

The return of a stolen god

by Paul N. Nkwi, *STL, Lic-és Lettres*

The 11th Dec. 1973 was a remarkable and an emotional day in the history of the Kom people. The young and old lined the 20 km road that divides the Kom kingdom into two halves, in order to welcome the Afo-a-Kom (the Kom thing) from its New York journey. Its removal is a classical case in the history of trafficking of primitive art. It was stolen from its storage sanctuary in 1966 and was « mysteriously spirited away by thieves using a highly organised system of logistics that included landrovers, trucks and air planes » (Time Magazine-5 Nov. 1973). The statue which is said to have reached France before it was finally bought by Aaron Furman, a New York specialist in African and Oceanian art, was later put on sale by its new owner.¹

When the statue reappeared in public, the Cameroon Embassy in Washington as well as many generous donors and others who knew its value and significance, negotiated its return.² It finally reached Kom in the midst of great jubilation and celebrations by the people who revere it. The purpose of this article is not to go into its theft and into the subsequent headlines it made in the press after its discovery, but we will attempt to analyse its origin, history and significance to the Kom people.

Kom is a small kingdom in the central mountainous district of the Cameroon Grassfields. Its emergence as a tribe and

1. According to Time Magazine (5 Nov. 1973), the respected Manhattan dealer had put it up on sale for 60,000 dollars.

2. Evans Schneider, a peace corp volunteer in the Grassfields (Cameroon), born in Kom while his father was a Baptist missionary there, was also responsible for the discovery of the stolen royal statue. The donors to whom the Kom people are very grateful, and who helped to buy back the statue are Lawrence Gussman, President of the International Association of Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Lamburu, Gabon, Warner-Lambert Co, National Geographical Society, Gen. Telephone and Electric Co.

people dates back to about 300 years ago. They are said to have migrated from Ndobbo plain to the Bamum Northern border line after breaking away from the so-called Tikar group. Arriving Laikom, their present hill-top capital, as a small band, they now number about 80,000 people. Its glory as a strong military state goes back to the seventh king (foyn) Yu (1865-1912) whose expansionist efforts were only halted by the arrival of the Germans in the closing years of the nineteenth century.

According to information I gathered, though conflicting, after the return of the Afo-a-Kom, it seems that the statue was a self-portrait of Foyn Yu. Although some informants told me that it was probably carved by Foyn Tufoyn, the fifth in the king-list, it is most probable that Foyn Yu carved it. He is said to have learned carving during his two years in exile in the chiefdom of Bambui.¹ He was sent into exile by Foyn Kümeng for attempting to establish himself as the sole ruler of the southern sector of the kingdom. Before his death Foyn Kümeng recalled Yu from exile and reconciled. Yu, then succeeded Kümeng. Although Yu is widely regarded as a warrior king, a close chamberlain of his told me recently that Foyn Yu found time to exercise his artistic skill he had acquired while in exile. The Afo-a-Kom along with other statues are said to have been carved privately by Foyn Yu. He is also said to have founded a school of carvers. Kom's finest pieces of art were produced by this school. It produced mask heads and statues as well as beautiful doorposts. Animal motives are the most common that figure on these pieces of art. The school included Foyn Yu himself, his sister's son Ngam who later succeeded him as king, Bobe Rudoph Cha, heir-apparent to the Kom throne who died last year, and who was widely known throughout Kom as Bomukum (the father of masks) because of his beautiful carvings and Nguo Fang of Acha who is said to have assisted Foyn Yu in the production of the Afo-a-Kom.

1. After his departure with his sister's son Ngam, Foyn Yu is said to have spent his two years of exile with his half-sister who had married the chief of Bambui, a small chiefdom to the south-east.



Fig : 1. The Afo-a-Kom after its return with Foyn Nsom Nggwe, the present Kom king. (Photo : Akoni : Njinikom).

Another name which was erroneously given to the male figure was that of Mbang. Mbang was actually a name of a small statue which a disguised palace retainer (nikang) held in his arms as he stood in front of the Afo-a-Kom as it stood exhibited at one corner of the large square (wae-jang) during the annual national dance.

The statues were carved of iroko wood and their bodies were sheathed in reddish and blue beads. The three main figures (see fig. 2) measure about 5 feet. The Afo-a-Kom measures 64 inches high. Its face is smeared with copper. It holds a scepter of power and stands behind a throne. It has also an embroidered crown made of the same material. The wife-figure and the mother-figure also stand behind thrones. The thrones carry designs of animal heads and are also embroidered with beads and cowries.

Although the whole set seems to portray the royal house-hold and the king's political status, it is however doubtful if it had any religious or ritual importance. According to Bobe Johnny Ngong there were no religious rites specially attached to it. Some informants asserted that there were some religious rites connected with it. Their argument seems to be based on the fact that the entire set was installed at dawn prior to the annual dance at one corner of the square by members of the kwifoyn ntu'u (the kwifoyn of the night), a secret branch of the regulatory society charged with the execution of criminals at night. Bobe Ngong could not recall any incidence during his stay at the palace when special sacrifices were offered to it. Some informants affirmed the contrary. The fact that there seem not to have been ritual purifications after the return of the Afo-a-Kom, gives some credibility to Bobe Ngong's information.

The set represents probably the family, the basis of the lineage clan and tribal continuity. The exposition of the genitals does not only stress their sex but seems to point to lineage and tribal continuity through fertility. There are profused fertility rites which hold a central place in Kom religious belief. There are special fertility rites which are performed at the palace to pro-

tect and avert any threat to the fertility of women, crops and beasts.¹

As an ancestral royal piece of art, each new foyn was obliged to protect it and to exhibit at annual dances which took place either in late December or in early January. It is said that Foyn Yu exhibited it himself after its completion, probably to show his people his artistic qualities. It is most likely that the mystery which surrounded it and the great fear and respect given it, were a creation of the disguised palace retainers (nikangsü) whose general task was to protect anything that enjoyed royal protection. The nikangsü were widely known as a group that terrorised the Common people (kommanchi). The set was considered as sacred and unapproachable by the kommanchi. The nikangsü never allowed the commoners to come close to it when it was on exhibition. The involvement of the princes of blood in the theft of the Afo-a-Kom casts doubts on the sacredness of the entire set¹. The religious and ritual importance asserted by some informants is also put into doubt by the co-operation of those who were charged with its protection, in the theft of the Afo-a-Kom. The set was also known as ghü-fuo-mu (old things), and this name which made vague references to the past, further made the commoners (kommanchi) to hold it with great reverence and respect. Some people even regarded the statues as gods. The kommanchi were puzzled when the Afo-a-Kom was stolen. Mr. Thaddeus Nkuo expressed the feeling of kommanchi when he said, that "no one would think of going near the royal room... It is the heart of Kom; what unifies the tribe, the spirit of the nation; what holds us together" (New York Times, Oct. 25 1973). Mr. Gilbert Schneider « agrees that it was unthinkable for anyone to venture into the sacred s'orage area » (New York Times, Oct. 25 1973).

According to Bobe Johnny Ngong its tribal importance gradually evolved through the years as it became a central figure at annual dances. It was an artistic expression of a Kom

¹ Nkwil: Clanship among the Kom of Cameroon Grassfields, p. 60 Fribourg, 1974. A mémoire presented in the Faculty of Letter;

king who tried to represent in concrete form what the Kom people believe so much in, the family, an institution specially protected by fertility rites. Its theft and triumphant return have given it a new dimension as a national precious piece of Cameroon art.

The age of the carvings have been a source of speculation. It has been widely held that the carvings are more than 100 years old. But if we consider the evidence of Bobe Johnny Ngong, then one is inclined to hold that the carvings are not as old as people have been led to believe. According to Johnny Ngong, Foyn Yu carved the statues while he (Ngong) was a page at Yu's court. Ngong asserts that the beads with which the statues were clothed, were bought by him. It is probably that Ngong was an adolescent at the time. He had been a servant of a German officer in Nigeria and North Cameroon. He must have been 18 or so when he returned to act as Yu's trusted emissary and interpreter. Since Ngong had travelled in the Grassfields and Nigeria, he knew dealers from whom he bought the beads. Ngong is himself above his nineties and if his testimony is true, then we can tentatively put the production of the entire set to the closing years of the last century. The carvings might be about 80 years old although some informants hold these are much older.¹

One can rightly say that the royal carvings of Kom are certainly genuine pieces of Negro art which were not only produced by a traditional artist with a traditional aim in view but also because the artist was basically inspired by his traditional milieu. He sought to express a fundamental human reality in a more vivid and concrete way.*

¹ According to the son of Foyn Ngam, Yu's successor, the statues were carved by Foyn Tufoyn, and it was Yu and Ngam who later sewed the beads on to the carvings. (Bobe Francis C. Ngam).

* The author of this article is a Kom himself, and a postgraduate student in the Faculty of Letters at Fribourg University, Switzerland. The information was gathered by the author himself, a week after the return of the Afo-a-Kom (16-22nd Dec. 1973).

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