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DIPLOMATIC GIFTS AS EXPRESSION OF THE COLONIAL TRAUMA. STORIES OF AFRICAN WOODEN AND IVORY SCULPTURES

Abstract: This article offers an analysis of a series of diplomatic gifts of African origin, part of the “Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu Collection” of the ASTRA National Museum Complex in Sibiu, Romania, from the perspective of their capacity of evoking the trauma of the colonial oppression, in an international context. While the collection includes a high variety of objects, of different types and origins, this study will focus on a selection of black wood and ivory sculptures which explicitly refer to catastrophic aspects of the colonialist encounter, such as war and slavery, and belong to a particular kind of political objects offered by African leaders to their counterparts throughout the second half of the 20th century. Although the objects derive from the colonial interaction and may seem, at first sight, an alienation of local artistic traditions, made for an external audience, so as to satisfy foreign tastes and expectations, I argue for understanding them as expressions of the catastrophic realities of the colonial oppression, which belong to the local culture and serve two main purposes. Firstly, they act as parts of a form of cultural resistance, as commentaries upon the endured violence and humiliation. Secondly, they serve as political messages for an external audience, meant to raise sympathy and support for the cause of the people’s liberation. The conceptual framework of performativity and cultural performance, as explained by anthropologist Victor Turner provides an understanding of the way in which social conflicts are memorized and communicated in artistic forms, while the works of Africanists such as Bennetta Jules-Rosette, Harry G. West and Nichole Bridges offer an overview of the aesthetics and functions of African sculpture as objects of communication, throughout the colonial and post-colonial eras. Comparative studies, referring to the contributions of Alexandre Girard-Muscagorry and Alexander Bortolot, provide concrete example of African sculptures being offered to several state leaders in diplomatic context, hereby offering valuable

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insights for the interpretation of similar objects in the “Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu” collection.

Keywords: *diplomatic gifts; African sculpture; colonialism; cultural performance; museum collections; Nicolae Ceaușescu.*

Interpreting and classifying diplomatic gifts of African origin

After the fall of the Romanian communist regime, a part of the diplomatic gifts received by the Ceaușescu couple which were in the custody of the National History Museum, were transferred to the Franz Binder Museum, part of the ASTRA National Museum Complex, as a manner of distancing the collection from the communist past and placing it in a more neutral context, as part of the collection of a universal ethnography museum. In 2018, a selection of the objects was featured in the “Gifts from the Golden Age” temporary exhibition, on display at the Franz Binder Universal Ethnography Museum. The exhibition narrative did not provide details regarding the significance of the objects in their culture of origin, or their intended message as diplomatic gifts, but it did place them in their original context, after several decades in which the artifacts have been exhibited as parts of ethnographic exhibitions or have not been exhibited at all.

The acts of interpreting African origin diplomatic gifts, classifying and exhibiting them in the most appropriate context raise a series of questions and conceptual tensions, related to their nature and provenance, which have been encountered by museum specialists throughout the 20th and into the 21st century. As a telling example, French researcher Alexandre Girrard-Muscagorry explains the difficulties posed by the integration of a set of regalia objects received by French president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing into the collection of the National Museum of Arts of Africa and Oceania (Girrard-Muscagorry 13). The set, received by the French president during his visit to the Ivory Coast in 1978, consisted of several handcrafted objects associated to Akan chieftaincy, with high relevance and evoking power in their culture of origin but which, in view of the museum curators, hardly met the criteria of antiquity and authenticity applicable to ethnographic objects, or those of value and craftsmanship which would have made them suitable for an arts museum. Girrard-Muscagorry also offers examples of other attempts of reconversion of artifacts, from diplomatic gifts to ethnographic objects, including an Ethiopian ceremony costume, which has been featured in the *Ethiopia of today. The land and the men* exhibition, on display at the *Musee de l’Homme*

in 1975, and exhibited as an example of the Ethiopian mastery of crafts, rather than as an illustration of the long history of Ethiopia's diplomatic relations with Europe (13). Girrard-Muscagorry shows that such acts of assigning diplomatic gifts to ethnographic collections, as it was also the case for the Ivorian set of Akan regalia, may be perceived as a recognition of the objects' aesthetic and cultural worth, but suggests that their value should rather be assessed from a different perspective, explaining that "for the givers, diplomatic gifts are often a privileged medium for evoking their personal history, their political path, or their artistic tastes." (7).

The *Ujamaa* style sculpture offered by Samora Machel, president of the FRELIMO party (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*) and of Mozambique, to Kim Il Sung, head of state of the Democratic Republic of Korea, is illustrative for the use of diplomatic gifts as a political statement and as an expression of a nation's experience of recent history. In December 1974, Samora Machel, a promoter of the socialist cause for Mozambique, led by Marxist-Leninist views, visited five socialist countries – the German Democratic Republic, the Socialist Republic of Romania, the Socialist Republic of Bulgaria, the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea – in order to tighten collaboration relationships and to gain increased support for the independence of his country. As a picture published in Issue no. 61 of the *Mozambique Revolution* magazine shows, during his visit to North Korea, Samora Machel presented Kim Il Sung a blackwood tower-like sculpture, measuring over a meter ("Stronger links with socialist countries" 3). The *Ujamaa* sculptures, as anthropologist Harry G. West explains, derive from the Makonde sculptural traditions, manifest in Tanzania, Mozambique and Kenya, and were "prominent among the stylistic innovations supported by the FRELIMO patronage" (West 46). Starting with the mid 1960's, Makonde sculptors, organized in cooperatives by FRELIMO, produced sculptures illustrating, among others, the hardship of the colonial oppression, which would often be marketed internationally and "drew attention and sympathy to the Mozambican Nationalist Cause", while "those expressing opposition to Portuguese rule would become images of popular resistance and, eventually, part of a Mozambican national consciousness." (West 36). As West points out, The *Ujamaa* sculptures, deriving their name from the Swahili word for "family", which was also often used to designate African socialism, were "intended to symbolize national unity and reflected the politics of the time." (36). The structure of entwined bodies, often sustaining a larger, prominent figure, which defines the *Ujamaa* towers, constitutes an illustration of the burden of colonialism and the struggle against it.

Other *Ujamaa* style sculptures, which express variations of the same theme, can also be found in the Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu collection of the ASTRA National Museum Complex (Inv. No 1384, 1386, 1387). Representing different aspects of the fight against colonialism, they all serve the same purpose – to communicate about the trauma of colonialism, to express the people’s adhesion to the socialist cause and to raise support and sympathy in the fight for independence. Along with other objects from the collection, they will be explained and analysed throughout this article, from the perspective of their message-bearing capacity as diplomatic gifts.

The colonial encounter and the messages of African sculptures

Since the earliest encounters between Europeans and the inhabitants of Sub-Saharan Africa, the sculptures resulted from the skill of the local artisans have been described and presented to European audiences in a variety of perspectives, and have been referred to “primitive art”, as fetishes used in magic rituals, or even as complex works, similar to European high art, following the new ideas introduced by Carl Einstein’s work on “negro sculpture”. Contemporary scholars, such as Suzanne Vogel, have rejected the term “primitive art”, stating that African art is not „an older ancestral version of Western art, lagging behind on the evolutionary scale” (6) and suggesting, instead, that „like much of the world’s art, African art is conceptual” (9) and it therefore represents a deliberate commentary upon reality, rather than an attempt of realistic reproduction. Other researchers, focusing on the study of the „Afro-Portuguese Ivories” such as Kathy Curnow, referred to their objects of study as „hybrid art” (4), developed by effect of repetitive and close contacts between locals and Europeans. The term of art itself, was, however, also put into question, by thinkers such as V.Y. Mundimbe, stating that “what is called African Art covers a wide range of objects introduced into a historicizing perspective of European values since the eighteenth century. These various «objects» which, perhaps, were not art at all, became art by being given, simultaneously, an aesthetic character and a potentiality for producing and possibly reproducing artistic forms.” (4).

However, regardless of their relation to the concept of art, the most relevant aspect of African artifacts in the context of diplomatic gifts is their narrative potential, as explained by Benetta Jules-Rosette, who states that “African art is an object of exchange and communication and, as such, is an important vehicle for

examining cultural change. Although popular graphic arts do not involve the same order of didactic and dramatic display as do theatre and oratory, they do contain a performative element. Each object is like an utterance – a communication between producers and consumers both within and across cultures.” (217). Jules-Rosette argues that an object emerged from the mechanics of souvenir market, as in the case of Makonde sculpture, should not be seen merely as a simplified and reductive versions of “true” African art, but as a new medium with its own language and aesthetics, while also pointing out that their meaning essentially belongs to the logic of representation and communication.

African sculptures featuring human characters caught in precise actions, often related to a more complex narrative context, are, based on their performative character, suitable to be interpreted in a perspective similar to that applied to other performative cultural structures, as Jules-Rosette’s argument implies. As narrative expressions, commentaries and representations of a given social situation, the sculptures of this kind – which includes, but is not limited to, black wood Makonde sculpture and incusted ivory – can be seen as serving the same purpose which anthropologist Victor Turner attributes to cultural performances, to the point to which they could themselves be regarded as cultural performances. Victor Turner refers to ritual, but also to oral and literary narrative as forms of cultural performance, while also pointing out that “there is an interdependent, perhaps dialectic relationship between social dramas and genres of cultural performances in perhaps all societies.” (153). Social dramas, regarded as antagonizing situations occurring in social groups, generate symbolic types in the form of “traitors, renegades, villains martyrs, heroes, faithfuls, infidels, deceivers, scape-goats” (Turner 155) which are memorized and perpetuated within the group, by power of cultural performances.

Although the authorship of the cultural performances is usually attributed to those who come out as “winners” of the social dramas, or, at least, the content of the cultural performances tends to be dominated by the version of the story promoted by the party which has the upper hand, in the case of the African sculpture which illustrate the encounters between locals and Europeans, the narratives represented in the artifacts involve a high degree of participation and agency on the side of the oppressed. Nichole Bridges explains that Loango Ivories, which developed in the 15th and 16th century, under the effect of intense interaction between the locals and the Portuguese traders, and illustrate commercial activities or aspect of daily life, often include scenes of violence and oppression against

Africans, such as chained captives or porters carrying foreign officials in palanquins (Bridges 54, 62). In most of the cases, such objects, which are to be regarded as a form of hybrid art, were commissioned by the Portuguese travellers, as souvenirs or as gifts to the royal courts, and were the result of European stories translated into a sculptural language which combined African and European aesthetics. However, Bridges argues that “Loango coast ivory carvers expressed subversive criticism through selected imagery, making Loango ivories elaborate forms of political disguise that use both elementary and elaborate methods.” (64) The “colonial hybrids”, resulted from the interaction of the colonizer and the colonized are, consequently to be seen not as a victory of the former, but as a form of resistance of the latter, and even though the imagery depicting oppression and physical violence against the locals “may have fulfilled Western narcissism, the same imagery may also capture the artists’ cool gaze or protest against catastrophic social realities.” (Bridges 64)

Makonde black wood sculptures, which also emerged as a result of the souvenir and curio market and usually illustrated an idyllic perspective over life in Africa, so as to meet the demands and tastes of European commissioners, gradually changed their content, throughout the 19th and the 20th century, so as to express the sufferance of the people at the hand of the colonial oppressor, as the quality of life of the locals kept depreciating. The typical scenes of the *binadamu* style, featuring villagers at work, praying or enjoying life, were replaced by a new series of scenes, such as the punishment of slaves or various illustrations of the burden of colonialism, which gained in prominence as the struggle for independence took shape. Historian Edward Alpers explains that “one of the most important popular expressions of the resistance to the brutality and humiliation of colonialism in Mozambique was cultural” (143) and that wooden sculpture, along with song, music and dance, stories and proverbs, acted as forms of protest. Stranger to the nuances of the local culture, the Europeans did not grasp the intentions of mockery behind the sculptures and, as Michael Stephen remarks, they even “appreciated the apparently subordinate attitude of the figures they carved.” (110)

However, far from being merely representations of various fragments of a violent and humiliating reality, expressing an apparently subordinate attitude, the wooden carvings played a subtle role in a particular form of cultural resistance which contributed to the maintenance of the locals’ identity in the face of the dehumanizing colonial oppression and eventually provided ideological resources for

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the struggle for liberation. Edward Alpers identified three levels on which African cultural expressions acted as forms of resistance, with the “process of diagnosis” (144) being the first one. Following the principles of cultural performances, as explained by Victor Turner, the wooden carvings show who the villains are and who the victims are, in a reflective act of identification and assignment of roles, which brings, in front of the people, in a narrative and expressive form, what it is that they should fight against. The Portuguese officials, the *cipaio* (local soldiers working for the colonial administration), the plantation owners and other enforcing agents of the colonial system became symbolic types represented in the scenes of the wooden sculptures, disfigured and mocked so as to better express the evil of their acts. The function of the sculptures as cultural performances hereby goes beyond that of memorizing the unfolding and outcome of a conflict and gains an active component, as commentaries upon the present, which require a response in the present.

The process which turned the realistic African sculptures from a medium meant to represent the European perspectives and biases, into a medium used by the locals to express their own experience of the colonial encounter, could, therefore, be seen as the emergence of a counter – narrative to that of the colonial imperialism, expressed and actualized in a figurative form, which had significant impact on both internal and external audiences. Internally, the stories expressed by the Makonde sculpture, regarded as cultural performances resulted directly from the colonial conflict, were recuperated into the narratives of resistance and, eventually, into the post-colonial national narrative. As Alpers explains referring to the case of Mozambique

for the Africans, then, cultural expressions of protest and resistance provided a bond of solidarity with the members of that culture, as victims of the colonial rule...And although it is important to recognize that these artistic expressions did not give rise to an immediate national conscience ...they created a tradition of popular resistance which eventually became part of such a consciousness when the liberation struggle began in earnest of 1962. (144)

A picture of an Ujamaa style sculpture from the National Museum of Art in Maputo, published in the 1978 issue of the *Tempo* magazine (qtd. by Bortolot, ch. 10) is a telling example of the integration of the Makonde sculpture into the

Mozambican national narrative. The sculpture features several tangled human bodies, supporting each other and holding several objects used in various pursuits, with a notable figure holding a gun, in the upper register, while the caption reads “*As ideias que as mãos conseguem / de uma vida que o povo tem*” – (“The ideas that the hands obtain/ of a life that the people have”).

In what concerns the external audience, the stories of the wooden sculptures could be seen as counter-narratives to the colonialist discourse, distributed on an international political stage, so as to relate to the analogous socialist discourses against imperialism. Pointing to the hardship of the people’s struggle and sacrifice for freedom, the offering of these sculptures as diplomatic gifts may be regarded as statements of their nation’s valour, worth and legitimacy, made by the ones who offer them. As a Makonde artist, who worked under the FRELIMO patronage during the independence war explains “all art works that showed the action of war or the suffering of the people were meant for the nations and organizations that supported the struggle for liberation.” (Bortolot, ch. 10)

Sculptures from the “Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu” collection. Making sense of diplomatic gifts.

The “Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu” Collection of diplomatic gifts, currently in the custody of the ASTRA National Museum Complex in Sibiu, Romania, features several black wood sculptures in the style of Modern Makonde, originating, according to the museum’s registry, from Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. The sculptures illustrate, to a different degree, the hardships of the colonial oppression suffered by the respective populations. The artifacts can be as simple as that representing a local women worker breastfeeding a child while carrying a heavy load, which makes her body collapse, in front of a dominant male figure (Inv. no. 1734), or as complex as the two large *Ujamaa* sculptures, one originating from Tanzania and featuring a woman with a tattooed face holding a baby, while other smaller figures holding elements of modern and traditional material culture attach to her body (Inv. No. 1387), and the other one originating from Kenya (Inv. No. 1384, see figure 2), featuring several small intertwined bodies and a larger male figure, holding an axe and a bunch of bananas, which, according to the metal plate attached to its support, was offered by president Daniel arap Moi, in his 1987 visit to Romania. Apart from the black wood sculptures, the collection also includes other objects illustrating the trauma

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of the colonial encounter and the struggle for liberation, such as an ivory carving, depicting scenes of war and massacre, involving military and civilian population alike, armed with machine guns and machetes (Inv. no. 1723, see figure 3). Based on the presence of the MPLA's flag (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*), the subject of the scenes could be identified as the Angolan War of Independence. While scenes of violence and oppression against local population are a frequent presence on earlier ivory carvings, such as in the case of the Afro - Portuguese Kongo Ivories, representations a 20th century conflict, along with its respective material culture (e.g. modern uniforms and machine guns) are rather uncommon, offering the artifact in question a high degree of specificity as a diplomatic gift.

Since neither the museum registry, nor the labels in the "Gifts from the golden Age" exhibition provided details regarding the circumstances in which the objects were received or the message they were meant to convey, the interpretation of the artifacts relies on additional sources, such as articles from the *Scânteia* newspaper accounting Ceaușescu's "friendships visits", photographic albums from the Romanian National Archives, illustrating the highlights of each visit abroad, or articles which discuss similar objects with political connotations from other collections.

The sculpture featuring two natives carrying a colonist, with the formers reproduced in black wood, and the latter in ivory, so as to highlight the difference in colour (Inv. No. 1762, see figure 1), which, according to the museum's registry, originates from Tanzania, finds a counterpart in a Mozambican sculpture described by Alexander Bortolot (ch.10), and seems to be part of a typical scene of the FRELIMO promoted modern Makonde sculpture, showing an extract of the colonial oppression. The naturalistic body proportions are adapted to the European sculptural standards, leaving out the enlargements and exaggerations, which were commonly used in Makonde sculpture to emphasize different traits of the characters, while the entire composition is rather austere, omitting details such as the tattoos typically found on the figures of the locals.

This simplifying approach to the sculpture indicates a focus on the clarity of the message, on the narrative aspect of the object and on the relationship between the characters, which ultimately expresses the humiliation and suffering of the locals at the hands of the colonial oppressors. The white character's relaxed while also defying attitude, smoking a cigar at the shade of the palanquin, contrasts with the tense posture of the porters, with the bent knees and the leaning head of the leader expressing pain and effort. Bortolot's description of the Mozambican

sculpture featured on the back cover of the 45th issue of the *Mozambique Revolution Magazine* is highly applicable to the sculpture in the Ceaușescu collection, with slight exceptions given by the fact that the former figure rests closer to the typical Makonde aesthetics and expressivity:

Materials and scale are employed to contrast the hard work of the bearers to the leisure of their passenger ...The casualness of his position, with both legs dangling limply from the sling, as well as the shade that protects him from the heat of the sun overhead, is juxtaposed to the stooped, straining bodies of the men who carry him. The slitted eyes of the leader convey a sense of fatigue, while the gesture of his arm, reaching outward for balance or to brush aside vegetation obstructing his path, communicates the work involved in bearing this human load. (Bortolot, ch. 10)

It is also noteworthy that, apart from its self-explanatory figurative meaning, the object can also be read as a metaphor of the entire oppressive colonial system, pushing on the shoulders of the locals, a connotation which becomes all the more significant when the object is offered as a political gift to a leader with socialist affiliations.

Other objects received as diplomatic gifts and integrated into the “Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu” collection, such as the carved ivory from Angola (see figure 3), express the trauma of the colonial oppression and the sacrifices for liberation in a stronger manner, graphically reproducing bloody scenes of war and massacre. The war of independence made Angola the site of several clashes between the Portuguese army and the local nationalist movements, many of which involved retaliation actions and atrocities against civilians. Therefore, the scene illustrated in the upper register, depicting a man and woman waving working tools instead of weapons, supported by an armed character, is the representation of part of the essence of this war. The fighter in the lower register of the sculpture is holding a machete, as a symbol of agricultural work, but also as an iconic object of the struggle for independence, which was eventually featured on the Angolan national flag, after extensive use in guerilla wars, as various accounts of the events show: “In the early hours of 4 February 1961, the prisons in Luanda were stormed with machetes and guns, some of them captured during an earlier attack on a police jeep.” (Davidson 21).

Apart from the characters featured on the visible side, the object also depicts, on the other side of the upper register, a woman fleeing with her children, which also stands as quintessential representation of the 1961 repression: “Villages were bombed and fleeing villagers strafed and napalmed. The total number of those killed has been variously estimated at between 20,000 and 30,000. It may well have been more, since the colonialists never bothered to keep any accurate census of the African population.” (Davidson 23). Although the numbers cannot be verified, the account stands as a proof of the perceived impact of the violence against the local population and of the relevance of such representations.

The contrast between the modern, Western origin objects, such as the rifles, the uniforms of the soldiers and the flag, on the one hand, and the objects associated with the traditional African culture, such as the clothing of the peasants and the vegetal landscape, on the other hand, is also part of the symbolic violence of the representation. As Bennetta Jules-Rosette points out, images of modernity “reflect ambivalence and a sense of anxiety about the present and future... Man-made objects disrupt the tranquil symbiosis between humans and nature and the peaceful past of the idealized village setting.” (55)

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of theories regarding the development of modern African sculpture, as objects of communication and interaction, this study has demonstrated the significance and purpose of a series of sculptures belonging to a particular type, made by African carvers to express the hardship and violence of life under the colonial rule. Instead of being regarded as adaptations to foreign expectations and tastes, with questionable aesthetic and memorial value, the discussed artifacts should be understood as cultural performances whose authorship and agency belong to their makers, created with the specific purpose of expressing messages of resistance in front of both local and international audiences, when recuperated as diplomatic gifts. While this study focused on a limited number of artifacts, its methods and arguments could be effectively applied to other similar objects in the “Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu” collection or to other collections containing diplomatic gifts of the same type, which relate to various conflicts and catastrophic social events.



Fig. 1: Wooden sculpture, “Africans with Palanquin”, black wood, 45 x 28 x 6,5 cm, Sibiu, ASTRA National Museum Complex, Franz Binder Museum, Inv. No. 1761, Author’s Photograph



Fig. 2: Ujamaa style sculpture, “Ebony column with sculpted scenes”, 122 x 17 cm, Sibiu, ASTRA National Museum Complex, Franz Binder Museum, Inv. No. 1384, detail, Author’s Photograph



Fig. 3: Carved ivory tusk, 25 x 10 cm, Sibiu, ASTRA National Museum Complex, Franz Binder Museum, Inv. No. 1723, Author’s Photograph

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