

Surviving Works: context in Verre arts

Part Two, Chapter Five: Towards a Verre catalogue raisonnée

5.3: Initiation helmets and crooks

Tim Chappel, Richard Fardon and Klaus Piepel

Special Issue

Vestiges: Traces of Record Vol 7 (1) (2021)

ISSN: 2058-1963 <http://www.vestiges-journal.info>

Preface and Acknowledgements ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

PART ONE CONTEXT

Chapter 1 The Verre ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

Chapter 2 Documenting the early colonial assemblage – 1900s to 1910s ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

Chapter 3 Documenting the early post-colonial assemblage – 1960s to 1970s ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

Interleaf ‘Brass Work of Adamawa’: a display cabinet in the Jos Museum – 1967 ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

PART TWO ARTS

Chapter 4 Brass skeuomorphs: thinking about originals and copies ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

Chapter 5 Towards a *catalogue raisonnée*

5.1 *Percussion* ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

5.2 *Personal Ornaments* ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

5.3 *Initiation helmets and crooks* ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

5.4 *Hoes and daggers* ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

5.5 *Prestige skeuomorphs* ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

5.6 *Anthropomorphic figures* ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

Chapter 6 Conclusion: late works – Verre brasscasting in context ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 The Verre collection in the Jos and Lagos Museums in Nigeria ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

Appendix 2 Chappel’s Verre vendors ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

Appendix 3 A glossary of Verre terms for objects, their uses and descriptions ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

Appendix 4 Leo Frobenius’s unpublished Verre ethnological notes and part inventory ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

Bibliography ([HTML](#) | [PDF](#))

5.3 Initiation helmets and crooks

Several items of the items of ceremonial dress associated with the different stages by which young men undergo initiation and circumcision (see Chapter 3) include accessories in brass: brass-handled daggers and figures, and the two that are our particular concern here, the helmet and crook. The 'original' of the helmet, *bal*, which is made of fibres and leather, embellished with cowries and either plaited animal tail-hair, or cockerel feathers, is not unique to the Verre, though a comparative analysis might reveal distinctive features. An example collected by Frobenius and attributed to Verre that it is now in Berlin (III C 29412, below left) departs in some respects from the helmet collected contemporaneously by Olive MacLeod that is now in the British Museum (Af1913,1013.30, below centre). The helmets collected in the 1960s resemble the MacLeod donation rather than Frobenius's, as does a sketch of another example in the Frobenius archives that was presumably drawn from another specimen collected by Frobenius (KBA 14866, below right; designated 'küssū' in this source only). Similar helmets have been documented well beyond the Verre, notably among Mumuye, some of whose wooden figures have heads that seem to be sculpted along the lines of the headgear collected by Frobenius (Berns, Fardon and Kasfir 2011). Although this is only supposition, given its greater bulk, and a different recorded name, it is conceivable that the Frobenius helmet was a war helmet of which initiation helmets were miniature versions. If this is the case, then the relationship between the two types would also speak to the symbolism of initiation helmets.



(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

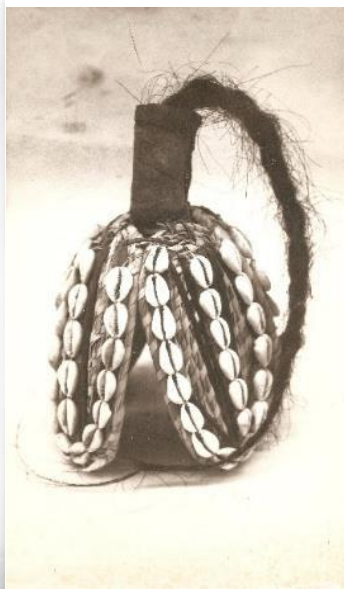
The most common brass skeuomorphs of the template shared by the MacLeod and Chappel helmets do, however, seem to be characteristically Verre, and they come in two forms. The helmet for *Tibaai*, or smiths is, like its non-metal original, called *bal*, which may be specified further as being in brass, *bal suktundal*, or being for smiths, *bal Tibaai*. A reduced brass version is made for *Gazabi*, non-smiths or farmers, which seems to consist only of the central section of the blacksmith's helmet, shorn of its flaps; this is called *tongta*, which may be simply the name of the central section of a helmet. No examples of brass initiation helmets

were, to the best of our current knowledge, collected in the early colonial period, which opens the possibility of the metal version being a later innovation although, in this and other cases as we have emphasised repeatedly, absence from the early colonial collection is not evidence of absence from the early colonial society.

Non-metal helmets collected for the Jos Museum in 1966



218



425



426

Additionally, **174** for which we lack illustration.

Brass helmets for Tibaii collected for the Jos Museum in 1966



256



427



433 (and below left)

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)



433 right

527 (plaited hair specified as reedbuck)

Additionally, **444** and **761**, for which we have no photographs, the latter is noted to be for *Tibaai* which implies it was in brass.

Brass helmets for Gazabi collected for the Jos Museum in 1966



712

772

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

Additionally, we have no photograph of **713**, acquired together with **712**, and probably similar to it.

Comparable helmets are to be found in many collections, here we note only those acquired locally by missionaries of the Sudan United Mission around the same time as Chappel's collection for Jos. The examples on the right and left depart in some respects from those in

the Jos Museum. That on the right, which appears not to have articulated flaps, may not be Verre, while that on the left may simply have been reassembled incorrectly.



SUM Collection



SUM Jens Hebsgaard



SUM Aarhus

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

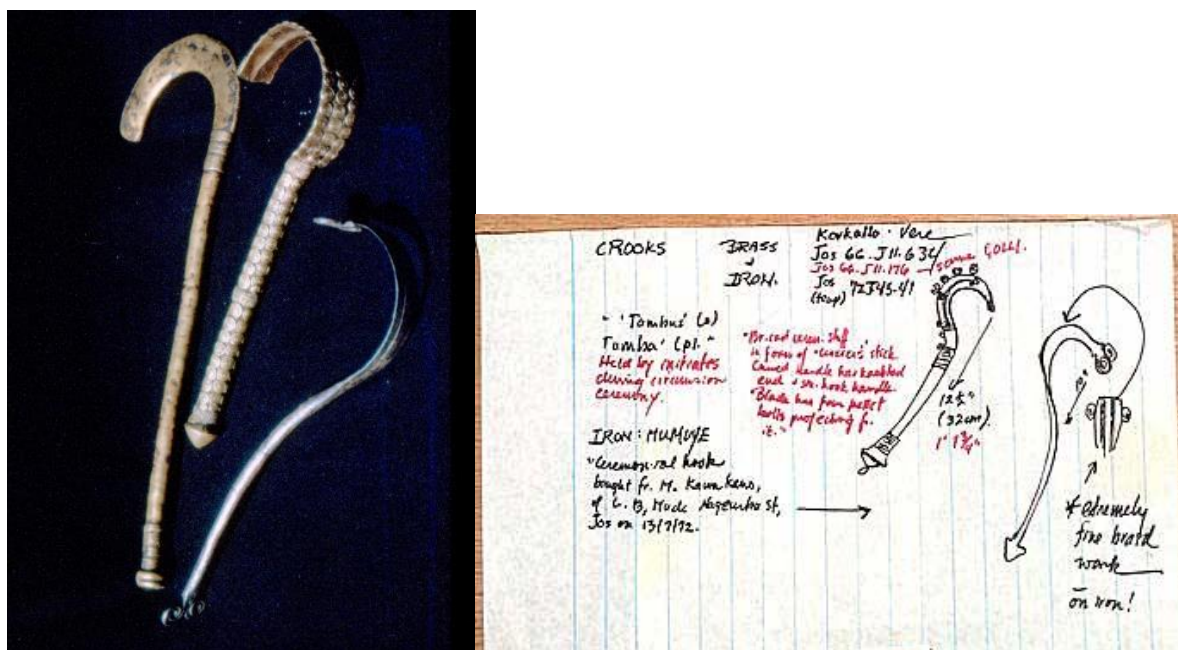
Initiation crooks

Like the helmet, the metal crook is not restricted to the Verre. Iron crooks used by the neighbouring Mapeo Chamba were not only identical but probably bought from Verre smiths, and the form was distributed more widely, to the west at least as far as the Mumuye. That said, other than for the occasional prestige purchase, it seems to be the case that the brass skeuomorph of the crook was restricted to the Verre. An iron example was illustrated by Frobenius's artist, Arriens, and a brass version collected by the expedition; and the use of the crook was noted by the Temples, 'Circumcision ... takes place at the harvest festival, when boys of nine or ten years of age are operated upon. They are held by a stick with a brass-bound crook around the neck, and should they flinch they are shamed for ever' (1919: 358). Whether in iron or brass, the crook is called *tambus* (s), *tambi* (pl) in Verre. In overall form, it is a skeuomorph of an iron sickle, *gamsus* (s), *gamsi* (pl): the regionally more widely used iron crook, in Verre *tambus wees* (s), *tambi wesa* (pl), was the initial skeuomorph of the crook, making the brass version a copy of an iron skeuomorph. There was also an all wooden version, *tambus rap* (s), *tambus rat* (pl), which among neighbouring Chamba Leko is a chiefly insigne. Although crooks are differentiated further by their decorative motifs and whether they are for use by smiths or non-smiths, *Tibaai* or *Gazabi*, their overall symbolism is unaffected, and is likely to be similar to that known from the neighbouring Mapeo Chamba. As a skeuomorph of a sickle, the crook is contrasted with a hoe. Men harvest with sickles; women plant with hoes. This may not describe actual work practices faithfully, but it does reflect the operative symbolic logic. Youths have to be cut in order to mature. Chappel's informants likened the knob at the handle of some crooks to the head of a penis. The youths undergoing circumcision clasp the crook with both hands and hook it behind their necks; doing so helps them to be unflinching. Cowardly boys were disgraced. The crook-sickle held firmly against the back of the neck analogizes this cutting, to expose the head of the penis, to the final cutting to

separate head from body which will take place after burial to allow the skull to be conserved. But compared to a sickle, a crook cannot cut: the blade of a crook has been rotated so as to lie in the same plane as a hoe blade. Hence, a crook has the overall shape of a sickle with the blade alignment of a hoe, which at least speculatively, given we do not have Verre testimony, might make it highly appropriate as the insigne of youths in a transitional gendered state.

Sickle and iron crook

The relationships between some of these objects become apparent from the illustrations below. Below the iron sickle tool (99) is juxtaposed to the iron crook derived from it (this example is from the Boston Museum). The photograph below on the left is from Arnold Rubin's archive showing three pieces in the Jos Museum: that on the left is a, so far, unique brass skeuomorph of the iron sickle which we think may be **626** in Chappel's field collection, it is most likely to have been a priestly insigne. The central brass crook in Rubin's photograph might be any one of numerous examples in the Jos collection: rather than having a plain handle it is covered entirely with the spirals typical of later Verre brasswork and also copied by Koma who took up the technology. The iron crook on the right of the three, has a double spiral at both ends. This might be Mumuye (72.J45.41) rather than Verre if we judge by Nancy Maas's sketch of a crook with a double spiral, albeit only at its 'blade' end.



(probably) **626**, left, Verre brass crook, centre

Verre or Mumuye iron crook, right Nancy Maas note

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)



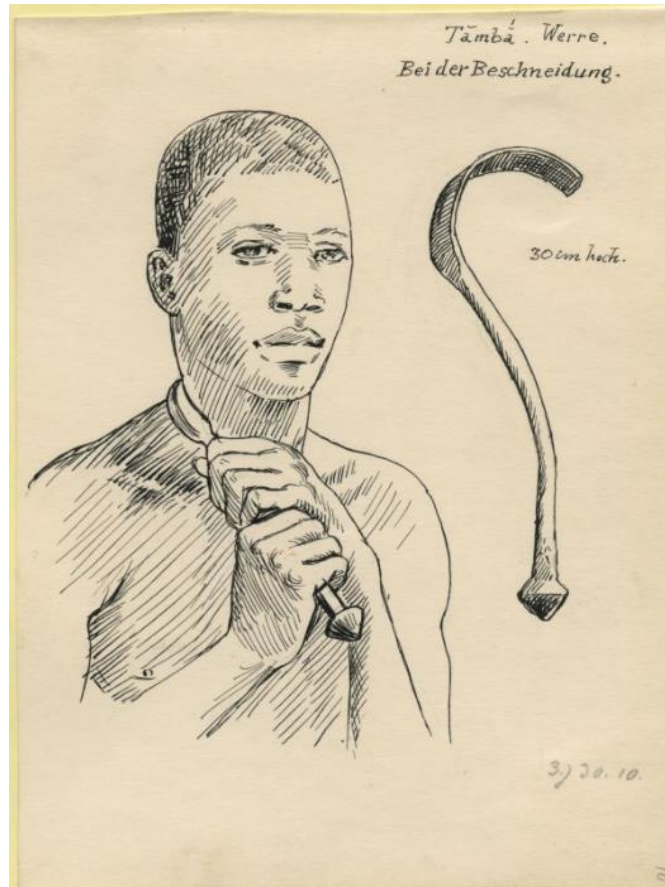
99

Museum of Fine Arts Boston 2005.1187

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

We lack illustrations of two more sickles collected: **175, 560**

The way in which an iron crook was held can be seen from a sketch by Frobenius's expedition artist, Carl Arriens.

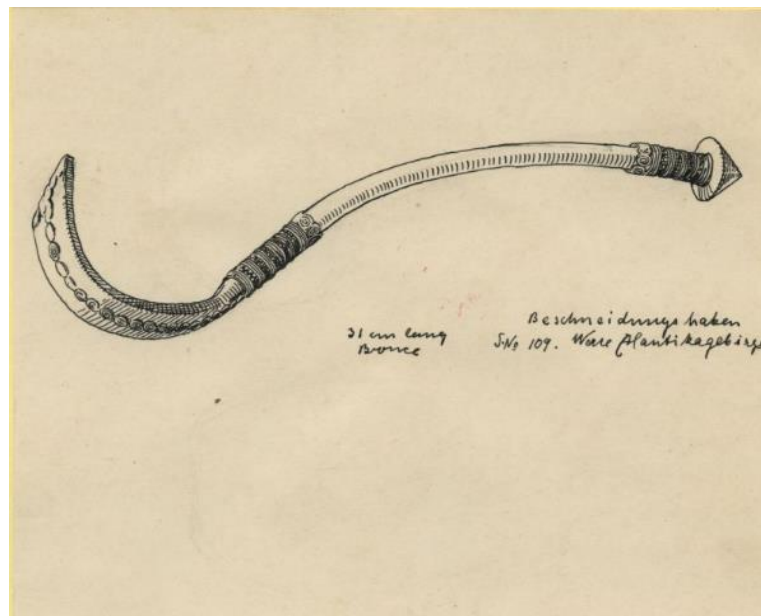


KBA 10626

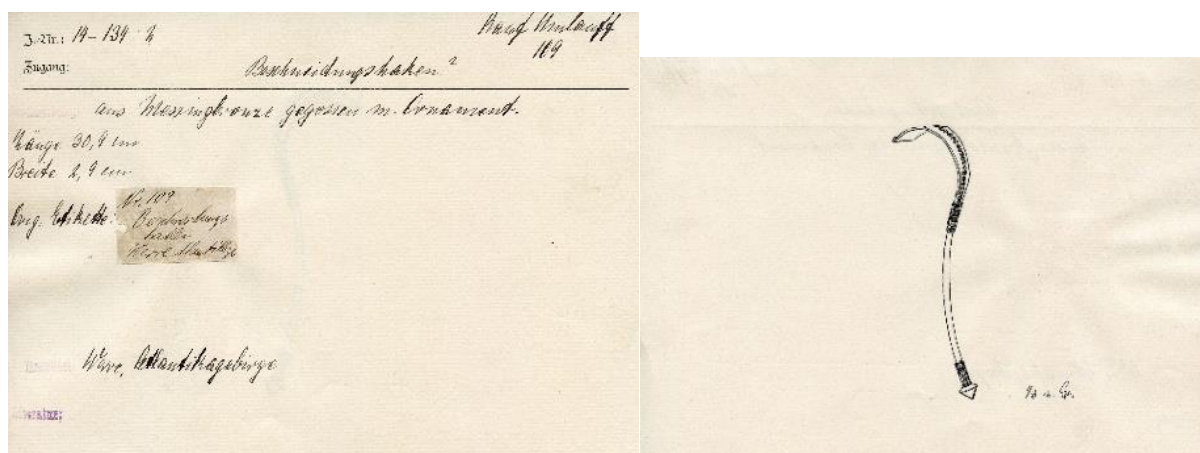
(Clicking on the image will open a higher quality version)

Brass crooks

Staying with the Frobenius Archive, we can trace an example of a brass crook from its sketch (KBA 03289) through to its acquisition by the Hamburg Museum from the dealer Umlauff in July 1914. The decoration is noticeably restrained compared to what we assume to be a later example in Rubin's photography above.



KBA 03289



Hamburg accession card

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

Since then, numerous examples of brass crooks have entered museum and private collections. Most are virtually identical in overall form, with some variations in patterned decoration and ornamentation. Unfortunately, we lack illustrations of Chappel's many acquisitions for the Jos Museum, which are simply listed here with any particular observations that were made in their accession notes: **101, 176, 274, 290, 352** for *Gazabi*, **405** *tambus seeri*, *seeri* meaning locust in reference to a type of decoration or ornament, **408, 421, 437, 561** with redbuck horns (see, Interleaf, illustrations left and central), **562, 634** the basis of Maas's sketch *tambus sa'sai Gazabi* (above), where *sa'sai* indicates decoration with crotal bells as we see in the illustration, **635** *tambus mule Tibaai*, *mule* referring to a beaded decoration, **636** noted to be for *Gazabi*, **683** *tambus ga'ga Tibaai* with double spiral decoration or ornament, for the use of smiths, **689** *tambus Gazabi* for non-smiths, **748** *tambus suktunus* crook in brass.

The examples we know from private collections differ in the extent of their decoration, depending upon whether the spirals continue down the handle, as they do in the example photographed by Rubin, or are confined to the blade, as in the sketch of the Frobenius brass crook. The four examples below indicate the modest range of variation.



Piepel collection



SUM Hebsgard



SUM Vestergaard



Charles Jones Gallery

(Clicking on the images will open a higher quality version)

Only one example has come to our attention that has an ornament which might include horns (like **561**), although in profile the head otherwise appears anthropomorphic. As we shall see next, similar ornamental features are more readily documented from the brass women's hoes which are the complement to the men's sickle-like crooks.



Herbelin Auction House, Chinon France

(Clicking on the image will open a higher quality version)

This work is copyright of the Authors. It is published under a Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. Images: copyright of the institutions as stated (all rights reserved).

Cette œuvre est mise à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution (4.0 International <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.fr>) qui permet à d'autres de partager le travail avec une reconnaissance de la paternité du travail et de la publication initiale dans ce journal. Images: copyright des institutions comme indiqué (tous droits réservés).