



ON THE ORIGIN OF THE AFRICAN
"KNOT OF WISDOM"*

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"Like many other peoples in Africa, the Kuba use a free-standing pattern of guilloche (interlace) in double knot form on a square, called the *imbol*. When it is used on the back of a certain type of mask, however, it indicates a relationship to the king. In other contexts it has no specific meaning."

Jan Vansina, *Art History of Africa*.
London and New York 1984, p. 117

The occurrence of the double-knot called "the knot of wisdom" in Africa has been recently concentrated in two foci. One of them is situated in the Kasai Province of Zaire and the other in the territory of Eastern Ivory Coast and Western Ghana. In other places, the knot appears but seldom and in some cases its occurrence is not documented in a reliable way; some culturally historical connection with one or the other focus mentioned above may almost always be supposed.

In the Kasai focus, the motif of the double-knot is to be found in many ritual woodcarvings of the Bakuba and other

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related peoples of the Bakuba stylistic complex especially of the Bashilele and Bashobwa. We usually meet it on vessels decorated with a carving in low relief. The surface of these vessels is as if covered with a net, the meshes of which are interconnected by conspicuously emphasized loose double-knots.¹ Besides, on a vessel collected by Dr. Hans Himmelheber, the double-knot also appears on its ear (photo No. I).² Perhaps even more frequent is the occurrence of the double-knot in connection with the motif of human hand. The objects on which the motif of human hand appears belonged to the members of the warrior aristocracy called *yolo*. It was because the membership in this organization was conditioned by the seize of an enemy hand. A human hand forms the ending of a handle of a vessel (drawing No. 1)³ or of a vertical drum; the handle itself is carved in the form of a double-string decorated with a doubled or further multiplied knot on which the hand is hanged. In the same way doubled or multiplied knots also decorate handles of ladles,⁴ the cup of which has sometimes again the form of a human hand (drawing No. 2).⁵ On a vessel from the collections of the Náprstek Museum in Prague, Cat. No. 34.424, h. 13 cm (photo No. II), two human hands are carved in relief, again as if attached to a double-string decorated with large double-knots.

Besides objects from the 19th or 20th century, a unique object is available, probably much older in origin and documenting the old tradition of the motif of double-knot among the Bakuba. This is a conventionalized symbolical portrait of the Bakuba king Bom Bosh, kept in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum. According to the oral tradition, Bom Bosh was the 96th *nyimi* of the Bakuba, reigning approximately in 1650—1660. This king who was a famous warrior is characterized in his portrait figure by a drum again decorated with a cut-off human hand. The body of the drum is covered with a system of double-knots, similarly as on the mentioned vessels from more recent days. If William Fagg is right in stating that "there is very little doubt that this is the actual statue made in his (Bom Bosh's) life time",⁶ the tradition of the double-knot motif among the Bakuba is attested more than three centuries ago.

Today's African studies agree in believing that both the idea of portraying their rulers and the conventionalized form of these portraits were taken over by the Bakuba, along with

other cultural phenomena, at the beginning of the 17th century from the regions situated far westwards, in the area of the mouth of the Congo River in the then Congo Kingdom. But we may assume that with the existence of relations between the two regions, the flow of cultural goods was not altogether one-way and some cultural impulses may have been taken over the other way about, i.e. from the east to the west. The motif of the double-knot is undoubtedly a part of a longstanding tradition among the Bakuba. This is testified not so much by the rather uncertain absolute date of the Bom Bosh's portrait, but especially by the broad application of this motif in ritual objects, in various decorative connections. It is perhaps just this supposed influence which may account for the isolated occurrence of the double-knot motif in the northern periphery of the former Congo Kingdom. In the collections of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, for instance, a leather fan with a wooden handle is being kept, allegedly collected among the Okande in Gaboun in 1877.⁷ Its handle ends with a little human head with two faces turned towards the opposite sides (Ianuskopf), the stem of the handle being formed by a double-knot (drawing No. 3). However, the information on the place where this object was collected may not be quite reliable, or the fan may have been brought to the place of collecting from another locality, which is a rather frequent phenomenon with African objects. Fans of this type were a part of the material inventory in a larger area, the centre of their use being certainly situated more southwards, i.e. closer to the centre of the old Congo State, as other documented specimens prove. The motif of the double-knot, sometimes very loose and modified, appears in other specimens as well. Interesting from the artistic point of view is especially a fan of this type included in the collection of Joseph Herman (drawing No. 4), published by William Fagg.⁸ The figure of the forest lemur of the *Galago* species, forming its handle, seems to be nothing else but an ingenious artistic paraphrase of the double-knot. William Fagg tries to find the origin of this undocumented example among the Fang or another tribe from Gaboun or Congo-Brazaville. He supports his theory with the area of the occurrence of the bushbaby, because the figure of the animal is naturalistic and does not present any features of a definite tribal style, which would make a more exact tribal attribu-

tion possible. As already stated, however, this type of fan is characteristic of the region situated further southwards, i.e. in the area of the Lower Congo and the coastal areas of Congo-Brazzaville and Southern Gabon. But we shall hardly ever be able to prove whether there really is any connection between the frequent occurrence of the motif of the double-knot in the Bakuba stylistic complex and its applications, strictly confined to the fan handles in the region in the far west of the Congo Basin.

However, the motif of the double-knot is also interestingly present in North-Eastern Zaire. Among the tribes of this area, there appear arm-rings made of two elephant hairs, again connected with a double-knot, sometimes even multiplied in the same manner as in the Bakuba ladles. As an instance, we may give the arm-ring of the Medje, collected in the twenties by Paul Schebesta and kept at the Náprstek Museum, Cat. No. 8.499 (photo No. III), etc. The presence of the double-knot in this area may be significant, to some degree, for answering the question indicated in the title.

Let us turn our attention to the other focus of the occurrence of this motif in West Africa. Its bearers here are the Akan tribes. In the Ivory Coast, these are the Baule, the motif appearing extraordinarily frequently among the Asante, from whom the Baule became separated as late as in the 18th century. The frequency of its occurrence among the Asante is more than comparable to the situation prevailing among the Zaire Bakuba, but in accordance with local art themes and style. Among the Asante artistic products, especially cast goldweights made of bronze, or, to be more exact, brass, are best known. These are miniature sculptures depicting abstract geometrical forms, various objects of nature, objects of everyday use and figures. One of their very frequent subjects is also the so-called knot of wisdom, rid of any decorative or other function in its relation to another object. Sometimes we may find here several knots of wisdom placed side by side and connected into one whole (drawing No. 5).⁹ Also among the Asante, however, the double-knot occurs in a similar function as in Zaire. An example of outstanding compositional abilities of Asante carvers is, for instance, the ladle preserved in the classical collection of C. Kjersmeier in Denmark (today's National Museum in Copen-

hagen). The handle of the ladle ends with a figure of a bird standing on a typical Asante stool, which is among the insignia of a high political rank in this tribe. A considerable part of the handle is formed by the bodies of two serpents, in the middle connected with a tight double-knot (drawing No. 6).¹⁰ A simpler but very interesting example from the collections of the Náprstek Museum in Prague (Cat. No. 13.050, 1. 42 cm) has a handle treated similarly as the ears of the Bakuba jars (photo No. IV). The carving imitates two double-strings bound together with a tight double-knot. The human hand in which the handle ends is reminiscent of the similar motif in Zaire, but this is obviously a mere coincidence, the meaning of the motif being altogether different; according to the data with which a similarly treated object in the Berlin Museum (drawing No. 7) is provided, this is the so-called royal hand,¹¹ insignia of the first vice-chieftain. The handle of this object is shaped as blacksmith's tongs, the jaws of which are holding a human hand. Both arms of these tongs are connected again, in a surrealist way, with a double-knot, similarly as the handle of the ladle kept at the Náprstek Museum. Some connection of the motif of the double-knot with the royal office is indicated also by the stool of the Asante king Prempeh II, published by Basil Davidson (drawing No. 8).¹² The seat of this *asantahene's* stool is supported by four columns, each decorated in the middle with a "knot of wisdom". According to Basil Davidson they symbolize the king's ability to rule by wisdom and not the strength of the sword.

Although the date of the Asante double-knot is not attested by any document comparable to the date of the Bom Bosh's portrait of the Bakuba, its longstanding tradition in this tribe is testified both by its broad application and its connection with the royal office, similarly as among the Bakuba in a certain case (see J. Vansina). On the other hand, as far as the larger area of West Africa is concerned, an undoubted document of considerable antiquity of this motif may be found in the territory of Burkina Faso (Upper Volta). Annemarie Schweger-Hefel discovered here, during excavations in the Mangao area, an iron arm-ring again decorated with a double-knot (drawing No. 9).¹³ It may be interesting to note that even nowadays similarly decorated arm-rings are produced by the Ghana Asante, too. By a complicated method, the whole find from Mangao was dated to

the beginning of the 14th century as the upper limit, but the author admits the possibility of a much older date. The latter is suggested by the find of beads which are probably of Ancient Egyptian origin.

An eventual recent occurrence of this motif among other ethnic components of this part of West Africa might be considered to be either a result of the Akan cultural influence or a residue of the cultural radiation from the area of the Sudan from which it could have been taken over, in older times, by the ancestors of the Asante and other tribes. It is necessary to mention, in this context, the recently published heddle pulley, allegedly originated among the Kulango in the Ivory Coast (drawing No. 10).¹⁴ The Catalogue ascribes this obviously undocumented object to the Kulango, probably on the ground of the half-moon symbol which is known from the masks of the Kulango and Nafana in the northern border area between the Ivory Coast and Ghana. As far as I know, this would be an isolated case; the provenance of this object seems to be better looked for among the Akan Baule who are renowned producers of heddle pulleys and among whom the double-knot motif is not at all extraordinary. If this object was really obtained among the Kulango, the possibility of its import from the south cannot be excluded.

While following the occurrence of the motif of the double-knot in Africa south from Sahara, yet another old cultural centre must be considered. This is Igbo-Ukwu in Eastern Nigeria. In 1959, Thurstan Shaw excavated here a famous and repeatedly reproduced bronze vessel¹⁵ standing on an open-work leg, the vessel being as if wrapped around by a metal net with a system of meshes emphasized by means of double-knots. The find was dated to the 8th century, by the C 14 method. When looking at this masterly piece of art of casting, one cannot help remembering the vessels and drums from Zaire, on which exactly the same type of covering is indicated in relief carving. The fact that the bronze vessel from Igbo-Ukwu obviously served cult purposes points not only to formal relations but also to the functional ones. However, in Igbo-Ukwu also other bronze objects were found, on which a simple knot appears, but is used in a function comparable to that of the double-knot in similar objects from

the two above-mentioned foci of the occurrence of this motif in Black Africa. This is again a number of arm-rings¹⁶ and especially a copper fan-holder, in the middle decorated with a simple but decoratively loosened knot (drawing No. 11).¹⁷ Neither in this case can we resist remembering the Asante insignia decorated with double-knots. But as far as I know, the motif of both the simple and the double knot has no continuation in the recent cultures of Nigeria.

Along with numerous documents of the historical as well as recent use of the motif of the double-knot or "the knot of wisdom", the two finds in Burkina Faso and Nigeria testify to the fact that this motif is not sporadic in Africa. Obviously it was formerly spread in larger or other areas than in the 19th and 20th centuries, i.e. the period offering large amounts of ethnographic documents. Thus we are justified to suppose mutual relations even between rather distant areas of the occurrence of this motif. The simultaneous find of the arm-ring provided with the double-knot and the imported ancient Egyptian beads in Burkina Faso suggests that the origin of this motif may perhaps be looked for directly in Ancient Egyptian culture. As a matter of fact, this motif was very frequent in Ancient Egypt since the oldest days already.

In Ancient Egypt the double-knot undoubtedly had magic and symbolic meaning. This is suggested for instance, by the find of two "knot-amulets" made of golden sheets (drawing No. 12), which were placed on both sides of the chest of Tutankhamun's mummy (XVIIIth Dynasty, 1347—1339 B. C.).¹⁸ Again we find here a double-knot rid of its primary binding function, used for a secondary purpose. The origin of Tutankhamun's "knot-amulets" can be traced back to the 4th millenium. On one of the oldest Ancient Egyptian art objects, the so-called pallet of the king Narmer of the Ist Dynasty, from about 3200 B.C., this ruler is portrayed in relief, clad in a short robe which is drawn over his left shoulder. Both ends are bound together with a double-knot on the left side of his chest. This archaic way of fastening the garment then appears practically during the whole period of the existence of the Ancient Egyptian state on ceremonial attires as well as wherever the old tradition was to be demonstrated. It is often used in the period of the IVth and especially Vth

Dynasties. E.g., the dress of the goddess Hathor from the temple of the king Sahure in Saqqara, from the beginning of the Vth Dynasty, i.e. around 2500 B.C., is attached in the same way as Narmer's robe in his old relief (photo No. V).¹⁹ But even in the 8th century B.C., an exact analogue of Narmer's robe appears on the stele of the king Iuput from the XXVth Dynasty.²⁰ The position of the "knot-amulets" on the chest of Tutankhamun's mummy must probably be interpreted in this context.

But on a number of male figures approximately from the middle of the 3rd millenium, e.g. the well-known statue of the Pontiff Ranefer, a new vogue appears. Men wear only short skirts reaching above the knees, whereas the upper part of the body is completely uncovered. Nevertheless, we again meet here the double-knot which moved from the shoulders to the centre of the skirt's waist (drawing No. 13). This is a double-knot exactly similar to those which we know, e.g., from the ears of the Bakuba jars or the handles of Asante ladles. The binding function has probably disappeared here, because skirts of that type to be seen on the figures from later times were able to do without them. Also on later female statues, the double-knot appears in other places than under the shoulder, where it was placed in the relief of the goddess Hathor. With this knot, for instance, the ends of a shoulder cover are asymmetrically bound together under one breast.²²

Objection could be raised that the double-knot on the archaic Ancient Egyptian garments was functional and that a double-knot is the most simple way of binding two loose ends of a garment together, so that in the mentioned cases, we cannot speak about a special artistic motif like in those from sub-Saharan Africa. But this is not right. One thing is apparent in the Narmer's relief already as well as in almost all Ancient Egyptian documents of this motif, viz. that the two loose ends of the string *behind* the knot are not visible. This means that this is in fact not the case of a double-*knot*, in the proper sense of the word, but two doubled strings fixed with a double-*loop*. And in those cases where exceptionally a real double-knot is represented, this knot is treated in such a way as to evoke the idea of such a double-loop. This form of the double-knot can be found, e.g., in heraldic plants of Lower and Upper Egypt depicted in a relief decorating the throne of the statue of the sitting Pharaoh Chephren from

the time of the IVth Dynasty already (drawing No. 14). This is a symbol of the unification of Lower and Upper Egypt into a single state.

Let us now return to the two golden "knot-amulets" of Tutan-khamun. There can hardly be any doubt that they are derived from the iconographically documented archaic way of fastening the garment. This is testified to by their position on the Pharaoh's mummy. They may seem to have had but an entirely decorative function at the time of the XVIIIth Dynasty. This, however, is contradicted by the fact that at the time of the same dynasty, double-knots currently appear also as a part of necklaces (drawing No. 15),²³ so that they were probably assigned rather the significance of protective amulets.

It is perhaps needless to remind the reader that all peoples, including the European ones, were assigning a magical significance to the knots, though also a decorative function cannot be excluded even in the case of the oldest mentioned Egyptian examples. But the fact that, when binding the garment which was to protect their bodies, the Egyptians, instead of a single knot, preferred a double-loop, the ends of which were, obviously with intention, hidden from the eyes of not only people but especially spirits, so that they could not unbind them in order to harm the body, seems to suggest that reasons of the origin of this seemingly purposeless element must be looked for just in the field of this naive argumentation typical of the magic way of thinking. In other words, the double-knot or, to be more exact, the double-loop was probably, from the very beginning assigned a magic protective significance, which may account for the spread of this motif in further regions of the continent, too.

The eventual spread of the double-knot motif from Egypt to the area of West Africa may be suggested by the common find of Ancient Egyptian beads and the iron bracelet with a double-knot in Burkina Faso. The spread of this motif to the area of the Congo Basin, then, may with right be attributed to the ruling stratum of the Bakuba, who, according to the local tradition, had come to Zaire just from the basin of the Nile. During this migration to their present settlements, the Bakuba may have given over the motif of the double-knot to other tribes of North-Eastern Zaire, among whom it occurs in a less conspicuous form on the arm-rings made of elephant hair. This theory might explain

the origin of all known cases of occurrence of the double-knot motif or, to be more exact, the double-loop in Africa. Further progress of African archaeology may — but not necessarily — support this theory with new facts.

Notes

- 1 See, e. g., *Le Miroir du Congo Belge*, Vol. II., p. 234. Brussels 1929; E. v. Sydow, *Afrikanische Plastik*, Pl. 79C, Berlin 1954.
- 2 Published in Hans Himmelheber's *Negerkunst und Negerkünstler*, Pl. 284. Braunschweig 1960. In this place, I would like to thank Dr. H. Himmelheber for sending me the photographs.
- 3 Elsy Leuzinger, *Afrikanische Skulpturen. Beschreibender Katalog*, p. 221—2, No. 168. Museum Rietberg Zürich 1963 (Bakuba-Bashilele, H. 15 cm).
- 4 See, e. g., *Le Miroir du Congo Belge*, Vol. II, p. 230, or H. Himmelheber, *op. cit.*, Pl. 295.
- 5 Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, Cat. No. III C 19623, H. 45,5 cm, according to Kurt Krieger, *Westafrikanische Plastik*, Vol. III, Pl. 221, Berlin 1969.
- 6 William Fagg, *African Sculpture*. National Gallery of Art. The International Exhibition Foundation 1970, p. 33.
- 7 Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, Cat. No. III C 1128, H. 38 cm, according to K. Krieger, *op. cit.*, Pl. 135.
- 8 William Fagg, *Miniature Carvings of Africa*, p. 52. Greenwich, Connecticut 1970.
- 9 Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, according to Brigitte Menzel, *Goldgewichte aus Ghana*, Pl. 1164. Berlin 1968.
- 10 See Carl Kjersmeier, *Centres de style de la sculpture africaine*, Vol. II, Pl. 9, Paris 1936.
- 11 Kurt Krieger, *Westafrikanische Plastik*, Vol. II, Pl. 44, Berlin 1969.
- 12 Basil Davidson, *Africa. A History of a Continent*, p. 232. London 1966.
- 13 Annemarie Schweger-Hefel, *Frühhistorische Bodenfunde im Raum von Mengao (Ober-Volta)*, p. 14. Wien 1965.
- 14 Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer München. 109. Auktion Afrika-Ozeanien, p. 44, No. 193. München 1986.
- 15 Thurstan Shaw, *Igbo-Ukwu*. Vol. II, Pl. 196—8. Evanston 1970.
- 16 *Ibid.*, Pl. 313—316; 322.
- 17 *Ibid.*, Pl. 368.
- 18 Howard Carter, *The Tomb of Tut-ankh-amen*. Vol. II, p. 122. London 1927. ("On either side, parallel with the right and left arm, was a gold amuletic knot of unknown meaning.")

- 19 Photo from Egyptian Mythology, p. 75. Paul Hamlyn.
London 1966.
- 20 E. g., Flinders Petrie, The Making of Egypt, Pl. LXXXI,
London 1939.
- 21 E. g., Edward L. B. Terrace and Henry C. Fischer,
Treasures of the Cairo Museum, p. 59. London 1970.
- 22 See Walley-el-dine Sameh, Alltag im alten Ägypten,
p. 85. München 1983.
- 23 According to The Art of Ancient Egypt. Introduction
by Hermann Ranke, Pl. 329. Wien 1936.

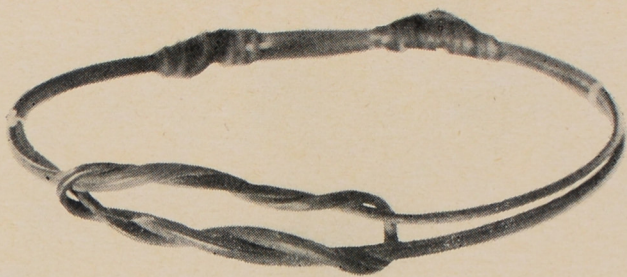


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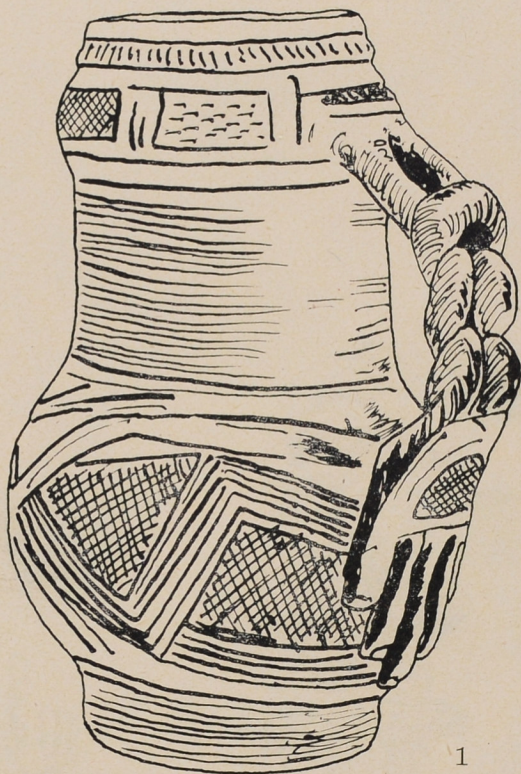
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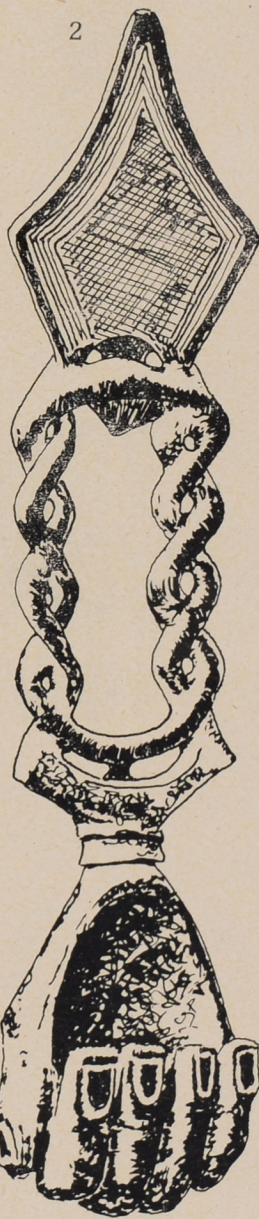
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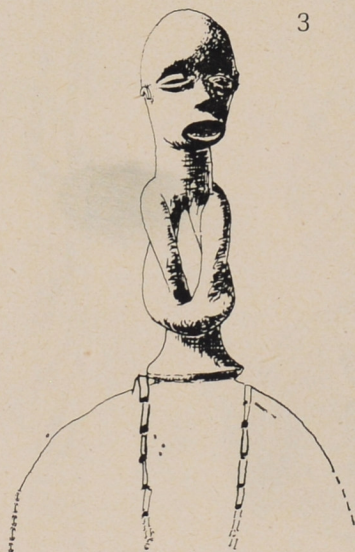




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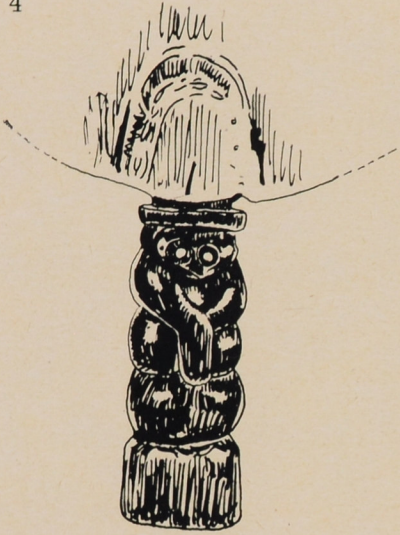


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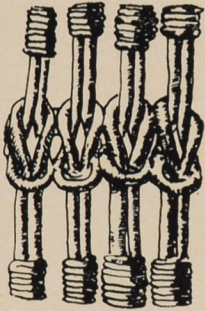


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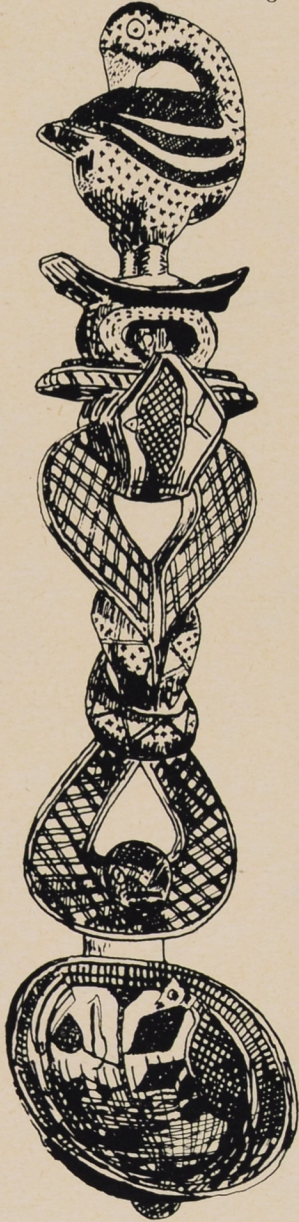
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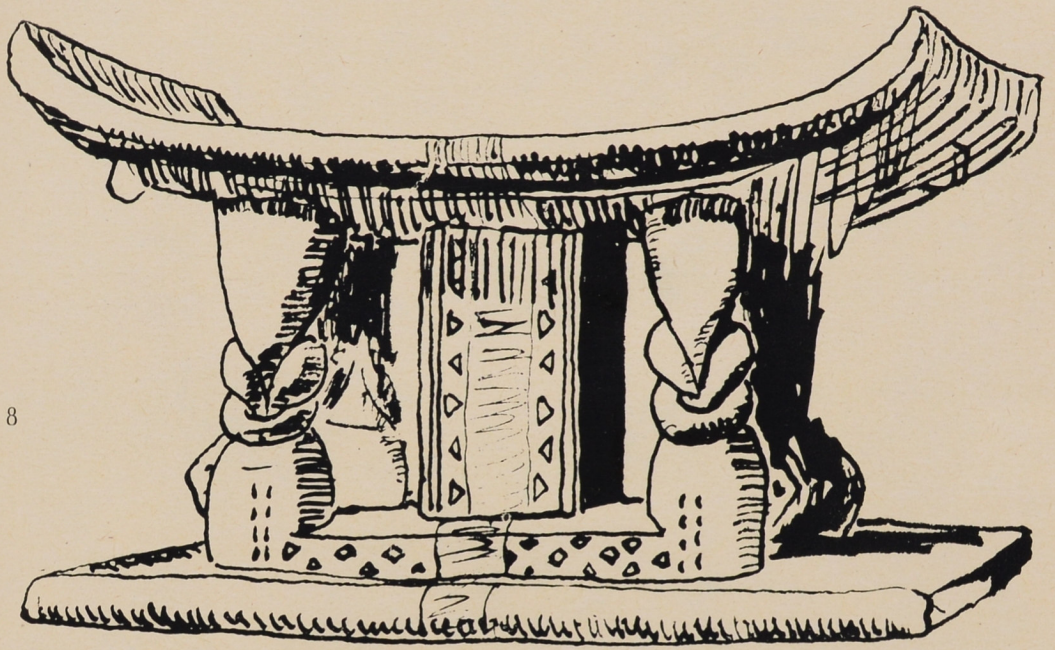


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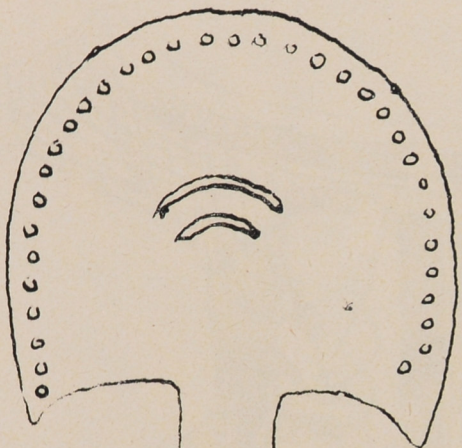
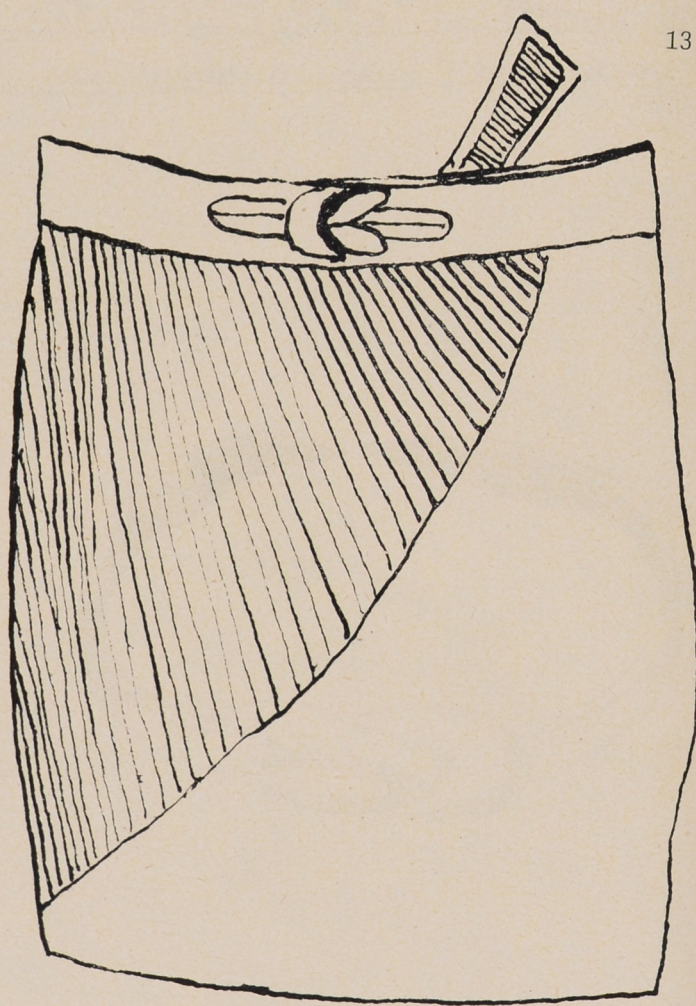
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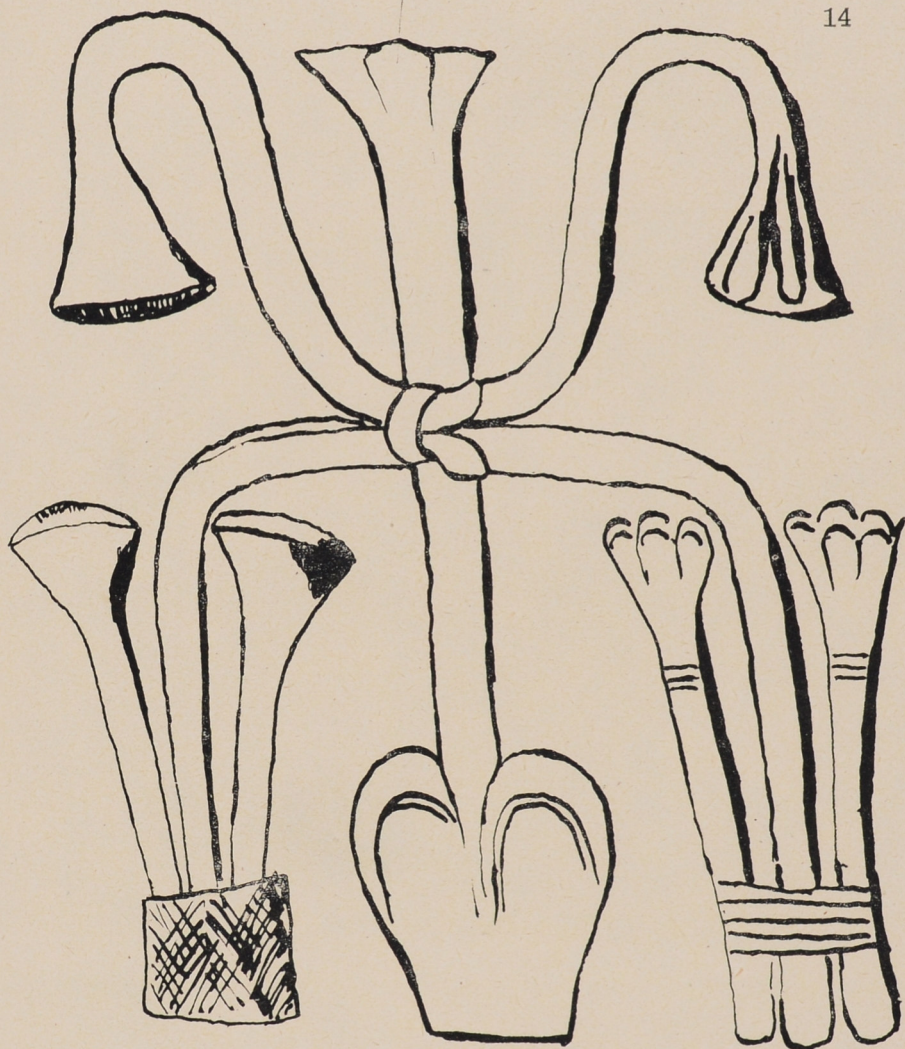
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