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# Shango Sculptures.

By LADISLAS SEGY

(Received August 8th, 1954.)

## PREFATORY NOTE.

In our study of African sculptures, we first took an esthetic approach. We enjoyed them as works of art, then analyzed them from the morphological viewpoint and defined the various tribal styles.

This approach, however, isolated the sculpture from its ethnic background, and thereby restricted our understanding. Our next step was to examine them in their original settings—discover who were the people who had created them; what they thought; and how they applied their thinking and feeling to their carving. This revealed that the ideas of the African sculptures were not individual in our sense, that they derived from a shared ideology or world-outlook; and that the same ideas were the basis of their various magico-religious rituals. From them rose institutions in a social organization that developed into impressive kingdoms and empires. This led us to inquire into their history and the contacts to be observed in it with other peoples and cultures; and to trace their influences in African tribal or national ideologies and institutions.

Some of these ethnological findings revealed direct social use of African sculptures. For example, because of the widespread animistic religion, sculptures were mainly used to afford habitations for spirits (1). Similarly, a psychological study of ancestor cults and initiation ceremonies, in both of which sculpture played an important role, revealed profound insights into human nature (2). And this extended to details. For example, the seemingly insignificant encircled dot pattern to be seen on certain ivories (3); or a snake motif (4) or seemingly unrelated factors, such as tribal names (5) were shown, upon closer consideration, to have important meanings.

Legends and mythologies proved to be important “material” in the study of African culture. For, on closer study, these seeming “fairy tales”, ascribing miraculous powers or divine origin to tribal founders and heroes, are seen to have served deep psychological needs of the community. Thus we shall see, in the legends connected with Shango, that this figure was not a Yoruba “invention”, but has significant resemblances to other legendary figures. And analysis of the meaning of these “stories” shows “universal”

or "basic" elements which help to explain why similar myths are to be found in other parts of the world.

Our subject in this essay is Shango, founder of the Yoruba nation, the Yoruba God of thunder and lightning.

Our aim is to make this legendary material an instrument for the identification and better understanding of certain sculptures, and to integrate now scattered and isolated material. We hope to facilitate the identification of certain sculptures, at present with uncertain or no attribution, as representations of Shango.

And we further hope, in this inquiry, to encourage the study of available African legendary material, for extending and deepening our understanding of African sculpture.

It is not our intention, hereto, to attempt a complete survey of the existing Shango figures; nor to deal with hitherto unreproduced figures. These limitations have been dictated both by the requirements of space and the desire to discuss only such material as will be accessible to the reader in existing publications.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EQUESTRIAN FIGURES.

Equestrian figures in wood, ivory and bronze have been reported among the Yoruba, the Bini, and in isolated cases, among other west African tribes. The equestrian figure is comparatively rare in the great panorama of west and central African statuary. Among the approximately two hundred known tribes, such figures are few.

That the subject of these carvings is a man on horseback is unique in itself; it is unique, also, for its narrative character.

The great majority of African sculptures do not aim to tell a story. Very seldom is there a facial expression, posture or gesture, or additional subject matter (such as the horse) to invoke, what would be for us, conventional associations with western ideas, images or concepts. By conventional associations we understand mental processes by which the image contemplated will invoke in the onlooker's mind a familiar image or a resemblance. Eventually, such an image, in turn, may invoke an emotional attitude. But the initial impression—and this is important—is not of sculptural forms, but of what we may call "illustrative" imagery.

In this "conventional" approach, when we compare the subject of an African carving with something "familiar", we are subject to misinterpretation since we are placing an African imagery into another frame of reference. Thus, if the facial expression on an African statue suggests sorrow, it is because it touches on some experiences stored away in our memory. Thus we may give to the line of the mouth carved by the sculptor a sense not intended by

him. He was interested, rather, in a certain plastic balance of forms. Instead of feeling his intention, we impose upon his work a significance to which it has no relationship.

Few African statues, however, lead us to such "conventional" image references. Most are unnaturalistic; in this lies their great artistic achievement. They stand in space and have their own lives as plastic unities. They are plastic architectures. They are simple, rigid, with impersonal expressions. They are not Negroid, since they do not aim at portraiture. They are *abstract*. The bodies, heads and faces are composed of planes, volumes, the abstract components of sculpture. Even its concept, to create an abode for a spirit, can be termed "abstract". Consequently, the forms utilized to express such a concept themselves were abstract. African sculptures are not images of visual realities; they are expressions of conceptual realities.

But, as in everything else, there are exceptions. Since we are dealing with the culture of about a hundred and fifty million of people, spread over a great area, many exceptions may be expected. Among them are Bakongo figures, some Baluba carvings, especially the Buli type; Ashanti goldweights; some Ibo and Ibibio carvings; and, especially, a large number of Yoruba and Benin artworks.

Though African sculptures do not aim at conventional emotional impressions—they radiate intense feeling. The emotional impact is achieved by sheer sculptural effects, by the tension between the component forms, as these resolve into a balanced plastic unity. It is for us to read this "plastic language", to "decipher" its statements. Then, without associational aids, we shall be moved emotionally. Then the sculpture *is* an embodiment of an intense feeling, and does not merely *look like* something within our visual or emotional references.

\*

The question may now be raised: why did some African sculptures depart from the basic simple forms and turn to more complex carving? They, too, show intense feeling, but they have an additional function as illustration. Properly interpreted, they "tell a story".

We have found that, as soon as simple tribal societies developed into states and kingdoms, their underlying ideologies experienced a corresponding elaboration. Now each tribesman not only traced his descent to the founder (5), but this flowered into a mythology which identified that descent with cosmological origins and developments. The simple ancestor cult grew into a complex pantheon



deifying all natural forces and royal descent (as in the case of the Yoruba Alafin, or the Bini Oba) was traced to divinities.

Art being the expression of ideologies and other cultural factors, it followed their changing manifestations. The best example is the great Benin tusk (Fig. 1). Its very form connotes both phallic power and the power of the largest land animal. In addition there are the significances of the 80 to 100 figures carved on it. These, human and animal, and their combinations, have symbolic meanings related to mythological concepts. So complex an artistic creation could have been produced only by a society with an elaborate hierarchic order.

It is by no accident that many Yoruba carvings attain a comparable complexity. The Bini people were "greatly influenced in their religions by their Yoruba neighbors" (6, p. 236). In our first Legend, we shall see that the chief Yoruba female deity is Odudua to whom Shango's origin is traced. The Bini people also trace their origin to a son of the same Odudua, thus acknowledging a Yoruba influence. According to another Bini legend, one of their first kings came from Ife, the spiritual center of Yorubaland.

The representations of Shango as an equestrian figure, and the representations of a kneeling woman with exaggerated breasts and a double-headed axe superstructure, are complex sculptures. Their purpose obviously is to convey to the onlooker some occurrence of historical significance.

That many of the equestrian figures have not been identified, is not unusual. In that respect, many African sculptures remain, today, uncertain as to origin and meaning. The available historical or ethnological material is scanty or sometimes useless for the purpose of identification.

It is amazing how frequently detailed field studies, particularly those made around the turn of the century, ignored tribal sculpture, usually dismissing them as "roughly carved barbarous attempts", or "grotesques". Sometimes the fault was not with the ethnologist. The African was reluctant to part with information considered sacred and secret. Moreover the African, himself, seldom can explain his concepts and magico-religious rituals. He, and the sculptor who carved the wooden figures, were traditionalists. The sculptor followed prototypes handed down by his fathers. Though within the frame of tradition, individuality was given scope, deviations from the tribal style were strictly prohibited. Since it was believed that the sculpture would presently be inhabited by a spirit, innovation was avoided lest the spirit fail to find his way home. Moreover, since the image had been ordered for ritualistic, not esthetic uses, the purchaser would have rejected

a carving whose departure from prescribed forms would have rendered it useless for the intended rites.

We have numerous examples of rituals that have survived, though their origins were forgotten. Similarly the African carver has forgotten the origin of the traditional forms that he so faithfully followed. He may understand that the equestrian figure with a tray a superstructure served to hold palm nuts used in divination; he may perhaps even realize that it represented Shango. But why the figure was on horseback, he could not know. As we shall see, there is mythological material available to us that may assist us in identification.

Our examples will show how hesitant scholars were about identification. Of seventeen Yoruba equestrian figures referred to in the literature, only three or four have been identified as Shango. FROBENIUS himself, who brought forward abundant documentation on Shango, failed to identify a certain equestrian figure (7, p. 550); and this carving is merely captioned, "the Founder of Yoruba", by WESTERMANN (8, Fig. 29).

Many Bini equestrian bronzes in the round and on bronze plaques and many similar representations in ivory were not identified as Shango, except one ivory; and even this identification was tentative.

Four equestrian figures, other than Yoruba or Bini, have been given no specific attribution. Of nine other Yoruba carvings, not equestrian figures, eight were identified as having been used in the Shango cult.

#### SCULPTURAL REPRESENTATIONS.

Let us first consider the published reproductions of sculptures which we consider to be representations of Shango.

This can be grouped in the following categories:

1. Yoruba equestrian figures.
2. Benin equestrian figures.
3. Equestrian figures of other origin.
4. Yoruba carvings identified as having been used in the Shango cult.
5. Utensils used in the Shango cult.

*Yoruba equestrian Figures.* (Citations in quotation marks are from the documents referred to.)

1. Equestrian figure holding a spear in the right hand. Attendant on each side. The mounted figure has three heads—two side heads issuing from the front head. The three heads are crowned with a

double-axe superstructure (9, p. 177: "Image of the God, Shango") (Fig. 13).

2. Mounted figure, no weapon in either hand (10, Fig. 239, "Yoruba, Dahomey"), right hand holding the bridle. Stylized hair treatment.

3. Equestrian figure, holding a dagger horizontally (11, Pl. 14: "Upper Ivory Coast, Sudanese Region").

4. Carved ivory tusk, an equestrian figure in the center, holding a dagger-like instrument in the right hand, shield in the left; below a carved ram's head (12, Fig. 3: "May represent Obatala, the sky God, from Yorubaland?") (Fig. 3). This figure will also be referred to in the Ram Section.

5. Ivory equestrian figure, holding thick staff in right hand (13, p. 668: "Benin").

6. Elaborately decorated column from the royal palace in Dahomey. Among carvings on it an equestrian figure, with a club-like object in the right hand (14, p. 58: "Dahomey").

The following four equestrian figures all stand on bases and serve as supports for large trays. Tray, figure and base hewn out of single block of wood.

7. Horseman holding spear in right hand (15, p. 76: "Ifa Utensil to hold palm nuts and other articles").

8. Horseman holding pointed staff or spear in right hand (16, p. 39: "Yoruba").

9 and 10. Two equestrian figures similar in every detail and style of carving and the way the rider mounts the horse. In each case a sword is held over the foreleg of the horse. Position of the horse itself: horseman's beard and headgear are virtually identical. Everything suggests that the two pieces were carved by the same artist. The only marked difference is in the shape of the bases. In the carving in the Newark Museum (Fig. 5), the base is rectangular. It is labeled as "Yoruba". The second has a round base. In the German museum where it stands, it has no identifying label. But it has been described by FRÖBENIUS (7, p. 550) as a "wooden equestrian figure, Yoruba", and by WESTERMANN (8, Fig. 29) as "Founder of Yoruba, cult-tray".

11. Equestrian figure, over the head of a kneeling woman. Horseman's head has a superstructure of a double-axe (17, p. 22: "Shango").

Numbers of hood-type marks have large superstructures, sometimes twice the height of the mask itself, elaborately carved, in some cases with equestrian figures.

12. Large hood mask from the British Museum, equestrian figure as superstructure, holding spear and shield in right hand. Four re-

productions under different captions (18, Fig. 243: "Wooden ceremonial mask, Nigeria"; 19, Fig. 25: "Elepa mask, tribal chief armed and mounted"; 7, p. 541: "Wooden dance mask, Yoruba"; 20, Fig. 153: "Mask with mounted warrior, Yoruba [Ekiti district]").

13. Similar hood mask in Philadelphia Museum (21, Fig. 18). Superstructure represents equestrian figure holding spear in right hand. Attendants stand on each side. Varied attributions: "Obatala"; "the founder of Yoruba", "Other great chief". The same mask is reproduced in another volume (22, Fig. 39) captioned as "Carved group, Yoruba" (Fig. 6).

14. Intricately carved, multicolored hood mask, with carved superstructure about thrice the height of the mask proper; center figure equestrian, with some ten figures on both sides, one on horseback (19, Fig. 27: "Equestrian chief accompanied by subordinate divinity and surrounded by incidents of tribal life. Yoruba").

15. Gelede type marks, topped by larger equestrian figure, a group of three horsemen on each side (23, Fig. 218: "Yoruba").

16. Two remarkable ivory equestrian figures, similar in style, in British Museum (Fig. 7). Horse's head a triangular shape. Horse's body very small relative to rider. Horseman holds a spear in each hand, ending in carved human heads. Conical headdresses, with geometrical designs. Catalogued as "Horseman, Yoruba". One figure reproduced (24, Fig. 3) as "Horseman, Gold Coast".

17. Ivory carving of equestrian figure, on diminutive horse, Hamburg Museum (Cat. No. 14.135:8), similar to above, but with these differences: both hands clasped around a staff; necklace in three rows of glass-beads white, red and green. Conical headdress has encircled dot incisions. Identified as "Deified founder of the kingdom of Shango?" (Fig. 9).

In this list of seventeen equestrian figures, four (1, 10, 11, 17) are attributed to Shango by FROBENIUS, WESTERMANN, HARDY and the Hamburg museums; two (4, 13) come closer in their attributions to a mythological figure of Obatala. As we shall see from Legend 1, Obatala was the great-grandfather of Shango.

#### BENIN EQUESTRIAN FIGURES <sup>1</sup>.

Among the Benin equestrian figures are:

1. Bronze figures in the round, riding astride.
2. Ivory figure riding astride.
3. Bronze plaques with one figure, riding astride.

<sup>1</sup> We have limited our Benin references to three sources (25, 26 and 27). They contain the most apposite material.

4. Bronze plaque, with central figure riding side saddle.
5. Head of horse.

1. Bronze equestrian figures, in the round, riding astride. LUSCHAN (25, pp. 297-8) mentioned five, all similar (25, Pl. 73, Figs. 442, 443; 26, Figs. 79 to 81) (Fig. 11). We must add a plaque (25, Fig. 295), which shows the same figure.

These figures have unusual feather headdress according to the description. They also wear collars so broad that they extend to both shoulders. The right hand holds a spear, the left the bridle. Clothes are richly detailed as are also the horse's head and neck.

The manner of mounting is unusual for the Benin people; although the figure has Negroid features. LUSCHAN, after discussing who the figure may be, concludes it to be a representation of a distinguished guest or neighboring chief. FAGG (57) seems to concur with this opinion, referring to explanations offered by various Bini informants, and adds that the headdress resembles those worn at present by the mounted bodyguards of the Fulani emirs of Hausaland. Their northern origin may confirm our own suggestion as to Shango having come from northern country, Nupe.

The following interesting report may show, however, that this figure was not a visitor from the north, but indeed had religious significance. We hope that this will support our contention that the figure might be a representation of Shango. Dr. F. N. ROTH, a physician, who took part in the 1897 punitive expedition, relates (28, p. 175) that on one altar in the Benin city, he saw "between the brass heads were brass castings of a man on horseback, in armour, in chain mail, etc." If this equestrian figure would have been a commemorative subject, like the plaques, it would not have been on the altar, where the great heads, the tusks, the wands, the bells and many other objects all had religious significance.

2. Ivory equestrian figures. Several examples of riding astride are known (Fig. 4). All appear to have served as heads of staffs. They are tube-like, with holes bored in them, indicating that wooden staffs were inserted and attached. The conventionalized facial expression of one of these staff heads (25, p. 117) (Fig. 4) resembles that of Benin bronze heads. It has eight collars of coral beads with a necklace of panther teeth underneath. Rich ornamentation is used on the rider's garments and on the horse's head. Right hand holds staff, or possibly spear. A similar staff is illustrated in PITT RIVERS (26, Figs. 19-21).

Another staff head (Fig. 2) (25, Fig. 805) apparently of greater antiquity, or harder wear is from the Hamburg museum. In its unusual conical headdress it resembles Yoruba Shango figure



(Fig. 7). Long hair frames both sides of the face. Only a fragment of what was held in right hand remains; might have been a spear. Inscription reads: "Deified founder of the kingdom of Shango?" A similar carving is reproduced by PITT RIVERS (26, Figs. 22-24), the long hair falling over the rider's shoulder, but without conical headdress. The carved tubular lower piece ends in double crocodile heads.

Such pieces may have been staff or scepter heads of the Obas or Kings, and may have been used to designate animals for sacrifice, or to close a road.

Certain bronze plaques show Bini warriors with one figure riding astride, identified by LUSCHAN as a "prisoner of war" (25, Figs. 385, 282, 384). A magnificent plaque (25, Pl. 129; 27, Pl. 14) shows a rider being pulled down by the head.

LUSCHAN's identification of the man riding astride as a "prisoner of war" is based on this deduction. If a man riding in this manner is not a European, he must have come from an enemy tribe, in this case a war prisoner. The Bini people had no cavalry. Horses were used only in royal processions or when noblemen came to court. In 1825, when FAWCKNER visited Benin city, he saw only three horses belonging to the king and they were not ridden, as the natives were afraid to mount them. BURTON in 1862 did not see a single horse (28, p. 148).

### 3 a) Plaques with Europeans, riding astride.

Two bronze casts, one a plaque (26, Fig. 129), the other a shield (26, Fig. 112) show Europeans (probably Portuguese) riding astride. They can be recognized by their European features and long hair. One wears a beard.

A carved ivory snuff box and a carved ivory comb show similar figures (27, Figs. 20 and 21; and 25, Fig. 687).

### 4. Bronze Plaques with Bini Figures, riding side saddle.

In 1601, a Dutch traveller, known to us as D. R., visited Benin city (28, p. 107-8). He observed that noblemen rode to the palace "upon horses, and sit upon horses as women and girls do with us...". LUSCHAN (25, p. 318) reproduces a woodcut, after DAPPER, to illustrate this manner of riding. The side saddle mount became the acknowledged custom of the Bini and is illustrated in a variety of bronze plaques (25, Pl. 24; Figs. 319, 321, 322) (Fig. 8).

### 5. Bronze Plaques of Horses Heads.

One plaque shows a horse front-face (25, Fig. 401), with elaborate bridle, and a crescent-like ornament above and under the horse's head. Another type of head, probably of a horse (25, Fig. 541), appears either in the round or as a mask, cast in bronze.



What the meanings were of such representations of the horse, we do not know. By analogy with other animals, such as the cat-fish, crocodile, snake, panther or ibis, which, when used alone as subjects for bronze plaques, usually had a mythological significance connected with religious beliefs, we may assume a mythological reference. But where the other animals are of frequent occurrence, and often in connection with human representations, we know of only two such uses of horse's heads.

In our description of Benin equestrian figures, and our emphasis on the manner of mount, astride or side saddle, our intention was to show that in the former case the figure represented a European, or some other aliens. Plaques, identified as "war prisoners" showing the rider mounted astride, leave little doubt that the riders were of alien tribes.

Only one of the ivory equestrian figures is identified (by the Hamburg museum) as Shango; and even then with a question mark. The bronze equestrian figure, cast in the round (and repeated on a plaque), does not lend itself to any adequate identification.

We believe it to be a representation of Shango, however; and we find support in the legends—attributing to Shango an origin in the north where horses were used. We conclude that the rider could not be a Bini, since he did not ride side-saddle.

EQUESTRIAN FIGURES (not from Yorubaland and not identified with Shango).

1. A hood type mask, with a wing-like superstructure. In the middle front an equestrian figure holds a spear in his hand (29, Figs. 36-37, "Bambara, French Sudan").

2. A mounted figure riding an animal about half his size. The head of the animal is so small, that it cannot definitely be ascertained to be a horse (30, p. 174, "Ancestor, Habbe, French Sudan").

3. Equestrian figure, holding some unascertainable object in the right hand (31, p. 38: "Senufo"). Another figure, probably of more recent date, is in the Philadelphia Museum (Fig. 10); it is identified as "Nafara, Ivory Coast".

4. Covered bowl, cover surmounted by equestrian figure (10, Fig. 34: "Dogon, French Sudan").

YORUBA WOOD CARVINGS (not equestrian figures), identified as Shango cult objects.

In this category, one group stands out, because all its sculptures have these characteristics: They represent a kneeling woman;

with exaggerated breasts. In a number of the figures there is a double-axe above the head.

1. Kneeling woman with three heads, topped by a double axe with snake carving in the center. Carries a child on her back (9, p. 177: "Image of the goddess Oja, sacred figure, used in the Shango ritual") (Fig. 14).

2. Another kneeling woman, carrying child on her back, probably a staff head (32, Fig. 19: "Shango cult of fertility; also 20, Fig. 91).

3. Kneeling woman, supporting distended breast in her hand (32, Fig. 20/a: "Shango priest staff, Yoruba").

4. Here the woman holds a different object in each hand. The double axe above her head is quite as large as the woman (10, Fig. 243: "Top of a sceptre, Yoruba").

5. Staff head. The kneeling woman holds a double axe in her hands; above her head another double axe, made of two triangular forms (16, Fig. 9: "Thunder God Shango, Yoruba).

6. The hands of this kneeling woman are on her abdomen. Figure has a base carved with geometrical patterns. From the illustration it appears that on the double axe, above her head, two figures with catfish appendages are carved. This resembles the Benin representation of the Oba, with the catfish symbolizing the sea god Olokun (9, p. 177: "Image of the goddess Oja, sacred figure, used in the Shango ritual") (Fig. 15).

Of these six figures, two are identified as Oja who, as we shall see from Legend 1, was the favorite wife of Shango, and later Goddess of the River Niger. FARROW (33, p. 51), without using an illustration, identified three figures standing beside a figure of Shango, as Shango's wives, holding "their hands with the palms joined together to their bosoms".

Most of the figures indicated lack these characteristics, but all have exaggerated breasts.

We must now refer to Legend 1 where Shango's mother Yemaja is thus described: "Her body swelled to a great size and from her breasts flowed two streams of water." The exaggerated swollen breasts of all these kneeling female figures may be representations of Yemaja, not of the wives of Shango. However, since they are shown with Shango, they may be his wives. According to the legend, when Shango left Oyo, his three wives accompanied him. Only Oja, however, accompanied him until his death.

Other carvings, identified as Shango cult objects, are:

7. A staff, the upper part of which has two rows of eight human heads, with a double axe affixed to the upper row (12, Fig. 6: "Shango dance-staff, Yoruba").

8. Standing figure, apparently a staff head, surmounted by a double axe, larger than the figure itself (9, p. 179: "Staff of Shango") (Fig. 16).

9. Staff, topped by a human head, with double axe (9, p. 179: "Staff of Shango") (Fig. 17).

#### SHANGO CULT OBJECTS.

The following objects are not essential for our study. They are dealt with here only to show how elaborate the Shango cult was and how varied and "artistic" were the objects used in its rituals.

*Ose Shango*, a sculptured, wood staff, used in sacrifices to Shango (9, p. 184).

The same appellation, *Ose Shango*, is also given to a roughly carved single or double axe placed in the fields to protect crops (9, p. 183). They are usually made of wood, but sometimes have stone heads. Such axes were used by the Shango priests in their rituals, and in searches in houses struck by lightning (15, p. 337).

*Sere Shango*, a rattle, used in rituals (9, p. 184), made of bronze, leather or long necked gourds.

*Ibauri Shango*, Cowry inset headgear worn by Shango priests during rituals. Placed on the altar when not used (9, p. 190; Fig. 13 on p. 175).

*Laba Shango*, leather bag decorated with iron serpent forms, symbolic of lightning. Used to hold the stone celts (9, p. 175, Fig. 13).

*Cylindrical stand* with hole in center and carved sides. Visible in this illustration is the front figure, which appears to be nude, a double axe in the right hand and a club in the left. Apparently another figure and a coiled snake are carved on either side of this figure (9, p. 232) ("Wood base for the ritual service of Shango").

*Oko Shango*, a sacred urn decorated with phallic symbols. (As we will see, this appears to signify Shango's role as fecundator.) The vessel was used in water-offerings (9, p. 190).

*Kele-Shango*, an amulet of white and red beads, worn by the Shango Priest (9, p. 129).

Metal bell without clapper (33, p. 93).

CARVINGS identified with Shango, but not indicated as having been cult objects.

Decorated bowl (34, p. 9).

Carved doors of nobleman's house. Double axe used as motif (9, p. 189).

Armlets with zig-zag pattern, symbolizing lightning. Benin

bronze casts of neolithic celts were similarly decorated with zig-zag patterns (25, Fig. 635).

#### THE LEGEND OF SHANGO.

The Yoruba mythology of Shango may be divided into two categories. The first deals with Shango as God of Thunder and Lightning; the second as the founder and culture hero of the Yoruba nation. There is a possibility that the legends have some historical basis; but the documentary support, often found for such assumptions, is lacking in this instance.

We shall number the legends in order to facilitate reference to them. We shall also underline the word *horse* to point up possible connections with sculptural representation of Shango as an equestrian figure.

The Yorubas recognized many Gods and some hundreds of secondary or lesser deities or spirits. Most of the deities are called Orisha and stand for certain concepts.

The Orisha might be:

1. A spirit of divine origin, therefore a deity. As a deity, the Orisha is associated with natural forces (rain, lightning, etc.) or natural resources such as the sea, rivers, earth, animals, trees, rocks, etc.

2. A person present on earth during its creation and the primal ancestor of a tribe (34, p. 29), sometimes called "deified man" (33, p. 34). Their worship is outside the ancestor cult, a remoter figure of a "legend". This concept has exogamic significance; those who trace their origin to the Orisha cannot intermarry.

3. Local deities.

4. Deities of professions—of hunters, warriors, smiths, etc.

Each Orisha has his own cult and priesthood. Although the descendants of an Orisha worship him as their protective spirit, others have the right to invoke him for the particular power attributed to him. In case of a tornado, for instance, Shango, as storm god, is supplicated everywhere by the Yorubas; in the case of war, Ogun is similarly supplicated.

It is worth noting that, despite the taboo against intermarriage, at certain places Shango priests can or must marry a female descendant of Shango (9, p. 189).

The infraction of a taboo always has deep psychological effects. The priest, in a ritualist (therefore sanctified) manner fulfills instinctual drives of all when he violates a taboo observed for social reasons, as a "necessary" restriction of instinctual wishes. He thus "lives out", the wishes of all the people who feel fulfilled in the process of identifying themselves with the priest, in that act.

Above all the Orishas stands Olorun, Supreme God, a remote spirit, Lord of Heaven, Creator of the Universe—a cosmological deity figure who is never referred to as “Orisha”. Olorun was considered too sublime and remote to be reached by human worship. Therefore no cult exists for him (9, p. 129; 6, p. 229).

In the following pages we shall deal with Shango as a Yoruba Orisha, God of Thunder; also as reputed first king of Oyo, and ancestor of the Yoruba kings (Alafin) and, thus, founder of the Yoruba nation.

No deity is better known or more widely worshipped throughout Yorubaland (33, p. 47) and more dreaded for his malevolence (15, p. 103).

Shango was more than the deity of frightful natural forces. His reputed descendants, members of the Shango clan, played a predominant role throughout Yoruba history (9, p. 134). The royal family traces its origin to Shango. Shango worshippers consider themselves the “aristocracy” of the county.

We shall begin our discussions of the Shango legends with the one, tracing his origin to the Supreme God, Olorun.

*Legend 1* (33, pp. 43-47).

When *Olorun* made the universe and roughly outlined man, he left the finishing touches to *Obatala* (Orishala), associated with purity and whiteness, the highest male Orisha of the Yoruba.

*Odudua*, chief Goddess, who had an independent origin and became the wife of *Obatala*.

*Aganju* (Abinju), their son and daughter, who married  
*Yemaja* (Yemoja) and had a son

*Orugan*, also known as *Oranyan*, the first king of the Yoruba. (A large stone megalith in Ife is called *Okpa Orangan*, or wand of *Orangan* [35].) In turn *Orugan* married his own mother, *Yemaja*. These two incestuous marriages will be elaborated upon later.

The legend further indicates that *Yemaja* fled from her son-husband, *Orugan*, in horror and shame. He pursued her and she fell; her body swelled up; from her breasts rushed two streams of water which became a lagoon. From her body issued a number of new Orishas, of whom

*Shango* was one,

*Oya*

*Oshun*

*Oba* three others,

became the Orishas of the rivers (*Oya*, Orisha of the river Niger).



All three became the wives of Shango. Since they issued from the same mother, another incestuous relationship resulted.

Where this occurred, a town arose which became the sacred city of Yemaja.

Thus the first two male members of this legend entered incestuous unions, Aganju and Orungan, although Orishas, have no cult.

In addition to Shango and the three river deities, the following other Orishas were born from Yemaja:

Olukun, God of sea (who became the symbol of the Benin King or Oba).

Orishako, God of agriculture

Dada, God of vegetation

Ogun, God of war

Shopono (or Shankpana), God of smallpox

Olosa, Goddess of lagoons

Oke, God of hills

Aje Shaluga, God of wealth

Oshori, God of hunters.

The role of these Gods has been given variant interpretations. For instance: Oke or Oko is considered the Orisha of agriculture; and Ogun is also the God of iron and the patron God of smiths.

#### *Legend 2 (33, pp. 48-9).*

This legend seeks to establish Shango as an historical figure.

In that aspect, Shango was king of old Oyo (Eyeo or Katunga), a powerful warrior, a great magician, and a cruel and despotic ruler. He could eject *fire from his mouth*. (This legend is illustrated in some sculptural representations.) At this instigation, two of his ministers fought each other. The victor, supported by the discontented people, deposed Shango who fled with his three wives, two of whom deserted him. Only his favorite wife, Oya, remained loyal to him. In despair, he hung himself from an *ayan* tree. (This tree is sacred to Shango and many objects used in the Shango cult are carved from its wood.) After Shango's suicide, Oya fled north and became Goddess of the river Niger.

Partisans of Shango, seeking revenge, filled some small calabashes with gunpowder. (This reference indicates this part of the legend to be of later date.) The next time a lightning storm occurred, they ignited these calabashes and threw them into houses. The explosions killed many people. Shango's followers declared that Shango was now a God, and had sent the lightning to punish those who had sinned against him. To appease him, people began



sacrificing to him. Thus the cult of the Lightning-God, Shango, was established.

This legend has three aspects: 1. The flight of Shango. 2. His deification. 3. His identification with lightning.

### *Legend 3.*

WESTERMANN's (8, pp. 252-3) version of Yoruba origins begins with Legend 1, but makes no mention of the marriage of Orugan to his mother. He notes, however, that Orugan (Oranyan) had two sons, Shango and Adjaka. The latter was the second Yoruba king, who proved a weak ruler and was replaced by Shango. In this version, Shango was the third king, and a cruel warrior. His origin is traced (with the intent of giving some "historical base") to the daughter of a Nupe King, Elempe. He might have lived in a vanished city, called *Ikoso*, south of the Ishaki. When his mother died, Shango asked his grandfather, the Nupe king, to send him a gift of a *horse* and a cow, to offer them as sacrifices to his mother's spirit.

His departure from Oyo (the old Oyo) is explained by the tradition that Yoruba kings ruled only seven years. Shango's departure is put in his seventh year when he set out for Nupe, to finish out his life there; but he committed suicide on the way.

WESTERMANN adds what is of interest to us—that, after Shango was deified as God of Thunder, he was represented as an *equestrian figure*, strongly indicating a Nupe and Borgu influence.

### *Legend 4.*

As to what happened to Shango after his death, and the nature of his deification, we have various legends.

In one (7, p. 277), the people searched for his body after he had hanged himself. All they found was a deep pit from which voices could be heard and the end of an iron chain could be seen. This place, called Kuso, remains today residence of Shango priests (Magbas), each of whom has twelve acolytes (33, p. 50).

According to a second version, after Shango's burial (9, p. 176), a chain rose from his tomb on which he ascended into the sky.

According to a third version (7, p. 278), when Shango wanted to die, he took a chain into his mouth, stamped on the earth, which opened under his feet. He descended with his wives and the earth closed over him with only the end of the chain visible.

In all three versions, the iron chain plays an important part. Since it has been suggested that Shango came from the north (Nupe), it may be noted that the legendary king of Nupe, Tsoede,

had a chain of great magical power. To this day it serves as the emblem of the Nupe king's judicial power (36, p. 73).

ELLIS (37, p. 52) records that Shango dwelt in the "clouds in an immense brazen palace, where he maintained a large retinue and many *horses*... He hurls on those who have offended him a red-hot chain of iron..."

Thus, in these two oral traditions, Shango ascends into the sky by climbing on a chain. Lightning is depicted as a chain of red hot metal, and his palace is made of metal.

According to the legends recorded by FROBENIUS (9, p. 90), king Shango came from Tapa or Takpa, lived in the old Oyo (called Orole), from where the best known coppersmiths came. Shango's palace was made of copper and decorated with copper. He adds that the excavations of the old Oyo (p. 104) disclosed a splendid palace with clay columns covered with carved wood and bronze plaques, and "chased bronzes of great beauty". (This suggests an origin for the Benin bronze plaques, which were also used to decorate columns of the Benin Oba's palace.)

From this copper palace, it was believed that lightning was hurled (9, p. 176).

As to the conception of lightning as a red-hot chain of metal, we have an analogous concept in Togo (38, p. 23), where lightning is a "luminous snake" of the Thunder-God Heviesso (a derivation of Shango). He is represented in the form of an iron serpent, called Ebi.

FROBENIUS illustrated (9, p. 215) a "serpentine lightning in iron", but it has a two horned animal head. In both cases, the snake body is associated with the serpentine-design of lightning.

#### ORIGIN OF SHANGO (Legend 5).

Both FROBENIUS and WESTERMANN suggest that Shango may have been an historical figure and attribute a northern origin to him—Nupe.

PEDRALS, in two of his works, makes interesting speculations on the origin of Shango. In one (40, pp. 27, 28, 30, 85, 106), his starting point is the biblical Noah, whose son Ham crossed the Red Sea and established himself in Africa. From an incestuous union with his mother (as in Legend 1) came four sons. One, Kush, who was born "black", married three of his sisters (as in Legend 1). His son, by one of these wives, was Shango, who became the king of the Kush. A connection may be seen here with the Hyksos, a Semitic people, who invaded Egypt and Abyssinia and who used *horses*, then unknown in Africa.

In his other work, PEDRALS (41, p. 55) cites MOIRE (42), who, without knowledge of the Yoruba Shango deity-concept mentions a Meroitic legend. According to this legend, the founder of Nubia was Shango, known also under the name of Kheviesso. Another appellation, Oba-Kush, accords with the tradition which makes him the king of Kush. As we shall see, this is also one of the appellations of the Yoruba Shango.

The origins are traced as follows:

Agandju, God of space, is his grandfather,  
Orugam, the God of midday, is his father,  
Dada, the God of nature, and  
Ogun, the God of hunters and smiths, are his brothers,  
Oya, Osun and Oba are his three wives.

(The names and number of these wives accord with Legend 1.)

It is further stated that this king of Kush, Shango, was a great warrior (like the Yoruba Shango). His conquests brought him to West Africa, as far as Dahomey.

His slaves included the king of the Bini, God of Darkness (no name given), and Aido Khuendo, God of the Rainbow.

The name of Kheviesso, under variant spellings, is spread all over West Africa. Equally general is the belief that neolithic stone celts are Shango's thunderbolts.

As to Aido Khuendo, God of the Rainbow, he is known in Dahomey as Aido Hwendo (43, p. 163) and is believed to be a serpent who hurls thunderbolts to the earth. In Togo, lightning is called a "luminous snake". In the Yoruba legend, the rainbow God, Ashumare (33, p. 51), appears as one of Shango's attendants, his function to bring water from the earth to Shango's palace. This is a reversal of the natural order of the rainbow's appearance, after the water came down to the earth from the sky.

A further connection between Shango and Nubia may be seen in reports of the large bronze warrior figures found on Jebba Island in the bend of the Niger (20, Figs. 31 and 44, p. 126) and the large bronze "Gago" cast, found at Tedda.

Sir PALMER (45, p. 252) comments on the Jebba figure, that "...the warrior might thus, possibly, be thought to represent Shango... the Yoruba God of Thunder, lightning and battle...", and adds that this figure might also represent an early conqueror king, or warrior demigod.

We have already seen that Shango represents an early conqueror who was later deified. Another indication places his origin in Nupe, where the bronze was cast.

On the helmet of this Jebba figure a round disk shows a vulture.

This has been identified with the Meoritic vulture mother-Goddess and Goddess of victory, Nekhebit or Mut, generally shown as tearing to pieces the enemies of the king (46, Pl. IX). Mrs. MEYEROWITZ (44, pp. 121-126) offers abundant documentation to show that not only the Vulture, but the garment of this figure, and the Tedda bronze called "Gago" display distinct Nubian motifs. This "Gago" wears a breastplate on which a triangle appears in the mouth of a Nubian ram. Such triangular patterns are found among the Blemmies of Nubia. The Blemmies were defeated by the Nobatae in the middle of the sixth century. A part of this warlike tribe migrated from Nubia into the western deserts of Sudan, where they established kingdoms in which their Nubian customs were retained. PALMER reproduces Blemmy pottery (46, Pl. IX, pp. 64, 243) where the vulture is prominently featured. They may also have comprised a part of the ancient Kanem kingdom, famous for bronze casting, and strongly under Nubian cultural influence. The Jukon tribe, a constituent of Kanem, appears to have migrated in 1250 A.D. to Nigeria, carrying with them their ancient tradition.

Kanem is situated north of Lake Chad. South of this region, there existed some time between the tenth and fifteenth centuries the Sao kingdom. Excavations in this region have unearthed a bronze gazelle of possible Nubian influence (47, pp. 177-178). The burial practice of the Sao resembles that of the Alafin, or king of the Yoruba.

In the Benin kingdom (28, p. 42) men were appointed to provide food for the vultures, who were forbidden to be killed. But there is no evidence that vultures were worshipped. They were not included in the sculptural representations of the Bini people. Possibly vultures were protected for their value as scavengers. However, in 1601, the Dutch writer, referred to as D. R., observed (28, p. 42) that the officers who carried food to the vultures, were regarded with awe. No other person could look at the food. Passers-by would make way for this officer, even running from him. This would indicate a survival from an earlier vulture worship.

From Legend 5 and additional material we can see that—

1. Two independent legends establish Shango as king of Kush, one making him the founder of Nubia. His name, Oba-Kush, is also borne by the Yoruba Shango.

2. His origin from incestuously united parents and grand-parents, and the names of his grandfather, father, brothers and wives resemble those in the Yoruba legend.

3. The fact that the king of Bini was held to be one of his slaves gains some support from the reverence the Bini show to Neolithic celts as "stones of Shango".

4. The God of Rainbow, associated with Shango, is a widely accepted concept among the people of West Africa. In the Yoruba legend, this God is an attendant of Shango.

5. The Jebba and Tedda bronze figures from north of Yorubaland in Nupe show marked Nubian influences. The warrior is tentatively identified as Shango.

6. The decoration includes a Nubian Ram, which is one of the Yoruba representations of Shango.

7. This suggests a connection with the Blemmies, who came from Nubia. There is a possibility that the bronze gazelle, excavated in the region of the ancient Sao kingdom, is also of Nubian influence. The Sao method of burying their dead in large pots resembles the interment of the Yoruba Alafin. Between Nubia and Nupe is the Chad region, where flourished the kingdom of Kanem, which showed marked Nubian influences.

8. The vulture Goddess of Victory, identified on the Jebba figure, not only indicates Nubian influence, but permits the conjecture that this bird might have been sacred in early Benin history.

Thus these seemingly unrelated factors tend to support the possibility that Shango, or the concept of Shango, might have originated in Nubia and been adopted by the Yoruba. A current theory traces Yoruba origins to the Upper Nile valley. In that case, they might have brought with them the concept of Shango (see our reference to the Abiri [Ife] ram head, page 170).

#### INCESTUOUS PATTERN IN LEGENDS 1 and 5.

We may comment here on the parallel repetitions of incest in the Nubian and the West African legends of Shango. Other mythologies and legends show similar recurrent patterns.

Recent investigations into the mythologies of peoples all over the world have shown that their legends are no mere tales; that they manifest an astonishing regularity, and similarities are not to be passed off as "coincidences". Inquiry has established correspondencies with strong and universal unconscious drives.

Incestuous marriage, in connection with ethnic origins, merits detailed study, but in this paper, we must restrict ourselves only to some suggestions. Thus, the Shango legend may be considered a "projection" or "living out" of the basic human drive called the "Oedipus complex", a stage of psychic development through which all individuals go in childhood. With most people, this occurs on such a deep instinctual, emotional level and at such an early age, that it leaves not even a memory trace. Nearly everybody has felt sexual impulses towards their parents and, or, sister or brother,



without being cognizant of them. Where such urges were given, some overt expression, social censure—taboos—came immediately into play, making the feeling abhorrent and dangerous, too. Infractio of taboos incurred severe penalty—onerous fines, banishment or even death.

Thus a myth ascribing satisfaction of incestuous drives to a hero, especially to the hero founder of the tribe, permits vicarious satisfaction of the repressed desire to all the tribesmen. The myth-makers, in intuitive recognition of these urges, in a society where sexual behavior is less inhibited than among us, provided, in these legends, opportunities to tribesmen to project their instinctual wishes into the acts of the hero.

Repeated from generation to generation, the legends become sacred tribal tradition. Every detail, every name, the very order of the narration must be observed without variation. (Through this, incidentally, we gain some assurance that surviving legends are likely to have come down to us, with little or no change, through the centuries.)

This may also assure the historical validity of some of this material. For in addition to expressing unconscious wishes, certain legends serve as oral chronicles. Thus the legend might record historical happenings, overlaid with fantasies and “morals” of later generations.

Let us return to the incestuous pattern of the legends under investigation. When such sacred legends were told and retold to a large number of people, each shares the conviction of direct descent from the legendary hero. Each feels that he, too, could have or would have acted like his forefather. In this identification with the hero not only the inventors of the myths, but all the tribesmen, through the generations, were enabled to project their own incestuous impulses upon the hero, to “unload” their own unconscious drives upon him. Thus the tribal myths kept open a channel for communal “catharsis” for centuries.

Let us note, however, that while both deities were direct descendants of the supreme creator God, neither Aganju, who married his sister, nor Orungan, who married his mother, is a subject of worship (33, p. 47). This lends itself to psychoanalytical speculation. These figures stood for the image of a Father, before the deified Shango was born. They represent the two polarities of human psychological behavior: love and hate, good and evil. The inventors of the legends made these two figures act out the instinctual incestuous wish—but left it with a sinful association. There is an analogy, here, with the Adam and Eve legend.

What was sinful, was socially harmful, therefore reprehensible.



Thus the incestuous drive, desirable at the unconscious level, turns into something undesirable on the conscious or moral level.

The same polarity or ambivalence can be seen in the attitudes of the child toward the father. This is incorporated in the role of Shango. He is the benefactor who brings the rain (for which he is loved) and also the destroyer who slays with lightning (for which he is dreaded). Every child's psychic development appears to include a stage of revolt and hate of the overpowering, tyrant father which leads to wishful fantasies of eliminating or killing him. The legend, by withholding cult worship from the two procreator fathers, thereby eliminating them, similarly fulfills an unconscious wish.

Reflections of the incestuous drive, traceable to infancy, may also be seen in the myths and customs of the Dogon of French Sudan (39, pp. 90-94). The origin of the first human beings is traced to the union of a brother and sister. "It was formerly believed that the ideal marriage was one contracted between a brother and sister." Marriage with the daughter of a maternal uncle is considered desirable. "Symbolically, this girl is regarded as a substitute for her husband's own mother. The marriage is thus, in some sense, a re-enactment of the mythical incest." This incestuous drive further appears in the sanction given in intercourse with the wife of a man's maternal uncle "substitute for his own mother". He addresses her as "my wife" and she calls him "my husband". In view of psychoanalytical concept, it is interesting to note that great rivalry exists, among the Dogon, between father and sons, and between brothers, both in regard to property and women.

#### MEANING OF THE NAME "SHANGO".

Let us now look into the various names and concepts attached to Shango.

1. Shango is believed to have been the ruler of Oyo, the founder of Yorubaland and of the royal line of Alafins, the Yoruba kings. Legends 2 and 3 trace these origins.

2. Shango's deification followed his death as a so-called "historic" ruler. As a deity, Shango is known under the following aspects:

God of Thunder and Lightning, he who destroys in the storm.

Jakuta, the "thrower of stones".

The Fecundator.

The Blower of Fire.

Thus he is the first procreator of the nation; he controls fecundity, and he has the power to punish. Our contention that Shango

is a Father image and object of both love and hate is confirmed by FROBENIUS. He points out (9, p. 175) that Shango is greatly feared (and one who is feared is inevitably hated), being the violent God whose thunderbolts kill people and set houses on fire. Yet he is also loved and adored as a beneficent deity for thunder is followed by fructifying rain. But the Father stands also for punishment. And indeed it is believed among the Yoruba that the victim of lightning had committed some sin against Shango for which the God punished him.

In this light, Shango appears as more than a figure of legend. His incestuous marriages symbolize basic human incestuous drives and the taboo-breaking marriages of his priests continue to provide communal projections for these drives. Finally, Shango stands as the most important figure in the life of a male, the Father figure. Thus Shango becomes a comprehensive symbol of universal, basic human drives.

#### JAKUTA (*The Stone Thrower*).

In this designation, Shango incorporated a specific Yoruba belief, that the thunderbolt that splits trees, destroys houses and kills people is a stone axe hurled by Shango from the sky. Neolithic stone celts, found in the fields, are believed to be his axes. This belief is spread all over West Africa.

LUCAS (15, p. 105) ascribes an Egyptian origin to the name of Jakuta, or stone thrower. The syllables of the name *ja ku ta*, he says, mean the "living soul (khu) of Ptah", the Egyptian God who was believed to be incorporated in a stone. LUCAS considers the Yoruba word for stone, an Egyptian derivation meaning "soul of Ptah". Now the symbolic animal for Ptah was a Ram, and in Yorubaland, Shango is associated with that animal (15, p. 334). LUCAS further suggests that the double-headed axe, Shango's most common symbol, derives from the double horn of the ram. These observations—taken with due reserve—might be of further interest in our study of Shango's Nubian origin.

DENNET (48, p. 65) supposes that Jakuta, the Thrower of Stones, began as an independent God, but was later confused with Shango. Today the two are interchangeable. In his analysis of the word Jakuta, *ja* means to fight, *ku* stands for Oko, which name means stone, and *ta* means to throw. He adds, however (p. 66), that the word *oko* has other meanings—foreskin, husband, a spear. Among derivations of the word, *ako* means male and *ole* means embryo. But Oko (or Oke) is also one of the Orishas, born to Yemaja, deity of agriculture.

In the various meanings of Oko, we can see a common concept of fecundation and fertility. Even "stone" as the symbol of Shango, who brings the fecundating rain to the farmland, becomes a concept of fertility. LUCAS mentions also—without developing the point (15, p. 111)—that Oko is "a phallic deity".

It is possible that the large stone megaliths found in Ife (49), impressive phallic symbols, have a closer connection with Shango than has been suspected up to now.

In further support of our contention that Shango represents fecundating power to the Yoruba, we may cite three rituals.

1. A stone celt, attributed to Shango, is placed among the seed to be sown to assure a good harvest.

2. When a stone celt is found in the fields (9, p. 190), it is kept there to fecundate the field. Later it is placed on an altar and prayers are made to it.

3. A roughly carved wooden instrument, representing a single- or double-headed axe, called "osse Shango", is placed on the farmland. Prayers to it plead for two blessings: fecundity to the fields and protection from destructive thunderbolts.

#### SHANGO AND THE ALAFIN.

The Yorubas trace their origin to Oduduwa (or Odudua), their chief Goddess, whose husband was Obatala, highest male Orisha. Shango was her great-grandson and therefore fourth Alafin or king of Yorubaland (48, p. 58).

Shango is also called Oba Kuso (48, p. 169), signifying king of Kuso. Here we must recall that, according to Legend 5, Shango was the king of Kush, and was designated in Nubia, as Oba Kush. In Legend 4, we find that the Yoruba Shango died in Kuso which is still sacred to him and to the residence of his high priests. We shall see later that the deceased Alafins were buried at Koso (or Kuso), where their predecessors had been interred.

These connections with Kush or Kuso, which we do not consider fortuitous, support the conjecture of Shango's Nubian origin.

FROBENIUS deduces (9, p. 182) two historical Shangos.

1. Shango Takpa (or Tapa) has his origin in Nupe, and is believed to be the older (9, p. 104). This dynasty appears to have reigned in Oyo for a long time, then it ceded its place to a new dynasty from Borgu. This Takpa Shango is represented by a *ram*.

2. Mesi Shango (Mesi, means king) came from Borgu and is represented by an *equestrian figure*.

Tapa Shango is said to have driven Mesi Shango away.

When the court left the old Oyo and settled further south in the

New Oyo, the Alafin was selected from the royal line of the Shango Takpa. According to the latest sources, this tradition was maintained. Each new Alafin was chosen by a council of seven (34, p. 20) from the royal line founded by Odudua. It is not indicated which Shango is considered Odudua's great-grandson.

FROBENIUS follows with what appears to be a contradictory observation. He states (9, p. 104) that the Alafin is descended from the old clan, which always made war on *horseback*. Earlier he had observed that the old clan of Takpa was associated with the ram, and the new clan (Mesi Shango) with the equestrian figure.

Further comments ascribe to the ram-represented old clan, the true origin of the Alafin, but the symbolic connection between the Alafin and the horse is retained. In the burial of the Alafin (9, pp. 110-111) one of the eight persons interred with him in voluntary self-sacrifice, as his retinue in the world of the dead was the Alafin's groom, who held the Alafin's *horse* by the bridle. The body of the king was carried in an enormous pot to Koso (or Kuso), where the tombs of the dead kings were placed, one beside the other.

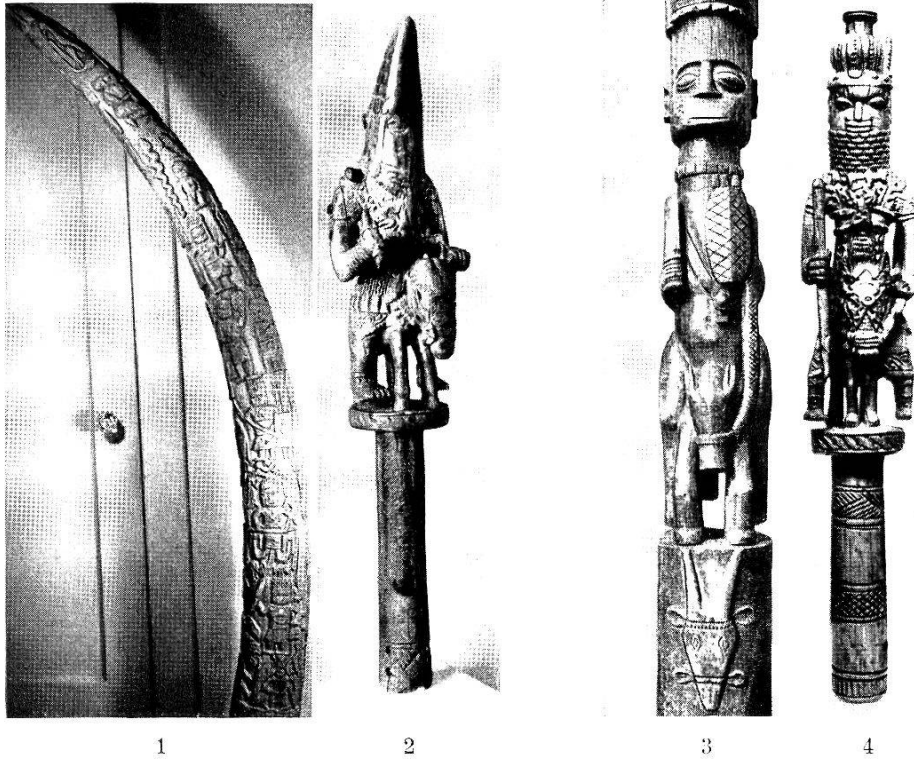
It is of interest to us to note, that excavations of cemeteries of the ancient kingdom of Sao (Chand region) has shown similar pottery burials (47, p. 91). The pot containing the body was covered with another pot. This similarity of burial customs suggests that the migratory group who settled in Nigeria, came from the Chad region.

Each tomb was in the form of a mound on which the king's *horse* was killed. He was then believed to join his royal rider in the "kingdom of the dead". The ritual phrase used for the burial, was: "The Alafin 'rode' to the kingdom of Shango."

To reconcile the association of Shango with the Horse and the ram, FROBENIUS offers the following explanation (9, p. 175). Shango is represented as an equestrian figure, but was also given the name of Ram, because he is "as joyous as a ram".

Possibly these two representations combine fear of the mounted warrior with the affection felt for so useful an animal as the ram. Possibly, the two symbols were confused in forgotten associations, through the centuries, and the two symbols were retained together. We see similar confusions in other mythologies. The Greek Hermes, for example, includes among his representations, a phallus, an infant, a bearded man, a nude, an adolescent athlete.

When the new Alafin was installed (9, p. 110), he drank a draught from the skull of his father, in the belief that thus he acquired "the divine power of Shango, the founder of the kingdom". This belief



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- Fig. 1.* Fully carved ivory tusk (72"). Benin Kingdom, Br. Nigeria. Collection: Segy Gallery, New York.
- Fig. 2.* Ivory carving. "Representation of the deified founder of the kingdom of Shango?" Collection: Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde und Vorgeschichte, Hamburg. Reproduced in Ref. 25, Fig. 805 (p. 476).
- Fig. 3.* Carved ivory tusk. Two captions: "Equestrian figure from Br. Nigeria" (p. 34). "May represent Obatalla, the sky God" (p. 230). From Ref. 12, Fig. 3.
- Fig. 4.* Ivory carvings. Collection: British Museum, London. Very similar reproduced in Ref. 25, Vol. 3, Pl. 117.



5



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- Fig. 5.* "Equestrian figure, wood (11¾"). Yoruba, Nigeria". Collection: The Newark Museum, Newark, N.J. Photo: courtesy of the Museum.
- Fig. 6.* "Mask, Chief on horseback (39"). Yoruba, Western Nigeria". Collection: The University Museum, Philadelphia. Photo: courtesy of the Museum.



that, by drinking from a skull, the spiritual power of the deceased can be assimilated, is wide-spread in West and Central Africa.

#### STONES OF SHANGO.

Under analysis, the role of Shango in the life of the Yoruba falls under two main concepts. In one, he is considered the founder of the Yoruba nation, and thus a "historic" figure of significance to all who trace their origin to this ancestor.

In another, Shango is the stone thrower, or God of the Storm, God of Lightning and Thunder. Since the region is swept by seasonal tornados, PARRINDER (6, p. 224) suggests that this powerful manifestation of nature "undoubtedly contributed to the worship of rain and thunder gods".

Two early (17th century) observations, when the ideas of the Africans on the Guinea coast were still comparatively free of much foreign influences, are of interest in this connection.

BARBOT writes (50, p. 306) that when it thunders "they say it is the voice of trumpets, or blowing horn . . . of God, who, with reverence be it spoken, is diverting himself with his wives . . ." "They run under cover, if possible, believing that if they did not do so, God would strike them with his thunderbolts." It is interesting, in the light of our suggestion, that Shango, as the great fecundator, has phallic significance, that the thunder itself was considered a sexual act. Here the fear of punishment is again clearly indicated.

BOSMAN (51) notes that the Africans of the Guinea coast are of the "opinion that the force of the thunder is contained in a certain stone".

These concepts, recorded three hundred years ago, were probably derived from much older ideologies.

The Yoruba expressed their awe of the storm by personalizing the force behind it as:

1. An anthropomorphic demi-god or Orisha.
2. They also "concretized" the force itself in an object: the stone. In this, it resembles other religious inventions.

Most religions personalize the function of natural forces in anthropomorphic deities. This is the first step in the "humanizing" of natural and supernatural forces. The second step is to give the concept "real" or tangible form by inventing "objects" (statues, masks, or simple stones) as "containers" of the divine force. Such objects then became "sacred" and the worshipper thus enabled to see, touch, or approach the object, could focus his fervor upon it. This was an important invention of the human mind. It "con-





*Fig. 7.* Carved ivory figure of a horseman (12" and 15"). Yoruba. Nigeria. Collection: British Museum, London.

*Fig. 8.* Bronze plaque, Benin Kingdom, Br. Nigeria. "Native on horseback, supported by two attendants, protected by two shields held by two other natives". From Ref. 25, vol. 2, pl. 24.

*Fig. 9.* Carved ivory figure (8½"). "Representation of the deified founder of the Kingdom of Shango?" Collection: Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde und Vorgeschichte, Hamburg.

*Fig. 10.* Wooden figure: man on horseback. Nafara. Ivory Coast. Collection: The University Museum, Philadelphia.



*Fig. 11.* Bronze figure. Benin Kingdom. "Native with feather headdress on a mule". From Ref. 25, Pl. 73.

*Fig. 12.* Bronze cast. Benin Kingdom, Br. Nigeria. "King with sceptre and stone axe, protected by two attendants, on the base two executed". From Ref. 25, pl. 79.

cretized" a mysterious force, which then was no longer entirely unknown and uncontrollable.

The neolithic celts fulfilled this function. They became the "containers" of the force of Shango, who hurled them from the sky. The complex ideas about Shango were "objectivized" in the stone and became important symbols in his cult.

We have noted the use of stones in agricultural rituals. The stone axe, being considered the embodiment of Shango's power, became a ceremonial instrument of his priesthood. Originally of stone, with a wooden handle, it was later carved entirely of wood. As we have seen, numbers of carved human figures carry a superstructure in the shape of the double axe, symbolizing Shango's stone axe.

For representations of Shango, we have mainly used Yoruba carvings. This should not be taken to mean that the Thunder-God concept is limited to Nigeria, Togo or Dahomey. We have already observed that some concepts (such as the snake for lightning, or the rainbow God) are also to be found among other tribes.

An interesting study by LAGERCRANTZ (52) thoroughly investigates the widespread belief of the divine origin of the neolithic celts, and their connection with the Thunder- or Sky-God.

Stone celts, ground or polished stone-axe heads are Neolithic artifacts. The African neolithic period lasted much longer than the European. For instance, the Bube of Fernando Po were still in a stone age culture at the time of their discovery (18, p. 190) in the 15th century. And where the Azande now live (northeastern Belgian Congo), there was formerly a small statured people who, a century later, were still stone age men (52 a, p. 20).

The stone celts were not buried deeply. A heavy tropical rain often "washed" them out. They "appeared" where they had not been seen before. Because they appeared after rain, which in this region is accompanied by furious thunder and lightning, the concept emerged that the stone celts and axes were bolts of the Thunder-God.

The various African tribes called these objects thunderbolt-stones, thunder-stones, God's stones, thunder-axes or rain-stones. We shall speak of them all as "stones".

Such "stones" were unknown in the pre-dynastic Egypt, but were common in Nubia.

LAGERCRANTZ establishes that the concept of the stones as missiles of the Thunder-God is shared *by about 65 different tribes in West Africa, from Senegal to the Cameroons*, and extends northward to some tribes of the Sahara; south-east to tribes in the Azande-Mangbetu region of the Belgian Congo, and eastward as far as Egypt.

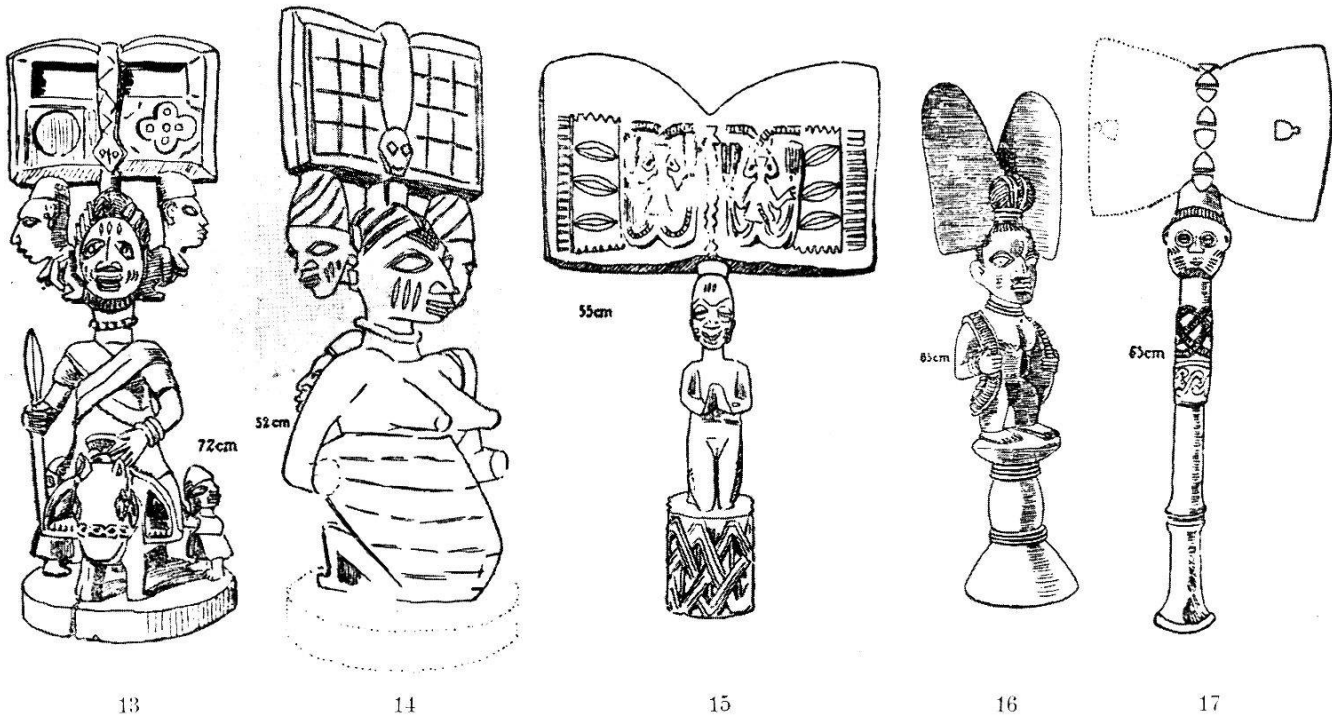


Fig. 13. "Image of the God Shango" (29"). Yoruba, Nigeria. From Ref. 9, p. 177.  
 Fig. 14. Image of the Goddess Oja, with double axe (21"). From Ref. 9, p. 177.  
 Fig. 15. Image of the Goddess Oja, with double axe (22"). From Ref. 9, p. 177.  
 Fig. 16. Staff of Shango, with the symbols of the thunder celts (26"). From Ref. 9, p. 179.  
 Fig. 17. Staff of Shango, with the symbols of the thunder celts (26"). From Ref. 9, p. 179.

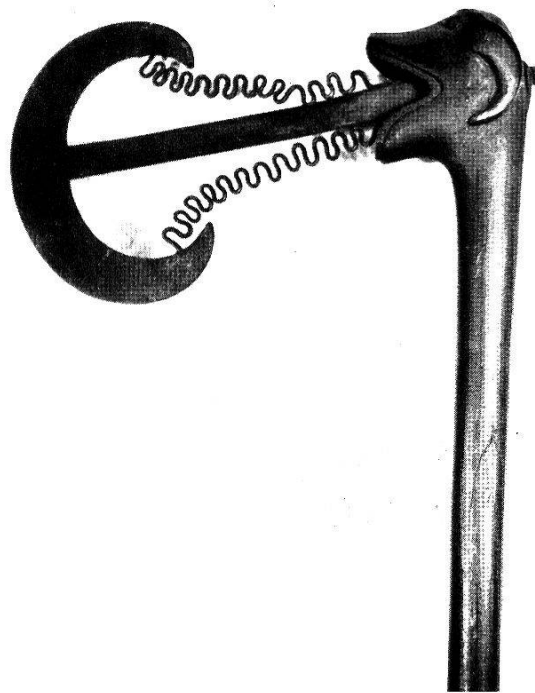


Fig. 18. Wooden axe with metal blade (21", blade 8"). Collection: Segy Gallery, New York.

Various beliefs attached to the stones are incorporated in rituals. As with most of the religio-magical rituals, the aim is to appease the divine wrath, to gain the God's goodwill; thereby to affect the course of events for the petitioner's benefit. That is why natural forces (in this case storm and lightning) were personalized and deified—that is, essentially humanized. Having brought these forces to a human level, the worshipper could understand and satisfy his God's needs. The sacrifice he offered could be considered due payment for the absolution sought for from God. What it amounted to was expiation for the sense of guilt.

Shango is primarily a wrathful, punishing deity, who hurls lightning and destroying stones from the sky. Enraged by men's sins, he inflicts these punishments. In Legend 2, this is clearly indicated. Sacrifices were offered to appease Shango. The sacrifice, an expiatory act to discharge a sense of guilt, remains to this day an important part of Shango worship.

The conviction that a man killed by a thunderbolt (the supposed falling stone) was punished for some sin against Shango, is so strong in Yoruba beliefs, that the victim cannot be buried in the customary manner, but is placed in the bush; or great penalties and sacrifices are paid to the God (through priests as intermediaries) to quiet the God's wrath.

When a house is struck, it is also taken for a sign of divine wrath. The Shango priest ransacks the house and always comes up with a stone as proof of the God's displeasure; and it does not matter that it is generally known that the priest brings such a stone with him. The house owner's possessions are forfeited and an additional fine is imposed on him. In former times, when such fine could not be met, the house owner could be sold as a slave in payment.

When lightning struck trees or other objects, the priest also unearthed the stone, probing for it with pincers, since it is considered to be "red hot", and it was placed into water to "cool off". Sometimes milk was poured over it, that liquid being the stone's favorite "nourishment". Sometimes it was cooked in oil.

As the container of formidable spirit power, the stones are handled with care, and with some exceptions, only by priests. To derive benefits from them, they are made ritual objects. They are placed on altars, or in special huts, or on ancestors' tombs, or on the roofs of houses. Offerings (and often animal sacrifices) are made to them.

They are believed capable of bringing the following benefits to man: rain to end drought; abundant harvests, achieved either by placing the stone among the seeds before sowing, or by planting a

double-headed axe (often made of wood) in the fields. They are then also expected to protect the farms from storm damage. Good harvest being equated with fecundation, the people often copulate on the open field, symbolically acting out the fertilization of the grain in the mother earth by the sun and rain. The stone then functions as a fertility machine. They are also used as magical cures for sicknesses, as amulets against lightning, and against theft; and as good luck charms. Oaths are sworn upon them in the belief that fear of offending the witnessing spirit will hold the oath-taker to his word.

We omit tribal names and other specific references, because LAGERCRANTZ's essay (52) gives them in detail.

Sculptural representation being our main interest, it is appropriate to dwell here on the fact that many Benin bronze casts represent human figures (mostly the Oba) holding a stone-axe in his hand.

We have a great mace, over five feet long, cast in bronze (26, Figs. 66-68), probably representing the Oba, holding in his right hand a stone celt. PITT RIVERS affirms that stone celts "are looked up to by the natives even now with great awe and superstition". LUSCHAN illustrates four other representations (25, Pl. 69, 79, 81; Figs. 714-5), each with a celt held in the hands (Fig. 12).

For the Bini, these stones were sacred (53, p. 182). They offered sacrifices to them. They made small casts in bronze of them, with zig-zag pattern incrustated (25, Fig. C.635). Obviously, since the Oba holds a stone axe in his hand, its representation on these bronze casts must stand as a "symbol of divine power". BALFOUR connects them with the Thunder-God.

As we have seen, the belief in neolithic celts as missiles of the Thunder-God is spread over an area of 2000 miles in one direction and 600 miles in another, and is shared by more than sixty-five tribes. So widespread a concept cannot be the invention of each tribe. The assumption seems justified that it was introduced from *one original source* and won acceptance, through many centuries, by tribes accessible to its spreading influence. For African tribes were in constant contact. It is probable that the great migrations, whose course was mainly from the east or north-east, must have brought this concept with them.

Just where did the thunderstone concept originate?

We know how early these stones appear in Nubia; and a Nubian origin is attributed to Shango, at about the same time. This suggests a common source for the concept of Shango and of the stone axe.

An thunderstone cult later rose in Egypt where it was con-



nected with the worship of Min and Amun, centering around Panapolis and Letopolis. "Priests of the double-axe" appeared in the fifth dynasty. And the double-axe, as a symbol, was to be seen in the first dynasty (52, p. 13). The cult of these neolithic axes may have reached Egypt from Nubia.

#### HORSE AND RAM. SYMBOLS OF SHANGO.

Shango may have been a historic figure. Should he have been only a legendary figure, it is probable that the concept reached Yorubaland from Nubia through intermediary migrations, or the Yorubas themselves brought it with them in their migrations.

Shango, as we have seen, has two animal representations, the horse and the ram. The horse was anciently unknown in Yorubaland. It reached them from the North. Though it was the subject of sculptural representations (as in Benin), it was not used in war, but at ceremonial occasions. The introduction of the horse to Africa is attributed to the Hyksos invasion from Syria, around the 17th century B.C.

The connection of the horse with Shango has been seen in several references. He requested a horse as a gift from his father-in-law in northern Nupe. In his brazen palace he had many horses. The Alafin's old clan of Shango were cavalrymen. At the burial of the Alafin (descendant of Shango) a man was killed to serve as royal groom in the world of the dead, and a horse was killed on the Alafin's tomb, as his mount in the after life. One of the ancestors, Mesi Shango, was symbolized by an equestrian figure.

Shango was also associated with the Ram. We recall that the name Jakuta was linked with the Egyptian God Ptah, and this divinity was associated with stone, and symbolized by a ram. The breastplate of the Tadda figure (Gago) carries a Nubian ram figure. The oldest Shango king (Shango Takpa) was also symbolized by a ram.

On the wall of the late king Behazin's palace in Abomey (54, p. 52), Xevioso (Shango) is represented by a ram's head with lightning issuing from the mouth, with two axes beside it which suggest lightning in their forms. According to Legend 2, Shango, the great magician, emitted fire from his mouth. The axe, as indicated, was Shango's most widespread symbol.

To this day in Dahomey, the ram is sacred to Shango worshippers. They carry an axe, one end of which carved into a ram's head; and the edge is encrusted with lightning and fish forms in copper.

In Togo (38, Fig. 3) similar axes were used with animal heads from whose mouths issue serpentine forms representing lightning.

and the edge is crescent-shaped. This axe is identified as "the axe of Heviesso, God of Thunder".

Fig. 18 illustrates another axe, with the head easily recognizable as that of a ram. From its mouth issue metal pieces. A similar one is illustrated by HERSKOVITS (43, pl. 68) from Dahomey, identified as the axe of Xevieso, and used in dances of the Thunder cult.

SYDOW (12, Fig. 3) (Fig. 3) reproduces an ivory tusk, in the center of which is an equestrian figure, holding in his right hand a dagger-like instrument and in his left hand a shield. On the same tusk, below the mounted man carved, in low-relief, is what appears to be the head of a ram. Here we have an example of sculptural representation, in which both the Shango animal symbols, the horse and the ram, appear together. SYDOW thinks that it may represent Obatala, the sky God, but questions his own attribution.

The Ram is important as a sacrificial animal, slaughtered at the Shango festivities (9, p. 184) in Yorubaland. Poor people kill one ram and celebrate for three days; the wealthier kill enough animals, through the offices of the So priest, to prolong the festivities a week. The blood of the sacrificed animals is poured on stone celts, on the altars and on sacred images. Certain of the worshippers fall into a trance, as if possessed by Shango. Their words are considered his messages and are used as oracles.

From the Benin kingdom, we have three bronze ram's head casts. One is a plaque (25, Pl. 45 B); the other two are small masks (25, Figs. 573/4) used as "buckles", or as belt pendants, as shown in one, large group, done in the round (25, Pl. 81).

From their sculptural representations of the ram, it might be construed that this animal had some significance for the Bini people. Most of their other sculptured animal representations (either in plaques, in the round, or in ivory carvings) had religious significance. The sole written evidence of the significance of the ram is that of LANDOLPHE, who visited Benin city in 1779. He observed (28, p. 42) that in a graveyard "... tusks are set on crudely carved wooden heads of rams and bullocks..."

From among the published Benin material, we learn of the existence of two wooden ram heads. One is illustrated in LUSCHAN (25, Fig. 825) and the second, very similar in design and concept, is in the Natural History Museum in Chicago. Both the illustrations are lacking in description so that it is not possible for us to ascertain whether these two heads have large holes on the top of the skull, a characteristic well known of the brass heads, which were used to hold the tusk on the Benin altar. Hence, we are unable to state whether these two heads are the same as those about which LANDOLPHE wrote. A large number of wood sculptures were de-

stroyed in the conflagration, which took place three days after the capture of Benin city, in 1897 (28, p. 209).

We have, however, other ram's heads derived from the same Yoruba cultural region. Among them is a granite ram's head (55, p. 55); and a terra-cotta ram's head was excavated at Abiri, near Ife in 1949. FAGG (56, p. 131) suggests that the "cult of the ram at Ife, Benin and elsewhere in West Africa is derived ultimately from the worship of Ammon, the Sky-God of Egypt, which persisted in upper Egypt and Nubia through Hellenistic times, perhaps until the period of migration of the Yoruba and other tribes from somewhere near the Nile Valley to the West Coast".

If the association of Ram with Shango derives from an Egyptian Sky-God, the attribution of the same symbol to the Thunder-God becomes significant. In many West African regions, as we have seen, neolithic stone-axes were attributed both to the Thunder-God and the Sky-God. There is thus a frequent co-mingling of the two concepts.

From Owo, near Benin city, comes a magnificent, wooden ram's head (56, Fig. 48; 20, Fig. 32) and a human head with ram's horns (56, p. 134; 20, Fig. 163). These are attributed to the ancestor cult; yet their origin may be traced to the same Sky-Thunder-God concept.

Among the pottery figures excavated in the Chad region, in the vanished kingdom of Sao, is a ram's head (47, Fig. 43). On review, in light of Legend 5, this new "coincidence" together with other evidence, may prove to be another link in establishing the connection between Nubia and Shango.

Furthermore, FROBENIUS reproduces two magnificent ram's heads on rock pictures found in the Fezzan region (7, pp. 475-6). In the great East-to-West migrations, Fezzan appears to have constituted an ethnic "melting pot". In the 13th century, under Dunama Dibalami, Fezzan belonged to the great Kanem-Borgu kingdom (8, p. 153) of the Chad region. It appears to have been from the Fezzan region that waves of migrations first reached the Chad region, and then possibly, the bend of the Niger.

It remains an open question, whether the Ram representations outside Yorubaland (where they clearly symbolize Shango) were not also Shango cult objects. Such a possibility would accord the suggestions of the Nubian origin of Shango.

#### CONCLUSION.

We have sought, in this inquiry, to correlate scattered data, bearing on the origin of Shango, its role in Yoruba ideology and its reflections in the sculptural representations of Shango. By bring-

ing "coincidences" into sequential order, an extremely "provocative" significance emerges.

The study of African culture history and the role of sculpture in African life is still in its infancy. Archeology, that important means for producing material historical evidence, has been at work in Africa only in the last decades. Its findings may establish African cultural studies on firmer grounds.

Our deductive method, however, may provide clues: primarily that the concept of Shango derives from foreign influence, possibly from Nubia, through the Chad region. What we see here may set a few stones in the great mosaic of the African past, still to be composed.

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#### Résumé.

Le but de ce travail est de déterminer la signification de certaines sculptures à l'aide de pièces concernant le mythe de Shango, dieu de la foudre et fondateur de la nation Yorouba. Les pièces en question se divisent en 5 groupes : figures équestres d'origine Yorouba et Bini, figures équestres ayant d'autres origines, sculptures Yorouba ayant servi au culte de Shango, ustensiles employés dans ce même culte. L'auteur fait une description de ces différentes pièces, expliquant leur signification et indiquant où elles ont été reproduites.

La mythologie de Shango se rattache à 5 sources dont voici les principales caractéristiques : Shango considéré comme dieu de la foudre et fondateur de



la nation Yorouba, Shango descendant de mariages incestueux, rapports entre Shango et l'usage du cheval (ce qui permet de supposer une relation avec une légende méoritique).

En outre le nom de « Jakuta » ou « jeteur de pierres », donné à Shango, est analysé et son rôle de fécondateur et punisseur est expliqué.

Comme le nom de « Jeteur de pierres » provient des lames néolithiques trouvées après les tornades et attribuées à Shango, l'auteur étudie la croyance très répandue parmi plus de 65 tribus de l'Afrique occidentale selon laquelle ces « pierres » seraient de provenance surnaturelle. L'usage de ces lames néolithiques figure aussi dans la sculpture de Bini.

Shango étant également représenté sous forme de bélier, l'auteur cherche à caractériser ces deux conceptions de Shango.

Cette étude permet de conclure que Shango est d'origine nubienne, ayant probablement traversé la région du Tchad et que les figures équestres trouvées en Afrique occidentale représentent bien Shango.

#### *Zusammenfassung.*

Die Arbeit setzt sich zum Ziel, mit Hilfe des Mythenmaterials über Shango, den Gott des Blitzes und den Begründer der Yoruba-Nation, die Bedeutung gewisser Skulpturen festzustellen.

Nach allgemeinen Bemerkungen über Reiterfiguren folgt ein Abbildungshinweise und bisherige Deutungen enthaltender Überblick des zu bearbeitenden plastischen Materials in fünf Gruppen: Reiterfiguren aus Yoruba, aus Benin und anderer Herkunft, im Shango-Kult benützte Schnitzereien und Gerätschaften, die in diesem Kult gebraucht werden.

Das zur Deutung herangezogene mythologische Material weist auf die hauptsächlichlichen Züge von Shango als Blitzgott und Begründer der Yoruba-Nation, als Abkömmling blutschänderischer Ehen sowie auf seine Beziehung zum Gebrauch von Pferden hin (was vielleicht auch die Verbindung mit einer meoritischen Legende ermöglicht). Der für Shango gebrauchte Name « Jakuta » oder « Werfer von Steinen » führt zur Erläuterung seiner Rolle als Befruchter und Bestrafer. Da der Name « Werfer von Steinen » in seiner Bedeutung mit neolithischen Steinklingen zusammenhängt, die nach Wirbelstürmen gefunden und mit Shango in Verbindung gebracht werden, folgt ein Überblick über den weit verbreiteten, bei mehr als 65 Stämmen Westafrikas nachgewiesenen Glauben an die übernatürliche Natur solcher « Steine ». Der Gebrauch dieser Steinklingen ist auch belegt durch plastische Wiedergaben aus Benin.

Da Shango auch als Widder dargestellt wird, wurde der Versuch unternommen, diese Wiedergaben und diejenigen als Pferd auseinanderzuhalten.

Auf Grund des vorgebrachten Materials wird vermutet daß Shango nubischen Ursprungs ist und möglicherweise durch die Tschad-Region sein heutiges Verbreitungsgebiet erreichte; ferner, daß die westafrikanischen Reiterfiguren sehr wahrscheinlich Shango darstellen.

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