

**Overview** If there is a single theme, to the development of African culture in this period, it is the mutual discovery of one another, by Africa and the ‘outer world.’ While the great western seafaring nations had begun their discovery of the Americas just at the beginning of the period before us, Africa (especially Sub-Saharan Africa) was to remain relatively little known for several centuries more, arguably into our own time, when international commerce and culture are still coming to grips with the interiors of this huge continent. However Portuguese traders had begun the opening of the continent in the 15th century, and traders from the major European nations had begun substantial African contacts in the following centuries. Missionaries had been among the most active additional forces, bringing to the emerging early modern Africa their zeal to spread the Christian gospel. Within Sub-Saharan Africa itself, however, there were indigenous movements of great energy, in the arts and sciences, which amply indicated the independent tenor of growing African culture. We can look at a few elements of development in architecture, the visual arts, and philosophy.

### The Visual Arts

**Architecture** The great palace of the Oba of Benin was initially founded in the thirteenth century, but grew in power and royal accoutrements, with the great power of the Oba of Benin, who seemed to European visitors of the 18th century to be the ultimate in dark majesty. (The increasing circulation of rumors, concerning the human sacrifices carried out here, only added to the growing ‘western’ sense of the evil of the place.) There was no question, though, about the extraordinary girth of the palace walls. In the words of an admiring visitor, ‘they extend for some 16,000 kilometres in all, in a mosaic of more than 500 interconnected settlement boundaries. They cover 6500 square kilometres and were all dug by the Edo people. In all, they are four times longer than the Great Wall of China, and consumed a hundred times more material than the Great Pyramid of Cheops. They took an estimated 150 million hours of digging to construct, and are perhaps the largest single archaeological phenomenon on the planet.’ The annihilation of this palatial wonder, in 1897, was the response of British troops to what they took to be unacceptable barbarism; to which they then added their own by destroying a great number of the splendid bronzes which still today strike us with awe at the achievement of early modern Benin.

**Painting** Rock painting embraces a history which survives, in Africa, to our own time. The restoration of modern Sub-Saharan art history is as difficult as the formation of a chronology of rock-painting styles and sequences. African art history, because Black Africans did not for the most part write their own history, was written for them by such as Ibn Battuta (14<sup>th</sup> century), who travelled widely through the Sahara and visited festival sites, say, in which dancing and masking events took place where ‘poets’ painted with ‘ridiculous red beaks’ appeared praising their ruler. There follow, in the centuries opened by the first Portuguese explorations of West Africa in the fifteenth century, discoveries of Africa as a source for plunder and excitement; one notes especially the ample travellers’ descriptions of the Royal Court of Benin, discussed above, but when it comes to identifiable paintings, from the early modern period, we find ourselves looking at the style developments of the mask and masquerade, regularly painted sculptural forms, which remain for us the most vivid center point of Sub-Saharan African painting. The dating of the earliest preserved samples of this masking, with its painted forms, is as complex and tribe or clan-specific as you can imagine, for each mask is created to meet tribe-specific issues, the expulsion of demons, the promotion of fertility, the frightening of foes, or, say, the representation of beauty or ugliness for educational purposes within specific clans.

**Sculpture** The growing presence of the white western world, in West Africa, is heralded by the fifteenth century arrival of Portuguese traders and soldiers; sculptures from the Guinea coast in the 15th century depict stout Portuguese fighters, cast in bronze; cf. illustrations 53, 55, in Willetts; *African Art*. There are examples like ‘the Master of the Leopard Hunt’, in work done for the Royal Palace in Benin, which try out an African perspectivism that suggests the western eye; cf. Willetts, (illustration 171.) We have traders’ purchase records indicating imports into Europe of curious carved ivory spoons from West Africa. We are at that point in a period of fervent, but largely undocumented, sculptural-mask activity, from within the bosom of tribes and clans whose rich achievements are still honored from within, by sculptors who to this date, several hundred years later, work in their traces. Illustrations

overwhelm us at this point, for we are on the brink of a flooding of original and inimitable mask-creations whose well springs will beg a final remark.

### **Performing Arts**

**Theater** From the first Portuguese commercial explorations of Africa, in the fifteenth century, through the Colonial invasion, from the late 19th to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, western observers freely expressed their astonishment, at the to them unknown social life styles of the Africans they encountered. The great Yoruba Egungun dances, masquerades celebrating god-power in dance ritual, were known to outsiders from the 15th century. Early Malian religious dance shows observers startled by the ease of interaction between 'spectators' and performers; and by the readiness with which the simple dramatic narrative of Malian plays replicated the social classes composing Malian society. Gikuyu circumcision dance-theater, in Kenya, startled travelers and missionaries from one century to the next, exemplifying the kind of 'primitive' naturalness for which African theater and spectacle was becoming known--and misunderstood. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, spiritual- possession rituals, a kind of theater in themselves, drew missionary attention, and traveler fascination gravitated to makeshift dance theaters throughout the continent. It was in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the slave trade, trans-Saharan commercial transport, and the serious execution of colonial rule took effect, that the reality of the Sub Saharan African cultural difference made itself evident.

**Music** We can only approximately date the accession of increasingly diversified instruments, to the African repertoire. We can, though, say that in the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 14th centuries Iqbin drums came into active use, that in the 15th century we see increased use of talking-drums--which are amply depicted on the walls of the Palace at Benin, and that by the same time there is widespread use of pellet and tubular bells. Rhythm enforcing instruments are making their way into performance, forerunners of those lamellophones, xylophones, koras, wind instruments which by the 17th century will be wrapped into a vast network of musical styles and expressions variegated throughout the continent. It cannot be overstated that the growth and direction of instrument technology, in Africa, is closely related to the kinds of rhythmic music indigenous to the continent. Whatever the occasion, for which the music is created--religious ritual, marriage ceremony, funeral songs, praise songs for chieftains, courtship songs for young girls--the polyrhythmic character of the art is omnipresent. Many instruments, in fact, are fitted with two or more rows of keys, permitting the instrumentalist to cross play on two or more sets of rhythms.

### **Worldview**

**Philosophy** In the dearth of written testimony, we had best refer this developmental stage, in African philosophy, to those Bantu migrations which we feel able to date to the almost millennium and a half long set of movements which initiated in Cameroon, and worked through into the cultural formation of the peoples of Central and Sub Saharan Africa today. This migration was 'ethno-philosophic': it implied and developed the gradually forming family-clan-tribal system--still the norm in sub-Saharan Africa--through which was formulated a comprehensive view of human being in society: a view of man as deeply and intimately social, god created, and mutually supportive: a view ultimately aligned with the traditions of human dignity, openness to god, freedom, and mutual responsibility which we have noted above, in our birdseye survey of early African philosophy.

**Conclusion** What can we know about early modern Sub Saharan African culture?. We can know that Sub Saharan Africa is beginning to find increasingly defined directions for its own artistic expression, arts which were under development, so far, with little recourse to writing. The Bantu communal perspective, packaged above as 'philosophy,' was a natural setting for the communal arts of the masquerade, the organized instrumental performance of music, the robust and participatory theater, and the types of bronze sculpture peaking in 18th century Benin.

### **Reading**

Titon, Jeff Todd, *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples*, New York, 1984.

Tracey, Hugh, *The Evolution of African Music and its Function in the Present Day*, Johannesburg, 1961

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

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**

Are there identifiably great Individual architects behind the major achievements of African architecture? Was architecture itself considered to be a separate skill, like mask making or painting?

What kinds of skills were required for the mask making that flourished in the period before us? Were they sculptural or painting skills? Or a blend? Did one have to understand the masquerade itself, for which the mask was being made?

Do you suppose the traditional tribal mask maker expresses his 'unique personality' in his work? Or does he simply work inside inherited forms and the challenges they convey?

What kind of theater do you take the theater of this period to have been? Do you imagine it as a kind of rustic opera? Did the performers need special training?

What is the special fascination of the bronzes from the Oba's Palace at Benin? What justification did the British give, for transporting these precious art works to London? Is the case similar to that of the Elgin Marbles?

Did African music develop in complexity, as the number and variety of its instruments grew?