

4-1-2011

"Après Dieu, c'est l'Artisan": A Study of Bamikéké Woodcarving in Dschang, Cameroon

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"Après Dieu, c'est l'Artisan"
A Study of Bamikéké Woodcarving in Dschang, Cameroon

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Social Pluralism and Development, SIT Study Abroad
Spring 2011
ISP Topic Codes: 101, 513, 401

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Abstract

Wood sculpture among the Bamilékés is a political, spiritual and economic endeavor. Sculptural artwork is ultimately at the service of the community and is used in the daily and ceremonial life of the chefferie. Though the sculptor must create according to the needs of his society, he is himself responsible for the very formation of his community's values and ideology.

Over the course of one month in Dschang I worked with wood sculptors in an artisanat, learning the technical aspects of the craft as well as their philosophies behind their profession. I created two wooden chairs and conducted seven interviews. Five of the interviews were with sculptors of varying ages; the other two interviews were with historians.

This paper attempts to present the history and traditions of Bamiléké woodcarving in a way that honors and highlights the importance of the sculptors with whom I worked. It examines the power of the sculpted image, spiritual forces' relationship with sculpture and the role of the sculptor in traditional and modern society.

La sculpture en bois chez Bamiléké c'est un travail politique, spirituel et économique. L'œuvre de l'art est, à la fin, pour le service de la communauté et on l'utilise dans la vie quotidienne et la vie cérémoniale. Au même temps que le sculpteur doit créer pour les besoins de la société, il est lui-même responsable pour la formation des valeurs et l'idéologie de sa communauté.

Pendant un mois à Dschang je travaillais avec des sculpteurs en bois dans un artisanat. J'apprendrais les aspects techniques du art et leurs philosophies de leur profession. J'ai fait deux chaises en bois et j'ai fait sept interviews. Cinq interviews ont été avec des sculpteurs qui ont les âges différents ; deux interviews ont été avec les historiens.

Cette composition essaye de présenter l'histoire et les traditions de la sculpture en bois chez Bamiléké dans une façon qui honore l'importance des sculpteurs avec qui je travaillais. La composition examine le pouvoir des images sculptées, les relations entre des forces spirituelles et la sculpture et le rôle du sculpteur dans la société traditionnelle et la société moderne.

To my parents
Who thought I could succeed in everything,
but were proud even when I failed.

To Teufack Dieudonne
Who thought I would fail,
but was proud when I succeeded.

And to Mama Charlotte
My Big Villager, thank you for the laughs, love and coffee.

Acknowledgements

I am forever grateful to the sculptors at the Dschang Artisanat for giving me a wonderful and enlightening month of woodcarving, sugar cane and discussions of marriage. Thank you to Père Super, Cedric, Lepage, Brice, Valerie, the twins and all of the many people who stopped by to give me advice and encouragement. I wish I could do it all over again.

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Wooden Sculpture in Bamiléké Life

Introduction

Countless stories of concealment, revelation and initiation are structured by a desire that posits secrets in order to reveal them, imagines an other with a true 'within.' By the end...there are no more ultimate depths: the search for revelations is shown to be endless.¹

Wood sculpture among the Bamilékés in Cameroon is a history, social contract, art form and source of income that I have, within this independent study project, attempted to understand both intellectually and physically within a one-month stay in Dschang. Needless to say my project is incomplete. It could, however, never *be* complete, and only by acknowledging this fundamental facet of Bamiléké art and society can I hope to discover a glimmer of “truth.” It is a testament to the power and significance of this wooden artwork that it remains impenetrable and mysterious even to those who have lived with the sculptures and the culture they serve their whole lives.

In the context of the grassfields—where secret societies organize social hierarchies and temper the power of the chef—artwork places secrets on display. This display, however, serves only to heighten the otherworldly, unknowable power behind the sculpted object because it is (by design) partial and incomplete. *"Secrecy dramatizes and inculcates a deep emotional experience of the partial nature of our understanding compared to the uncharted fullness of reality."*² Thus the symbols of wisdom, power, fertility and wealth frequently employed by Bamiléké artists are created to show us what we cannot know, and to make us aware of the mystery and sanctity of our daily

¹ James Clifford. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, MA, and London, 1988. pp. 159

² Fredrik Barth. *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman New Guinea*. Oslo and New Haven, 1975. pp. 221

lives. “*The visible functions to keep the invisible invisible.*”³ It is, therefore, in an attempt to honor the teachings of this last month (and to avoid the mistakes of the art historians, anthropologists and colonialists that came before me) that I immediately claim my partial knowledge.

Colonial systems of political and religious control did not appreciate the value of the unknown and unknowable and thus labeled African art “primitive” in an attempt to foreclose the meaning and power of the continent’s symbolic, artistic imagery.⁴ The effects of colonialism’s manipulative “understanding” of Cameroonian art and society are still at work in the politics and culture of the country. With this in mind I hope, within the course of the paper, to critique occidental art truisms (of which I am undeniably a product), explore the culture and religion surrounding Bamiléké wood sculpture, and allow the Cameroonians I spoke with a voice in their own production.

History and Consciousness in Cameroonian Art

*On utilise la sculpture pour connaît l’histoire de notre région.
Parce que on a acté et c’est celui qui crée.*^{5 1}

In much occidental art history “*the works of anonymous sculptors from sub-Saharan Africa were regarded as having sprung in Africa from a collective subconscious devoid of history.*”⁶ Because names were often kept secret⁷ and there was no written history, occidental scholars—entrenched as they were within their euro-centric mindset—believed that Africans did not have a history and that their art was not the

³ Mary H. Nooter “Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals.” *African Arts*, Vol. 26, No. 1. Jan. 1993. pp. 58

⁴ Id. 55

⁵ Teufack Dieudonne. Personal Interview. 14/4/11

⁶ Bettina Von Lintig. *Cameroun*. Galerie Dulon: Paris, 2006. pp. 16

⁷ Id. 120

product of innovation and artistry, but rather an expression of the primitive, collective subconscious. This is a clear example of cultural imperialism that dichotomizes the “Western us” from the “African Other” and posits the African as an underdeveloped savage who cannot attain the lofty intellectual and creative accomplishments of European artists. Fortunately, scholarship has begun to move away from this dogmatic and racist worldview, which was proven incorrect on countless occasions throughout my interviews with Cameroonian sculptors and historians.

Far from lacking history, the Bamiléké society transmitted their stories, and those of their ancestors, through art. *“La société était pour longtemps une société sans écriture. Donc l’artiste était celui là qui devait apporter la clé de compréhension de cette société.”*^{8 ii} For the preliterate grassfields, sculpture was *“une forme de littérature, une forme d’expression... les Bamilékés essayent d’exprimer leur littérature à travers la sculpture.”*⁹ⁱⁱⁱ These quotes demonstrate that Cameroonians have a strong and vibrant history that was overlooked in Europe’s determination to devalue African culture and religion and exalt western modes of thought. The images, utility, style and even the very existence of Bamiléké sculptures are rooted within the history and artistic consciousness western thought refused to acknowledge. To this day sculpture is charged with the task of historical preservation: *“ça que nous faisons aujourd’hui, on essaye de rédac la passé, comment vivaient nos aïeux. C’est ça qui nous représentons aujourd’hui sur le bois, pour que ça ne perd pas.”*^{10 iv}

⁸ Flaubert Taboue Nouaye. Personal Interview. 20/4/11

⁹ Noupa. Personal Interview. 18/4/11

¹⁰ Anonymous Woodcarver. Personal Interview with Teufack Dieudonne. 14/4/11

Language and Imagery

*Language is most often represented in models as a chain in two dimensions only whereas even the simplest art objects exist simultaneously in many dimensions.*¹¹

The nonexistence of written language within the Bamiléké society does not connote the primitivism and ignorance that classical understandings of development and culture might assume. Artistic rather than written modes of expression can instead signify a *more* rather than *less* nuanced philosophy. *“Prosaic speech and mundane graphic design aim to evoke a single level of meaning, while art—like poetry—achieves its effect by giving tangible form to many levels of meaning at once.”*¹² Where written language lies flat on the page—nonexistent for any who do not take the time to read the words—and spoken word disappears upon utterance, artistic communication through sculpture can continue to transmit meaning even after the artist who created the work, the person who commissioned it and the society in which this exchange took place all cease to exist.

Art in the Bamiléké tradition speaks without speaking and conceals in the process of revealing; art is at the service of the society, but without it there would be no society. It is, therefore, significantly more effective to transmit history, religion and social mores through masks, stools and doorframes than books. Placed within the community these objects cannot be overlooked or denied, yet—by utilizing multifaceted symbols rather than clearly defined words—they maintain the ambiguity and secrecy that are at the heart of the chefferie’s power structures. Artistic expression *“restores to*

¹¹ Nigel Barley. “The Linguistic Image in the Interpretation of African Objects.” *African Languages and Cultures*, Vol. 1, No. 2. 1988. pp. 89

¹² R. Layton. *The Anthropology of Art*. Granada: London, 1981. pp. 113

*language the dimension of what cannot be expressed. The difficulty of perceiving the invisible world and the problem of showing the aspects of the supernatural powers, whilst concealing those that are reserved for the initiated, imply a recourse to symbols.*¹³

Power of the Chief, Power of the Sign

Sculptural objects have an undeniable power within the Bamiléké culture. These works of art communicate and thereby simultaneously perpetuate the religious, historical and hierarchical ideologies of the community through their effective employment of symbols. The chief is the religious leader of the community and as such his power rests in the politics of everyday life as well as the unknown world of God and the ancestors. *“Le roi est le principal responsable administratif religieux, judiciaire et politique du royaume”*¹⁴ v The political and spiritual life of the community is thus structured around the chief and the secret societies that support him; yet the *symbols* of power—represented in the community’s art—truly create and sustain the chief’s authority. The artistic symbols linked to royalty are *“necessary for the very exercise of power, to the extent that certain objects are the mediators of the fon’s power.”*¹⁵

Power is conferred upon and maintained by the chief through a series of performances and signs recognized by the community within the chefferie. Animals, such as the lion, the elephant and the panther¹⁶ are often employed as symbols of strength and power. The chief and the artists who create for him make use of these

¹³ Jean-Paul Notué and Bianca Triaca. *Mankon: Arts, Heritage and Culture from the Mankon Kingdom (Western Cameroon)*. Catalogue of the Mankon Museum. 5 Continents Editions: Milan, 2005. pp. 64

¹⁴ “Les Rois.” *La route des chefferies*. Musée des Civilisations. Dschang, Cameroon.

¹⁵ Notué: 2005. pp. 64

¹⁶ See the table on page 14 for more detailed explanations of each animal’s significance.

signs to further impress the power of the chief upon the community. For example, *“during the major festivities, the fon of Mankon sits on a sculpted throne, his feet resting on one or two tusks lying on a leopard skin,”*¹⁷ thereby displaying and asserting his right to power for the community. Sculptors also use images *“des perles, le cowrie, des pièces de monnaie...pour vous montre l’idée que le roi est une personne qui ne manque de rien.”*¹⁸ vi

The deployment of symbols is not reserved for the king alone; the nobility, secret societies and other high-ranking community members also frequently call upon the realm of the symbolic. Masks, canes and chairs—fabricated by the community’s artisans—confer mystery, power and prestige to those who are allowed to employ them. When asked about the significance of the wooden masks worn in ceremonies, Lepage (a Dschang based sculptor) replied, *“C’est le pouvoir! Celui qui est masqué, on ne peut pas découvrir son identité. Comme la commandent du chef, il port un masque.”*¹⁹ vii

He also explained that when someone holds a cane *“pendant une cérémonie personne ne peut l’approcher. On ne peut pas approcher quelqu’un qui a la canne, n’importe qui.”*²⁰ viii

Teufack Dieudonne, the "père super" of the Dschang Artisanat provided a further glimpse into the hierarchy and spiritual significance of sculptural objects saying :

À la chefferie, et il y a un lieu—on appelle ça le lieu sacre—c’est la notables qui partent là bas, et chaque un a sa place. Il y a les grades des chaises, les grades

¹⁷ Id. 58

¹⁸ Flaubert

¹⁹ Nangmeteu “Lepage” Daniel. Personal Interview. 19/4/11

²⁰ Ibid.

des notables et le chef. Dans chaque chaise il y a le sacrifice pour ça. Donc je ne peux pas m'assois, ni fabriquer.^{21 ix}

This quote not only illustrates the routine political utility of symbols within the Bamiléké community, it also highlights the underlying connection between the daily, public exercise of power and the more mystical, hidden forces at work in the society. By employing the example of the simultaneously spiritual and hierarchic chair system in the chefferie, Dieudonne demonstrates the fundamental importance of sculptural art and signs within this highly structured social order.

Ancestors and Totems

Le but de l'œuvre d'art est d'affirmer la permanence et d'actualiser le system mythique auquel doit se conformer la vie terrestre.^{22 x}

As previously mentioned, the Bamiléké chief is the religious and political leader of his kingdom. This dual role demonstrates the lack of clear separation between the spiritual and the social within the community. The absence of distinct poles—public and private, mystical and mundane—is a crucial aspect of the power structure at work. The chief and the notables draw much of their political power from their religious functions, which are themselves dependent upon the artistic object for legitimacy and power. A respectful relationship with Si/Ndem/Mbi, the Supreme Being or God, and the ancestors marks a crucial aspect of the religious beliefs in the grassfield, and the chief is the key to this relationship.²³ The chief is *“un personnage sacré, quasi divin...Il est le premier représentant des ancêtres dans le monde des vivants.”*^{24 xi} The importance of the chief is

²¹ Dieudonne.

²² Jean Laude. *Les Arts de L'Afrique Noire*. Librairie Général Française, 1966. pp.187

²³ “La Cosmology.” Musée des Civilisations.

²⁴ Id. “Les Rois”

thus affirmed and strengthened through this identification with the non-terrestrial world of the ancestors. He is not, however, the only link. Just as sculpture mediates the power of the chief to the people, the people can utilize sculpture to mediate between themselves and their ancestors.

Il y a les sculptures dans la tradition, dans la chefferie, qui sont comme le dieu. La plupart des fois, dans la cote chefferie et dans la cote spirituelle, c'est le peuple qui utilise la sculpture pour faire les sacrifices, pour faire le prier et quelques choses comme ça. Les ancêtres essayent de passer par la sculpture pour les parler, oui pour transmettre certaines choses.^{25 xii}

The ancestors can directly influence the daily lives of the living as well as their future afterlife, so it is necessary to appease them with sacrifices and offerings.²⁶

The totem is a statue and a spiritual concept that represents the chief and his nobility's mystical link between the divine world of the ancestors and the terrestrial world of the chefferie. Families practice rituals revolving around totems to honor their ancestors,²⁷ and the community's elite (usually as members of secret societies) use animal totems, or Pi, to transform into animals and protect the village.²⁸ *“Le totem transforme un homme en animal pour protéger ou sauve le village. La panthère est le gardien de la chefferie. Si une mauvaise personne entre la chefferie il rencontre la panthère et il fuit ; si il ne fuit pas la panthère le tue. Ça c'est le totem.”*^{29 xiii}

The animals chosen as totems are those that are recognized by the community as having certain characteristics—such as strength, wisdom or nobility—that will serve as an asset to those who assume them. Because of the socially accepted significance of

²⁵ Valerie Nana. Personal Interview. 17/4/11

²⁶ “Ancestral Worship.” Musée des Civilisations.

²⁷ Noupa

²⁸ “Worship of Totems.” Musée des Civilisations.

²⁹ Lepage

specific animals, the most common totem animals are also those that are most often represented in Bamiléké sculpture, with much the same meaning. I have created the table below in an attempt to illustrate, through quotations, the various animals and their symbolic significance.

Animal	Significance ^{xiv}
Elephant	L'éléphante est fort. Les éléphants sont la puissance et la chance. (Dieudonne) 'L'éléphant, aucun piège ne peut le prendre' : proverb. (Massa 123) 'Big Elephant' would be a title of honor for a chief." (Von Lintig 60)
Spider	L'araignée, sculptée en particulier sur les sièges, est l'image de l'intelligence et du savoir. (Massa 45) Il y a aussi l'araignée égale, ça veut dire le gros spider, qu'on représente aussi parce qu'il a une signification dans l'imaginaire. (Noupa)
Lion	Des statues de lion, symbole de l'autorité politique, étaient parfois placées à l'entrée de la concession du Chef pour rappeler à chacun sa toute puissance (Massa 124) Le lion c'est la force. Il y a les lions ici. (Dieudonne) Il y a aussi le lion qui est le animal le plus fort ; il représente le chef. (Noupa) Puissance c'est le lion, ici on appelle le chef l'homme du mane, parce que le lion est un animal que on ne chasse pas, ça veut dire qu'il est le roi. (Flaubert)
Panther	Il y a aussi la panthère des animaux qui sont forts. (Noupa) Tu peux voir la panthère que le chef partage avec des autres notables, parce que tu peux voir les éléments des certains notables trouve aussi la panthère. (Flaubert) La panthère c'est la force et la royaltie de la chefferie, la noblesse. (Dieudonne)
Monkey	Chimpanzé, celui qui est fort pour la guerre. (Dieudonne) Monkeys are strong, brutal and less intelligent. (Musée)
Turtle	Le tortu c'est un animal cardinal qui représente la sagesse. Et dans la vie quotidienne, aussi il représente beaucoup. Dans la spiritualité parce que les gens croient en le tortu, puisque c'est un animal qui aide à deviner, qui a monté dans le village qui a volé qui a fait un faut. Donc c'est un animal quelque sort, on peut dire, pour la divination. (Noupa)

Removed from the "nature" versus "civilization" dichotomy created by occidental culture, the people of the grassfield recognize their existence as part of

nature. They believe, therefore, that a totemic connection between a human and an animal can serve to strengthen the human, physically and spiritually. *“In the Grassland, men (specifically the fon) are allied with animals with the aim of having double, triple or multiple existence and taking over all the qualities—and even the defects—of the animal or animals chosen so as to be effective in their lives.”*³⁰

The signs of power conferred from important animals and represented in the community’s artwork thus serve to further strengthen the power of the social elite. The Bamiléké chief *“avait par ses pouvoirs surnaturels la faculté de se transformer en éléphant, léopard ou encore en buffle—animaux royaux qui dont de ce fait représentés en des masques imposants qui symbolisent l’autorité du Fon.”*^{31 xv} The authority and spiritual force granted upon the chief and nobility by the artistic and religious expression of totems is not, however, unchecked or personal. The sorcery at work in totems remains distinct from harmful, community endangering sorcery only in that the chief utilizes his mystical power for the good of the community and not for personal gain or vengeance.

Sorcery

During the course of my research I discovered that there are two main forms of sorcery among the Bamiléké: that which is deployed for the well being of the society at large—taking place within the sanctioned religious and social practices—and that which is socially deviant, deployed to achieve individual desires such as power and wealth. A

³⁰ Notué: 2005. pp. 58

³¹ Gabriel Massa. *Sculptures Animalières d’Afrique Noire*. Société des Amateurs de l’Art Africain. Sépia, Arillac: 1996. pp. 44

rigid distinction between good sorcery and evil sorcery is, however, somewhat difficult to maintain. Both forms of sorcery utilize sculpture to communicate with spirits and achieve their mystical ends. Furthermore, as previously stated, the chief, nobility and secret societies derive and maintain much of their power through the realm of the symbolic, which also serves to magically link them with totem animals and spiritual forces. Thus the sorcery employed by the chefferie's elite might also be a form of personal aggrandizement. Notions of the individual, however, do not function this way in Bamiléké society. The chief uses symbolic objects to establish his authority in the community, yet simultaneously he is *himself* a symbolic object utilized to maintain the order and harmony of life in the chefferie. *"C'est le roi mais pas le roi comme une individu, comme la civilisation occidentale, de l'individu c'est 'one man, one name;' le roi c'est le roi de la communauté. Et l'individu qui passe là n'est que un élément qu'on utilise, que la communauté utilise."*^{32 xvi}

There are no doubts surrounding the chief's use of magic because his very identity as chief rests upon the appropriate uses of spiritual power in the service of the community. Sorcery *"pour le chef c'est rien que pour protéger la population, c'est pas pour faire le mal."*^{33 xvii} Any power or wealth that a chief or noble might gain from his symbolic and spiritual practices is positive because it signifies a powerful force against harmful elements both outside and within the community.

The Kun'gang secret society, of which the chief is also a member, demonstrates the ways in which sorcery must contend with inner and extra-societal evils. Through

³² Flaubert

³³ Dieudonne. Personal Interview with Nafack Cedric Merllin. 14/4/11

sculptures of dogs and lekat figures, the Kun'gang "takes action in the village context against supposed anti-social were-animals and cannibals in the wild bush."³⁴ The threats, however, often emanate from within the chefferie, and this society, therefore, also serves as a secret police force—conducting inquisitions into the affairs of the community—and a hospital.³⁵ The members of the Kun'gang work with "plants and mu'po and small statuettes (6 to 15 cm) with the power of healing numerous illnesses."³⁶

Negative sorcery—such as curses, witchcraft and vampirism³⁷—also uses sculptural objects. Wooden statues are thus an integral aspect of sorcery and spirituality of all kinds. As demonstrated by ancestor worship, totems and the Kun'gang, objects can be harnessed to communicate with supra-human forces. They can also be utilized, as mentioned earlier, to gain individual rewards or inflict harm on another person. This practice, however, is condemned by the community and seen as very dangerous. "*Je ne utilise pas les objets d'art comme ça parce que l'esprit dans l'objet peut me tue facilement. Les objets ont beaucoup de puissance.*"^{38 xviii}

Sculptor's Role in Sorcery

*Je suis seulement un travailleur,
je ne suis pas un magicienne ou sorcier.*^{39 xix}

An art object is not automatically invested with magical powers, nor are all of the pieces Bamiléké sculptors create supernaturally meaningful. An object's original creator has little say in the mystical employments of his or her art. "*Simplement, il exécute une*

³⁴ Von Lintig: 2006. pp. 114

³⁵ "Kun'gang." Musée des Civilisations.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Id. "La Cosmology"

³⁸ Valerie

³⁹ Lepage

commande et reçoit en retour, un salaire. L'objet fini qu'il livrera n'est pas lui-même chargé d'émotivité. Il ne sera consacré, imprégné des forces religieuses qu'à la suite de rites appropriés."⁴⁰ xx Though the sculptor must understand his society well in order to instill an object with the correct symbolic power (using a certain animal or design to convey a certain meaning), paranormal power is generally only added once the object is complete.

*Il y a une rituelle, on utilise les herbes, une certaine quantité des herbes appropriées. Ces herbes parlent de la tradition, on peut les mélanger avec beaucoup des autres ingrédients, on combine tel herbe et tel autre, et on fait un rituelle au tour de la statue, et ce n'est plus la même statue qui était là puisque le travail. On dit travail, quand on dit travailler un objet, ça veut dire de conférer de puissance, de force.*⁴¹ xxi

The sculptors I spoke with all denied using sorcery or magic of any sort in their work. They often referred to sorcery as a negative "complication" that created problems and scared people.⁴² It was made clear to me that, although others could place special powers in their objects after purchasing them, these artists had neither the ability nor the desire to work with mystical forces. "*C'est chaque un qui connaît ce qui il veut faire avec l'objet. Le sculpteur, on a fait ici comme ceci simplement, on ne complique rien.*"⁴³

xxii

Sculptor's Role in the Chefferie

Though Bamiléké sculptors do not usually have spiritual powers, they nonetheless serve a very important role in the political and spiritual life of the village. They provide the objects necessary for the multifaceted power of the community's elite

⁴⁰ Laude, Jean: 1966. pp.140

⁴¹ Noupa

⁴² Dieudonne, Nafack Cedric Merllin and Kenfack Brice Armel. Personal Interviews. 14/4/11

⁴³ Brice

and are themselves charged with the role of historical documentation and daily observation. Sculptors take the daily life of the community and translate it into art, a process of creation that has much value. *“L’homme qui fait la sculpture est d’abord un artiste et c’est quelqu’un qui compte dans la société, parce qu’il fait de l’art. Les artistes comptent beaucoup pour leur représentation de la vie du village.”*⁴⁴ ^{xxiii} The purpose at the root of sculptural production is cultural transmission and the preservation of tradition.⁴⁵ This does not mean, however, that there is no room for creativity among sculptors or that Bamiléké sculpture is a stagnate art form. *“Artists, producers of noble works of great value, are first and foremost the guardians of tradition, but they are also at the fore of innovation.”*⁴⁶ The political and religious institutions of the Bamiléké are intricate and nuanced enough to allow for an endless amount inspiration and reinterpretation.

The legend of Ateu Atswa is a perfect example of how a Bamiléké sculptor, from the Bangwa kingdom, worked within the tradition to create new meaning and political commentary (even satire). In this history, Fomen, the chief of a neighboring woodlands group with whom the Bangwa’s had close economic ties, commissioned Ateu Atswa to create a royal sculptural portrait. Tradition mandates an idealized image of chiefs, overlooking their physical flaws. The Bangwas were at this moment, however, upset with Fomen for arrogantly buying their Lefem secret society. Ateu Atswa decided to make their displeasure known, so—instead of creating a sculpture of royal perfection—

⁴⁴ Noupa

⁴⁵ Notué: 2005. pp. 61

⁴⁶ Id. 52

he “carved an unflattering portrait figure of Fomen as he apparently really looked, with one side of his face paralyzed.”⁴⁷ Fomen was naturally furious, but Ateu Atswa had, under the protection of the Bangwa chief, already fled the kingdom with his reward money by the time his insult was discovered.

Ateu Atswa’s story also demonstrates the potential for political power accorded to talented artists. Within the chefferie—a “social order defined above all else by its focus on hierarchy,” where social ascension was greatly desired but almost impossible to achieve⁴⁸—the sculptor’s position was one of mobility. “The social position of artists was not fixed per se; some were slaves but in the grasslands there were also chiefs who worked as sculptors.”⁴⁹ The process of becoming a sculptor took years of apprenticeship, but if an artist was talented and hardworking he could hope to climb to the top of Bamiléké society. As long as the sculptor avoided being killed by a client in an effort to protect the originality of his newly acquired masterpiece,⁵⁰ he could hope to achieve great social status.

The societal importance of sculptural objects in the Bamiléké’s daily lives largely accounts for the sculptor’s ability to climb social ladders with greater ease than other community members. The sculptor’s creations are seen as having substantial use value. As I have already explained, art objects are used to establish and maintain power through symbolic social cues and make supernatural connections with supra-human

⁴⁷ Von Lintig: 2006. pp. 122

⁴⁸ Dominique Malaquais. “Building in the Name of God: Architecture, Resistance, and the Christian Faith in the Bamileke Highlands of Western Cameroon.” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1. Apr. 1999. pp. 53

⁴⁹ Von Lintig: 2006. pp. 122

⁵⁰ Pierre Harter. “Four Bamileke Masks: An Attempt to Identify the Style of Individual Carvers or Their Workshops.” *Man, New Series*, Vol. 4, No. 3. Sep. 1969. pp. 416

forces. They are also valuable diplomatic tools and are offered as gifts to a chief to gain political favor or given from one kingdom to another to strengthen political ties.⁵¹ It is an object's functionality, more than aesthetic beauty, which accords it value and prestige in the eyes of the community. The sculptor, therefore, is of more importance to the community than a singer, "*parce que on peut dire que le chanteur, il est paresseux, il ne travail pas. Le sculpteur peut servir dans la chefferie, sculpter les animaux, la trône du chef, par exemple, les tabourets.*"^{52 xxiv} Though aesthetics are important and sculptors gain status in accordance with their talent, at the core "*art is not intended to be a merely aesthetic experience, but it is, above all, functional and is involved in daily life.*"⁵³

Sculptor's Role in Modern Society

*Le rôle de la sculpture Bamiléké dans notre culture
est de vendre pour pouvoir faire nos besoins.*^{54 xxv}

How then does the role of the sculptor change when the daily life of the community changes? When social life no longer revolves around the chief and secret societies? There was a general consensus among the historians and sculptors that I spoke with that the art of sculpture in the Bamiléké community has changed from the days of the ancestors. "*Oui, ça que nous faisons maintenant est très différent que les sculpteurs du passé. Les objets d'art étaient plus importants que les objets que nous créons aujourd'hui.*"^{55 xxvi} In the past, the sculptor's clientele resided largely within the chefferie and he could count on a comfortable income because the villagers needed his

⁵¹ Von Lintig: 2006. pp. 18

⁵² Noupa

⁵³ Notué: 2005. pp. 63

⁵⁴ Cedric

⁵⁵ Lepage

objects to participate in the religious and spiritual life of the community. Modernization, however, brought with it new religion and new social rules that do not place the same importance on sculptural objects. The director of the Musée des Civilisations told me that, *“l’artiste capitalise toutes ces valeurs sociales. Il doit penser : c’est pour qui que je faire ? Il doit poser la question : qui est au cœur de la société ? C’est les éléments qu’il va mettre dans la production.”*^{56 xxvii} If this is true, however, what happens to the social values, the heart of the society and artistic production when sculptors say: *“le client pour qui nous créons c’est le tourisme”*?^{57 xxviii}

There are those who believe that creation for tourism signals the decline of artistry and meaning in sculptural production. They assert that African art has become tourist paraphernalia and *“today’s artists are not as dedicated to their craft as their ancestors.”*⁵⁸ This seems, however, as reductionist and patronizing as previous theories that held African art to be unconscious and history-less. Though the modern world has undeniably made life for the sculptor so uncertain that his main source of income stems from a market that values exoticism and decoration over communal well being, this does not mean that the objects modern artisans create have no value and are fully removed from tradition.

There are many aspects of the modern Bamiléké sculptor that remain the same as those who worked in an earlier time. In the past, for example, the men hoping to become sculptors *“received solid training (sometimes followed by an initiation),*

⁵⁶ Flaubert

⁵⁷ Dieudonne

⁵⁸ John Mukum Mbaku. *Culture and Customs of Cameroon*. Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut, 2005. pp.107

generally lasting more than 15 years, to become experts in their art."⁵⁹ At the artisanat where I worked for the past month the "apprentices"—young men in the process of becoming professional sculptors with "patrons" who are responsible for their formation—had already been apprentices for eight to fourteen years. Additionally, the dichotomy between art and tourist trinket might be yet another example of a western imposed system of values into a context where they do not apply. My occidental perspective tells me that Art should not pander to popular opinion and market demands, but should instead hold up a mirror to society and aspire to some form of "Truth" or "Meaning." This month, however, I was forced to ask myself: are business and truth mutually exclusive?

On my second day at the artisanat, Bobo, an employee of SIT, visited Dieudonne and me to inform him that my studies here were not purely "technical." I was shocked at the time because I believed myself to be clearly embarking upon a "creative" project, whose academic merits have already been well established. During the course of my month with the sculptors, however, I realized how this confusion might occur. As previously stated, it is economically difficult for sculptors to earn money today because their society has changed. *"Est-ce que l'art permet l'art—est-ce que quelqu'un qui fait ça pour sa profession, est-ce qu'il peut vivre de l'art ?"*^{60 xxix} Without the money from tourism, earning a living from sculpture would be almost impossible. Thus in order to have enough money to provide for the basic needs of himself and his family, the modern sculptor *"est en service d'un art décoratif, un art qui est connu, vu dans le sensé*

⁵⁹ Notué: 2005. pp. 52

⁶⁰ Noupa

occidentale, et c'est qu'il met c'est plus de la stylisation de valeur ancestral. Il style ça parce que les touristes aimèrent partir avec ça."^{61 xxx}

The artisanat where I worked is first and foremost a business. It is not an art institution where students go to learn about occidental art, theory and art history. The young men taught at the artisanat are there to learn to make a living from their craft, and those that I interviewed were complementing their sculptural studies with electrician or construction training. These apprentices, their teachers and Bobo believe sculpture to be a technical craft: "*l'importance de mon travail, c'est que le fait de faire comme ça est de vendre.*"^{62 xxxi} The purely economic facet of sculptural production does not, however, signify the absence of creativity or meaning. These two aspects, the financial and the artistic, exist harmoniously within the same sculptor's philosophy. Lepage says of himself, "*bon, je fais la sculpture pour vivre, pour avoir l'argent d'acheter la nourriture et les vêtements pour ma famille,*"^{xxxii} but also "*pour conserver la culture Bamiléké. Dans la sculpture tu peux voir les dessins de la guerre, de la chasse, de la vie quotidienne. Nous mettons l'aspect de nos vies et de notre culture dans la sculpture.*"⁶³

^{xxxiii} The distinction between tourist trinket and meaningful art is, therefore, not applicable within the Bamiléké sculptural community.

Aujourd'hui la sculpture est en train de développer, ça devient un peu comme un business, mais le rôle spirituel et le rôle social ne change pas, ça reste la même dans la chefferie et la maison aussi... on est en train de développer parce que on a conservé la culture africaine.^{64 xxxiv}

⁶¹ Flaubert

⁶² Cedric

⁶³ Lepage

⁶⁴ Valerie

The preservation of meaning and culture is thus *dependent upon* rather than destroyed by the transformation and evolution of sculpture into a business. If the Bamiléké artists at the artisanat refused to sell to tourists or made their work inaccessible, they would not have the financial ability to continue working within the craft of their ancestors. In the act of selling their heritage to foreigners, they are conserving their culture for themselves and future generations and thereby continuing the important dual role of the sculptor in Bamiléké society: guardian and innovator.

Conclusion

The title of this paper, “Après Dieu c’est l’artisan,”^{xxxv} is a remark that Dieudonne, my teacher and the Père Super of the artisanat, declared to me one day as we were working. He wanted me to appreciate that the importance of his work is, like God, in the act of creation: God creates and so does the sculptor. Sculpture among the Bamiléké serves as a mediator between God and God’s creation. It is also employed to maintain and bolster the authority of the chief and nobility. Politics, history and religion all work through sculpture and are, in turn, affected by sculptural production. Without recourse to animals, masks, canes and chairs the power of the chief would be non-visible and therefore nonexistent.

The Bamilékés have managed, through the work of dedicated artists like those I met, to preserve the images and meaning of their culture in the face of a shifting society. Though change is inevitable, Bamiléké artisans have adapted to these new challenges with a proficiency that demonstrates the artist’s *traditional* ability to understand and work within the society. If these sculptors refused to acknowledge to

new demands of modern life, they would be dishonoring the creative and innovative spirits of their ancestors. Sculpture in Bamiléké society has never worked in the service of stagnancy; it is rather an expression of the lived existence of the community, which has always experienced some form of transition. The sculptor is meant to preserve, not maintain, history through his art. Like God, the artist must create and observe, not force.

Methodology

With a huge amount of help (tempered slightly by amusement and disbelief) from Teufack Dieudonne and the other sculptors, I embarked upon the project of creating two chairs in a style that I had seen in the artisanat and in my Dschang family's house. During the course of my work I learned that I was creating "repose" chairs, which were, due to their smaller size, specifically for the relaxation of children. This information—along with Dieudonne's assertion that this style was common among many Cameroonian ethnicities and not specific to Bamilékés—disappointed me at first because I felt as though I was not learning to create meaningful Bamiléké sculpture. As I will discuss in the analysis section of my paper, however, I soon realized that this disappointment was unreasonable and a product of my own cultural bias.

Process

All of my work and the majority of my interviews took place at the artisanat in Dschang, Cameroon. I began my studies with Dieudonne, the Père Super, learning how to draw. The first and second day largely consisted of him drawing a picture of a traditional scene (such as a woman returning from the field or men playing tam tams) and then I would attempt to draw the same image on the next page. I am not a talented drawer, but I have sketched a little throughout my life, so this assignment went fairly quickly. Because I finished the drawings quicker than expected, I began to start asking to do other things such as sanding and carving. Dieudonne's initial surprise at my ability to mimic his design and my willingness work was ultimately to my advantage because,

though he originally told me that I could only hope to accomplish a small wooden tableau in a month, by the end of the second day he agreed to let me attempt a chair.

When I arrived at the artisanat on Thursday, my third day, it was the official cleaning day. I had already been receiving comments about my gender so when I was asked to sweep or machete (neither of which I knew how to do) I chose to work outside and machete with the rest of the men, rather than remaining in doors and sweeping. This is the moment when I feel that Dieudonne transitioned from being skeptical to amusedly open to the idea of me. After we finished machete-ing the ground I began work on my two chairs. There were two main reasons behind my making two chairs rather than one. The first reason was that the large piece of wood that Dieudonne had to sell to me was exactly big enough for two small chairs. The second idea behind the two-chair decision was for there to be one chair that Dieudonne used to teach me and the other chair that I did myself. Now that I am at the end of the project and many people, including Super himself, have confessed that they did not believe me capable of completing two chairs, I am curious to know his true motivations for this decision. Was it a challenge or a joke or an attempt to allow me to go home with the chair he would make after I ruined the one that was my responsibility? Even if he did not think me capable at the beginning, he did not make this opinion known to me and was always ready to let me try what I wanted and advise me along the way.

My first official step in the creation of the chairs was sawing apart the large wooden plank into four pieces—two seats and two backs. Dieudonne sawed the first piece and then, when I reached for the saw, we had, for the first time, the conversation

that was to be repeated near daily for the next month: “Tu peux?” “Je peux essayer!” After the wood was divided up, he showed me the measurements I needed to make on the pieces so that I would know where the ovals and the inner drawing would go when it came time to sculpt the inside. We then used a compass to make the rounded edges according to the measured line we had drawn. When that was finished I drew the elephants, which would form the base of the chair, and sawed the openings in the elephants’ feet and the corners of the top to create the rounded edge. That was by far my most productive day of the entire month. I continued to work diligently for the rest of my time, but no other day attained the same level of excited production.

The following day I made the decorative border around both backs and both seats. This process involves using the large “bouge,” a V mouthed tool, and carving out the two ovals in the center. I then used the ciseaux, a flat-ended tool, to lower the area inside the two ovals. This stage heralded the beginning of my difficulties with “contresensé”—when the wood goes in a certain direction that must either be obeyed or disobeyed knowledgably (which I have yet to master). Following that, I used the little bouge to create the rope pattern design around the border.

Sculpting the elephants for the base of the chair was by far the most difficult stage. By this point in my stay at the artisanat, the other sculptors were stopping by to give me feedback on a regular basis and their advice would often conflict with directions someone else had given. There were also several of the apprentices who preferred to take the tools out of my hands and shape an elephant’s ear for themselves rather than

watch me struggle through it. This was frustrating at first, but I eventually learned how to tell them to let me do it myself in a way that was light hearted rather than rude.

Once the elephants were finally acceptable to the artisans, I began work on the seats. Cedric, one of the apprentices and my most critical teacher, showed me how to make the trees for the back section of the seat (the part that rests on the ground and is skinnier than the other parts). This did not take long to complete because it requires only the large bouge and no real sculpting. The following step, however—making the image for the center of the seat—required a great deal of sculpting in a similar fashion as the elephants. I chose trees and traditional Bamiléké houses as my central images for the two seats. To begin sculpting, by which I mean giving dimension to an image, I carved out all of the lines I had drawn with large bouge and then used the ciseaux to lower certain parts in relation to others and round edges. This was almost as difficult as the elephants, but I had a slightly better grasp of the technique by this point. The sculpting stage, in my opinion, is one of the most artistic because it requires knowledge of depth, perspective and placement.

I had stated throughout the process that I wanted to make a lion chair because I knew that the lion was an important Bamiléké symbol. After I finished the seats Dieudonne allowed me to start on my lion in the center of the back. I chose an elephant for the other chair because I had been told the significance of the elephant among the Bamilékéés and Dieudonne expressed a desire for me to sculpt this design. Dieudonne makes many elephant chairs because he has observed that tourists prefer elephants to any other animal or scene. The center of the chairs' back required much the same

process—draw, bouge, ciseaux—as the elephant base and the seats, but with the addition of empty spaces between the animal and the trees. I made the holes by tapping a small ciseaux at a ninety-degree angle around the perimeter of where I wanted an open area, removing more and more wood with each round. Once I had removed all but five millimeters of the wood, I made a small hole that pierced through the rest of the wood, then turned the chair over and used a C mouth tool to find and fully remove the remaining level of wood. After the holes were complete, I began sculpting the images. Though sculpting was by far the hardest part, by the time I carved the lion I was proficient enough that no one attempted to help me, for which I was very proud.

The final step before the “finissions”—sanding and coloring—and after completing all of the “habilles”—the small details such as the lion’s mane and tree leaves—was to fully round the edges so that they were smooth. To do this I used a tool that was like a razor, which shaved away all of the excess wood. Once the edges of the backs and seats were successfully rounded, I began sanding. In my very limited woodworking in the United States I have always used an electric sander, which makes the process go very quickly. There were, however, no machines involved in the making of my chair and this held true for sanding as well. I used three different levels of coarseness to create a surface that was clean and smooth enough for the tint. The sanding was the last difficult and time-consuming step; the rest went very quickly and painlessly. I applied the tint with a brush then let the pieces sit in the sun. After fifteen minutes they were ready to be varnished. The “varnish” was shoe polish, which (after

allowing to sit for an hour) was scrubbed off with a brush, revealing a beautifully colored and very shiny chair!

Limitations

In reflecting about my limitations it is difficult for me to distinguish between what was a limitation and what was a concealed advantage. My gender was the most obvious disadvantage. I was repeatedly told that sculpting is a profession traditionally reserved for women. As I have already mentioned, none of the other sculptors (all male) believed at the beginning of the month that I could successfully complete two chairs. This disbelief, however, meant that everyone was amazed at each step and regularly complimented me on my skill. Although the incessant exclamations of “du courage” seemed patronizing at times, the positive feedback gave me energy when I was experiencing difficulty or discouragement. It was slightly disheartening for me that all of my interviews were, by necessity, with men but the all-male atmosphere of the artisanat provided me with an insight into the culture that would have been difficult to experience otherwise.

Another possible limitation/advantage was the lack of machines. For almost every step in the process of creation, Dieudonne would mention a machine that would accomplish what we were doing by hand faster and more accurately. Yet he also often remarked with pride that it would be impossible for an American or European to accomplish what he did because it required small details and knowledge of the wood’s intricacies that no machine could recreate. Watching him create many chairs in one day I can easily comprehend why he would desire electronic tools to speed along the

process; but I was personally delighted, at the end, to claim credit for a piece that I had done without any of the machines an American woodworker would have. The absence of power tools also allowed me to appreciate the finesse and understanding that goes into woodcarving. When I first began to use the saw I struggled intensely, believing I was not strong enough. Eventually, however, one of the apprentices showed me the “technique”: guidance rather than force. I was messing myself up in my attempt to pit saw against wood when the two elements were willing to work harmoniously together, requiring only my light direction. If I had used an electric saw I would never have realized the oneness that can exist between the sculptor and the sculpted.

The main limitation that I can solidly identify was that of time. I had only one month to learn and create and I did not, therefore, even *begin* to approach the level of artistic insight that existed between the other sculptors and the wood.

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Translations

- i We use sculpture to know our history, because we acted and it is us who create.
- ii The society was for a long time a society without writing. It was, therefore, the artist who held the key to the society.
- iii A form of literature, a form of expression. The Bamilékés try to express their literature through sculpture.
- iv What we do today, we try to write the past, how our grandparents lived. It is that that we represent today on the wood, so that it is not lost.
- v The king is the main person responsible for the religious, judiciary and political administration of the kingdom.
- vi Of pearls, cowrie and money to present to you the idea that the king is a person who lacks for nothing.
- vii It is power! The man who is masked, no one can discover his identity. Like the chief's commandant, he wears a mask.
- viii During a ceremony no one can approach him. One cannot approach someone with a cane, no matter who.
- ix At the chefferie there is a place—called the sacred place—it is the nobles who go there, and each one has his place. There are ranks of chairs, ranks of nobles and the chief. There is a sacrifice for each chair. Therefore I cannot sit on or make [one of these chairs].
- x The goal of the work of art is to affirm the permanence and to actualize the mythic system which must be in accordance with earthly life.
- xi The chief is a sacred personage, quasi-divine... He is the first representative for the ancestors in the world of the living.
- xii There are sculptures in the tradition, in the chefferie, that are like god. The majority of the time, on the side of the chefferie and on the side of the spiritual, it is the people who use sculpture to make sacrifices, to pray and things like that. The ancestors try to pass through sculpture to speak to them, yes to transmit certain things.
- xiii The totem transforms a man into an animal to protect or save the village. The panther is the guardian of the chefferie. If an evil person enters the chefferie, he meets the panther and he runs away; if he does not run away the panther kills him. That is the totem.

^{xiv} Table of Animals and Significance

The elephant is strong. Elephants are power and luck.

The elephant, no trap can take.

The spider, sculpted particularly on seats, is the image of intelligence and knowledge.

There is also the equal spider, that means a fat spider, which is also represented because it has significance in the imagination.

The lion statues, symbol of political authority, were occasionally placed at the entrance of the Chief's domain to remind each person of his all-powerfulness.

The lion is power. There are lions here.

There is also the lion, which is the strongest animal; it represents the chief.

Power is the lion, here we call the chief the man of the mane because the lion is an animal that one does not chase, that means that he is the king.

There is also the panther of the animals that are strong.

You can see the panther, which the chief shares with the other nobles, because you can also find the panther in the elements of certain nobles.

The panther is the strength and royalty of the chefferie, the nobility.

Chimpanzee, the one that is strong for war.

The turtle is a cardinal animal that represents wisdom. In daily life he also represents many things. In spirituality because people believe in the turtle since it is an animal that helps with divination, which shows who in the village stole, who made an error. Therefore it is an animal, we can say, for divination.

^{xv} His supernatural powers were the ability to transform into an elephant, leopard or buffalo—royal animals who, represented in masks, symbolize the authority of the Fon.

^{xvi} It is the king but not the king as an individual, like in occidental civilization where the individual is 'one man, one name;' the king is the king of the community. The individual who passes through [the post of the king] is nothing but an element that is used, that the community uses.

^{xvii} For the chief it is for nothing except protecting the population, it is not to do evil.

^{xviii} I do not use art objects like that because the spirit in the object could easily kill me. Objects have power.

^{xix} I am just a worker, I am not a magician or sorcerer.

^{xx} He simply executes a commission and receives, in return, a salary. The finished object that he made is not itself charged with emotivity. It will not be consecrated, impregnated with religious forces until the appropriate rights are done.

^{xxi} There is a ritual using herbs, a certain quantity of appropriate herbs. These herbs speak of the tradition, they are mixed with many other ingredients, combining this herb and that, and one does a ritual around the statue and it is no longer the same statue that was there before the work. One says 'work,' when one says 'work' that means to confer power and strength.

^{xxii} Each person knows what he wants to do with the object. The sculptor, we made [the objects] here simply like that, we do not complicate anything.

^{xxiii} The man who makes sculpture is firstly an artist, and it is he who counts in society because he makes art. The artists are very important for their representation of the village life.

^{xxiv} Because we can say that the singer is lazy, he does not work. The sculptor can serve in the chefferie, make the animals, the throne of the chief, for example, the stools.

^{xxv} The role of the Bamiléké sculptor in our society is to sell to be able to take care of our needs.

^{xxvi} Yes, what we do now is very different from past sculptors. Art objects were more important than the objects that we create today.

^{xxvii} The artist capitalizes all of the social values. He must think: who am I making this for? He must pose the question: who is at the heart of the society? It is these elements that he will put in the production.

^{xxviii} The client for whom we create is tourism.

^{xxix} Does art permit art—can someone who does that for his profession live off art?

^{xxx} Is in service of a decorative art, an art that is known, seen in an occidental sense, and they put more stylization of the ancestral values. They stylize that because the tourists like to leave with that.

^{xxxi} The importance of my work is to make like that and sell.

^{xxxii} I make sculpture to live, to have the money to buy food and clothes for my family.

xxxiii To conserve the Bamiléké culture. In sculpture you can see the images of war, of the hunt, of daily life. We place the aspect of our lives and our culture in sculpture.

xxxiv Today sculpture is in the process of developing, it is becoming more like a business, but the spiritual role and the social role do not change, they stay in the chefferie and the house... we are in the process of developing because we are conserving our culture.

xxxv After God is the artisan.