Surviving Works: context in Verre arts

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Preface

Surviving Works is a study of the artworks of the Verre people of Nigeria to be found nowadays in museums, dealers' galleries, and private collections, as well as of their documentation. It is an exercise in rescue ethnography based on what remains, and, so far as we are aware, little of what remains is in Verre hands or has been for more than a half century. The works made by Verre that survived were those that were collected; in the absence of outside demand, they might have remained in Verre hands; we acknowledge the counter-factual but can analyse only the upshot of what did happen. The circumstances of the collection and preservation of Verre works are significant to our story not least because they bear on the question of how representative these artwork survivors are of the range of works once in use. As a further complication, little that survives was collected strictly *in situ*, a circumstance reflected in our sub-title ('context in Verre arts'), though most pieces were collected nearby. Conventionally, a study like this would aim to put these surviving Verre artworks 'back' into a series of ethnographic, historical, and linguistic contexts to understand better what they might have meant to those who made and used them. This largely eludes us. Descriptive accounts of the Verre are few and thin. The Verre appear fleetingly in historical records, even when we might anticipate they would feature more fully. First-hand ethnographic research has been superficial. So, we find ourselves largely reversing the usual formula of putting material objects 'into context' in order, instead, to supplement our understanding of context from the evidence of what was collected at different times. Hence, in search of a productive development of what remains a lopsided relationship, we attempt first to find *context in Verre arts* rather than to put Verre arts into context.

With roughly a half-century gap between them, two periods of collection stand out. The first occurred in the decade or so immediately following the invasion and colonial occupation of the Fulani Emirate of Adamawa, the state that from the early nineteenth century had encompassed the Verre. This took a few years but the fall of the capital of Adamawa in 1901 was a signal date. Most Verre were included within British Nigeria, close to the border with German Kamerun. Occasional Verre artworks had been acquired in the first decade of the twentieth century by colonial officers and other travellers amongst them, but by far the largest collection was made during the traversal of the region by the German scholar-collector-dealer Leo Frobenius and his 'expedition' in 1911. We trace this collection's subsequent dispersal among German museums. Because the early colonial assemblage, even in its entirety, was relatively modest, we can discuss all the most significant pieces known to us in Chapter 2. The second period of collection occurred during a period of little more than a decade following British withdrawal from Nigeria in 1960, and shortly afterwards from the Trust Territories of the Cameroons in 1961. This time the major collecting agents were a mix of African dealers, Europeans who were mostly, but not exclusively, working in Christian missions, and Nigeria's then Federal Department of Antiquities, for which Tim Chappel collected several hundred objects in 1966. Insofar as we are able to do so, we reconstruct the

entirety of Chappel's Verre collection in Appendix 1. The wider circumstances of the early postcolonial assemblage are the subject of Chapter 3 in which, largely based on Chappel's fieldnotes, we also survey and supplement the slight existing ethnographic record of how these objects were made and used.

Before embarking on a survey of object types in Part Two of our account, we pause for an Interleaf that recuperates a display case of the metalwork of Adamawa installed in the Jos Museum in the late 1967. In addition to its museological interest, the installation included several objects of which we otherwise lacked illustration.

Part Two provides a step towards a *catalogue raisonnée* of Verre objects arranged only for convenience into: percussion instruments of various kinds, personal ornaments, initiation helmets and crooks, hoes and daggers, and a catch-all of the remainder of brass skeuomorphs of objects made in other materials. With one exception, emphasis is placed on metalworks, and in particular the brassware for which Verre were renowned, however, a final section of our catalogue surveys anthropomorphic figures which were made in wood, clay and brass. As far as possible, we relate these objects to the Verre terms for them in the hope of reflecting Verre categories in use.

Our catalogue is introduced by a brief discussion in Chapter 4 of brass skeuomorphs, copies in brass of objects of which the 'originals' are in other materials, and our entire account returns to this topic in the concluding chapter, Chapter 6, when we place Verre and their immediate neighbours into a wider regional context. With very few exceptions, surviving Verre works derive from the two rounds of collection we have described that took place fifty years apart and were centred in the decades of political transition of the 1910s and 1960s. By the time of the second round of collecting, the local industries that produced these objects had all but disappeared, so what was sold could not be replaced. Given the increasing influence by then of the world religions and the call of modernity, things construed as traditional exerted diminishing attraction in any case. No third round of collection is in prospect, and most middle-aged Verre today are unlikely even to have seen many of these objects in their past uses. Our hope in making this account freely available is that another generation of Verre will become interested in the works of their forebears and fill in some of the gaps, while correcting errors, in what we are aware is an incomplete project. The planned repatriation of the artworks collected by Danish missionaries to a purpose-built archive and museum for the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria may provide the stimulus to such an interest.

Comparing the two assemblages object type by object type, we were struck by both resemblances and differences. Of course, there were continuities: given the durability of metalworks it is likely that some of the objects collected in the 1960s had been made by the 1910s and were contemporary with things collected as new then. But equally or more striking, are the respects in which they differed: some types of object collected in the 1960s were absent from the earlier assemblage. Was this a consequence of the way collecting took place,

or did it represent change? Absence of evidence is not, of course, evidence of absence, but looking at what evidence there was, persuaded us that the second factor was as significant as the first: the range of Verre production had been reoriented to some extent during the half century between the two collection periods. The assemblage collected by the 1910s was likely to represent a pattern of production established before colonialism when the Verre were a small minority surviving within the lamidates (or sub-chiefdoms) of the Fulani-ruled Emirate of Adamawa. Brasswares from this earlier period for the most part used material more sparingly than those collected in the 1960s; castings were typically finer and more delicately ornamented. Castings made during the colonial period, by contrast, often used material abundantly; some objects, of which oversized beads are a striking example, seem designed to flaunt the sheer bulk of material required to make them. Changes were not confined to brassware.

A striking instance of disappearance concerns the decorated gourds with attribution to Verre that were collected in large numbers by the Frobenius expedition in 1911. These are absent from the early postcolonial assemblage, except as copies made in brass, akin to the fossilized remains of a previous form. With few exceptions, the objects Verre made in brass were skeuomorphs, recognizable versions of things already made in other mediums. In responding to demand at a particular moment, the brass skeuomorph objectified its prototype and, when that prototype was less durable, preserved it as a subject of desire. This effect is intensified by brass itself being a prestigious, red material; anything copied in brass was valuable, and probably the more so in the earlier than in the later period of collection when the supply of brass had increased. Given that the range of skeuomorphs tended to widen, those few objects found only in brass have an, at least prima facie, claim to originality, certainly in terms of their forms and possibly also chronologically. The outstanding examples would be clapper bells, crotals and perhaps also arm cuffs, none of which have close prototypes in iron. Brass dagger handles differ sufficiently from their iron or wooden counterparts for these not to be considered as prototypes, so they may be included in this category of originally brass objects, particularly since the most valuable type of dagger handle was that ornamented with crotals. While clapperless bells, leg pellet rattles, and various kinds of metal bracelet all have functional similarities to bells, crotals and cuffs, none of them is a plausible prototype of the other. Without brass, these items would not be in the Verre material repertoire.

Turning to the skeuomorphs, we can distinguish two main sources of prototypes. Some of the brass works collected reflect the culture of the Emirate, for instance large-bladed ceremonial spears clearly not designed for hunting, fans and fly whisks, muslim amulets, even a pair of sandals. It seems likely that this range would once have been wider, including arms and horse tack for instance. Other brass objects seem less likely to be objects of Fulani desire, including a variety of objects used at Verre male initiation and during other, to differing degrees esoteric, rituals and performances, including the brass hoes associated with women. A few things, like ornate daggers, the skeuomorphs of decorated gourds used as drinking

vessels, brass clapper bells and so forth may well have been desired by Fulani and Verre, as well as by non-Fulani neighbours including Bachama, Bata and Chamba, who also acquired at least some of the Verre ritual wares. In view of the proportions collected of these two classes of skeuomorphs in our two assemblages, we explore the possibility that the religious and ceremonial aspects of the local religions flourished briefly between the relative lightening of the burden of Fulani overlordship under early colonialism and the acceleration of conversion to world religions during later colonialism. This efflorescence, if it was real, would have been enabled by the greater abundance of materials (notably brass), the availability of new tools for carving (in the case of wood), and the increased surplus remaining in the hands of farmers and smiths to provide effective demand.

By comparison with their neighbours, Verre had a high degree of artisanal specialization, producing goods for which there was demand in regional economic systems. This was true particularly of metalwork, both in iron and in copper alloys. Hence, interpreted with care, the changed composition of the two assemblages should also tell us about some of the changes that occurred in the regional economy over the half century between their collection. The distinctive forms of later Verre iron- and brass-wares can be interpreted to have arisen over the course of a transition, at least in relative terms, from meeting the needs of military and military-ceremonial complexes towards satisfying a desire for ritual and ritual-ceremonial display, not just on the part of their non-Verre neighbours but also for themselves, and particularly for the families of smiths among them. Demand for ceremonial and prestige goods may have peaked between the World Wars but was in decline by the 1960s, another reason the objects collected in that decade were readily sold and not replaced. Verre brass casters disappeared as an occupational grouping. The distinct communities of metalworkers apparent from earlier sources dispersed, as families of smiths came to live in the plains alongside farmers producing mundane hoes, axes, knives and so forth to meet their needs. In brief, the society that produced and used brasswares ceased to exist.

Our title, *Surviving Works*, is meant then to refer not only to the two assemblages of objects that survived and that we are able to analyse but also to the adaptations for survival that Verre made to produce them, and later to cease producing them. We nod, in this sense, towards one element of the influential argument of Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz's ironically titled *Africa Works* (1999) about the logics of at worst getting by, and at best making the most of whatever the situation. Verre found themselves acting within circumstances that were often dangerous and unpredictable, periodically chaotic, with little military capacity at their disposal. Their options to survive, or indeed to do better than survive, were limited, but one of them involved the skills they possessed as workers, whether as farmers or in specialist manufactures. Production was simultaneously a work of adaptation to their political circumstances as well as a way of gaining whatever security and advantage might be derived from their special skills. Thus, our argument is that the make-up of the works surviving in the assemblages of the early colonial and early post-colonial periods differ not just on account of the ways they were collected, but because of the ways Verre had instrumentalized their

specialist position in regional systems of trade in the decades preceding the two collections. Seen in this way, the assemblages themselves, and particularly the differences between them, enlarge the context in which we can understand Verre history, justifying the sub-title 'context in Verre arts', rather than the more conventional reverse formulation.

Note on the authors

Our collaboration was initiated by Klaus Piepel (Nigeria-Desk Officer at Misereor, the German Catholic Bishops' Organization for Development Cooperation, from 2005-13) who, as a collector of Verre art, had contacted Tim Chappel to ask about the Verre artworks he had bought locally in the mid-1960s on behalf of the Nigerian Federal Department of Antiquities, then his employer. This enquiry encouraged Chappel to return to and begin to write up the partial copies of collection notes and images he had retained since that time, and to explore the literature on the area. Piepel had simultaneously reached out to Richard Fardon (now Emeritus Professor at SOAS University of London) who had carried out fieldwork among the Chamba, southern neighbours south of the Verre, intermittently since the mid-1970s. The sites of Fardon's longest main fieldwork in the Alantika Mountains had been nodes in the regional circuits through which Verre products had once moved, and he had met Verre smiths there producing for a Chamba clientele, so was eager to collaborate towards understanding this wider regional set of connections.

As authors we have shared the research while trying to bring to the collaboration whatever complementary skills we have. Hence, Piepel undertook the bulk of primary research in German archives and in the contemporary art market, Chappel analysed aspects of the various types of objects he collected, and Fardon has considered their ethnographic and historical contexts. But we have not worked on any of these aspects exclusively, and we have exchanged ideas and reading notes extensively. Fardon synthesised the research materials and wrote the text for Chappel and Piepel to comment upon.

This study could be refined and extended in ways which we are not able to pursue ourselves, most obviously: consulting the collections and archives of the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Jos and Lagos, reading the colonial reports on Verre in the Kaduna National Archives, continuing to seek out Verre works in European and American collections, and not least carrying out local archaeological, historical and linguistic research. Given we cannot bring this work to completion ourselves, we are grateful to *Vestiges* for making it available to others in a format that can be revised, enlarged and as necessary corrected in future. Because this volume is meant as much as an archival resource as a finished book, we have included illustrations of poor quality when we have access to nothing better, and we have made available our reconstruction of Tim Chappel's accession notes in a relatively raw form in the hope that details we cannot interpret are clearer to those, particularly Verre readers who may want to elucidate them in the future. As an obvious instance, a Verre reader competent in a contemporary orthography should be able to refine or correct our transcriptions of Verre language, though some archaic terms might have

slipped out of general use. Anticipating that it may be used as a reference work, and given its digital form, many object entries appear both in the ordinal listing of collections (Chapter 2 for the early colonial collection; Appendix 1 for Chappel's Jos collection) and in the analysis of types of object (Chapter 5). While this repetition is inelegant, the alternative would be to ask the user to flip back and forward within the online text which would be tiresome.

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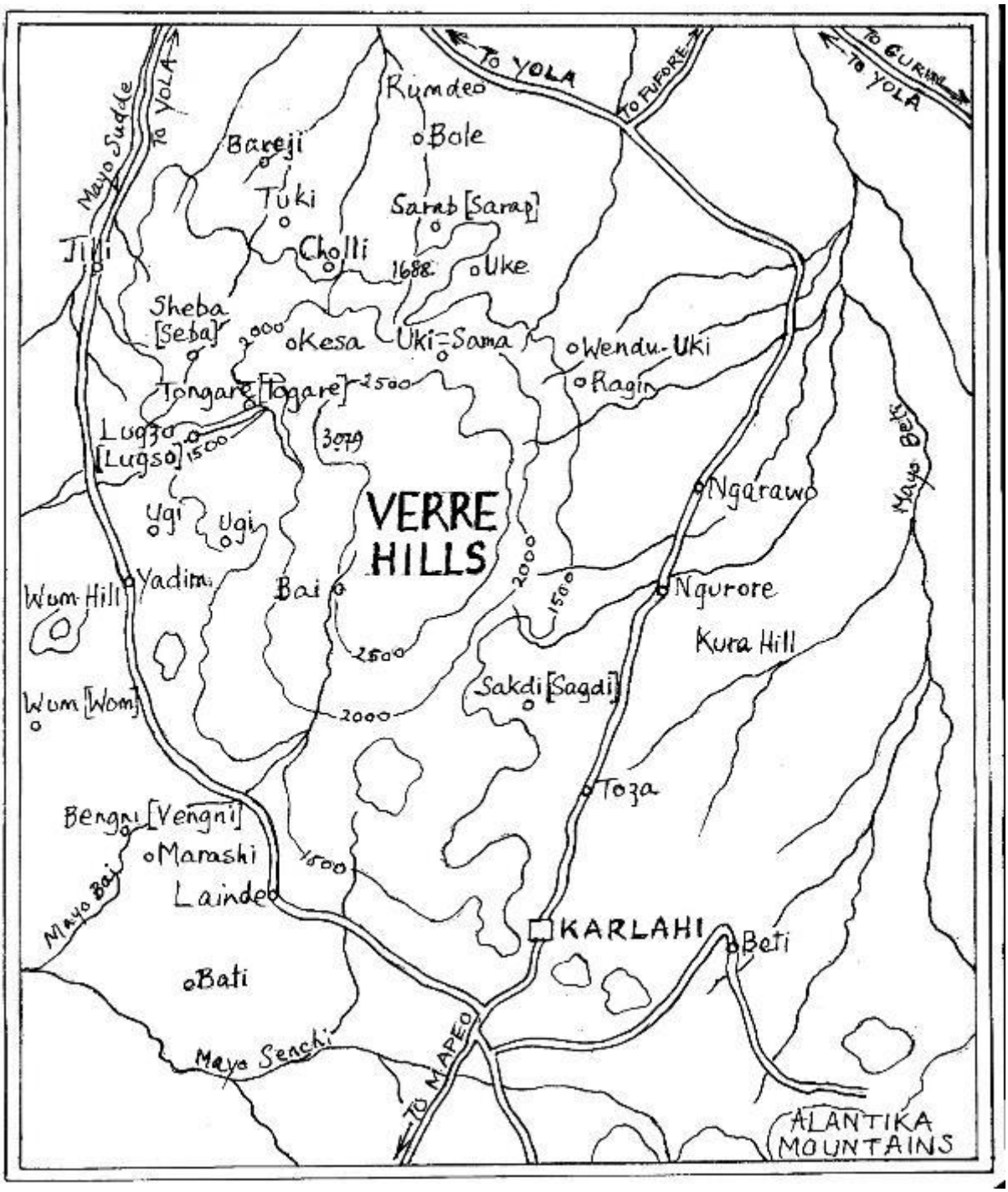
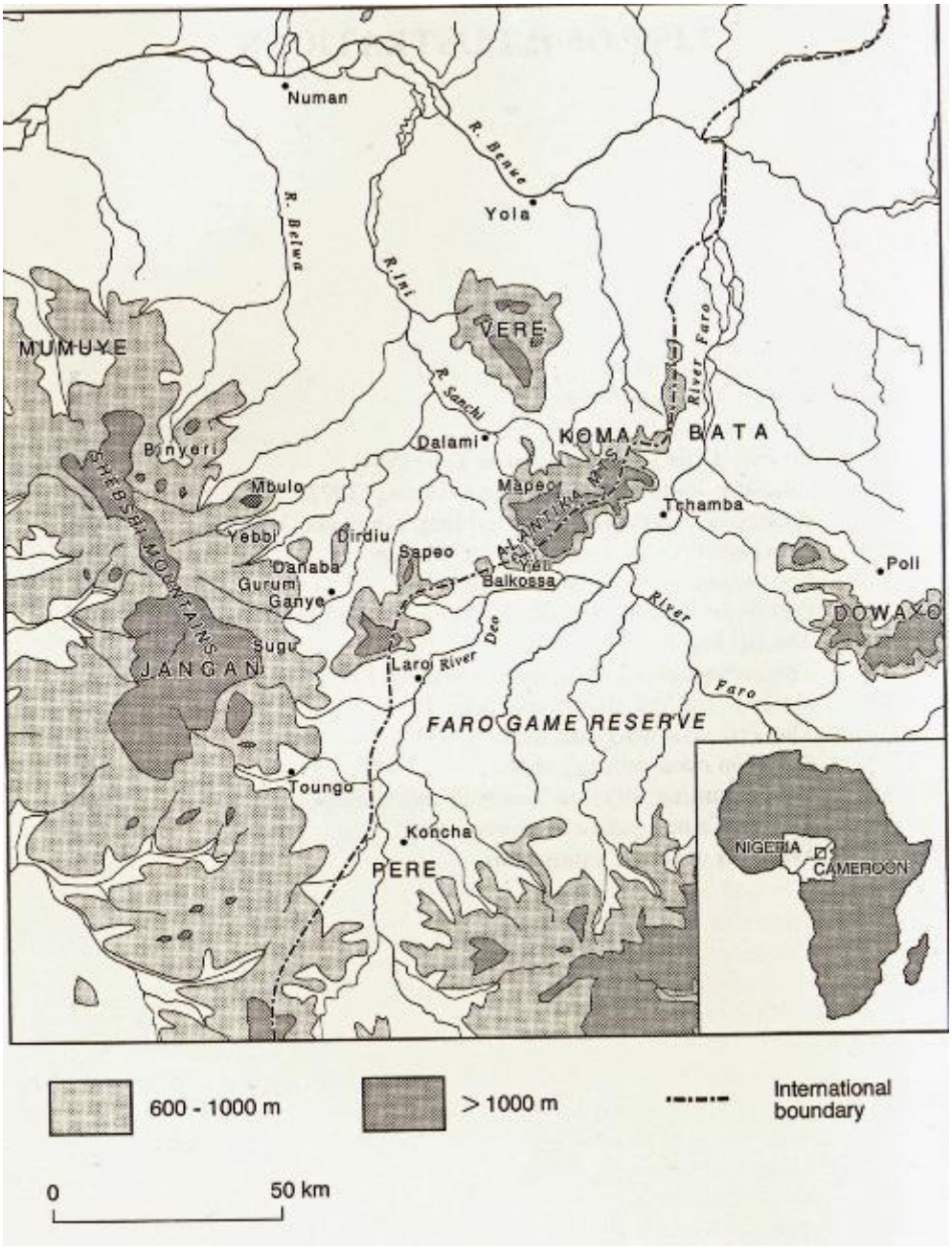
Maps



The Verre Hills and nearby plains (Chappel)

(Clicking on the image will open a higher quality version)



The region south of Yola, Adamawa

(reproduced from Richard Fardon 1990 *Between God, the Dead and the Wild*,

Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute)

(Clicking on the image will open a higher quality version)