent as to isolate his work from references to them, thus attracting ridicule or rejection. Forced to walk this dangerous line, the carver is marginalized by the mainstream of society. Both horns of this dilemma do,

however, stem from the same impulse: that of local differentiation within an otherwise homogeneous cultural superstructure.

This impulse to differentiate is expressed at the local level of chiefdom affiliation, as well as at the national level of the Francophone/Anglophone division, an increasingly hot issue in Cameroon that forms the tacit or overt basis for much of the political struggle occurring in the country. Just as the preservation of discrete languages and distinct customs serves this end, so does the ongoing creation of difference through varied styles in the production/consumption of artefacts of material culture. Change and continuity can thus both be applied to the same ends, and traditionalism and iconoclasm can serve equally well as strategies of dissent from the dominant order.

Having posited the particularization of the artefact—the marking of its identity—as a major aspect of the significance of the performance in which it is involved, it remains for me to explain the pertinence of this process. In the first place, meaning in the conventional, overt sense is rejected in favour of a more dynamic, plastic model. According to this analysis, the object accumulates significance through its biography as well as through its form. To a certain extent, form will influence subsequent biography, but the artist is not the only agent engendering strategies through the use of material culture. Those who interact with it after him also can. The following example, taken from an article by Eugenia Shanklin on a commemorative sculpture from the chiefdom of Kom, illustrates the process by which individuals can appropriate an object at any stage after its production and recreate it to strategic ends.

4. *The Afo-a-Kom*

The Afo-a-Kom was stolen from the chiefdom of Kom in the Cameroon Grassfields in the early 1970s and eventually turned up for sale at a prestigious New York art gallery in 1973, at which stage the *New York Times* began to publicize certain details of the sculpture's history. The articles, along with others in *Esquire* and *National Geographic* (for specific references, see Shanklin 1990: 96) precipitated a national appeal for the restitution of the sculpture to its place of origin. Even the name Afo-a-Kom, 'Thing of Kom', was only applied to the object by a Cameroonian diplomat in the United States after the matter was making headlines. Thus we can see from the outset that the object itself, let alone the circumstances of its appropriation, is extremely ambiguous.

In her article Shanklin examines the nature of this ambiguity by elucidating the (very different) perceptions of the Afo-a-Kom that various interest groups promoted during the course of negotiations for its return to Kom. In the United States, journalists working for the *New York Times* and staff of the National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC, formed a liberal pressure group

campaigning for the return of the sculpture to Kom. The Cameroonian central government in Yaoundé, initially represented by its embassy in Washington, formed another interest group, while the fon—and eventually the people—of Kom formed a third group. When the Americans began to campaign for the return of the object on the grounds of its 'sacred' significance to the benighted people of Kom, the local fon quickly capitalized on this American tendency to paternalism by spreading rumours of local droughts, crop failures, mass depression and hysteria, all associated by the local people with the loss of the Afo-a-Kom. Ostensibly, he did this with the object of pushing the Americans in the direction they were already showing signs of falling: of returning the object as a means of enhancing their self-image of benevolence and open-minded honesty.

By getting them to return the object, however, the fon realized he would be increasing his prestige enormously at both the local and national levels by having tricked the powerful, rich Americans into giving up the Afo-a-Kom to a tiny African chiefdom. The Cameroonian central government, who constantly urge national unity over local identity in the fledgling independent republic, were very much opposed to this interpretation of events. To them, the Afo-a-Kom became an embarrassment and a nuisance. Seeing that the fon was using it to gain prestige for one ethnic group, and hoping to diffuse the situation, they tried, but eventually failed, to exhibit the Afo-a-Kom in Yaoundé as a *national* treasure belonging to Cameroon as a whole.

Apart from providing an example of radically divergent ideologies regarding objects of material culture in separate societies with differing cosmologies and expectations, what is most interesting about this chain of events, in the context of this essay, is the view of the Afo-a-Kom taken by the fon and people of Kom. Shanklin's first point is that the rumours of crop failures and other cataclysmic premonitions were all a tongue-in-cheek construction of the fon's, designed for the benefit of the American press with the aim of getting the object returned. The people of Kom, as Shanklin explains, see royal memorial sculptures as highly important, and even powerful, but not in any sense divine or sacred. This is very clearly illustrated by an anecdote told me by E. M. Chilver, who was in the Grassfields in 1963 with Phyllis Kaberry. On a visit to the palace in Kom, they saw the Afo-a-Kom lying face down on the muddy floor of one of the compound huts, its decorative bead covering strewn about the place. When Mrs Chilver asked what it was, she was given the unceremonious reply: 'furniture'. This episode demonstrates perfectly how an artefact can repeatedly pass in and out of a state of emotive salience according to its treatment. The Afo-a-Kom may have fallen out of use, or simply been seen by Chilver at a time of year during which its significance was dormant, waiting to be activated through annual display, but it gained power immeasurably as it came to be viewed in the context of the events developing around its life history.

The precedent for the sense of the importance of the Afo-a-Kom is, however, rooted in the secrecy with which such objects are usually treated. Such things are traditionally closely guarded by a small group of élite palace officials, who

undergo rites to enable them to withstand the object's power and display it only once or twice a year to the general populace. Before the return of the Afo-a-Kom from New York, most of the people of Kom had in fact never laid eyes on it. The secrecy surrounding the object, and the ritualized respect with which it was treated led to its perception as a thing of great power. But what did the power itself signify?

The explanation that something has some attribute X or Y because it is treated as if it does seems tautologous. As with the Bangwa case, however, the power of the object stems from its fit in a category of objects that embody aestheticized social values. The discourse an artefact is engaged in begins with its formal relation to its style category (the class of objects it is perceived as belonging to): a relation that carries the potential to signify. This potential can be exploited through the elaboration of events in the biography of the object by interested individuals and groups. Being emotively charged, yet ambiguous enough to be applied to changing contexts, these objects represent valuable opportunities for appropriation to strategic ends.

This is not the case, however, if treating something in one way conveys some message on a different level. In the case of the Afo-a-Kom, what is most significant about the high degree of respect surrounding the object is the emotional intensity generated around it. This is not to say that some specific message is thus communicated, but rather that *whatever* message is associated with the Afo-a-Kom will bear the poignancy and vividness of something deeply felt: the object turns any matter associated with it into a 'hot' issue. Given this state of affairs, it is very much in the interests of anyone trying to further his or her ends to associate such an emotively charged object as the Afo-a-Kom with them, thus lending a saliency and vindication to the matter at hand.

This is exactly what the fon of Kom did so successfully when he plotted for the return of the 'sacred' object. Suddenly, an emotionally loaded object came to be associated with the whole question of identity, boundary and power in the Cameroon Grassfields, giving the fon an extremely powerful symbol with which to enhance his local and national prestige and influence. In this situation, it is hardly surprising that the central government was so opposed to the organization of a major public ceremony welcoming the object back to Kom—a position which the American escorts of the artefact did not understand and about which they registered great frustration.

Whatever was stressed in the fon's interpretation of the Afo-a-Kom, 'aesthetic' consideration of the object in the conventional sense of the term was pretty low down the scale, though this is not to say that matters of form were not important. The fact is that the artefact had to conform, or at least relate, to the norms of a certain category of Grassfields sculpture before it could be mobilized successfully to political ends as an emotionally salient marker. Given the object's value as a good example of a particular category of Grassfields aesthetics, the pertinent but ambiguous, relative and ephemeral constructs that define the region of a symbolic dynamics of politics, could then be engendered. The biography of the object is

related to its form in the same way as its consumer is to its producer. In both cases, the seeming distinction gives way to a diachronic perspective that treats both sides of the syllogism as strategies carried out by individuals in interaction with the social structure.

Concerning the Afo-a-Kom then, the overt significance of ancestral association, timelessness and allusion to the history of the people of Kom was enormously enhanced by the object's peregrination through the prestigious art establishments of the First World, but dependent upon the niche the artefact occupied in the tradition as a fine example of a relatively rare style. At the ground-level understanding of the object, this chain of events enriched the Afo-a-Kom's biography beyond measure, thus increasing its power accordingly. This understanding of the artefact is clearly expressed by Shanklin (1990: 67):

> In Kom eyes, the statues are not sacred but they do have great power, and their power makes them objects of reverence, beyond monetary value...Whoever carved them [the Ufwu-A-Kom statues, of which the Afo-a-Kom is one] they are products of the reign of the most powerful Kom Fon; their power derives from his aegis and from the reverence for age that is characteristic of Kom culture.

This power can be seen as resulting from an objectification of the symbolic value of the object as an opportunity for the enactment of strategies by interested individuals and groups. This is not to say, however, that the formal significance is impassively constituted by the social structure; rather, all later elaborations depend primarily on what they can signify from the raw material of the form and iconography of the object, their relation to the categories they operate in, and the emotions consequently attached to them from their original production. No artefact is a *tabula rasa*; this is at the heart of the connection between one's personal experience of the artefact and the objectification of one's objective historical conditions.

Shanklin goes on to describe how the death of Fon Nsom in 1974 was attributed to the Afo-a-Kom, which he set eyes upon twice, whereas a fon is only ever meant to see it once during his reign. In this process of emotional loading, the biography of the object funnels attention toward it. A progression from this process into higher levels of metaphor and abstraction plays upon the fit of the object in its formal category and on its biography as a springboard for a wider system of social and political ramifications, which validate the emotional salience of the artefact. It would not be out of keeping, therefore, if the story of the Afo-a-Kom were seen on this sliding scale as at once part of a process of historicization and (at least originally) as an appropriation of the object to a specific interest or strategy.

It follows from this that elaborated significance is not tied inherently to the stuff of the artefacts that it springs from, and that it is versatile and dynamic, forming part of a complex of construction and reconstruction that works in a triangle of influence between form, biography and individual and group strategies. This is the sense in which Chinua Achebe's dictum (1988: 365) that to get a good

view of the world or of a mask, one should not stand in one place is most apposite. Just as one needs to move around the mask, which is also moving, to see it in its three dimensions, so too does one need to look at artefacts in the Grassfields from the vantage-points of various fields of discourse, or struggles in the wider social fabric, to grasp the full significance of their aesthetic.

5. *Conclusion*

In dealing in this essay with the interactive significance attributed to artefacts in the Grassfields, sometimes without reference to iconographical factors, the nature of the object as signifier may at times have seemed arbitrary: arguments emphasizing individual volition and the treatment of artefacts for maximization of symbolic capital in dynamic situations may have obscured formal considerations. Indeed, one could be led to wonder what is so important about particular artefacts, when their significance seems to hinge upon occurrences not directly related to their form. Why did a certain statue make a better signifier than any other one, or for that matter, than a Ghanaian plastic doll or a Chinese enamel pot? There must, in the end, be something about the signifier itself that is significant—or which makes it a particularly apt vehicle for signification—or else the whole question of the arbitrary attribution of meaning founders in the lack of particularity of the single artefact.

Emotionally loaded objects are largely self-justifying: because they frighten, many mysterious occurrences are explained in terms of them; and because of the rich historiographies thus built up around them, they are frightening. It is not sufficient, when seeking to understand West African iconography, to look at the single example, gather oral testimony on it from informants in the field, and elaborate a system, however clever, from the verbal data. Systems elaborated from the standpoint of symbols, coded meanings and textual analysis (such as historical, art-historical, functionalist and structural-functionalist systems) are doomed to reveal only part of an artefact's social significance. An exegesis from semantic material, although essential to an understanding of the significance of artefacts, will never be sufficient if, as I have argued above, the more influential (or affective and thereby effective) aspects of decorated objects are not part of the verbalized sphere of communication of the informants, but rather embodied by them as the naturalized experience of the objective historical conditions in which they interact.

I have tried to argue that elements from all the theories discussed in section 2 above can be helpful in finding the significant continuities and differences in the designs, as well as in the biographies of objects in dynamic historical conditions. It is in the endless possibilities of both form and biography that each artefact's signifying integrity is to be found. The full significance, from an anthropological

perspective, of the signifying integrity of an object will not be apprehended with respect to the single object, nor to the relations of one object with its style category (form) or its life history alone. Rather, I have tried to advocate that it is through a diachronic study of the relationship between a style category and the objective conditions in terms of which that category gains its salience—and which can themselves be affected by changes in the category effected by producers and consumers, or *productive consumers,* in the society—that an understanding of an object's socio-historical significance is to be reached.

The last paragraph of section 2 above suggests that there are parallels to this approach that could be applied fruitfully to the analysis of ceremonial and performance in Africa, both of which are so intimately related with artefacts. Again, it is not the single event, or parts of it, that are significant in anything but a trivial way. For one thing, and this essay could be criticized for failing to do this, it is essential to recognize the enriching echoes and interrelations between aesthetic fields in a community—masking and dancing or masking and music—as well as between these aesthetic fields and the socio-political realm. Secondly, the significance of an aesthetic field lies largely in the opportunities that alterations in its performance, or control of its production and consumption, provide not only for reflecting but also for constructing and reconstructing the social and political conditions of the interested individuals and groups.

Finally, amongst the many ends left untied here, three questions are particularly in need of attention. First there is the means by which the artefacts that we have been discussing come to be appropriated by the various élite groups in the Grassfields (or elsewhere). Secondly (though this is perhaps not a separate question), how they manage to model the thing to their intentions more or less successfully in different situations. And thirdly, how this relates to the maintenance or alteration of power relations. These questions could lead to more concrete ones regarding the creation and maintenance of difference and social closure, and how transgressions of these conservative practices come to be accepted or rejected through local systems of criticism, which are the observable face of socio-historical change.

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