

Some African Vernacular Names For Polished Stone Cults

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In West Africa the use of neoliths lasted well into the advent of the iron age. Craft of each appears to have entered Africa from the east. However, the object of this article is to draw attention to the occurrence in west Africa of Vernacular names for polished stone cults which in many areas in west Africa are described as thunder bolts or Stones from the sky.

Fourneau (1935, V : 70) who was a French Colonial Administrator wrote that in *Bafia*, an administrative district, in the former French Cameroons : « Les pierres y sont appelées yaguébogol. Ces indigènes les tiennent pour surnaturelles, tombées du ciel et nées du jui de la foudre ». Fourneau (p. 79) remarked that among « les Osanaga du canton Ngorro, ces pierres polies sont connues sous le nom de itané bambarassia dont la traduction littérale est 'Pierre de l'arc-en-ciel' ; dans le canton Djaniti par lesoimba qui a la même signification ; dans les cantons Betsenga par owon nam, la hache-du-pays ». Fourneau (p. 79) continues that in « la subdivision de Banyo, leur nom en langue Wouté est foannoé (foar ; hache ; noaé : la pluie) la hache de la pluie ». In the region of *Bafia* these polished stone axes are called « nkokdiom (nkok : pierre, diom, case réservée aux discussions secrètes) ». While among the *Lémandé* these implements are regarded as : « pierres de la foudre s'appellent niendan nieoka (niendan : caillou ; nieoka : hache) et niendan boanan (boanan : maladie à caractère d'ulcère) ». Fourneau (p. 80) has pointed out that among the *Balom* these implements are called : « nkong (pierres glissantes en journe de hache). Fourneau then remarked that Haessig, a Basle missionary at *Bassa*, had collected five names among the *Bassa* people for these implements, namely : « hõnd mbok, hõnd Bako, hõnd balemba et hõnd ikona ». The word *hõnd* being the local *Bassa* name for an axe. On p. 81 Haessig remarked that among the *Bassa* of *Babim-bi bayon* meant a slave and hence such names for the polished axes as « Hõnd Bako au hõnd bayon serait ainsi la hache-des-gens-connus-comme-esclaves, les Bako ». Nowhere else have I come across such a profusion of names for these artifacts and the fact that there are these numerous names for them indicates that their use as useful tools has died out only recently.

Working in the Bamenda division of the former British Cameroons I found that polished stone implements were rare and none of the locals had any idea as to what they were called. Among the Yoruba of the Nigeria Bowen (1857 : 315) wrote : «Shango, the Thunder God of the Yoruba, is often called Jakuta, the stone caster, and certain old stone hatchets... are picked up in the fields and are venerated as thunder bolts ». According to the Church Missionary Society's Yoruba dictionary published in Lagos in 1918 a thunder bolt, i.e. a polished stone celt was called either okuta manamana, stone of the lightning flash or édan ara, thunder-stone. Thomas (1910, II : 221, 246) stated among the Edo, oghara was a stone-axe, while isavang was a long stone-axe. Burton (1883, II : 106) stated that in the Gold Coast the locals called these implements Osraman bo or abonua and regarded them as thunder bolts. Rattray (1923 : 322) stated that in 1911 he happened to be in Ashanti and collected a number of celts. « The Ashanti generally call them Nyame akuma or Nyame asaso, i.e. the Sky-God's axes or hoes. » Johnston (1919, I : 379) stated : « Axo is called tadi in Kikongo ; tale in Kakongo ; Ktali in Ktali. » Johnston then stated that tadi « suggests 'stone' as well as 'iron' ; and stone axes were anciently in use in West Congo land. » These remarks illustrate a well known principle that provided function remains the same it is immaterial what the substance is. A good example is the use of the English word 'ship'. To-day most ships are built of metal, formerly only of wood. The material used in their construction has changed, but the function remains the same, hence the name is not changed. On this analogy these Congo words for an iron axe replace the original names for neolithic celts.

I would be pleased to have other references referred to me.

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Editor's Note.

Recently Mr. J. Barbary of ORSTOM, Yaounde, discovered giant sculptured granite stones, megaliths, erected in the villages of Bamali and Bamalang in the Ndop Plain of the Bamenda Prefecture of West Cameroon. The inhabitants of the last village declared that the stone had been raised at the time of German colonisation to attract the blessing of the gods on their village — which supposes that religious beliefs are attached to such stones. It was observed that the Ndop Plain stones resemble the raised sculptured stones of the upper Cross River near Ikom, home of the Ekoi (Ejagham). Such stones are commonly found in all Ejagham villages in South-Eastern Nigeria and the Manyu Division of West Cameroon. P. A. TALBOT¹ states that among the Ekoi (Ejagham) these hexagonal stones half buried and half raised above the ground are called Nimm stones. Before any village is established Nimm stones are first buried at the site of their Ekpe (Ngbe) house. One of these stones is also erected before the Ekpe house, painted with black and white circles and called « Etai Ngbe » meaning « Leopard Stone » (Ekpe or Ngbe being the 'Leopard Society'). Sacrifices to their gods Obassi Osaw, Obassi Nsi and the ancestors are offered before it as the guardian of the town. TALBOT adds that many such Nimm stones, supposed to be creation of Obassi (God) himself, lie buried in the bush, « and when discovered are objects of great reverence to the Ekoi ».

Reference :

1. P. A. TALBOT : In *The Shadow of the Bush*, London 1912 pp. 171-2, 265 and 263.

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