

BOOK REVIEWS

“THE STORY OF SACRED WOOD CARVINGS FROM ONE SMALL YORUBA TOWN”, by H. U. Beier, edited by D. W. Macrow. Printed at Yaba, and published by the Nigeria Magazine, Marina, Lagos (No price given).

This slender book, consisting of a monograph of 13 pages of close letterpress and 53 superb photographs, tells of the enormous wealth of wood carvings to be found in every town and village of Western Nigeria—not tourist stuff, but actually in use in the cultural life of the people. The author takes as an example a small town called Ilobu in the Oyo district, which he considers typical of hundreds of others in the Yoruba country—a town which had until recently a population of only 10,000, though now three times that number; and he gives a comprehensive account, with photographs, of the numerous sacred wood carvings to be found in its shrines and private houses.

He begins with a valuable discussion of the religious philosophy of the Yoruba, and an account of their worship of those semi-mythical tribal ancestors called “*Orisa*” who have become infused with divine attributes from the High God, and so are now by derivation “gods” (though also remaining very human!) The worshipper chooses the *Orisa* that best suits his personality, and seeks to intensify his own life by becoming one with, or “possessed” by, the god, thus establishing a constructive relationship with the forces behind the universe. The wood carvings associated with the cults are not idols or fetishes, nor have they any magical attributes; they merely “embellish the shrine, create atmosphere, and stimulate religious feeling.” (cf. statues of saints in Roman Catholic cathedrals.) They do not inspire fear, but joy and dancing and singing, and are much loved by the children. The carvings stand from two to four feet high, and although some must be sixty or seventy years old, they are preserved in excellent condition by being washed every fourth day (the Yoruba Sabbath) and painted and dressed up annually for the Festival of Images when all are carried in joyful procession to the king’s palace.

The author describes, in popular language, each of the *Orisa* cults practised in Ilobu and their associated cult objects. Added to some of the human figures are charming and imaginative little horses, and fat dogs with crocodile jaws. There are numerous “*Ibeji*”—tiny wooden images which take the place of deceased twins; also carved wooden boxes and mortars, and the masks used in dances for contacting the spirits of the dead and getting messages through. Also there are a few lively though crude little grinning brass figurines probably associated with the ancient earth worship taken over from the indigenous people who occupied Nigeria before the Yoruba conquest.

This book provides a fascinating introduction to African art for the uninitiated European. Yoruba sculpture is not difficult to understand, especially when seen in its natural setting, away from the mothballs and glass cases of the museum. Despite the conventional distortions of the human figure (enormous heads with bulbous eyes covered with tin foil; shrunken limbs, and the diminutive horse held between the knees like a football) it is based on naturalistic realism. “The round swelling forms seem to be pushed out by the rising pressure from within,” but they are not deliberately grotesque nor merely symbolic. Though one feels oneself in a strange world (a world, for example, in which a flute player stands quite naturally on another flute player’s head) it is an intensely human world. “The expression (on the figure’s face) is that of a worshipper just after the mystical union with the god, resulting in a complete harmony of the soul, an utter relaxation of the mind and balance of the personality. The carver is always striving to express this relaxation and balance. He has no time for the emotions of everyday life, like laughter and anger and so on.”

Few new carvings are now being produced. Islam and Christianity have undermined the prestige of the traditional beliefs, and a cash economy is compelling the wood carver to convert himself into the commercial carpenter; if he does produce a carving, it is tossed off too quickly in soft wood susceptible to white ants. One of the major tragedies of our beloved Africa is that Christianity is sapping the art impulse of the people. Is this inevitable? The author thinks not, and points out that the ancient Greek culture was pagan but it nevertheless inspired Christian Europe for centuries. However, the recession will have to be halted soon or it will be too late.

A minor criticism of the editing: Why do we have to fumble to the end of the book, beyond the plates, to find that so-and-so is “a town in Oyo province”? Far better to put these small textual notes at the foot of the page. And why are photographs of the same carving or shrine separated, as is often the case, by several pages of other plates? But these are small matters, and one is filled with amazement that a production of this high quality should have come from a Nigerian press.

B. KINGSLAKE

* * * * *

FOLK MUSICIANS IN UGANDA, by K. P. Wachsmann, Ph.D. (Uganda Museum Occasional Paper No. 2); the Uganda Museum, Kampala, 1956.

This important paper forms a preliminary report on the work which has been carried out under the “Music Research Scheme R.233,” authorised in 1948 for the regional collection of folk-music. The research