

**Zeitschrift:** Acta Tropica  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerisches Tropeninstitut (Basel)  
**Band:** 10 (1953)  
**Heft:** 4

**Artikel:** African names and sculpture  
**Autor:** Segy, Ladislav  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-310469>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 29.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# African Names and Sculpture.

By LADISLAS SEGÝ.

(Received February 5th, 1953.)

Among special aspects of the culture of the Africans is their nomenclature, their system of personal and tribal names. On examination these are found to have great significance and interest. It is unfortunate that previous studies of African culture have ignored this aspect, seldom doing more than using names for tribal identification. In the present essay we hope to make a start in filling the gap and to indicate the origin, meanings and cultural significance of African names—and to show how these can throw additional light on other aspects of African culture—particularly sculpture, which is the writer's special interest.

In our investigation we are handicapped by lack of African written documentation. The early Arabic and the later European accounts of explorations paid insufficient attention to the African ways of life (1). Religious prejudice (Moslem or Christian) made them ignore African customs in disdain; and often simple lack of training rendered them incapable of collecting data.

In our investigation of the meaning of African personal names and tribal names we begin with the observation that the tribal names exhibit recurrent patterns. These are not products of chance; some basic ideology or behavior may be discovered as the origin, wherever it is observed. The fact that the African is, above all, a member of his community and not an individual, means that the recurrent patterns in nomenclature arise in a communal ideology and not individual inventiveness. Further, the initiating cause is often lost or must be retraced from oral tradition or deduced from ritual, usually with the help of comparative material. To use a familiar example, most people who knock on the wood do not know the original reason for this ritual; but it can be traced back to the early practise of summoning the aid of the protective spirit of a tree.

Orally preserved mythologies are among the chief riches of traditional African culture; and they are helpful for an understanding of other elements of African life. Names come within this oral tradition (2). Like other traditions, their oral communication is repeated with great precision, unaltered, for generations. Thus, being rooted in the origin of the tribe, we may hope, with their aid, to penetrate to deep psychological sources.

Now what, actually, does a *name*, tribal or personal, signify to Africans? This is a serious question since names have deeper significance to them than to us. And a penetration into the depths of meaning in personal names will help us to an understanding of the tribal names.

### *1. The Meaning of a Name.*

In our own culture a name identifies a person or a group, and differentiates one from the others. It is true that through association we attach certain characteristics to certain names. John denotes masculinity and American nationality. In Africa, however, the name is more than that. The name *is* the person, and a new name creates a new identity, a new personality.

According to TEMPELS, in his "Philosophie Bantoue" (3) the Bantus use three names, suggestive of the triune African concept of the personality.

1. A name which represents the individual's inner self. This name is immutable. It is his identity, his actual life. It cannot be taken away or changed. It corresponds to his living breath, it is one of the members of the psychic trinity.

2. The second name corresponds to his Vital Force (4). Nyama, as it is termed by the Dogons or Muntu, by the Bantus (2), which is close in sound, as well as meaning, to the Mana of the Polynesians. It may be described as the spiritual quality of the individual, and its distinguishing characteristic is that it can be increased or decreased, gained or lost. This name is acquired in youth, during the initiation ceremony when, by the acquisition of this name, the individual passes from adolescence to adulthood. This transformation is accompanied by an access of power. This second name is sometimes termed "the shadow" but, as we shall see, it has deeper meanings.

3. The third component of the triumvirate of the individual is his body for which he receives his third name. Under this name, which he gives to himself, is his "name of address" by which he is known in daily life. To the African, bodily existence is of minor importance. Therefore, this third name holds a lower rank. It is the first two which denote his spiritual powers, that are important to him.

The primacy of the first two names is illustrated by the fact that only the third name, the "name of address", can be freely pronounced. The other two are kept secret. Knowledge of either name, by anyone outside the clan, would put the outsider in possession of a vital part of him. The names are guarded as are his hair, his nail parings, or pieces of his garments, possession of which, by another,

would put him in the possessor's power. As in black magic, where nail parings, hair, etc., can be used to cast a spell on the individual from whom they came, so the first two names can similarly be used. These two names are more than what we understand by names; they are vital parts of the individual.

His third name can be changed at will by the individual, but the two first names are received by him, the first, at birth, from his parents or from a diviner; the second from his clan or secret society, at his initiation.

The name received by an African on embracing Christianity, has the category of the third, or bodily name, put on rather like a new shirt. This indicates the minor importance that—with exceptions—the new creed has for the African. It is an outer, bodily thing, not an inner, spiritual reality.

Thus we can see that the name indeed has a deep significance for the African. For us this acquires added meanings when interpreted, psychologically. In that light, what appears to be a magical or "superstitious" custom, reveals great psychological insights on the part of the tribal founders and is shown to correspond to certain modern scientific concepts.

Let us return to the three names, in order:

1. The *first* name is the immutable one which the individual received at birth. We may then ask what, analogously, is the particular spiritual quality one is born with, the quality not subject to the later conditioning that shapes his personality, but is his genetic inheritance.

The fact of heredity, seen of course, in their own way, was taken into account by the Africans. We have noted in past studies of African customs or concepts, their great insight into human nature. Because, back of all events, Africans saw spiritual forces—genii, ancestor or magical spirits, inheritance, too, was thus explained.

The African observing inherited personality characteristics, the fact that a boy may look or act like his father or grandfather or uncle, seemed to infer from this that in the newborn child the spirit of an ancestor had taken residence. MUNDAY, in his study of spirit names called it the dead person's "come back" (5), and in the majority of the cases, the returning spirit is identified as the family ancestor. This may be regarded as an expression, in African terms, of the idea of the transmission of genetic characteristics. We must emphasize the difference of this African concept from reincarnation, which would have involved all the three parts of the triune individual. Here the transfer affected only the spiritual or vital force of the ancestor who otherwise lived on in the world of the dead.



Since, to the African mind, names can have vital force, this belief in the family's hereditary store of spiritual force was ritually fulfilled by bestowing on the child the name of the person believed to have taken abode in him. The spirit's identity was determined with the help of the diviner, or by a dream of the mother in which the dead person had appeared. If it was the grandfather, the child assumed the grandfather's *immutable* name. By this means the continuity of the family was assured, the *same* spirit living on, in new lives, immortally.

(Could not the use of the same name, with added numbers among the European dynasts—Louis, among the French and Henry, among the English or Pius, among the popes—be attributed to an analogous concept?)

To continue our example, it was also believed that the grandfather, whose name the child had acquired, was bound to protect the child. Furthermore, that, through the grandfather, as a member of the tribe, the newborn child, possessing his name, immediately acquired membership in the tribe and is regarded as *always* having been a member of the clan.

This connecting link to the tribe would later be re-established at puberty in the initiation ceremony (6) when, as an adolescent, he received a new name (his second), which augmented his power. The new spiritual force came from the tribe. One may consider it a symbolic expression of his feeling of community with the tribe, and of the security gained by this assurance that the tribe (or secret society) will stand by him.

We know, from psychoanalytical studies, that the security is a major factor in personality formation, especially in pre-puberty stages. In infancy the child depends on the physical, we may say, bodily, security of his mother. (African children are suckled for several years and are carried on the mother's back wherever she goes.) The child is told, very early, that his grandfather's spirit resides in him, which gives him a feeling of being under the protection of the spirit. And, at the initiation ceremony, the security of membership in the tribal male secret society is added. All this through the faith in the magic of names, in their vital power. As FREUD commented, one "can change the outer world by mere thought of it" (7 p. 874).

2. The second name, as we have seen, also has spiritual quality. It is of the vital essence of the person. But it is mutable, capable of being acquired or of growing or diminishing. It is subject to change by the conditions of life.

As in the case of the first name the second, also, is based upon sound psychological observation, approaching the psychoanalytical

understanding of human nature. The Africans understood that conditions, to which the child at all stages of his development is exposed, can have a deep effect upon him in moulding his "spiritual part".

This force, which the Bantu-speaking people call *Muntu* is close to the *unconscious* of psychoanalysis. This force is acknowledged, today, from clinical experience, to be decisive in the human and to be the product of cultural conditioning. One is not born with his unconscious but acquires it. Its power is so great that it can overcome intellectual controls and force the individual to compulsive acts.

Let us now recall that the second African name, or the power attributed to it, can be increased or decreased. Similarly, with the unconscious, whose strength depends upon emotional pressures encountered in life. The individual who functions satisfactorily in a favourable atmosphere, may become "neurotic", under adverse pressures. These may weaken his resistance to the inner unconscious forces whose prisoner he then becomes. The African seems to have intuitively understood this complicated process. The use of the second name, in the subtlety of its significance and function, shows penetrating insight, on the part of the African into the motivations of human nature. Thus the name was endowed with immense psychic power. It did not merely describe a phenomenon; but it was the phenomenon *itself*, with all its power and domination over individual human destiny.

3. The third name, beyond being a name of address, as are names among us, had no specific meaning for the African. No power was attributed to it.

In his description of names and the meanings attached to them by the natives, TEMPELS restricts himself to the central African, Bantu-speaking peoples. It is interesting to note that the custom of giving several names to individuals extends to many other African tribes, widely separated geographically.

In the Sudan (8) we find the same triune name system. The first, called *togo*, connotes the same family, and is of historical or religious origin; the second name, *diamou* is given by the clan; the third name has various origins.

In the Cameroons, north of the Central African regions, the Fali, as noted by LEBEUF (9), also use various names.

Further east among the Nuer (10), a Nilotic people, according to EVANS-PRITCHARD, four names are distinguished—the birth-name, maternal-kin name, clan praise name and ox-name, after the child's favourite ox.

Having dwelt on the significance of African personal names, let us see what other implications this naming system may have.

On admission into the tribal secret society an adolescent receives his second spiritual name, symbolizing an access of energy, the vigor of maturity, derived from the tribe and by which he achieves adult status. This initiation (6) is a very dramatic and even traumatic experience for the adolescent. It mostly involves the painful circumcision rite and frequently includes flagellation and other ordeals. This cannot but impress him and the name given him on this occasion will be endowed with emotional associations. Furthermore, he then loses his name of address (which is connected with the lightly regarded physical existence), and receives a new name. To dramatize this, in many tribes, the adolescent undergoes a so called "ceremonial death", in his bodily or external existence. In the physical sense the adolescent dies and is reborn an adult. In its further implications (6) this means that the youth terminates his status as a child in the family and takes on membership in the tribe. This does not mean that the new member of the secret society actually abandons his family, and thenceforth lives apart from them. The ritual, like most African ceremonies, has a deeper psychological meaning. Let us examine it in the light of the powerful attachment boys can have to their mother and their ambivalent feelings toward the father which, buried in the unconscious, can affect even the entire adult life of the individual. These deeply rooted emotions are dealt with in the ceremonies surrounding the giving of the second name. The ceremonial "death" of the adolescent helps to undercut the deep emotional attachment to the family; the rebirth as a member of the tribe promotes the consciousness of being a self-sufficient adult.

That a name has an inner meaning, that it actually stands for the person, is an idea that has appeared among other peoples. In orthodox Jewish families, when a child is gravely ill, his name is changed. By this, it is believed, a new identity is given to the child, who thus, becoming a new person, can escape the dangers of the disease he contracted under the old name. This identical custom of changing the name of the endangered child was observed in the Cameroons by RELLY (11). Among the Basuto of South Africa (12) children are generally named after ancestors. But, if there have been previous deaths of children in the family, the newborn child is named after something despicable, in the belief that the spirits will not concern themselves, for good or evil, with a child bearing such a name. It must be borne in mind that sickness and death are never attributed to natural causes, but to malevolent spirits, wrathful ancestors, or the spells of an enemy.

As we have seen, on receiving his immutable (first) name, which was that of his ancestor, the child was automatically linked to his

tribe. This signifies, further, that he is of the same *substance* as his clan, which takes on further significance in the case of a totemistic clan, which has the name of an animal.

Now one of the laws of totemistic clans is Exogamy, which prohibits sexual intercourse between members of the same clan, that is, those bearing the name of the same animal. Theories were advanced that by this rule incest and inbreeding were avoided. No scientific evidence supports these assumptions. We have another explanation to offer—that it is not the actual blood relationship which counts but the name only. According to the regulations of Exogamy, a man must marry a woman from another clan. In matriarchal societies where inheritance follows the maternal line, the daughter, inheriting the mother's clan, may marry her first cousin, the son of her father's brother, who belongs to another clan, while, people of the same clan, without the slightest blood relationship, may not marry (13). This indicates that the name is more important than blood kinship. It is to the name that power is attributed and not to the actual relationships for which it is supposed to stand.

The totemistic clans make another use of the name. By assuming the name of the powerful totem animal the members of the clan feel that they acquire its strength, cunning or daring. The explanation given by many totemistic clans, that they originated from this animal, is a rationalization outside the scope of this essay. What interests us is its evidence of the surviving belief in the inner power of the name which is added to the vital forces of the individual who assumes the name.

The use of different names with complex meanings, ideas and interrelationships, was much facilitated by the peculiarity of the Bantu language which forms a great number of derivative nouns by inflexion and by prefixes (14). As an example let us cite the tribal name of Basonge (Belgian Congo) (sometimes also Basongo). BA is a prefix meaning people; SONGO is a derivation from a legendary chief, Kasongo. In English the name would have to be rendered "the people of the great chief Kasongo" (15).

## 2. *Characteristics of African tribal names.*

African personal names being given with so much thought and adherence to tradition, and fulfilling such great psychological needs, it is probable that African tribal names have no less significance.

Since tribal names also show recurrent patterns we assume this



must have a reason. From the slender source material on tribal names with recurrent patterns, we select a few typical examples for analysis. The recurrent patterns can be grouped as follows:

1. The tribal name differing from the name used by outsiders.
2. A name connoting origin.
3. A name derived from location, profession or descriptive characteristic.
4. A name meaning Men.

1. *The tribal name differing from the name used by outsiders.* In the Belgian Congo, the name of the Bushongo tribe (16) means "the people (Bu) of the throwing knife" (shongo). The Balubas, their neighbors, to whom the weapon was unknown until Bushongo arrived, named them Bakubas, meaning "people of the lightning bolt", so impressed were they with the lightning-like effect of the hitherto unknown weapon, the shongo.

Similarly the Oromo, who live in the Belgian Congo and also call themselves Vuitu or Huma, are called Bahoma (15) outside the tribe. Huma means sons of men (which is close to the Latin Homo meaning "man").

The Gouin (17) of the Ivory Coast call themselves N'Lemon, meaning "man").

In the Chad region (18) a tribe called N'Gambaye by outsiders, call themselves Dohoudje, which means "men".

2. *The tribal name connoting origin.* In the name Baluba, the prefix *ba* is added to the name of a great chief, Luba. Thus, as in Basongo, we arrive at "the people of Luba" (15).

3. Below are examples from the Belgian Congo of names indicating *location, profession or descriptive characteristics* (15).

Abasongo, or "the people of the water".

Babemba, or "the people of the lake".

Bangala, or "the people of the small river".

Bambala means "red people", and Balolo, "iron people". The name of the merchant tribe, Bateke, means "people who trade".

4. *The tribal name means "men" or "people" or "sons of men".* This is one of the most remarkable patterns in tribal naming.

The Bantu tribes, numbering some fifty million people, speaking about 250 different dialects, are often called a race or stock. Properly, Bantu should be understood as a family of languages. Both syllables of the name are words, Ba meaning "people" and Ntu, "man". Thus Bantu means "men, people". TEMPELS replaces the "Ntu" with "Muntu" which means, as we have seen, the human essence, man's spiritual self. The name further implies that through this Muntu man becomes the most important of living beings. Thus

Bantu means not only "men" but "spiritual men" set apart from other living beings.

In the Belgian Congo Babali means "we the people", Bayaka means "the males" or "manly people", Warega is translated "all the people" or "humanity" (19) and, as we may recall, that Bahema (or Huma) also means "men".

On the Ivory Coast, in addition to the N'Lemon, the Toura tribe (17) call themselves Ouemebo, which means "men", or "we, the men".

In the Chad region, according to PEDRALS (18) the Yalnas translate their name, "the children of men". PEDRALS quotes VAN DEN BOSCH (20) in analyzing the name Balendu, which derives from the word *lendu*, meaning "men" and compounding it into *a-balendu*, "the people of themselves". The tribe, named Wagogo, living south of Lake Victoria, means "those who have the head", which by extension connotes "men".

The word Hottentot means "men of men" or "complete people" and the name Zulu (Abatu) means "the people" (21).

From the summary given above it is clear that the use of words meaning "men" as tribal names is rather widespread in Africa. Is it restricted, however, to Africa?

DAVIE's interesting study (22) indicates that this phenomenon has occurred in ancient times and all over the world. Thus it must fill some universal psychological need.

The name Eskimo is used by outsiders. In Algonquin the word means "eaters of raw meat". The Eskimos, however, call themselves Unuit, meaning "men" or "people". The American Indian names, Tinneh, Kenai, Kutchin, all mean "men", and Kiowa means "real people" or "main people". The Illini, from which the state of Illinois derives its name, also means "people".

The Caraihs of South Africa, call themselves "the people" and when asked where they come from, their answer was "we are the only people". In Asia, the Samoyeds (a name given by the Russians, signifying cannibals) call themselves Hasovo, which means "men". Tungus, the name of another north Asiatic tribe, has a similar meaning. In Japan, Ainu (a dwindling people of apparently Caucasian stock conquered by the Japanese) means "men", but their conquerors transformed the name to the Japanese word Aino, meaning "dogs", perhaps on account of their abundant body-hair. The same phenomenon occurs among many Polynesian tribes, in Malaya, in Australia, etc. (References cited by DAVIE.)

A clue to the reasons for this universal phenomenon of tribal names denoting men, whose neighbors call them by other names is afforded by African mythologies.



These myths are tribal versions of the creation of the world, and tribal assumptions about the forces of nature (*genii*) and the origin of the tribe. They constitute the oral histories of the tribes. These myths are sacred, in contrast to other legends, and have been transmitted orally from generation to generation. Scrupulous care was taken to insure accurate enumeration of tribal ancestors' names, any error being feared as incurring calamities. According to these myths the tribe originated from the first man, consequently the tribe considers itself the origin of humanity. In most cases, this ancestor had supernatural power, frequently received from the god who created the world. This is very clearly indicated in the Ife mythology (23), every living member of the tribe being believed to be a descendent of this great ancestor, whose role is comparable to the biblical Adam. Among other tribes the ruling king is believed to be of divine origin, like the Bakuba's Nyimi or Bini's Oba. This sacred myth obviously instils *pride* in the tribesmen and an assumption of their superiority over neighboring tribes. They actually believe their ancestor to have been the first man on earth.

These sacred myths are revealed to each youth at his initiation ceremony, the revelation constituting one of the solemn events that add to the drama of the occasion.

Thus the tribal name denoting "men" identifies them as the "genuine" men, originating from the first man on earth, which other, and therefore inferior tribes, are not. As HUXLEY observed (24) this tribal exclusiveness is almost always rationalized into a feeling of superiority over all other people. The Greek, too, called others "barbarians", to emphasize Greek superiority.

In some cases the original meaning of a tribal name has been forgotten, but that it once meant something like "people" or "men" is apparent from other indications. As noted by LIETARD as recently as 1924, in his essay on the Warega (25) (we recall the name means "all the people"), the tribal sense of dignity is so intense that where anything might be construed as deprecatory "the knife intervened" immediately.

This sense of group superiority appears to be a universal human trait. The anthropological term for it is *ethnocentrism* and has been defined as an "ideology characterized by an unduly high evaluation of the language, and of the religious and cultural manifestations of one's own population, and a depreciation or snobbish disapproval of such manifestations in other populations" (26). We have seen it in the Greeks. The ancient Egyptians called themselves *rot en ne rom* or "the race of men", and the Jews called themselves "the chosen people". In our own time the "Deutschland über alles" slogan followed by the Nazi theories, and the Japanese credo of

racial superiority led to aggressions that influenced the history of mankind.

This tribal sense of superiority expressed in nomenclature may bear analysis by the concepts of psychoanalysts. Where there is a secure sense of strength no need is felt to exhibit it, whereas any exhibitionistic display generally connotes that the contrary is being covered up. That is, a feeling of inferiority may be projected in assertions of superiority. The attempt to convince others is only a secondary aim. The real need is to convince oneself of superiority. By attaining acknowledgement of superiority from others one acquires a proof, for himself, of superiority in which at bottom he never believed. Since it is never wholly believed this mechanism must be repeated continually to retain the sense of superiority, or rather to eradicate the anxious feeling of insufficiency.

How can this psychoanalytic finding be applied to African conditions?

From the, as yet insufficient existing documentation, the so called Negro people of Africa appear to have come from the East. In occupying the new territories, they had to adjust to new conditions, find ways to survive and to organize themselves into tribal unities. They could hardly have escaped anxiety about their future. Their leaders, no doubt, were superior in intelligence and perception into human nature. To this day, African chiefs and medicine men are of marked intellectual superiority. The methods devised by the founders of the tribes, to hold their group together show great psychological insight. One such method appears to have been the inculcation of a sense of superiority, used to this day with the result of racial discrimination.

This psychic mechanism was used to overcome a feeling of inferiority or anxiety. Such "overcompensating" forces are more dynamic, more forceful, than forces stemming from a well balanced person, at peace with himself. Studies of geniuses in all fields have shown their creative urge to "overcompensations". This same impulse which gave tribes their assertive names, appears to have provided the force that also welded tribal unity and might have been responsible for the magnificence of their art works.

And this will explain why tribes used other names for each other, refusing to accord to others the significance of being the "only men" or the "superior men" that their own names denoted. They gave to their neighbors names which would not admit such superiority.

Racial superiority was also a subject of study to FREUD (27) in connection with Jewish circumcision. His comments are pertinent here since most African tribes practise circumcision, in some cases

of female children as well. The Bantus seem to have adopted it from the Egyptians (28) among whom FREUD conjectured that it originated. Moses, he assumes to have been an Egyptian himself and after liberating the Jews from slavery, introduced this ritual among them to make them feel equal to the Egyptians. In addition to the enhanced self respect of being the equal of their former masters, the circumcized Jews felt themselves the "clean" ones among the uncircumcized who were "unclean". Today, some Arabic peoples, who practise circumcision, call those who do not, "the unclean".

Now if circumcision promoted racial superiority feelings among Jews and Arabs, we wonder whether it might not have done so among the African tribes as well. This superiority feeling probably originated at the "infancy" of the tribe. Traces of the same psychological manifestation are to be observed in the developments of the individual in our society. Indeed, one of the stages of the child's development is a combination of narcissism, or self-love, with a feeling of omnipotence. The child feels that he is the best, the center of the world, able to do anything. From this is derived the "omnipotence of thought", as FREUD calls it (7 p. 847), one of the keys to magical action.

A belief reaches a magical level, when fantasy is more real than reality. Then the believer considers his own thought infallible and capable of imbuing a chosen object with power. This is animism, when actually the object becomes the "support" of a projected wish, and actually concretizes the projected idea. This is basic to an understanding of the function of African sculpture (29).

The African similarly imbued a *word* with the same animistic, magical power, that he did his sculpture. The psychic processes here include the "omnipotence of thought" which is clinically observed in the infantile phase of human development. Obviously the child develops this fantasy as sublimation for his inner feeling of inadequacy. The African, similarly, overcompensated his feeling of inferiority, and called himself, collectively, "men", superior to other living beings, his neighbors included. The similarity of this naming to animism and magical action is significant, linking it with other African concepts. Being more than a word for identification, being part of a person, the name can be appropriated to magical action. Like other objects it has form and capacity to be endowed with power. How these stages are interlinked, FREUD indicates in his statement that "in the animistic stage of man's development, may ascribe omnipotence to himself" (7 p. 875).

### 3. *Tribal names and their connection to sculptures.*

What may be concluded from these observations of the meaning of African personal and tribal names? How can we apply this information to broaden our understanding of African sculptures?

One of the basic concepts behind African sculptures is the ideology of animism. This, we now see, can be applied also to names. The omnipotence of thought applied to objects is also applied to uttered words. The spell, so much feared in Africa, is considered an actual emanation of the spiritual entity of the one who casts the spell (the second name) and the breath which pronounces it is only a vehicle.

Thus we have a common clue to the inner meaning of both names and sculptures. How can this help us in understanding works of art?

In the history of art, major artists are generally in advance of their own time. Often they are not understood by their contemporaries. In spite of this isolation, they continue their work. Their creative drive is sustained by a feeling of being *right*; that others are wrong, or at least different.

To sustain such a feeling over a long period, the artist must build up great self-confidence; in relation to his public this becomes a feeling of superiority which protects him against lack of understanding in others. This is particularly true when new forms are created and especially when the new forms are the expression of a new idea. This is the psychological constellation of an ideology, when a new style appears, such as Byzantine or Coptic, which developed around the Christian ideology when it was a new concept which was crystallized in a new art style.

African carvings, however, for the past millennia, had been fully integrated and accepted by the African society. What the artist carved was understood and used by his fellow men. His sculptures were not works of art, in our sense, but objects necessary in the daily rituals which distinguished African life. Because the carver was not separately individualized, or isolated from his people, he could be their spokesman, he could express their feeling in his works. Thus African carvings became documents of the African culture.

It is, however, questionable (unfortunately, lack of documentation permits conjecture only) whether such universal acceptance prevailed at the time when the tribal styles were actually created. Whenever and wherever they originated in Africa, it must have been as the work of some artist of exceptional creative talent. He, as so often in the history of art, must have had to mould the public's



taste and wait for acceptance of his work. Tribal exclusiveness and his own sense of superiority might have empowered the creators of the tribal styles with self-confidence great enough to impose his creation on his public.

Here we encounter two factors: the artist's superiority feeling conjoined to the sense of tribal superiority. The first played its decisive part in the past when the tribal style was originated. In the later fusion the artist's individual need to feel superior vanished with his acceptance into an integration with his culture. On his part the superiority feelings, natural in an artist, made the tribal superiority feeling congenial and easy for him to assimilate. He was one of them who happened to be endowed with the talent to carve and held the status of sculptor. Attuned to the tribal need to feel superior he was able to create carvings which *concretized* this wish.

The statue stood in space and could be touched and physically felt, yet its links with the other animistic concept such as the name, may be seen.

Like the name, the statue was an overcompensation of anxiety or fear, fear of spirits (the unknown). To control these spirits, they had to be localized or concretized. The statue or mask became the abode of these spirits. Then by the magical strategy of sacrifices or offerings to the carved objects (another example of the omnipotence of thought) the good will of these spirits, resident in the carving, was gained, and fear was overcome. The creation of the statue served the same end as the formulation of the tribal name. Fear and inferiority were mastered by the Africans by the overcompensating devices of the name that identified them as superior "men" and the carvings that contained the awesome spirits.

The name "men" signified not only superiority but, by inference, exclusiveness. The latter quality in the tribal consciousness also appears in their art. The wealth of distinctive tribal art styles emphasizes this exclusiveness.

In his book (4) the writer has listed some 140 different major tribal art styles. Each, however, has several sub-styles. Thus it is possible to distinguish at least five hundred different styles.

Now, we must recall that a new style is the expression of a new ideology. The forms which make up the sculpture are the vehicles of such new thought. The forms become the "plastic language" by which the artist speaks; but they are successful only when coordinated in the artistic unit, in this case the carving. The different forms, thus organized into a plastic unity (sculpture), gives the style; and observation enables us to distinguish one style from another. Through these morphological observations we can recog-

nize, immediately, an Archaic Greek statue as differentiated from one of the Hellenistic period; or a Romanesque from a Gothic figure. In the same manner we can distinguish one African tribal style from another.

The Bayaka (Belgian Congo) for instance, have about seven different mask styles (Fig. 1) in addition to about four in wood or ivory statues, not to speak of their special style of carved cups. In the Benin kingdom, which achieved one of the most uniform styles, study has been able (30) to date separate styles, the first period styles established in African art history (Fig. 2).

Thus style is, indeed, the "handwriting" of the artist and, in turn, of a given culture, or of a period of that particular culture. In Western culture, style is often the individual style of an artist though a uniform spirit may be discerned and identified as a collective expression of the art of the period. In African culture, the tribal style is definitely the style of the tribe, produced by anonymous carvers. Every African, including the carver, functions as a member of his community, not as an individual. His whole education is aimed at assimilating the tribal past; with the result that the tribal styles, established centuries ago, have been repeated unaltered, up to the last fifty years. We must note, however, that repetition does not mean copying. Within the basic tribal form slight variations occur and no two African sculptures are alike.

As an example of the exclusiveness or distinctiveness of tribal styles, consider the small territory of Gabun and the Middle Congo. There have been intertribal relationships in this area for centuries, and numbers of them have entered this region as immigrants in the last hundred years. Yet, within this small territory we have a large number of styles, each so different in concept, as to call for research in order to understand this phenomenon. We have the bulbous Pangwe, half- and full-figures and heads, carved with great sophistication (Figs. 3a and 3b). Their western neighbors, the Bakota, have created a two-dimensional funerary figure, covered with hammered metal, not only entirely different in form and concept but unique in the whole of West- and Central African art. We can distinguish within this group about nine styles (31) (Fig. 4). About 150 miles south of the Pangwes, we have the M'Pongwe masks with a superficially Oriental appearance, with white faces and red mouths, completely different from both their northern neighbors (Fig. 5). The Babembe, to the Southwest, have still another distinctive style of small statues (about six inches in height) with rich scarification marks in bas-relief on the abdomen (Fig. 6). We could continue, with the Kuyu dance staffs, the Bateke figures containing magical substance (Fig. 7), etc., to show



how, within a small territory, each tribe developed its own, entirely original, exclusive style.

What prompted such differentiation appears to be the assertion of exclusive distinction in each tribe, so proudly expressed, also, in their name, meaning *men*.

While it is not that the names Pangwe, Bakota, M'Pongwe or Babembe all mean "men", we use this analogy to indicate the universality of ethnocentrism in Africa. Since concepts are accepted all over West and Central Africa, we have felt justified in assuming that the feeling of exclusiveness must have applied, also, to the tribes of Gabun. This clue in what we have observed of African psychology provides an additional answer to the question: why the tribal styles are so different from each other.

Exclusiveness has the connotation of difference from others, especially when, taking on an exclusive designation of "man", and assuming descent from an authentic "first man". Others, then, are not real men or are "newcomers" on earth. Thus exclusiveness involves pride in one's autochthonous status. In our own democracy those descended from earlier immigrants feel superior to those derived from subsequent immigrations.

Now, the impact of such feelings of pride in one's exclusiveness is transformed into an emotional state of mind. Such an emotional state of mind, when the result of an emotional experience, may have bearing on works of art. If one feels different, one seeks to express this difference, especially since it is an overcompensation. By the laws that seem to govern psychic energy such feelings are marked by great force, since they are required to impress others and one-self. This self-assumed feeling of aristocracy is often expressed in stylized behavior, dress and restrictions in social intercourse, all to sustain this irrational superiority feeling. In another rationalization, it was further believed that this exclusive society had its own specially powerful ancestors (often descendants of gods) and spirits. The sculptures, embodying these distinguished ancestors and spirits, consequently had to be distinctive in style, so as to differentiate them from the other tribes which were held to be inferior.

With *each* tribe asserting its distinction we can see how within such a small territory as Gabun, tribal exclusiveness was jealously asserted through distinctive art styles.

---

*Fig. 1.* Mask, Bayaka tribe, Belgian Congo. Collection of and photograph by the author.

*Fig. 2.* Benin Bronze Plaque. Photo shows 2/3 of the upper part of the Plaque to bring out the details. Collection Segy Gallery, New York. Photo by the author.

*Fig. 3 a & 3 b.* Statue, Pangwe tribe, Gabun. Side and head views. Collection Segy Gallery, New York. Photo by the author.

*Fig. 1.*



*Fig. 2.*



*Fig. 3 a.*



*Fig. 3 b.*

This exclusiveness was all the more insisted on because physical isolation was impossible. Relations with neighboring tribes were unavoidable and even necessary. In order to conserve, intact, the ancient tribal customs, source of their pride, and of which the tribal art was a part, they resisted change.

Here again we can observe not a typical African, but a universally observed phenomenon of conservatism. Pride and an ideology of superiority leads among groups to strong nationalistic feelings. The desire to preserve status and the characteristics that are considered to give distinction, particularly art forms, fosters *conservatism*. For this reason, outside forces, in this case cultural influences from neighboring tribes, are seen as dangers, and are resisted. When the "interfering" influence is strong, the reaction is correspondingly strong, becoming *reactionary*.

Considering that mythical tribal origins are the actual springs of social action in African societies, the strength of their conservatism becomes comprehensible. Any deviation from tradition would deprive their myths, and the carvings which embody them, of sacred power. Style forms were handed down from generation to generation as canonic prescriptions to be rigidly adhered to if their effectiveness was to be maintained.

#### References.

References concerning general African concepts and artistic considerations have been omitted from this paper since they have been listed in the author's book, *African Sculpture Speaks*. The references below documentate material specific to the present essay.

1. *Segy, Ladislav* (1953). African Sculpture and Writing. Jl. of Human Relations. Wilberforce, Ohio, No. 1.
2. *Griaule, Marcel* (1938). Masques Dogon. Paris, pp. 821-836.
3. *Tempels, Placide* (1949). La Philosophie Bantoue. Paris, pp. 66, 73-74.
4. *Segy, Ladislav* (1952). African Sculpture Speaks. New York, pp. 42-45.
5. *Munday, J. T.* (1948). Spirit Names Among the Central Bantu. African Studies. Johannesburg, March, pp. 39-44.
6. *Segy, Ladislav* (1953). Initiation Ceremonies and African Sculpture. American Imago, Vol. 10, n° 1, Spring 1953. St. Denis, Mass., USA.
7. *Freud, Sigmund* (1938). The Basic Writings. New York.
8. *Delmond, P.* (1945). Quelques Observations sur L'Etat-Civil Indigène au Soudan Occidental. Bull. de l'Ifan, Dakar, 7, 1/4, 54-79.

---

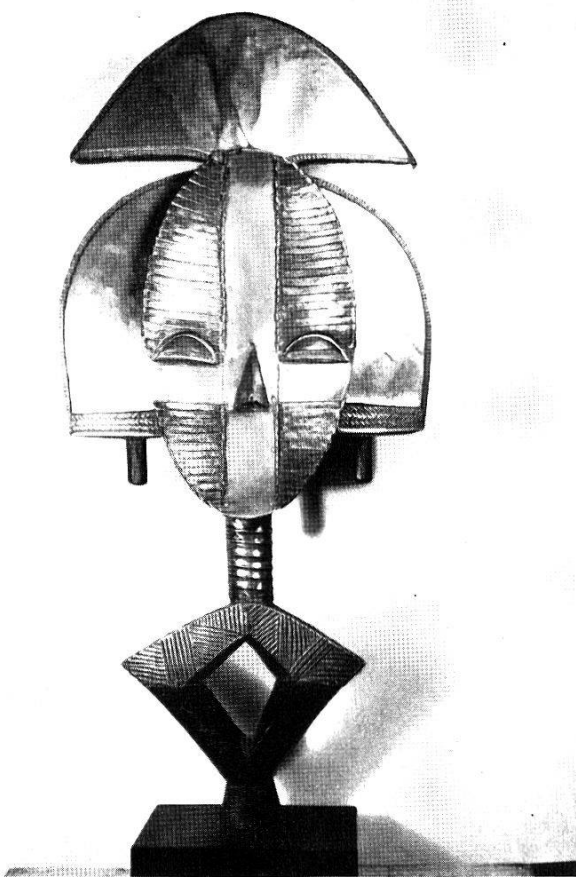
*Fig. 4.* Funerary statue, Bakota tribe, Gabun. Collection of and photograph by the author.

*Fig. 5.* Mask, M'Pongwe, Gabun. Collection C. Ruxton Love, Jr. Photo by the author.

*Fig. 6.* Statue, Babembe tribe, Middle Congo, French Equatorial Africa. Collection of and photograph by the author.

*Fig. 7.* Statue, Bateke tribe, partly Middle Congo, partly Belgian Congo. Collection Segy Gallery, New York. Photo by the author.

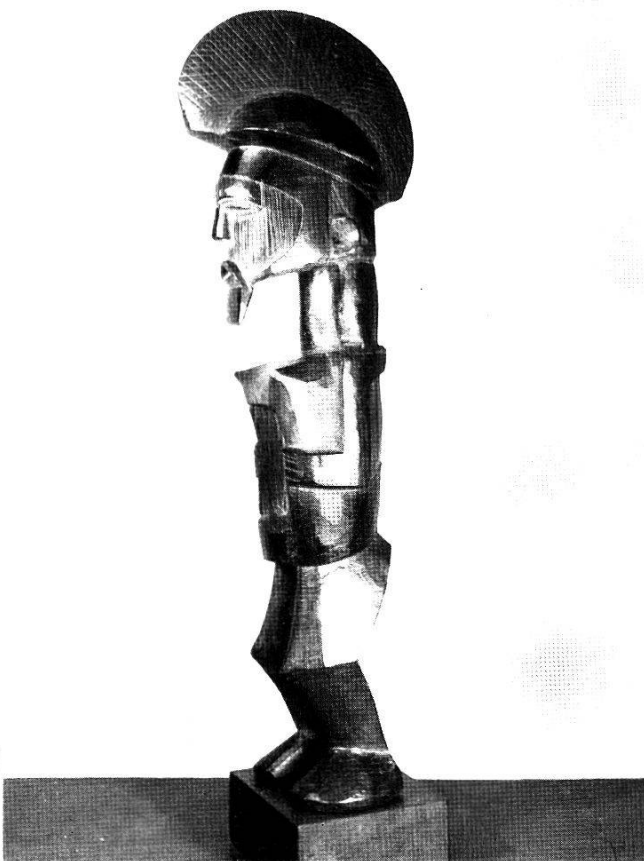
*Fig. 4.*



*Fig. 5.*



*Fig. 6.*



*Fig. 7.*



9. *Lebeuf, Jean-Paul* (1939). Le nom chez les Fali. Jl. de la Société des Africanistes. Paris, 9, 1, 103-17.
10. *Evans-Pritchard, E. E.* (1948). Nuer modes of Address. Uganda Jl. Kampala, Sept., pp. 166-71.
11. *Relly, Henri* (1945). Quelques notes sur les noms et titres du Grassfield. Bull. Soc. d'Etudes Camerounaises. Douala, Juin, pp. 77-83.
12. *Laydevant, P.* (1948). L'enfance chez les Basuto. Annali Lateranensi. Rome. No. 12, pp. 207-79.
13. *Parrinder, Geoffrey* (1950). La Religion en Afrique Occidentale. Paris, pp. 207-11.
14. *Doke, C. M.* (1948). The Basis of Bantu literature. Africa. London, Oct., pp. 284-301.
15. *Maes, J. & Boone, O.* (1935). Les Peuplades du Congo Belge. Bruxelles.
16. *Torday, E. & Joyce, T.* (1910). Notes ethnographiques sur les peuples communément appelés Bakuba ainsi que sur les peuples apparents des Bushongo. Bruxelles.
17. *Tauxier, L.* (1933). Les Gouin et les Tourouka. Jl. de la Société des Africanistes. Paris, t. III.
18. *Pedraza, D. P. de* (1950). Archéologie de l'Afrique Noire. Paris, pp. 148-51.
19. *Segg, Ladislav* (1951). Warega Ivories. Zaïre, Vol. V, No. 10. Louvain.
20. *Van den Bosch, R. P.* (1928). Quelques Notes sur le nom et la notion de l'Etre Suprême chez les Balendu. Anthropos, XXIII.
21. *Ross, Emery* (1951). African Heritage. New York.
22. *Davie, Maurice R.* (1931). La Guerre dans les Sociétés Primitives, son Rôle et son Evolution. Paris, pp. 353-55.
23. *Aderem, Oni of Ife* (1937). Notes on the City of Ife. Nigeria. Lagos, No. 12.
24. *Huxley, Julian* (1950). New Bottles for New Wine; Ideology and Scientific Knowledge. The Jl., Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. LXXX, Part I and II. London.
25. *Lietard, L.* (1924). Les Waregas. Bull. de la Société Royale Belge de Géographie, No. 48. Bruxelles.
26. *Jacobs, Melville and Stern, Bernhard J.* (1947). An Outline of General Anthropology. New York.
27. *Freud, Sigmund* (1947). Moses and Monotheism. New York.
28. *Jeffreys, M. D. W.* (1949). Circumcision; Its Diffusion from Egypt Among the Bantu. Criteria, I. March.
29. *Segg, Ladislav* (1953). Animism and African Sculpture. Psyche. Paris.
30. *Struck, Bernard.* (1923). Die Chronologie der Benin-Altertümer. Zs. Ethnologie, Bd. LV, pp. 113—166.
31. *Segg, Ladislav* (1952). Bakota Funerary Figures. Zaïre. Louvain. Vol. VI, No. 5.

#### *Résumé.*

Le but de cet article est de démontrer que les noms d'individus ou de tribus ont une signification plus grande pour les Africains que pour nous. Ils leur attribuent un pouvoir magique, ce qui les apparente à l'animisme. Des influences semblables apparaissent dans la sculpture. Les noms de tribus ayant la signification « hommes » étaient l'expression d'un ethnocentrisme universellement reconnu, traduisant des sentiments de fierté et d'exclusivité. Un mécanisme psychologique complexe, agissant sur le créateur originel du style de la tribu, exaltait sa puissance créatrice. L'exclusivité de la tribu conduisit à un style artistique, particulier à une tribu, se distinguant des œuvres d'art d'autres tribus. Le besoin de maintenir les traditions dans les coutumes et l'art aboutit au conservatisme qui explique les styles artistiques fixes, inchangés depuis des siècles.

Les origines historiques, le fond mythologique, religieux ou magique que reflètent les rites animistes africains, le culte des ancêtres, les cérémonies d'initiation, etc., jouèrent tous un rôle important dans la création de l'art africain, comme l'ont établi des recherches approfondies.

Cet exposé de la signification des noms d'individus et de tribus des Africains et de leur influence probable sur la création artistique doit être considéré comme un pas de plus vers la compréhension des motifs qui expliquent la manifestation si étonnante et puissante de la sculpture africaine.

#### *Zusammenfassung.*

Unser Bestreben war es, hier zu zeigen, daß individuelle und Stammesnamen den Afrikanern mehr bedeuten als uns, daß sie mit magischer Kraft begabt und so dem Animismus verwandt sind, und daß analoge Kräfte in der Plastik erscheinen. Stammesnamen mit der Bedeutung «Männer» waren Ausdruck einer allgemein beobachteten Ethnozentrität und nährten gewisse Gefühle von Stolz und Abgeschlossenheit. Komplexe psychologische Mechanismen, die solche Gefühle im ursprünglichen Schöpfer des Stammesstils hervorriefen, steigerten sein Selbstvertrauen. Die Abgeschlossenheit des Stammes führte zur Schaffung eines einzigartigen Stammeskunststiles, von dem sich die Kunstwerke anderer Stämme unterscheiden lassen. Der Trieb, die Überlieferung in Brauch und Kunst aufrechtzuerhalten, hatte einen Konservatismus zur Folge, der die starren, durch Jahrhunderte unverändert gebliebenen Stammeskunststile erklärt.

Der historische Ursprung, der mythologische, religiöse oder magische Hintergrund, die sich in den afrikanischen animistischen Riten widerspiegeln, der Ahnenkult, die Initiationszeremonien usw. waren alle für die Schaffung der afrikanischen Kunst von Bedeutung, wie ausgedehnte Untersuchungen ergeben haben.

Die vorliegende Untersuchung über die afrikanischen individuellen und Stammesnamen und ihres möglichen Einflusses auf die künstlerische Schöpfung ist zu bewerten als ein zusätzlicher Versuch, die Beweggründe zu verstehen, die so eindrucklich und kraftvoll in der afrikanischen Plastik zum Ausdruck gelangen.

---