

The Ishan Cult of the Hand

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The Ishan (or Esan) are an Edo-speaking people, numbering about one half million, whose villages are located on and about the Ishan Plateau in southwestern Nigeria (see map). The territory they occupy is roughly 78 by 104 kilometers, a relatively small though densely populated area. At one time, it was also very thickly forested, a perfect refuge for disaffected groups fleeing Benin City. Both Ishan and Bini oral traditions agree that Ishan was settled primarily through migrations from Benin, which began as a trickle, it is said,

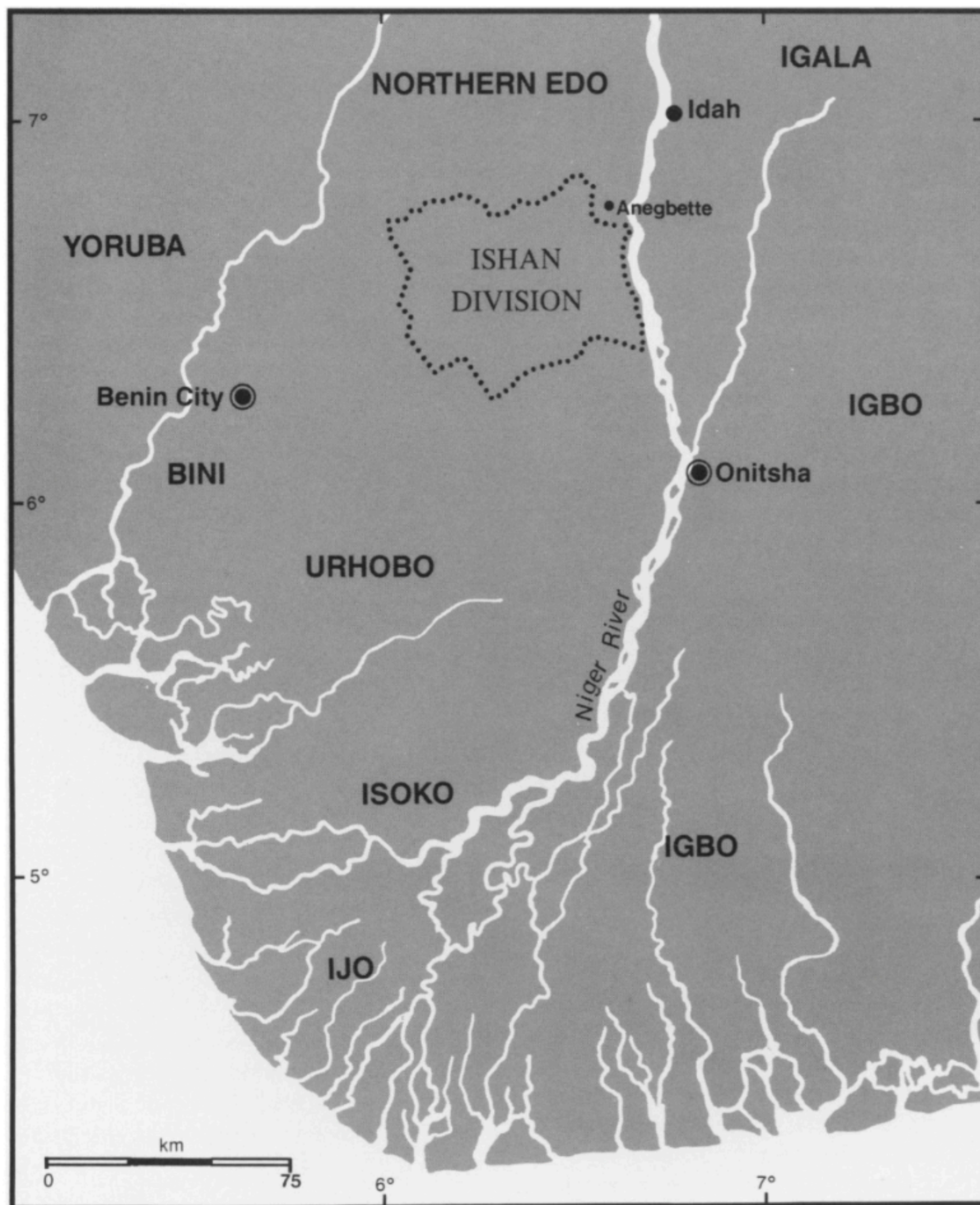
around the eleventh century and reached a peak in the mid-fifteenth century during the tyrannical reign of Oba Ewuare.¹ Indigenous populations are rarely mentioned in Ishan oral histories, and they are invariably explained as descendants of the earliest migrants from Benin, who had degenerated to a primitive state in the remote forests, but whose language was still intelligible to later arrivals from Benin (e.g., Okojie 1960:209).

Ishan culture is still most akin to that of Benin, as close similarities in language,

religion, and socio-political organization clearly attest. Nevertheless, as the population increased and sorted itself into various small kingdoms, and as the forests were thinned under the cultivators' hoes, the area became a veritable crossroads of cultures. Ishan's proximity to the Niger River, as well as its growing network of pathways and hospitable outposts of civilization, enticed parties of foreign migrants, traders, native doctors, and even warriors headed for more distant battlefields to cross through its territory. Ishan local histories are full of accounts of the settlement of such parties within its domains, and although these groups were absorbed into the local communities, detailed information concerning the foreign origins of their lineages has been carefully preserved.

Both the travelers and the settlers had an impact on Ishan culture, most notably through exchanges of religious practices, masquerades, and other art forms. Benin's influence did not end with its historical parentage. The titles, duties, and regalia of Ishan kings and chiefs, for example, are very close to Benin prototypes. Its court also provided Ishan with actual art objects such as brass bells and carved stools (which continue to be preserved in palaces and shrines), or with the craftsmen skilled in making such objects (Chief Idiahi, Uromi-Ukoni, Sept. 3, 1980). Some cultural adoptions, such as that of the "cult of the hand,"² have been ascribed to the ancient past, but Ishan is still in the process of absorbing features of neighboring cultures. For example, an acrobatic masquerade known as *ilo* is a recent innovation, having been introduced in the 1940s and '50s from the Okpella people, a neighboring Northern Edo group. Even more recently, a personal protection cult (*igo*), together with its earthen pillar-shaped shrines, was brought from Anegbette in Etsako territory.

Cultural features adopted by the Ishan people have not always diffused throughout their territory. Often the impact of a neighboring group is felt most strongly in the borderland area between that group and the nearest Ishan communities. In addition, although some elements of culture have been adopted from groups at some distance from



Ishan, such as the Nupe and Igbirra peoples, the most influential groups were and continue to be Ishan's nearest neighbors: the Yoruba to the northwest, the Northern Edo to the north, the Igala to the east, the Igbo to the south and southwest, and the Southern Edo and Bini to the southwest and west.

The Ishan people are organized into some thirty semi-autonomous kingdoms of various sizes, each ruled by an *onojie* who is independent of other Ishan rulers, but owes allegiance to the Oba of Benin. The *onojie* administers his realm in a manner similar to that of Benin, with both palace and town chiefs (*ekhaimon*). Much of the day-to-day governance on the local level, however, is in the hands of the elders (*edion*), men of sufficient age and moral stature who have buried their fathers with all due ceremony and have completed the necessary age-grade ceremonies. The age-grade system (*otu*) varies somewhat from kingdom to kingdom, but everywhere it organizes common men into groups with well-defined public service and leadership roles.

Much of Ishan art — including figural houseposts, stools of office, memorial heads, and elaborately carved boxes and trays — is reserved for the elite of society, the *onojie* and his chiefs, or their religious counterparts, the priests and diviners. It is interesting to note, however, that votive objects associated with the cult of the hand do *not* follow this rule, but represent one of the more egalitarian expressions of Ishan art and culture. This may be due in part to the fact that the practice of venerating the hands probably originated with the less socially stratified Igbo peoples. Neither the Ishan cult nor its carved images, however, are simple reproductions of Igbo prototypes. Two principal factors seem to account for the differentiation. First, the elements that constitute the Ishan version were probably introduced not just from Igboland but from various directions. Indeed, the degree of importance of this cult, the practices involved, the appearance of the hand images, and the names by which they are called vary from place to place in Ishan, reflecting the multiple origins of the cult. Secondly,



TOP LEFT: 1. IKEGOBO OF CHIEF UWANGUE OF UDO-EQUARE, WITH A HIERARCHIC ARRANGEMENT OF FIGURES ON A CYLINDER BASE WITH AN OPENING AT THE TOP FOR OFFERINGS OR MEDICINE. 24cm. TOP RIGHT: 2. FIGURE OF A TYPE USED BOTH AS IKEGOBO AND DIVINATION OBJECT (IGHOLE). THE FIGURES FLANKING THE CENTRAL FIGURE HAVE BEEN ABSTRACTED TO THE POINT OF NONRECOGNITION. UROMI-UZENEMA, 1980. CENTER: 3. THE SMALLER IKEGOBO, 10.2cm., BELONGS TO THE ONOJIE OF UJIOGBA. THE LARGER HORNS-ON-STOOL ONE, 17.8cm., BELONGS TO ONE OF HIS SUBJECTS. BOTTOM LEFT: 4. IN SOME AREAS A WOMAN MAY OWN AN IKEGOBO OF THE HAND-PESTLE TYPE WHILE MEN HAVE THE HORNS-ON-STOOL TYPE. EKPON, 1980. BOTTOM RIGHT: 5. IKEGOBO OF CHIEF ONIHA OF UGBEGUN-EBUDIN, 27.9cm. 1980.

the cult of the hand has been "Ishanized" to form a unique construction consistent with the people's own cultural values and religious needs.

Versions of the cult of the hand have been documented among a number of cultures in southern Nigeria, including the Igbo, Igala, Isoko, Urhobo, Ijo, and Bini peoples. Moreover, each culture has devised, as a focus for devotion to the hands, a sculptural object that embodies the locally preferred principles and values of the cult. The Ishan version does likewise. Although much has been published elsewhere on the cult of the hand both in general (Vogel 1974) and in specific areas, it will be useful to recapitulate this material here as a basis for comparison with Ishan.

It has often been suggested (e.g. Orita 1973; Boston 1977:2; Cole & Aniakor 1984:24) that the Igbo people are the originators of the cult of the hand, which they call *ikenga* or *ikega*. Widespread and highly developed, with numerous and varied images (Cole & Aniakor 1984:24), Igbo *ikenga* is a male cult that stresses the right hand and represents the force of a man's individual strength, skill, industry, status, and wealth. A pair of horns, connoting masculine strength and ag-

gression, is the most essential element in the carved image. *Ikenga* sculptures are differentiated in form, size, and degree of elaboration according to the achieved status of the owner. More elaborate examples are usually figural, commonly depicting a warrior carrying weapons or decapitated heads, or else symbols of elevated rank such as staffs of office, tusks, horns, and various ornaments.

As one examines the cult of the hand away from Igboland, at the periphery of this tradition, one finds many changes in its practice as well as in its associated figures. The Igala version, called *okega* or *okinga*, can be found in two very limited geographical areas, in the southwestern Ibaji district and in and around Idah (Boston 1977:87), both of which have had extensive contact with Igbo peoples. Some *okegas* are reminiscent of Igbo *ikenga* carvings in form and style, but in the Idah area, a unique *okega* form developed with two or more tiers and multiple figures of both men and women (Boston 1977:87, 89). The latter belong to hereditary lineage leaders and stress the "achievement of a whole clan and of all its members, both men and women" (Boston 1977:94) in contrast to the Igbo emphasis on individual masculine success and competition.

In Bini country, the cult of the hand, called *ikegobo* or sometimes *ikega* (Bradbury 1961:133), is known primarily from the court of Benin, where kings and chiefs have venerated the hands as a personal spirit at least since the reign of Ewuare in the fifteenth century (Egharevba 1949:88-89). Carolyn Dean (1983:33) suggests that Benin's expansion during this period "would have exposed it to cults of neighboring groups," and that the cult of the hand in particular would have appealed to Ewuare as a symbol of his military prowess. During the eighteenth century, Oba Akenzua I, who reunified a disintegrating Benin by force of arms, elevated the *ikegobo* "to an instrument of statecraft," perhaps in an attempt to identify with his mighty forebear Ewuare (Dean 1983:36).

Like Igbo *ikengas*, Bini *ikegobo* sculptures exhibit a number of symbols of aggression: warriors fully armed for battle, weapons, beheaded corpses, severed heads, and predatory animals. There is also, however, an emphasis on status and wealth, including figures swathed in abundant lengths of cloth, with elaborate ornaments and hierarchically arranged attendants. Also reflecting Benin's preoccupation with rank, *ikegobo* are made in several different materials according to the owner's position in society. Large and elaborate bronze examples are exclusive to the *oba* and a few others, while terracotta *ikegobo* seem to have been permitted only for brasscasters (Bradbury 1961:135). Chiefs and others have wooden versions further distinguished by size and type of decoration. In this system, deities might also have their own *ikegobo* images as part of their shrine furniture (Bradbury 1961:136).

The basic element of the Benin *ikegobo* is a representation of a "box-stool" (Vogel 1974:8), which serves as both a seat and a treasure container. This stool image, rather than horns as in Igboland, is the most important feature of the Benin *ikegobo* (Boston, cited in Bradbury 1961:138, n. 14), which in fact lacks carved horns and instead often has a post, or a hole for an inserted stick, designed to support an actual tusk or horn. Other differences between Benin and Igbo practice, according to Bradbury (1961:133-34), are that Benin *ikegobo* are intended for the praise of both hands rather than just the right hand, and that a high-ranking or wealthy Benin woman might have an *ikegobo* of her own, although such instances are not common.

The Southern Edo area seems to have been influenced by both Igbo and Benin cult of the hand traditions. The Urhobo (Vogel 1974:11) and Isoko (Peek 1981:143; 1986:47) divide the twin values of the cult — status and wealth on one side, strength and aggression on the other — into two separate cults. The cult of the right hand is called *obo*, or "hand," and is associated with a small and simple stool-like image that occasionally has an additional horn on top (Vogel 1974:11). A second cult, called *ivri* (spelled in a variety of ways), is concerned with determination, aggression, and warfare, but may also have a protective or anti-aggression function. The *ivri* objects depict a massive beast with a huge belly, gaping mouth, and prominent teeth. A human figure representing the owner or his "spirit double" (Peek 1981:42) sits or stands above this creature, often flanked by smaller attendant figures; it has been suggested that this hierarchic arrangement reflects Benin's stylistic influence (Foss 1975:141).

An image like the *ivri*, called *efiri* or



6. CHIEF IYASELE OF UGHOHA DISPLAYING HIS OBO, WHICH IS IN THE FORM OF A WASHING VESSEL (UKPABO). 1980. RIGHT: 7. IKEGA FIGURE WITH ERODED TOP, SUPPORTED BY FOUR CARYATID FIGURES. EWOHIMI-OKAIGBEN, 1980.



ejiri, may be found among the Western Ijo. They also have an object known as *ikenga* or *amabra*, consisting of a stool with a low-relief face on top, or a two-horned figure reminiscent of an Igbo *ikenga* (Horton, cited in Bradbury 1961:138, n. 14). The *efiri* and *amabra* images seem to be of limited distribution in Ijoland, confined to areas most in contact with Igbo and Southern Edo cultures. As in Igboland, the *ivri* and *efiri* are normally restricted to male ownership (Peek 1980:59) and the size and elaboration of these figures depends upon the "power, wealth, and prestige of the owner and his ability to control the image once made" (Foss 1975:134-35). Furthermore, the owner figure often is depicted with attributes of the warrior, including feathered headdresses, weapons, and severed heads.

Among the Ishan, the cult of the hand is called *ikegobo* or *ikega* as in Benin, but also by variant names including *ikekobo*, or simply *obo* ("hand"), as among the Southern Edo. It can be found in almost every area of Ishan country, its absence today in the most northerly kingdoms seemingly attributable to the encroachments of Islam. Ishan *ikegobo* is one of a variety of religious practices designed to protect the individual and his family and to secure his fortune, warding off evil and bringing good luck. It is integrated with other forms of religious expression, most notably the veneration of ancestors. Often the senior male maintains his family's *ikegobo* together with the paternal ancestral shrine; it seems that upon its owner's death the *ikegobo* is never destroyed but is preserved instead as a relic of the deceased. As in Benin, the Ishan cult of the hand is one of the trio of personal cults including also the veneration of the head (*uhomon*) and of one's personal guardian or destiny (*ehi*).

Like the Southern Edo *obo* cult, the Ishan *ikegobo* stresses success, achievement, good luck, and the accumulation of wealth. One sacrifices to the hands in order to thank them for past successes and to petition them for future benefits. But unlike the Southern Edo version, there is no complementary cult comparable to *ivri* that focuses on aggression or protection from violence. Those concepts are simply absent from the Ishan *ikegobo* cult as it is practiced today, and there is no hint that it ever had such connotations. There are no warrior figures, no decapitated victims, no images of weaponry, no devouring beasts. In fact, although a few representational Ishan *ikegobo* depict figures grouped hierarchically much like those on top of Southern Edo *ivri* images, the Ishan figures stand not on the back of a toothy beast but on a plain cylindrical base (Fig. 1).

Also absent in the Ishan version is the emphasis on political rank or elevated



8. FIGURAL *IKEGOBO* SAID TO HAVE BEEN CARVED DURING THE TIME OF THE OWNER'S GREAT-GRANDFATHER AND PASSED FROM SON TO SON. A SMALL DEPRESSION AT THE TOP IS USED TO HOLD MEDICINES. 16.5cm. UJIOGBA-IDUOBO, 1980.

social status found especially in Igbo, Benin, and Igala examples and to a certain degree in the Southern Edo and Ijo ones. The Ishan cult of the hand is concerned, rather, with seniority. Usually only the elderly may establish a shrine to their hands.³ Although ownership of many Ishan art forms is the prerogative of high-ranking individuals, the *ikegobo* cult and its sculptures represent one aspect of the culture that is particularly nonelitist. Anyone of sufficient age may have an *ikegobo* carved, regardless of social position or profession. Moreover, since all are carved in wood, no distinctions are made on the basis of the type of materials. In fact, the *ikegobo* of a king may not be any larger or more elaborate than, or otherwise distinguishable from, those of his subjects (Fig. 3). In the town of Ujiogba, for example, I was shown five *ikegobo* figures, including that of the *onojie*, which was the smallest of the group. This parallels the tendency in the Southern Edo region to minimize the *obo* sculptures even of important men (Vogel 1974:11). Very few Ishan *ikegobo* are figural, and even these lack the elaborate costuming and ornamentation that indicate status elsewhere in other cult of the hand areas. Perhaps the only visual concession to status in the Ishan *ikegobo* may be found in the small number of sculptures with hierarchically arranged figures, as in Figure 1, although sometimes the subsidiary figures are abstracted to the point of nonrecognition (Fig. 2), thus losing their significance as indicators of social or political differentiation.



9. IKA IGBO *IKENGA* FIGURE AT THE PALACE OF THE OBI OF AGBOR, 91.4cm. 1980.

In practice, differences between poor and wealthy owners of Ishan *ikegobo* may be apparent in the quantity and quality of the sacrifices. A poor man must content himself with small offerings of kolanut or everyday food items, whereas a rich man might praise his hands by slaughtering a cock or a goat. This is not, however, religious behavior exclusive to the veneration of the hands, but rather a fulfillment of generalized expectations of generosity from those who can afford it.

All Ishan practitioners of the *ikegobo* observe an annual festival to venerate the hands, as do other groups with the cult (Talbot 1926, vol. 2; Bradbury 1961:134; Boston 1977:76). Various called *iluobo* ("festival of the hands"), *ukpe* ("year," a generic term for any annual ceremony) or simply *ikegobo*, this

yearly service often follows planting time.⁴ Indeed, for most Ishan people, the prime function of the *ikegobo* is to insure success in farming, a mundane but essential occupation. Apart from this annual rite, however, the frequency of attention to the *ikegobo* varies according to individual preference. Some report making daily offerings (e.g. James Ikekhua, Uromi-Unuwazi, Aug. 2, 1980), others sacrifice when they feel they have achieved something noteworthy (e.g. Inegbenebor, Ugbegun-Ebudin, Sept. 16, 1980), while still others do so only upon the advice of a diviner (Chief Ijie, Uromi-Ewoyi, July 30, 1980). A type of divination kit known as *ewawa*, common to both Ishan and Benin, often includes a tiny image representing the hands.

Although ownership of the *ikegobo* is an individual matter, there is no great emphasis placed on individual achievement, as in most other versions of the cult. First, serving the hands is often linked with ancestral observances, so that it becomes a lineage matter. Second, a man prays for success and prosperity for all his family including his wives and children, and sometimes also junior siblings and their families. His wives and children may be present and even participate in the sacrifice and prayers. In some cases, a woman might make her own sacrifice to the hands using her husband's *ikegobo* as a focus of her devo-



10. AN ELDER'S OKPO STAFF (DETAIL) SHOWING A SIMPLIFIED HUMAN HEAD. UROMI-AWO, 1980.

tion. In fact, ownership of the carved figures is not limited to men; in many Ishan areas women are equally entitled to own *ikegobo* and sacrifice to their hands, the principal criterion being, as in the case of men, advanced age. Distinctions are often made, however, in the form of the images for men and women (Fig. 4).

Ishan *ikegobo* may take several different forms, some of them sculptural and others resembling ordinary domestic utensils. All are relatively small, ranging from about 7.5 cm. to perhaps 38 cm. in height, and simply formed and decorated. The commonest type is shaped like a small hand pestle (*olumobo*), which is similar in form to a stool. It thus combines allusions to both the labor of the hands and to rank and status. All those interviewed considered it a laughable notion to venerate only the right hand and agreed that the *ikegobo* is for praise of both hands, since both are active in work, upon which one's welfare depends. The hand pestle is a tool grasped in both hands, which may be used by both men and women to grind tobacco, medicinal herbs, or condiments for the family meal. Many of the pestle type of *ikegobo* are extremely plain; others may have simple incised lines or geometric designs. Often a string of cowrie shells (*ikpigho*), suggestive of wealth and good fortune, is tied around the middle.

A second kind of *ikegobo* (Fig. 5) widely found in Ishan combines the pestle or stool image with a pair of upward projecting horns, as in the simplest Igbo *ikengas*. This one is always limited to ownership by men. On the basis of the visual evidence alone, it would be tempting to deduce that, as in Igboland, the horns are associated with aggressive masculinity; however, perhaps not surprisingly, in Ishan these projections are often identified as two hands rather than horns (e.g., Chief Uzama, Igueben-Idigun, Sept. 11, 1980).

A third *ikegobo* type (Fig. 6) is a shallow wooden tray like that commonly used to wash one's hands (*ukpabo*). Either unadorned or carved with incised geometric patterns, the *ukpabo* is sometimes combined with other forms of *ikegobo* to form a cult ensemble. For example, a pestle-type image might be set on the tray, and strings or cowries placed in and around them. The latter may be used alone as a focus for veneration of the hands; in some areas (e.g., Ugbegun-Ebudin), women use strings of cowries, while men have carved wooden *ikegobo*. As in the case of the pestle-type images, even very high-ranking men may use circlets of cowries as their shrines to the hand (e.g., Chief J.O. Ojabhole, Uzea-Ebunlen, Oct. 15, 1980).

Figural *ikegobo* are very rare in Ishan and appear to be exclusive to men. One

old and very eroded piece has four caryatid half-figures encircling a stool-like base, with strings of cowries around the largest figure's neck and waist (Fig. 7). More commonly, half-figures are arranged hierarchically on one side of the top of a small stool or cylinder base. Sometimes there is a hole or depression in the top intended to hold medicines or sacrificial offerings (Figs. 1, 8).⁵ A simpler version of the figures-on-base type is also commonly used as an image representing an intermediary between a diviner and the supernatural realm; this type of image is called *ighole* (Fig. 2).

Because most of the human images are half-figures, there is no overt masculinity in their appearance. All are simply carved, with scant attention paid to facial features or other anatomical details. In fact, in many of these *ikegobo* the subsidiary figures are reduced to mere cylinders upon which the main figure rests his arms (Figs. 2, 8). Considering that there are barely any human features in these images, it is not surprising that details of clothing and ornamentation are totally absent, as are depictions of regalia such as state swords or crowns.

There is one exceptional example (Figs. 11, 12) from Ewohimi in southern Ishan, however, in which an *ikegobo*, in this case called *ikeg'osun*, and dedicated to the god Osun (Bradbury Archives nos. B/11.2), consists of a single full figure, male genitals displayed, standing atop a horns-on-stool image. It has decorative patterns incised on the body and wears a pendant necklace as well as a feathered headdress. This piece is also unusual in that the figure grasps two swords of office in his highly stylized hands. It is similar in many ways to *ikenga* figures among the Ika Igbo people directly to the south of Ishan territory (Fig. 9), and there is every likelihood of Ika influence in the Ewohimi example.⁶

With the exception of the unusual *ikeg'osun*, all other figural examples — that is, those with multiple figures, simplified and unadorned forms, and hierarchic proportions — derive from the central Ishan district, which continues to have strong cultural ties with Benin. It is also in this region that cult of the hand images are called *ikegobo*, the most common term used in Benin. In contrast, the more usual southern Ishan term is *ikega*, which is closer to the Igbo term *ikenga*.

In contrast to the figural images, which are limited in distribution, the simpler hand-pestle and horns-on-stool types of *ikegobo* are found throughout Ishan. Even these, however, seem to derive from two different sources, the latter being of a common Igbo type, and the former linked with *obo* images of the Southern Edo peoples. The term *obo*, moreover, is probably the most common word used to refer to cult of the hand objects in Ishan.



11 & 12. IKEG'OSUN IMAGE (TWO VIEWS) FROM THE SHRINE OF OSUN AT EWOHIMI-EGUARE. THE FIGURE WEARS ORNAMENTS AND A HEADRESS AND CARRIES STATE SWORDS. R.E. BRADBURY PHOTO.

R.E. Bradbury's suggestion (1961:138, n. 14) that the cult of the hand in southern Nigeria may have been "... two, originally separate, cults which have impinged on each other... [or] a single cult which, at an early stage, split up into Ibo and Benin varieties which, however, continued to exist side-by-side and influence each other" may be useful in examining the character of the Ishan version. Although Igbo influence may be seen in some *ikegobo* types, and in the Southern Ishan preference for the term *ikega*, the Ishan cult of the hand and its associated sculptures belong to a basically Edo tradition.

As in Benin, Ishan worship is directed toward both hands; and the *ikegobo* images emphasize the stool rather than the horns. But it is not only Benin that has contributed to the Edo character of the Ishan cult. The Ishan *ikegobo* shares with Southern Edo *ivri* imagery the hierarchic groupings, which the Southern Edo in turn no doubt derived from Benin sculpture. Formally, the Ishan stool/hand-pestle type of *ikegobo* is also similar to *obo* of the Southern Edo, and in both areas great men as well as commoners may use small, simple sculptures to venerate their hands.

Perhaps at one time in the distant past, Benin also had such simple images, but between the fifteenth and eighteenth

centuries the cult of the hand developed in Benin as an imperial institution, with sculptures reflecting the hierarchical structure of society, and the military basis upon which the empire was dependent.

Both Benin and Igala practices may have influenced the fact that in Ishan, the cult of the hand is less rigidly masculine in its orientation. Both the Igala-Idah and Ishan cults are also similar in that they downplay the concept of individuality of achievement, instead emphasizing familial or communal welfare.

Although the Ishan share some cult of the hand features with the Benin, Southern Edo, Igbo, and Igala people, they have not adopted any of the neighboring traditions in a comprehensive way. Some styles and practices have filtered into the region, but others have failed to pass through the cultural barriers at the Ishan borderlands, or have been transformed into something which is at this stage uniquely Ishan. Ultimately the Ishan version of the cult deviates from all of them in certain significant ways.

One important difference between Ishan and its neighbors is the absence of references to violence and warfare in the cult of the hand. The most notable and essentially Ishan deviation, however, is the cult's association with seniority rather than elevated social or political



13. AN ISHAN ELDER WEARING A HANDWOVEN WRAPPER AND A LEATHER FLYWHISK OVER HIS SHOULDER, AND HOLDING AN OKPO STAFF, A SIGN OF HIS SENIORITY. UGBEGUN EBUDIN, 1980.

rank. The cult of the hand itself, and the *ikegobo* sculptures, are truly egalitarian expressions of Ishan art and culture, in which both kings and commoners own essentially the same type of *ikegobo*. These are often no more than ordinary domestic items associated with the everyday labors of the hands. Their simplicity in form and detail may be compared with other art forms used by the elders, such as the *okpo* walking staff with minimal human heads at the top (Figs. 10, 13), or clay pipes with incised lines or geometric designs on their surfaces. While in Benin the cult of the hand developed as an institution associated with rank, prestige, and military might, in Ishan it remained a basic expression of lineage welfare associated in particular with the achievement and moral leadership of the elderly. □

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have a large circular, sagittal crest of thick dried grass. I suspect that the leaf mask tradition was adopted by the Dafing from the Bwa when they penetrated the Bwa area.

7. Mossi society developed from the fusion of invaders from northern Ghana with local populations. The conquered groups were amalgamated with regard for ethnic origin, forming a large heterogeneous Mossi people, in which the recent arrivals gradually intermarried with the daughters of older families, reinforcing social cohesion.

8. Masks appear at burials and at funerals of clan elders. They protect and aid the members of the clan, and they protect the harvest of wild-growing fruits. Finally, they are portable altars on which the blood of animals may be offered as sacrifices to the ancestors of the clan.

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FRANK, notes, from page 55

1. I am referring specifically to the panel titled "African Art: The Methodological Dilemma," organized by Sidney Kasfir for the Annual Meetings of the African Studies Association, Madison, October 30-November 2, 1986. It included papers by John Picton, James Fernandez, René Bravmann, Suzanne Blier, and Peter Weil, as well as responses by Jan Vansina, Simon Ottenberg, Tamara Northern, and Christopher Roy. The panel organized by Patrick McNaughton for the Annual Meetings of the College Art Association, Boston, February 12-15, 1987, which included an earlier version of this paper, addressed the issue of open borders, which implies movement and change in time as well as space. In addition, the panel "History and Change in African Art," organized by Jean Borgatti on the behalf of ACASA for the CAA meetings, with presentations by Susan Vogel, Barbara Blackmun, and Suzanne Blier, focused specifically on problems of history and change in African art. It was formed in response to another CAA panel devoted to "Art Without History," whose organizers grouped together graffiti, children's art, and psychotic, naive, prehistoric, and "primitive" (my quotes) art as art forms without history and without aesthetic considerations at their genesis.

This paper is, in part, my response to some of the issues raised by these discussions in light of my own research on leatherworking traditions in Mali. Museum and field research was made possible by a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Fellowship (1983-84) and by an Indiana University Friends of Art Fellowship (1982). Research in the collections of the National Museum of Natural History was made possible by a Smithsonian Predoctoral Fellowship (1985-86). I would like to thank all the museum personnel who gave

generously of their time and expertise. My research in Mali was carried out under the direction of the Institut des Sciences Humaines and the Musée National des Arts, Bamako. I am also grateful to all those who assisted me in various ways in the field, especially Hassan Kone. I would also like to thank Margaret Ford, Kris Hardin, Patrick McNaughton, and Adria La Violette for their critical comments on an earlier version of this paper, and Mara Wade and Eli Bentor for their assistance in expediting matters concerning photographs and publication rights.

2. Exceptions to this include such items as cushions and household containers that are typical in the repertoire of Hausa, Hausa-related, Maure, and Tuareg leatherworkers, but rare among the ethnic groups of the Western Sudan. Some of these objects also function in ritual contexts and as leadership regalia, especially items associated with hunting, warfare, and cavalry. The horse, while no longer a source of military power, continues to be a symbol of wealth and prestige. In this context, the horse may be seen as an extension of the owner's body, and the elaborate horse trappings as personal adornment.

3. These bags also reflect consistency over time. Thus an example collected by Konsul Schmidt in the late nineteenth century (accessioned 1896), now in the collections of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, is virtually identical in design to more recent examples, including one acquired by the Etnografisch Museum in Antwerp in 1959; one, acquired in 1957, in the collections of the Deutsches Ledermuseum in Offenbach; as well as one collected by Roy Sieber in 1971 in Oyo (Fig. 2). This stylistic continuity over time has also been noted by Wescott and Morton Williams (1962:35, n. 3).

4. The focus of this article is the visual style of the finished product. However, there are other aspects of equal importance in understanding the history of artistic traditions, and for which ethnic labels may be more appropriate. Especially important is what may be defined as styles of technology, including differences in the gender of the artists, variations in the process of manufacture, and variations in tool kits and especially distinctions in the forms of certain tools. For example, leatherworking among the Maure and Tuareg is the domain of women, the wives of blacksmiths. In contrast, elsewhere in West Africa it is a man's craft, although women may help with tanning. Differences in the style of the objects made, however, are not due to the gender of the artists.

5. There are some examples in museum collections of this type of sword that are labeled as Hausa, but they are without clear documentation. I suspect that they have been so labeled because of the reputation the Hausa have for their leatherwork as compared to lesser-known leatherworking traditions among other ethnic groups, including the Bamana.

6. These are in the collections of the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren. The museum also has a pair of bags purchased in Bamako in 1933 by Houzeau de LeHaie, and at least one collected among the Gurma of Nanergou in northwestern Togo. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has one example acquired by F.W. Ensor among the Asante in 1935, identified as a bag (*fotuo*) for carrying brass weights used in weighing gold. Other examples include bags acquired among the Kassena of Guiaro in southern Burkina Faso and among the Kassena of Navrongo in northern Ghana (collected by Dr. K. Dittmer, on a museum-sponsored exhibition, 1954-56, Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg); and among the Mossi of Koudougou (Mrs. Alexis Zalstem Zalesky, 1949, American Museum of Natural History, New York). One of this type, made in Bolgatanga in the central part of northern Ghana, was acquired from a "Lobi" elder in Birifu, some 240 kilometers west of Bolgatanga, near the Ivory Coast border (UCLA X76-667, Cole & Ross 1977:63, see also fig. 16). I saw a bag of this style for sale in the market in Marrakesh, Morocco.

7. Dr. Tautain acquired a bag of this type in the late nineteenth century. He included an illustration of it in a brief article (1887) on the Bobo, where he identified it as a Bobo horseman's bag. He remarked that the bag was unlike any he had ever seen among the Maure, Mandinka (Mandinka), Soninka (Soninke), Bamana, or Fulbe (Fulani). However, he also noted that he had never actually seen a Bobo and that the Bobo were known for their cannibalism. All of his information on the Bobo came from several Jula traders.

8. Hausa-style sandals, for example, were manufactured in large quantities in several centers in northern Nigeria for the trade north, especially among the Tuareg, and southwest along trade routes to Ghana.

9. The man I interviewed was the brother of the original horseowner, who had died. The horse had died the year before my visit.

10. The leatherworking traditions of the Arma are quite distinct from others in the Western Sudan. These craftsmen are not members of a separate professional artisan group (or

caste). Arma leatherworkers, like Arma embroiderers, are usually from "noble" Muslim families, said to be the descendants of Moroccan soldiers who married Songhay women following the Moroccan invasion at the end of the sixteenth century. Today these craftsmen claim that the origin of their craft, and in some cases of their own families, is Morocco. Although questions remain as to the genealogies of these artists, it is significant that the tools they use are known by Arabic names and are parallel in form and type to those used by craftsmen in Morocco; these tools are distinct from those of other leatherworkers in the Western Sudan. In addition they have a rather limited repertoire of objects, primarily slippers or shoes and boots.

11. In the course of these interviews, people were asked their *siya*, which may be translated as "race" or "ethnicity." The responses were sometimes Bamana, Maraka (Soninke), or Fula (Fulani), or else a caste identity—*jeli* (Bamana griot and leatherworker), *garanke* (Soninke leatherworker), or *sakke* (Fulani leatherworker and saddle maker). Certain patronyms are identified as leatherworker names, some exclusively so, such as Korkoss, a Soninke *garanke* patronym. Other questions concerning family origins, caste systems, and oral traditions also elicited answers that reflected different ethnic origins. (More detailed information on these interviews is given in my forthcoming dissertation, Indiana University.)

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LORENZ, notes, from page 75

Research on Ishan arts was carried out in Nigeria in 1980 with the assistance of a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship and a Columbia University Department of Art History and Archaeology Summer Travel Grant.

1. Chief A.G. Idiahi, Uromi-Ukoni, 1980; Chief Joseph O. Odigie, Ewohimi-Okaigben, 1980. Compare Okojie (1960:209), who dates the exodus from Benin to Ishan a century earlier, and Egharevba (1968:5), who places the beginnings of Ishan in the era of Benin's Ogois kings.

2. This term will be used for the sake of consistency with precedents. The word "cult" is here used to mean an expression of traditional religion that focuses on a single spiritual entity, in this case the personal spirit of the hands.

3. Upon the advice of a diviner, a younger person may establish a shrine to his hands, but he must at least meet the minimum requirements that he be married and have children.

4. An *onojie* or local ruler might hold his *iluobo* festival to the hands at another time of year so that it will coincide with other royal festivals.

5. A single example of a larger stool-like *ikegobo* with an opening for offerings in the top was recorded at Uromi-Ewoyi, and is similar to shrine furniture at Benin (cf. Dark 1973, pl. 51, no.

104).

6. Classification can be tricky and sometimes leads to errors. One type of image identified as an Ishan "panel ikenga" (Vogel 1974:11) is now known through Boston's work on Igbo and Igala cult of the hand images (1977:78) to be an *uvo*, or attachment for an Igbo *ikenga* used to mark a special achievement of its owner. The style and imagery of the examples illustrated in Vogel's work, which are now in the British Museum, are typically Igbo, but it is not impossible that they were collected in Ishan territory.

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POYNOR, notes, from page 61

1. I discuss the introduction of various styles and object types in "Edo Influence on the Arts of Owo" (1976).
2. For specific influences refer to Poynor 1976.
3. Oshogboye, the sixteenth Olowo, was said to have been trained in the court of Benin. Was he there because the two royal families were related, as Owo tradition states, or was he there as a royal hostage, as Benin tradition suggests? Beyond the oral traditions, the structure of the Owo court is modeled after that of Benin. Great numbers of chieftaincy titles obviously have Benin origins. See Poynor 1976 for specifics.
4. A number of Owo titles seem to derive directly from Benin, as suggested by the Benin Edaiken and the Owo Idaniken. Other sets of titles include the Ezomo of Uzebu/the Ojomo of Ujebu; Oliha/Olisa; Uwangwe/Unwagwe; Ologbo-shere/Ologboshere; Ero/Ero; Eriyo/Ariyo; Eribo/Aribo.
5. Oshogboye was said to be a sword bearer to the Oba of Benin in the sixteenth century, before he left to be crowned the sixteenth Olowo. Elewuokun reigned during the eighteenth century and was very much a "Beninizer" of the Owo court. He introduced Benin-style court garments and changed the names of several chieftaincies to Benin-derived names.
6. Egharevba 1960:154. According to Benin sources, the war chief Iken had to recapture Owo, and for a period of time Benin forces were repelled. Iken was eventually killed by Owo forces.
7. I discuss Owo masking traditions in "The Egungun of Owo" (1978).
8. I discuss this cloth briefly in "Traditional Textiles in Owo, Nigeria" (1980).
9. Frank Willett recently (1986) published a tribute to Akeredolu. An earlier reference to Akeredolu is "Thorn Carving by Native Nigerian Artist" (1947).

ing by Native Nigerian Artist" (1947).

10. I discussed these topics with Akeredolu occasionally during my stay in Owo in 1973. Notes of October, 1973, indicate that Akeredolu's evolution of thorn carving began in the early 1930s.
11. Willett 1986:50. Willett's article provides photographs of thorn carvings produced in the 1930s.
12. Justus Akeredolu, personal communication, May 1973.
13. The figure is carved during a lengthy ceremony lasting seventeen days. In the past, these were apparently as stylized as any other Owo art form. In the twentieth century they became quite naturalistic and have been compared by Owo informants to photographs of the deceased. The *ako* figures and ritual are discussed in Willett 1966, Abiodun 1976, and Poynor 1978.
14. Willett took a photograph of this *ako* in 1958. I photographed the object myself in 1973. The upper part of the figure was stolen from the Department of Antiquities Building on the palace grounds in Owo in August 1973.
15. The Sashere *ako* was also photographed by Frank Willett in 1958, when he and William Fagg were allowed to see the pieces of the disconnected figure stored in the attic of the Sashere compound. I found a slide of a photograph of what appears to be the same figure in ritual context in the slide collection at the University of Iowa. William Fagg told me this was of a photograph of the Sashere *ako* he was shown in Owo.
16. I came upon a photograph of the *ako* that was used in the ceremony in Owo in 1973. I was not able to purchase a copy, but I was allowed to photograph it. The image I got was extremely fuzzy, but it does reveal that the piece that was actually used was more like the Sashere object in style, and much less naturalistic than the Lamuren figure that was preserved.
17. Celia Barclay, personal communication, December 1973.
18. Carol Ann Lorenz, personal communication, December 2, 1973.

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MCNAUGHTON, notes, from page 77

1. I am not at all convinced that Appadurai's relegation of sacred or aesthetic objects to realms beyond commerce is valid for most African societies. See pp. 22, 23 of his introduction and Davenport 1986.
2. McNaughton 1986. Carol Ann Lorenz and Mary Moran, the organizers of the symposium at which this paper was presented, intend to publish the papers as an edited volume.
3. A great many enlightening articles can be read in three edited volumes: Bernardi, Poni & Triulzi (in which Terence D. Ranger, for example, has published an excellent article titled "Personal Reminiscence and the Experience of the People in East Central Africa"); Miller 1980; and Brown & Roberts 1980. In addition the reader may consult d'Azevedo 1962; MacGaffey 1978; Peel 1984; Strobel 1977; Tonkin 1982, 1986; Willis 1976; and Vansina 1985.

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