



ON SOME PROBLEMS OF THE MODERN ART OF THE MAKONDE PEOPLE

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Little attention has been paid to the modern carving of Africa. After all, hardly eighty years have passed since the time when the intellectual Europe started to realize that, besides the fine arts based on the heritage of the antique of the Mediterranean and perhaps also the arts grown up from the soil of the great religious systems of Islam and Buddhism (having some common points with the antique), there exists yet another art quite independent on the antique and guided by entirely different principles. This is the traditional tribal art, or, as one used to say, primitive art, or the art of natural peoples. But nevertheless *Art*, no mere *masks*, *idols*, or *godlings*. Among the areas in which this art was living, Africa with its carvings occupied the foremost place. It was thus only natural that, after the new conception had asserted itself and the European knowledge of the traditional tribal art had grown wider and deeper, one started to look, and is still looking, for works as old and original as possible, undisturbed by foreign influences of form, ideas and socio-economic elements. It is only these works which are accepted as real representatives of the African artistic genius and, therefore, also the only criteria of the value of everything which has originated in the soil of Africa, formerly as well as nowadays.

To a certain extent, this attitude is justifiable, especially when evaluating sculptures which, though retaining traditional themes, were not made to traditional social order, but to satisfy the de-

mands of tourists and the uninformed foreign arts market. It is similarly justified, of course, when dealing with the mass souvenir production of the most varied genre statuettes and naive forgeries of pieces of traditional arts, produced in various places of Africa for long years, often according to pictorial models to be found in European and American art books. It is, however, not justifiable as far as that artistic production is concerned, which has grown up from a new social situation and on the ground of new ideological, aesthetic or social and economic needs and demands.

The latter category includes also the modern art of the Makonde people inhabiting the northern part of the today's Republic of Mozambique. Unlike the modern sculpture of some other parts of Africa, however, this art cannot complain of a lack of specialists' interest. During the past years, not only many special and popular articles but also a couple of monographs have been written about it and a number of exhibitions organized abroad. In Czechoslovakia, the Náprstek Muzeum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague presented, in winter 1975—76, an exhibition entitled *Dreams of Ebony*, with the subtitle *Modern Art of the Makonde People*. About sixty modern Makonde wood-carvings, mostly from private collections, were concentrated there. It is just this concentration of a larger number of study materials which has made it possible to pose certain questions connected with the modern Makonde art.

All of this art is a unique phenomenon, at least in the context of the African Continent. We know that it arose more than twenty years ago, in the then British Tanganyika. Members of the Makonde tribe were coming there from Mozambique to work in plantations and, later on, flying en masse in order to escape the despotism of the Portuguese colonial administration as well as war sufferings afflicting their territory as a consequence of the fight for national liberation. Since the moment when specialists had started to treat it, its continuity with the traditional Makonde carving, perhaps the richest art of this sort in the eastern half of Africa, has been looked for. Generally accepted was the thesis that among the Makonde who came from Mozambique, there were also tribal carvers who instructed some of their fellow-countrymen in their art or, better to say, the carving skill, in order to help them achieve easier and more profitable sources of income.

Though it may have been so, in principle, this explanation is not without problems. We know that traditional tribal carvers in Africa did not hand over their knowledge to the other members of the tribe at random, whenever merely asked for. The execution of the profession of a carver was guided by strict ritual rules, the apprenticeship being also subjected to strict ritual and social rules, considerably different in various tribes. It is easy to understand that even these rules became loose at a time of desintegration of the tribe. However, we must feel interested in the way taken by this process in the actual case of the Makonde. It might be possible to find out, by means of field research, a pattern of these changes even today. It would certainly help us to understand more than one problem.

In modern wood-carving initiated by traditional tribal art, we are to expect a response to traditional models, especially the traditional formative codex, i. e. the tribal style. But it is just this response which is rather lacking at the very beginning of modern Makonde carving. In one of the modern genre figures, from the collection of the Náprstek Museum (Fig. 1), we may find classical proportions of traditional African sculptures. This particular figure, perhaps representing an African in a European dress, or even a European (the traditional Makonde tattoo on the face of the statuette need not be decisive, in such a case!), has a disproportionately large head and short pillar-like legs, the latter as if taking over the huge mass of the whole sculpture. Even its symmetric conception and arms loosely hanging down, parted from the trunk and then joining it again, the hands being thrust into the pockets of the jacket — all of these are typical expressions of the traditional art order of Africa. The difficulty results from the fact that this is an isolated sample, at least in Czechoslovak collections (no similar sample from elsewhere having been published) and, moreover, we do not know when and where it originated. It came to Czechoslovakia in the first half of the fifties, at the latest, but it could have been brought before the Second World War as well. We also do not know whether this statue was made in Tanzania or rather in Mozambique itself. Excepting this only known case, the relatedness of modern sculptures with the traditional ones is to be seen but in the above-mentioned characteristic tattooing of the face and the traditional Makonde ornament, the *pelele* labret inserted in the upper lip. Neither of

these phenomena, however, can be conceived of as an element of style, in the exact sense of the word. We know that almost everywhere in Africa, even where the abstraction and style deformation of the traditional sculpture reached their maximum, the tattoo continued to be reproduced quite true to life. The tattoo and the apparent deformation of the face need not thus be expressions of a taken-over art tradition, but merely independent reflections of the changed reality, moreover supported by an effort to comply with the European customer's demand for exotic peculiarities of Africa.

Thus when considering the purely formal artistic aspect of modern Makonde carving, there appears an illogical gap between this branch and the traditional carving. Might the statue preserved in the collection of the Náprstek Museum represent some kind of "missing link" to overarch this gap? And if so, there still remains the question whether it was made in Mozambique already, or as late as after the Tanganyika exodus, and when. The former case would mean that those who were spreading the art of carving among the Makonde in Tanzania were perhaps not traditional carvers in the strict sense of the term, or at least not only them. The process of secularization of carving would have to have taken place in Mozambique already. The latter case would indicate that the modern carving of the Makonde people would have been born in the former Tanganyika, the process most probably taking a longer time than supposed, the fruits of that preceding transitory stage remaining almost unknown. These questions may be answered by another field research, in this case aimed, first of all, at the depositories of world museums which have not yet paid almost any attention to this "decadent" art, for reasons mentioned above.

These questions may appear insignificant, interesting for a couple of specialists only who are not concerned with more important tasks. This is not true, however. As stated already, the Makonde modern carving is an entirely exceptional phenomenon to be found on the artistic map of Africa. Its exceptionality is based on a number of aspects. This is the only case when the production of souvenirs has risen to a veritable art. This emancipation, then, does not concern only a handful of exceptionally gifted individuals but at least a hundred people (in the course of long years, they may have been even thousands in number — this

question also cannot be answered yet, which might be done only after field research again).¹ If we accept the thesis of the autochthonous origin of this art, without any interference of European teachers, artists, missioneries etc., as we know it from other places in the African Continent this is perhaps the oldest case of such an emancipation. E. g., Nigeria's modern art, well-known all over the world today, was born as late as in the sixties, and though having grown up from a much more cultivated soil, it has never become a mass phenomenon, not to speak of the influence of European teachers, patrons etc., which cannot be excluded.

The modern Makonde carving has thus been living for at least thirty or forty years. During this time, it has proved its vitality. It has produced thousands of carvings, the absolute number of which cannot be even estimated. Let us leave aside the fact that there are undoubtedly many products of no artistic significance among them, be it current souvenir goods, senseless imitations or even works inferior in craftsmanship. But even after their elimination, there is still a respectable number of pieces which cannot be denied the character of objects of art. Only a small part of them have remained in the land of their origin, the overwhelming majority having been exported to perhaps all the countries of the world where they may be seen decorating private interiors. The better part of this fund will undoubtedly find its way to the larger art collections, galleries and museums, in the course of time. Such is the natural course of development. Besides we must consider the fact that this carving is no closed chapter but continues to develop and will undoubtedly continue to do so, both in the territory of Tanzania and Mozambique. This is why a serious problem is posed by the way in which these vast materials should be studied. Obviously one cannot apply the usual approach to the traditional tribal carvings of Africa. This art is different by its very substance. Neither can it be approached like European or Asian folk art, the only common feature being its anonymity. It is just this anonymity which constitutes the main problem of the classification of modern Makonde carving. Let us imagine the following model situation: The complete modern art production of a European country from the past twenty-five years is lying in front of our eyes (the number of authors and works being approximately the same). We know the names of about ten artists, a few among them being adorned even by some lively

story, such as that an artist drank himself to death because his production was profitable enough to enable him to do so. Besides, we know a handful of generalities, such as that some artists work in common studios, some have come to the country where they execute their art from somewhere else, or that some (but we do not know which) have yet another profession besides their artistic work, etc. Everything else which we know about the art of this imaginary country had to be read out from the very pieces of art. And this is approximately the situation we are in, as far as the modern Makonde carving is concerned.

The extant writings on the modern Makonde carving, based on a direct study of the problem in question in Tanzania, were arising as early as ten or fifteen years ago (J. A. Stout, M. Shore-Bos, E. Grohs). The authors felt the necessity to classify the materials according to some criteria. Elisabeth Grohs found the starting point in postulating two basic styles, see the *shetani* style and the *jamaa* style. The former included the sculptures thematically drawing from the world of supernatural conceptions, the world of demons and monsters with human bodies and animal heads, with heads of one-eyed Cyclops, dream beings wantonly put together from the individual anatomic components of human bodies, etc. It was the carvings of this kind, called *shetani* with the use of a Swahili word (taken over from Arabic and meaning the devil), which attracted the attention of European and American collectors, because of their formal similarity to some products of modern world sculpture. Mrs. Grohs attributed the *jamaa* style to pillars carved in relief, as if vertically put together from human figures supporting one another, in standing, sitting or climbing postures, with a larger figure jutting out on the top, allegedly representing a tribal or family ancestor. The name of the style is derived from another Swahili word denoting a human collective.

This classification, in principle retained also by the Prague exhibition of the Makonde carvings, was undoubtedly justified at its time, contributing to a first orientation in the vast amount of materials. At the time of its origin already, however, it suffered from some shortcomings. The basic one was the uncritical and wrong use of the term *style*, which has been used for long decades while studying tribal arts. There we speak of a certain tribal style, the substyle of some village, or the personal

style of a known as well as anonymous carver. In all of these cases, the term denotes a set of formal means of expression, mostly taken over traditionally, used by the artist to depict a theme which is mostly traditional, too. At the first sight, it is obvious that the modern Makonde carving is no case of this kind. The vertically arranged human figures supporting one another represent a certain subject but not a style. Another subject are figures of fantastic monsters, perhaps demons, supporting one another. We would have to use some infra-style here, a combination of the *shetani* and *jamaa* styles. In order to cover the rich Makonde materials, a large number of such "styles" would have to be created. Or should we perhaps consider a combination of any vertically arranged figures to constitute the sign of a style? This principle of composition may be called, at a certain moment of development, a mannerism, but not style. In defence of the authors of the original division into the two styles, we have to remember that materials were poorer at their time, their division being able to cover if not all, then at least a substantial part of materials. But many Makonde sculptures are known today, which simply cannot be included in any of the two styles. There are new themes elaborated in a new way, or new ways, respectively, in which also various styles are applied. If we did not know that they were made by Makonde carvers from Tanzania and if the carvings were not made from the uniform material, i. e. black ebony wood with red tint, of the tree *Dalbergia melanoxylon*, we would hardly ever think of these carvings being works of the same authors who had made the sculptures *shetani* and *jamaa*, in the fifties and sixties.

According to my view, the investigation in the modern Makonde carving must proceed in two directions. The first direction must be aimed at the actual personalities of the authors. The classification of the sculptures into "stylistic" or other arbitrarily constructed groups does not say anything about the genesis of the piece in question, its deeper relations to the other contemporary as well as preceding carving production, its contents and artistic quality. Due to the actual situation, this way is difficult to follow, of course. Older materials are scattered all over the world, hardly accessible and, with a few exceptions, anonymous. It is only in the recent years that we may find signatures on some sculptures, but without the knowledge of local conditions and the language,

we are unable to interpret them. The approach to the new works in the process of their origin and their authors is similarly difficult. In the first place, there is the distance of East-African Tanzania from the countries where the study of theoretical problems of fine arts, including the African ones, is concentrated today. But even if ignoring this fundamental obstacle, there are still other ones resulting from the given state of African society. A Makonde carver is no European artist living a cosmopolitan way of life within a narrow intellectual stratum, more or less isolated from the rest of the society. The Makonde carver is an uneducated plantation labourer or farmer experiencing the basic problems of the changing African society of today. His are existential worries how to feed his large family including numerous relatives, carving being one of the means how to achieve this goal. The changed and ever-changing environment, see the young and wolfish city without any historical cultural background as well as problems of a large world replacing tribal traditions and the eternal cycle of the year dominating the life of a farmer in the bush, on the one hand drive him into new and never dreamt-of social and psychological conflicts, on the other offering him the existence of an artist. Without this change, the modern Makonde carving would have never arisen and would not exist at all. It is just the fact of constituting a fruit of these new conditions, which makes it an element of modern art. Thus the necessary communication with the Makonde artist and the necessity of following the process of creation on the spot, during some time, require, besides considerable financial demands and those of time, also suffering some discomfort and overcoming social barriers. It means to overcome the distrust of both the very artists and various middlemen whom these carvers work for. Nevertheless, this is the main way how to proceed considerably towards a better knowledge of the modern Makonde art.

The other main direction of research, closely connected with the preceding one and, in fact, aimed at the same goal from the other side, must be the study of themes, their origin, spread, mutual taking over, etc. By a comparison of works by different carvers elaborating the same theme, we may understand the inner mechanism guiding the creative process of that admirable community of Makonde carvers in Tanzania, or Mozambique, respectively. We have already stated that what had appeared to be

styles, at the beginning, was in fact several subjects, taken over and elaborated by different carvers. During a new elaboration, there usually comes to the fore a different personal style, and, in exceptional cases, even a different hand of the carver, the original theme being further elaborated and changed. The talent of the carver gives rise to the quality of his work. Considering the large number of carvers working for a customer who almost never has a clear view of the whole sum of production, not knowing the contents of the bought piece or the intention of its author, but who simply has to have his "Makonde ebony" in order to show that he had visited East Africa, it is only natural that also much routine and senseless imitation are to be met with. An example may illustrate this problem in the best way. The magazine *Le Courrier* edited by the UNESCO in Paris brought on the back side of the cover of its November issue, 1973, a reproduction of a modern Makonde carving (Fig. 2), obviously of no remote origin. At least, a similar work cannot be found in any of the previous books on the Makonde carving. This is a sculpture as if formed by ribbons, winding and intertwining in gracious curves. In two arches above, formed by these ribbons, two small hemispheres with two bumpy protrusions are inserted, obviously symbolizing the eyes. In the lower half of the sculpture, a human nose is hanged on the noose of a "ribbon," the lower end of the "ribbon" facing the spectator with the whole width turned into a kind of mouth with two teeth in the lower jaw. The whole obviously represents a fantastic human face or rather a head, the bulk of which is demarcated by the curves of the intertwined "ribbons". It depends on the free interpretation of the spectator whether he wants to see enciphered faces, cheek bones etc. in these curves. We do not know the intended contents of this piece, or its author, or the exact time of its origin. We may like it or not, but we shall certainly not doubt the high talent and imagination of its author as well as his carving skill. The only fact we know is that it was made by a Makonde artist, probably at the beginning of the seventies. And we are in a similar situation, whenever we meet a modern Makonde sculpture. During the preparation of the Prague exhibition mentioned above, the reproduced sculpture ceased to be unique in subject. In the private collections imported to Czechoslovakia in the first half of the seventies, there appeared a whole number of sculptures treating the same theme

in a similar way. To make possible a better comparison, we are reproducing three different pictures of the majority, two reproductions being sufficient in two cases, one frontal and the other from the backside. Let us point out only some of the significant details and problems involved. Thus the largest of these sculptures, 67 cm high (Figs. 3a, b, c) is conspicuous by indulging in sharp edges, the curves and strips demarcating its mass being three-edged in diameter. There are three globular "eyes" in sculpture. Naturally, the question arises whether they are eyes at all, or at least all of them. Does not at least some of these forms represent a breast? It may perhaps also be a case of intentional artistic ambiguity. This would be in accord with the fact that these sculptures do not represent only a head, but a whole figure. The lower end of the three-edged strip obviously stands for a leg resting on a hemispherical pedestal. We meet it again in further sculptures (Figs. 5 and 8). Some of the sculptures have also a hand each (Fig. 4 — the hand is expressed by the bifurcated end of the "ribbon" on the left side of the mouth, 5, 9, 10). In some sculptures, even one ear seems to be depicted. Without doubt, we may find it in two statues somewhat deviating from the whole series (Figs. 9 and 10). An ear (rather an animal one) may be, however, represented also by that tongue-shaped form which is to be seen in the sculptures in different places (Figs. 3, 4, 6 and 7) as well as the flat form with a relief spiral, in the Fig. 5c. With the exception of eyes, all the pair organs of the human body are represented but once (perhaps a mannerism surviving from the period of *shetani* monsters). The three globular forms in the sculpture No. 3 may thus represent two eyes (as in the other sculptures) and a breast. This is, however, contradicted by the African artistic tradition. Breasts were never depicted in such a juvenile form, in the African sculpture, because they have never been a symbol of erotics but of fertility here. The African sculptor has also never enciphered sexual phenomena in similar double-meanings; it would contradict the African mentality and morals. However, it may be an effort to comply with the liking of a European customer. This question, however, similarly as many others, cannot be solved in a satisfactory way by speculation but only by field research.

In connection with the significance of the hemispherical eyes, it is necessary to stop at the sculpture No. 8a, b. At the first

sight, this figure might appear to answer our question in an unambiguous way. We may see a pair of hemispheres above, whereas in the lower part, where the other sculptors have placed the mouth and nose, we may see a whole monstrous face with one eye and a strange muzzle, as we know them from many older sculptures called *shetani*. The whole of this sculpture also differs from all the others by the stiffness of its forms and the illogicality of the individual "ribbons". One curve does not continue logically another, as is the case in the other sculptures. Thus it seems to be a senseless imitation, the sculptor having simply copied the individual fashionable forms without even knowing their significance.

In three sculptures (Figs. 5, 7 and perhaps 10), the flat conception is conspicuous. These figures were carved to be viewed from the front only, or from the backside. This is best testified to by the Fig. 5b. Here also, it is difficult to decide whether this was really the free intention of the carver, or whether this particular conception was enforced by the form of the material in question. The field studies published so far teach us that, for economic reasons, carvers often prefer to carve abstract and fantastic figures rather than realistic genre statues, being able, apart from other things, to utilize materials which would have been discarded formerly.

With all of these materials in front of our eyes, we should, of course, try to read, in a speculative way, several things out of them, i. e. the development of the elaboration of materials, the chronology of the origin of the individual sculptures, the mutual dependence of carvers, etc. I doubt it, however, that such proceedings could bring about relevant results, with perhaps the only exception of the sculpture reproduced in the Fig. 8 and perhaps also 9 and 10. The sculptures Nos. 2—7 have a uniform compositional and space conception, in principle (with the comprehensible deviations in Figs. 5 and 7), but they differ in trifling details and the personal style. Only the sculptures Nos. 6 and 7 seem to have originated from one hand. All of them have in common a perfect processing of the surface, all of these carvers having obviously mastered their craft to a high degree. None of the sculptures, as far as we were able to ascertain, was bought directly from its author, all of them having been acquired from a middleman. One of the Prague collectors was able to give the

author of the present article an information gathered from the Dutch mission of White Fathers, viz. that all of the carvings elaborating this subject were made by the members of a single carvers' family settled in the village of Ubunga, some fifteen kilometers from Dar-es-Salaam. This information has not been verified in any way, of course, and even if trustworthy, it does not answer any of the questions concerning the creative process of the Makonde carvers. Even though all of these sculptures, if judged individually and without the knowledge of the answers to these questions, may be acknowledged artistic qualities, we still do not know the main thing: Who is the master and who is the pupil? Who is an artist and who a plagiarator? We shall never know it, without field research on the spot. One of the most important artistic phenomena of modern Africa certainly does deserve it.

Note

¹ This paper was written in August 1976 for a journal which later ceased to be published. Since that time an important article on Modern Makonde Art appeared in *African Arts*, Vol. XIII, No. 3 (Los Angeles 1980): *Patronage and Maconde Carvers* by Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, based on field-research of 1970. It completes the material contained in the literature consulted by me and it elucidates some questions put in the present paper. Above all it estimates the total number of Makonde carvers working at one time in the surroundings of Dar es Salaam as 200 people. Further on the genre figure published here (Fig. 1) may be perhaps assigned (on it's basis) to the early period, when "genre figures of human beings" began to be commissioned.

Consulted literature

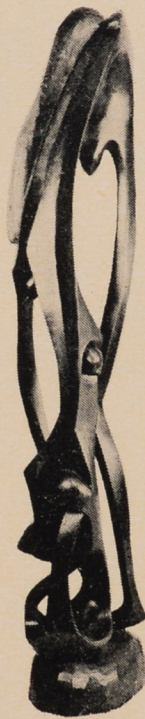
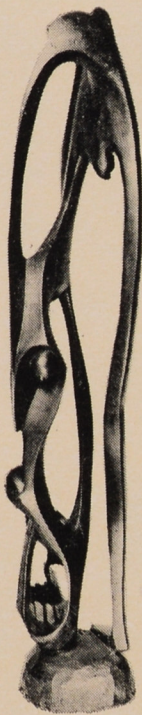
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1/ Collection of the Náprstek Museum,
Praha. h. 29,5 cm



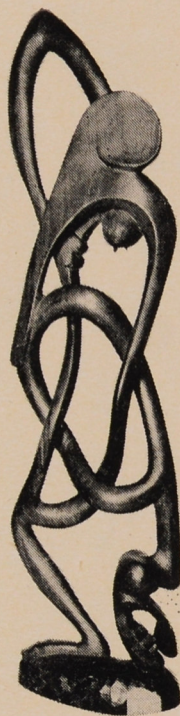
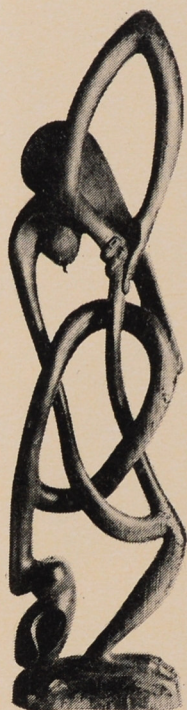
2/ Le Courrier. [UNESCO], Novembre 1973
[XXVI^e année].



3/ Private collection, Praha. h. 67,5 cm

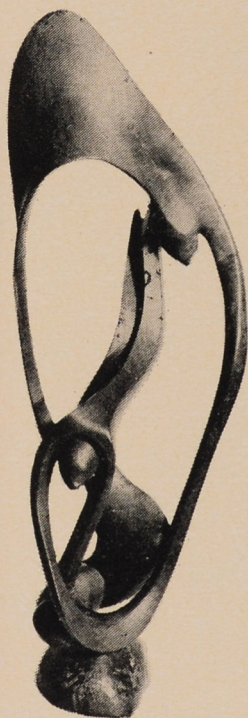
4/ Private collection, Praha. h. 52,6 cm

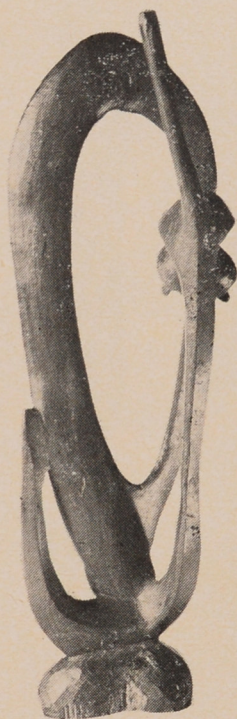
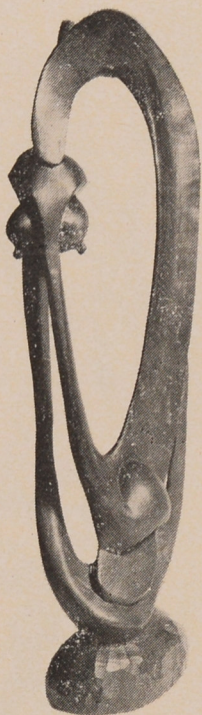




5/ Private collection, Dvůr Králové. h. 60,5 cm

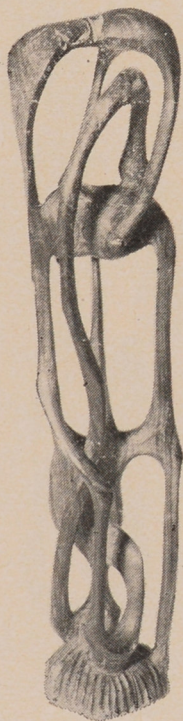
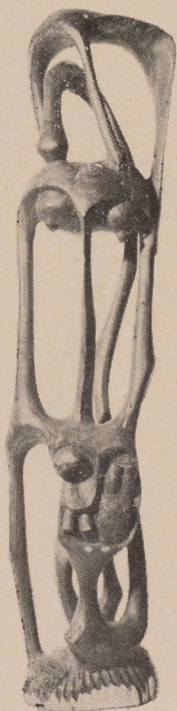
6/ Private collection, Praha. h. 45,2 cm

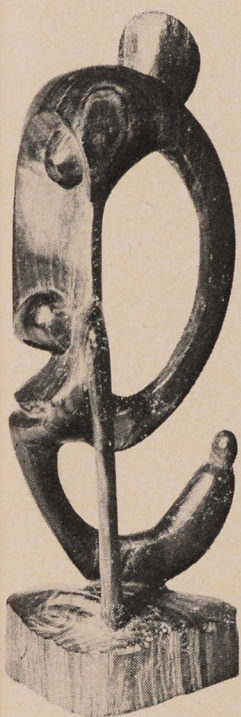




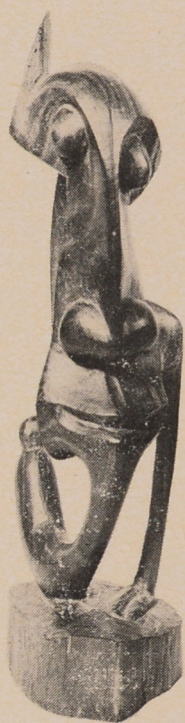
7/ Private collection, Praha. h. 41. cm

8/ Private collection, Brno. h. 49 cm





9/ Private collection, Brno. h. 31 cm



10/ Private collection, Hradec Králové. h. 40 cm.

