

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## SUB SAHARAN AFRICAN CULTURE – Ancient Period

Frederic Will, PhD

### Ancient Africa ('Beginning' to 500 C.E.)

**Overview** The northern regions of Africa were from earliest times homes to writing, which is the historian's most robust tool for characterizing the ancient past. Following examples from Mesopotamian culture, the Egyptians mastered and passed through several stages of writing skill, leaving behind them a detailed record of lived life, both elite and peasant, north east of the Sahara. Without stopping for detail, we can vault from the world of ancient Egypt, to the book centered and highly literate cultures of seventh century Malian Islam, from which were to grow Arabic and East Africa systems of writing and material of substance for scholars and saints. Meanwhile, south of the Sahara, texts and writing systems reflected the southward drifting influences of Muslim-African culture, but apart from that the entire ancient period of Sub Saharan African culture was barely caught up into the written and recorded mass of world historical awareness. As a consequence we must by and large look for *non-verbal records* of ancient Sub Saharan African culture. We will review below a few of the most informative remaining sources--visual art, music and dance, religion-- for the understanding of this early period of African history.

### The visual arts

**Architecture** The ancient Egyptians were, for three millennia B.C.E., masters of massive granite creations; those pyramids which served as heavenly burial chambers for the Pharaohs. Nor were they the only pyramid builders in Africa, for their southern neighbors, in Meroe and Nubia, continued long into our era to construct vast cities of Pyramids for their deceased and deified rulers. Quite outside the Egyptian tradition, however, lie many traces of massive ancient African construction: the Nubian city of Kerma (2400 B.C.E.), a vast desert complex carved from stone; stone monoliths in what is now the Cross River State of Nigeria; unanalyzable stone circles in Senegambia: many further traces, like Tichitt Walata, 2000 B.C.E., which was a massive Saharan settlement redolent of advanced urban planning skills.

**Painting** The earliest painting remaining on the African continent dates (these dates are conjectural) from the middle of the sixth millennium B.C.E., and is to be found everywhere but especially in the Tassili region of the northern Sahara, and in the Hoggar (in today's southern Algeria.) This rock painting, time-worn but often still vivid, is of a type which can be found millennia later in many parts of the African continent--among Namibians, Bushmen and throughout East Africa, as well as in the northwest--but which, in the Sahara, preserves images of life conditions and life styles, which distinctly span several millennia of human development, frequently providing us insights into flora and fauna, conflictual and pacific social situations, and historical political settings. Thus this kind of painting on rock, which flourishes as perhaps the first sustained recorded art, proves its capacity, through time, to reflect the desire to express. Telling samples can be found in numerous reproductions--my reference here is to the excellent brief book by Willetts, *African Art*, illustrations 27,29,30--which indicates the intangibility (ill. 27), historical continuity (ill. 29), and design freshness (ill. 30) of this archaic work. One would search these rock paintings in vain for the bold colors of later African painting, for millennia in sandy rock do much to bleach the vigor of ground rock.

**Sculpture** The oldest African sculptures--with the exception of those from Egypt-- date from the Nok culture, the first discovered works of which were found in tin mines in Zaria State, Nigeria, and represent a tradition vital from roughly 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. These sculptures of humans and animals are often created in terra-cotta, and are often small, figurines of six to twelve inches. Brother to these works, and roughly contemporary with the second half of the Nok period, is the sculptural work of the capital Yoruba city of Ife, also frequently terra cotta. Of both these traditions it needs saying that on occasion they created totally unprecedented, almost life-sized terra cotta figures. The vitality of sub-Saharan sculpture, which thrives yet today, is inscribed in these earliest works, compelling instances of a shaping drive seemingly part of early humanity's requirement to reflect on itself. (My references to actual works, here as in our entry on African *painting*, are to the excellent brief book by Willetts, *African Art*; one could hardly improve, for example, on the selection of plates-- illustrations 17-45 in Willett-- representing Nok and Ife work.)

## Performing Arts

**Music** Ancient African cave paintings depict musicians playing for dancers, energy exploding from the rock walls. Nor are these walls, scattered by the thousands across many parts of Africa, the only source of information about ancient African music. We can even return to the travel document of the Carthaginian admiral Hanno, in the fifth century B.C.E., who found, on sailing down the West Coast of Africa, pockets of black dancers making music and fire along the coast, awakening in him the passions that were later (in fiction) to terrorize Marlowe, in Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness.' This was the Ur form of Sub Saharan mystique.

**Dance** It is a frequent assumption--supported by ancient Saharan rock paintings as old as the fifth millennium B.C.E.-- that the ancient African dancer is a direct representative of the tribal god, and can serve as a communication channel between the tribe and its creator--or spiritual forces living from the supernatural. The dancer expressing this spirit function is usually preoccupied by inspiration, even trance, during the period of the dance itself.

## Worldview

**Religion** What we can say to this topic will apply to African culture at all times, and we will repeat only parts of it, with only limited variations, in our surveys of later periods of African culture.

With a few exceptions ancient indigenous Sub Saharan African religions are monotheistic--not polytheistic like the myth-religions of the Greeks and Romans, or of Hinduism. Also with a few exceptions these African indigenous religions have at all times emphasized the importance of spirits who mediate between God and his (almost always male) people. (This mediation will have been rendered especially important, because God is typically described as having withdrawn from the universe after having created it. Extrapolating backward, from what we know of later African religion, we can surmise that exceptions exist within this kind of creator 'withdrawal': Amma, the supreme creator for the Dogon people in Mali, brought mankind into existence by mixing the primordial material elements with 'the vibration of his spoken word.') While God is universally respected, as part of the ongoing process of the cosmos, he is not the stern Father God of the Abrahamic tradition, or the god with whom one 'dialogues intimately.' The Supreme Being Malungu, of the peoples of the Great Lakes region, in East Africa, is seen as the object of the prayers of last resort, the last place to turn for help. While this foundational monotheism is the trademark of the oldest known African religious beliefs, we see it persist to our own day. To our own day, equally, persist other of what seem to have been the primal concerns of archaic African religion; *the nature of the sacred, the journey through sacred space; the entitlement of salvation.*

## Entering God's world: sacred space

Characteristically, the path to the discovery of the sacred, the healing, and the holy has in Sub Saharan African religion always been through ecstasy, some kind of altered state in which one becomes preternaturally sensitive to the presence of the harmony of the universe. Dance induced trances, herbal concoctions, ritual prayers--all such conditions, invariably in a group dancing or chanting setting--these are the paths toward access to the 'presence of the kingdom,' whatever form that takes.

## Finding your way in God's universe; the spiritual journey

Once 'inside the spirit,' the African believer has always wanted above all to find himself in a place of harmony, where the human and the creator were at oneness with each other, or, alternatively, where the still unborn and the original creator of the universe meet, at the believer's standpoint. The Yoruba God, Olorun, directs his secondary messengers, his *orisha*, to direct affairs on earth, and to protect the virtuous. Mulungu, of the Great Lakes peoples, directs the deities of the tribe's many clans, to care for their members. Amma, the god of the Dogon of Mali, generates social harmony into which the believer is embraced, and in the order of the universe is thought to be sustained by *politeness*. In all these finding processes, the believer is aided by the active search provided by divination; the scoping out of the god's will, through manifestations in the material world. There is no indigenous Sub Saharan African religion without its system of diviners, who read signs in the stars, who study the alignment of cowrie shells or bones that have been 'fortuitously' scattered across a field, or who interpret the god's voice in the thunder. In the end there is no evidence more compelling, for being in the god flow, than pregnancy and good health, and no contraindication more vivid than illness. To be ill is above all to be on bad terms with the gods.

### **Meeting your maker in the end: salvation**

Broadly put, life throughout native Sub Saharn African religions tends to be experienced as part of the grand cosmic scheme of life cycles, human and natural. The virtuous man is the one who fits richly inside that higher order, venerating his ancestors, praying for the newborn. Social compliance, fitting inside one's society, is not simply following convention, but being oneself as nature intended. It is (a nearly) hard and fast convention, of the tribe to which marriage has made this author a co-partner, that the male head of household should be buried in his/her place of birth, quite appropriately, if possible, underneath the bedroom he occupied in life.

### **What we can know, about ancient African culture**

By the nature of the evidence, we are limited to a broad set of conclusions. (Writing, which is lacking, is where specific conclusions enter the picture: who was where and when.) Ancient African Sub Saharan culture (like all African culture) is highly religious, prolific in its artistic expression, and adept at employing nature--rock, sand, stone, wood--for purposes of construction and expression

### **Reading**

Bascom, William, *African Art in Cultural Perspective*, New York, 1971.

Beier, H.U., *Art in Nigeria*, Cambridge, 1960.

LaGamma, Alisa, *Genesis: ideas of origin in African sculpture*, New York, 2003

Paulme, Denise, *African Sculpture*, London, 1962.

Rachewiltz, Boris de, *Introduction to African Art*, trans. Whigham, New York, 1966.

Willett, Frank, *African Art*, New York, 1993,

### **Discussion questions**

Metallurgy assured the abundance of tools in many parts of ancient Africa, and at various times. Were there factories? Where were tools made? How were they distributed?

It is estimated that African rock painting has a history lasting over 30,000 years. What was the attraction of painting on rock? How durable a surface did rock present? What were the special advantages and limitations to painting on rock

Are the uses of carving and painting united in the making of the African mask? Is one or the other element dominant?

Is the original impulse to African sculpture religious? Is it relevant to know that for the African sculptor the very tree from which the sculptor's wood is taken is considered sacred?

Does the absence of writing in general, in pre-colonial Africa, explain the absence of a Holy Book, or religious scriptures? Or is the whole tenor of African religion antipathetic to the notion of such scriptures?

Does the notion of sin enter the perspective of indigenous African religions? Of conscience? Of spiritual self-examination?