KAMBA CARVERS[1]

by

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You generally find the carvers on a street corner, sitting under a tree out of the hot sun, behind the neat rows of their carvings arranged on a mat, and it may be anywhere from Francistown to Jinja; the scene is the same. Their round, dark faces, their soft language with its *th* sounds, and above all the distinctive lines of their carvings mark them out as members of one of the enterprising tribes of Africa, the Kamba from Machakos, to the south east of Nairobi, in Kenya. These people travel over most of central Africa to sell their work, from Southern Rhodesia to the Sudan (not, however, the Portuguese territories), and in addition their carvings stock most of the curio shops all over Africa and are to be found both in America and Europe. Behind them is the Akamba Handcraft Association in Kenya, a society which looks after and promotes their interests and is run entirely by the Kamba. But to start at the beginning . . .

The Kamba are closely related to the Kikuyu of Kenya, but unlike these they have a reputation for soldiering as with the Tonga of Nyasaland. 30 K.A.R., among other battalions, has a large number of Kamba, and so has the Kenya police force. This, strangely, may have something to do with the fact that so many men of the tribe have now taken enthusiastically to carving. Their tradition in wood carving was very slight, similar to that of many of their neighbours, being limited to such articles as spoons, stools and medicine horn stoppers,[2] but the present craft seems to have started during the first world war when a number of Kamba soldiers found themselves stationed in Dar-es-Salaam. Amongst them was a man called Mutesya waMunge. The WaZaramu of Dar-es-Salaam had already been carving for a long time, having originally received the craft, so the Kamba say, from the Ceylonese, and they were best known for their expertly worked heads in ebony. Mutesya learnt their craft, and on his return to Wamunyu, his home district of Kambaland, he began to carve professionally.

He was not popular among the Kamba elders to start with, because of the sticks he was carving. The heads, they said, resembled *Ngai* (God) and this they could not have. So for a while he had to do his carving in the bush, and come in to Machakos only once in a while to sell his work. But by about 1920 he was becoming better known; he came into the open, and began to teach a few others. This was the beginning of a small group of carvers centred on Wamunyu.

Before the second world war the number of carvers was still small, and it was not until during and after the war that the whole thing suddenly expanded, and large numbers of Kamba took up carving as a profession. When the battalions were demobilised in Kenya at the end of the war many African men were at a loose end, and this must have seemed a good, and suitably sedentary, way of making a living. This explains why the average age of the carvers is quite high—the youngest at present in Southern Rhodesia is 30. It was at this time that the Akamba Handcraft Association was founded. The Kikuyu also had to face the problem of unemployment at the end of the war, and it may be no coincidence that by the time the Kamba had worked up to their greatest number of carvers, and were having their greatest commercial success, i.e. about 1950, the Kikuyu were near to perfecting Mau Mau.

One of the attractions of the present-day Kamba carvings is their variety of figures, both animal and human, although most of this variety only originated after the war with the sudden development of interest in carving. Before the war, one of the first figures of their own design was, most suitably, of a Masai 'warrior'. While very well aware of the tourist attraction of the Masai, one wonders if the Kamba were not taking the fine opportunity afforded by this new weapon of carving to get their own back on the haughty Masai, their inveterate enemies, by cutting them down to size! Later, it was during the war that, under the impetus of Europeans who often provided them with drawings to work from, the number of figures increased suddenly and business possibilities became evident. The pattern of trade altered significantly now; due firstly to the suddenly increased demand for African curios, especially from America, and secondly to the restrictions that were placed upon street selling in Kenya, business began to be concentrated increasingly into the hands of a few Kamba dealers, and white and Asian dealers also stepped in, establishing the vertical differentiation between carvers and sellers that has become a salient feature of the industry. However, many Kamba still remain individualists, to judge by the experience of the Akamba Industries Co-operative Society, founded in 1951, which collapsed no more than a year later.[3] Their well-known salad-spoons began to appear quite early together with the first of their wide series of animals, at first following the Zaramu carvings of lions, elephants and giraffes (which, incidentally, have never been their strong points), then the other animals of their home country such as rhinos, hippos and, notably in recent years, masks and varieties of buck in different positions. These started in or about 1950, and have become perhaps their most characteristic figure.

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[1] This article makes no claim to exhaustive knowledge of the Kamba. The information was collected from various carvers I have met in Kenya and Rhodesia.

[2] Walter Elkan. *The East African Trade in Woodcarvings.* AFRICA, October, 1958, pp. 314-23.

In recent years trade has not been so flourishing as it was from 1947 onwards, and there have been few innovations. In Rhodesia at least the carvers buy some of their display locally, such as carved drums from the Lozi at Livingstone and wooden dishes from the Manyika at Umtali, in addition to a number of carvings, old men with sticks, women and heads that are bought from the Zaramu. About 1958 the Kamba began to make small laced drums in imitation of those made by the Ganda. Authenticity evidently does not come into consideration; in fact the whole craft is unashamedly commercial. Any new ideas that come along, whether the product of common inspiration or not, become common property and are taken up by all the carvers, eager to get on to a novel line.

Most of the trees used for carving grow in Kamba country; *mwawauzi*, *mutoo* (guava), *mpingo* (ebony), *mwangu*; others, such as *muuko*, *mutamayo*, *kyowa*, grow in the forests of the Aberdares and elsewhere, and permission has to be sought from the Kenya Forests Department to make a cutting. All these woods share the qualities of hardness, a relatively straight grain free from knots, and good colouring. The trunks are sawed into lengths, split, then left to dry for only about a week before the shaping is begun. This is done with homemade tools, an adze, and two knives, one sharp, one blunt. The work is finished with sandpaper or broken bottle, and finally, "*Kopla*" ('Cobra') floor polish is the only thing, they say, which can bring out the qualities of the wood and give a lasting finish. Beeswax was originally used; it gives a better finish but it gets spoilt by the fingerprints of the customers as they handle the carvings when buying.

When a carver decides to go abroad for the first time, he has to set to and make anything up to four or five hundred pieces if it is to be a long trip to Rhodesia or the Congo, less for a shorter trip. This may take him two or three years to complete, or he can make up his collection by buying from other carvers or dealers. While he assembles his stock he lives at home, supported by the womenfolk who, it seems, are the really hard workers as among so many African peoples. Or he may work in Wamunyu which is still the centre of the carving industry. There the work is more communal, some of it organised into workshop/teaching centres, and he may only have to do the finishing, or do the roughing out for someone else. Some carving is also done in Tanganyika, at Dar-es-Salaam, where good ebony is to be had, especially by the itinerant carvers who do not want to have to go right back to Kenya.

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[3] Ibid.

They travel by bus, with the goods packed into several cardboard boxes or wickerwork crates. There are groups of carvers in most of the big towns of East Africa and the Federation; in the northern Congo they use Stanleyville or Bukavu as centres with Elizabethville and Jadotville in the Katanga province. (In 1954, one carver, Mwambetu, a son of the original Mutesya, even went to London, where the prices are said to be double those in Kenya; he is reputed to be doing very well.). Once arrived in the country, they join up with the local group of Kamba, and either set up their stall next to the others, or go on their own round from house to house. They do not work as a team, financially speaking, but trade separately, each selling only his own work. One of the group may be appointed leader; in the case of Southern Rhodesia Mailo waNdetu, the only literate, is also the only one who speaks English and it is he who organises the occasional trips made to the smaller towns like Gwelo, Fort Victoria, Umtali and Francistown. How do they manage about languages? In most of the area in which they work Swahili is spoken which is their second language; in the Federation they learn enough SiLolo. the 'town language' based on Zulu, to manage. Having established a preference for one country and learnt its language, the carvers generally keep returning to the same place.

Some of the fifty Kambas in Rhodesia have been returning for up to eight years. Others have been in Rhodesia continuously for up to five years, and here we come to a contradictory, but perhaps typically African fact—they say they do not carve when they are away from home. So when their display of carvings starts to run low they have to send home to Kenya for further supplies, always to a relative or close friend for fear that they may be palmed off with shoddy work and pay too much for it. The main reason for this, they say, is that they can only get the right carving woods in Kenya (this may be true, but many other lovely woods grow in other parts of Africa which they could use); that they have not brought the right tools with them, and so on. However, in the evenings I have seen them carving small figures simply for their own enjoyment, but as for the main work, that is something that is only done at home. After all, it is an easy life, to sit behind your carvings all day. Why should you spoil it by working when you don't need to! And indeed many of the successful carvers do not need to add to their troubles in this way; an average gross monthly earning is £20; it may be considerably less in the cold season, but on occasions they can earn up to £50 a month. That was especially so in the early days, from 1947 to about 1953, when their carving, besides its other qualities, had also the virtue of novelty. Walter Elkan, East African economist, estimated the total value of carvings sold in 1958 at about £200,000, a considerable tribal income.[4] Most of their work is priced too high for Africans who admire it greatly but rarely buy.

It seems to be a feature of many African art groups, such as those at Brazzaville, Elizabethville, Cyrene or Makerere, that when the work is communal the best art is produced. Individuals do not usually create a notably individual style, but the style of the school may be highly distinctive and original. This is also true of the Kamba carvers; the very way in which they learn indicates that they are not aiming at individual expression in their carvings so much as a common standard set by all. Learning is by copying; you have a figure in front of you and when you can make a good copy of that one, you may go on to the next. Your training is complete when you can make all the figures in the current repertoire of your teacher and also when you have paid him a fee of anything up to £50! Then the better carvers may start to put in their own details around the stock patterns. The training may last longer than this because you will probably have to start by doing the roughing out for someone else. It is interesting to note that the Chinese workers in ivory and jade of Hong Kong go about it the other way: the roughing out is considered to be the skilled part, and the finishing and details are the job of the apprentices. Nevertheless, individual carvers may acquire a reputation for skill at say, elephants or rhinos and they will naturally tend to specialise in those. Carvers of great reputation or long experience often go to Wamunyu in Kambaland and become teachers, apparently a lucrative occupation.

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[4] Ibid.

These are the people at the centre of the Kamba carving industry, the ones who should be working out new figures to make and new selling lines. But in fact they are very conservative, and one wonders why they keep endlessly to the same patterns, relying for new ideas largely on Europeans or Americans, when so much of their trade depends on novelty. This is something that has also been noticed at African art schools. Most African artists, once left to themselves, develop a limited repertoire of subjects or styles and rarely stray beyond its bounds.

What is so attractive about the Kamba repertoire is the life and movement in the figures, although few of them could be said to portray exactly the animals they represent, and there is much shoddy work, judged by the worn feet of some of the carvings that must have been standing on the pavements of Africa for many years. The beautiful natural grain of their woods which puts muscles under a shoulder or pattern into an empty space is their first ally, but perhaps the greatest appeal of Kamba carvings is their ability to portray the animal's character or intent, often by means of the expression on its face. I have a python in ebony whose face, although less than half an inch square, is a picture of malicious intent. Again, rhinoceros-ness will be evident from every side of their carving of one, although the figure itself may not look strictly very much like a rhinoceros. When going through a museum recently I was struck by the much more life-like impression these carvings give than do the stuffed specimens; it must be for this very reason—that the Kamba put into wood their own attitude towards the animals, similar to the descriptions you can find in the countless African animal stories. Whether they see in their carvings the beauty, charm or self-expression which Europeans expect in works of art, is doubtful; carving is first and foremost a commercial proposition. But there is still that delight in embellishing and in small details that makes each piece just a little different from its fellow. Can this be compared with so much in African music—the principle of repetition of the theme, with variations to suit your taste?