Benin, Oyo, and Dahomey
Warfare, State Building, and the Sacralization of Iron in West African History

SANDRA T. BARNES and PAULA BEN-AMOS

Along the Guinea Coast of West Africa there is a cluster of conquest states that rose to power in the period between 1400 and 1700 and dominated large areas of the forest belt for several centuries. Their domination was based on well-organized and heavily equipped armies using a highly developed iron technology and, in some cases, mounted divisions. These states included the Edo kingdom of Benin, the Fon kingdom of Dahomey, and a series of Yoruba kingdoms, the most famous of which was Oyo (see map). All of these states based their political supremacy on violence and aggression.

It is no accident, we think, that these states also share a god, Ogun (Gu), whose character, exploits, and powers reflect their own accomplishments, including the extensive warfare that made them formidable powers in pre-colonial West Africa. Ogun is the god of iron and its multitudinous uses. In this essay we intend to introduce the history of iron and explain its role in state building along the Guinea Coast. Then we shall turn to the sacralization and deification of iron and its representation in the visual arts of these kingdoms.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF IRON TECHNOLOGY

The earliest known ironworking in sub-Saharan Africa is now believed to have occurred in what is today central Nigeria. At the site of Taruga an advanced iron technology existed as early as the 6th century B.C. (Burleigh, Hewson and Meeks 1977: 154-5). Archaeological excavations at Taruga uncovered wrought iron objects, quantities of slag, and over a dozen fur-
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2 Benin, Nigeria. Brass plaque representing a high ranking war chief in ceremonial regalia. In his right hand he carries a dance sword and in his left a spear. His immediate attendants carry shields and spears. 15th-16th century. H. 36". The University Museum, AF2906.

near the coast. Similar sites occur in eastern Nigeria and western Cameroon. The scale of smelting in these ore-rich areas was impressive. In the 19th century, for example, when smelting was dying out due to imported European iron, one Oyo site had a smelting population of 120 (Bellamy 1904: 101) and one Cameroon area had 270 smelters whose production exceeded the famous East African site of Merere and was traded throughout Nigeria (Warriner and Fowler 1970: 329-30). Whether or not these smelting sites were the ones that were producing iron when the forest belt empires were formed is unknown. The significant point is that the raw material and an indigenous capacity to work that material clearly must have existed in this area.

It has been suggested that the possession of iron smelting knowledge and control of ore sources were critical to the conquering groups that expanded their polities into West Africa's kingdoms and empires (Davidson 1990: 62-3). In other words, iron was essential to successful warfare, and warfare was the mode of expansion and state building.

IRON, WARFARE, AND STATE BUILDING

By the time Portuguese explorers arrived in Benin in the late 16th century it was already an expanding warrior kingdom (Fig. 2). According to an account by the Portuguese sailor Duarte Pacheco Pereira, “The Kingdom of Beny is about eighty leagues long and forty wide; it is usually at war with its neighbours and takes many captives” (Hodgkin 1969: 93). While the Portuguese traded with the Benin kingdom intensively during this period, they sold it neither guns nor iron due to a papal ban (Ryder 1969: 41). Benin, then, had begun to expand its milliaryistic power without the aid of European imports. Iron goods were not lacking as this late 16th century Dutch account indicates:

They also have several places in the Tovene, where they keep their Markets; in one place they have their great Market Day, called Dia de Ferro; and in another place they hold their little Market, called Ferro . . . They . . . bring great store of Ironwark to sell there, and Instruments to fish withall; and many Weapons, as Arrowges, and Knives also for the Warre. This Market and Trafique is there very orderly holden . . . (D.R. in Hodgkin 1969: 121-2).

With its army using a variety of weapons — shields, javelins, spears, assegais, bows and poisoned arrows, rapiers — the Edo expanded their empire. The variety of weapons used by Benin warriors, and indeed their glorification of military prowess, is represented in an 18th-19th century brass casting called ikogho “altarpiece of the hand” (Fig. 3a-c). This sculpture belongs to the Esomo, one of the two supreme military leaders and can be owned only by an individual who has achieved much by his own efforts whether in trade or war. The imagery of these sculptures exults such achievements, and the Esomo’s is hardly an exception. On it we see a
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celebration of the owner's greatest
acquirements, the overthrow of a rebel chief
(Bradbury 1973: 251-70).

From Dutch sources we learn that the
king could "mobilize twenty thousand
soldiers in a day, and raise in a short time
an army of eighty thousand to one-hundred
thousand men. Thus he is the terror of his
neighbors and an object of fear to his own
peoples." Headed by a general, noble
warriors and common soldiers were well
disciplined and brave; "they never leave
their posts, even when they have death

before their eyes" (Hodgkin 1969: 128-9).
At its height during the 14th and 16th
centuries the Benin kingdom reached its
natural boundaries at the River Niger to
the east and the sea to the south, and
established suzerainty over Yoruba areas
to the west and southwest up to the border
of what was to become Dahomey. In the
late 16th century it reached a common
boundary with the kingdom of Oyo.

It is not known when the famed Yoruba
kingdom of Oyo got its start. Its foundation
is variously set in the 10th to early 15th
centuries, with the 13th being the most
favored. We do know, however, that as an
empire it began to be important early in
the 17th century, and by 1780 had attained
its greatest size—greater than any other
coastal African state—stretching from the
Niger River to the sea and from Dahomey
to the Benin border in the east (Law 1977:
80). Like Benin, Oyo expanded without the
aid of firearms, which were not used effec
tively until sometime between the 1820s
and 1840s. Instead, Oyo's effectiveness in
its military drives was based on two things:
a mounted cavalry and a huge arsenal of
iron weapons. The main weapon was the
spear, although swords, javelins, clubs, and
axes (Fig. 4) were also significant parts of
the foot soldier's and cavalry's arsenals.

Special divisions of archers made use of
the bow and arrow. Oyo's army was highly
organized, particularly the core divisions
that came from the capital and were led by
warrior chiefs who directly advised the
king and who acted as a powerful check on
his power. Recruits came from the
provinces and tributary states (Smith 1973:
232-3).

Mounted horsemen had special signifi
cance in this part of West Africa. At the
forest edge a cavalry was limited by the
rainy season, its horses often were prone
to disease from the limited feed, and the
expense of importing horses, which could
not be raised in this area, was high. Yet so
great was the importance of the cavalry
that Yoruba artists commonly idealized the
equestrian warrior, and in fact portrayed
the god of iron and warfare as a mounted,
spear-bearing soldier (Fig. 5).

Dahomey, to the west of Oyo, traced its
foundations to about 1625 (Akinjohin
1976: 383). Long a tribute-paying state to
Oyo, it expanded gradually and threw off
the latter's yoke in 1618 to become the
foremost power along the coast. Dahomey's
economy was based on slave exports to
Europe, and thus needed to mount an on

for this militaristic prowess. Iron must be
cared for, said the king, or its owner would
become a lizard with a black tail (i.e., he
would die), whereas the owner who cared
for iron would become a lizard with a red
tail (i.e., he would live). (Ibid.)

The reliance of Dahomean iron
weaponry was made explicit by the rela
tionship between smiths and the crown.
All iron craftsmen were considered to
work under the control of and at the
behest of the king (Lombard 1967: 80).

Similarly, the army was highly centralized
and under the immediate authority of the
king, including the famous divisions of
women who lived on the palace grounds
and who, along with other powerful and
well organized divisions of male warriors,
brought Dahomey international fame as a
military power. The relationship between
iron and kingship was also explicit in the
Yoruba kingdom of Oyo; the sacred meeting
place of chiefs in the palace, where judicial
matters were deliberated, was the Ogun
room in which rested a huge lump of iron
called Ogun-Lade after the society's first
blacksmith.

Blacksmiths were given special treatment
throughout West Africa (Fig. 6) (Barnes
1980: 12). In some societies, it was a serious
crime to kill a smith. In others they could
not be treated as prisoners of war but had
to be given privileged care. Smiths, it might
be noted, often traveled with their armies;
this is believed to be one of the ways iron-
working skills were initially transmitted
civilly. Indeed, their capture may have been
not only a fringe benefit but even an objec
tive of warfare. Two of the ironworking guilds
in Benin, for instance, traced their origins
to the north of Benin and claimed they
were forcibly brought to the capital of the
kingdom during the reign of Eghie, one of
the great 16th century warrior kings (Brad
bury 1957: 81: BS270-277). Wherever they
were settled smiths acquired significant
ritual status.
THE SACRALIZATION OF IRON

Throughout West Africa iron was sacralized, its powers ranging from holy to profane, curative to punitive. It was sacrificed to, sworn upon, subjected to stringent taboos, or made into a shrine. This sacralization extended from the least imposing scrap of metal to the most imposing decorative art form (Barnes 1960: 8-13). Art and sanctity merged in iron objects among the Fon, Yorubas, and Edo who frequently used the warriors' weapons as the basis for aesthetic elaboration in iron. In Dahomey, for example, the gubue was a ceremonial sword considered to be the emblem of Gb (the Fon counterpart of Ogun among the Yoruba and Edo) (Fig. 7). According to myth, when the creator came to earth he held Gb in his hand in the form of a gubue and with it he cleared the forests, and taught men to build houses and till the soil. The creator then taught humans how to use metal so that they, too, could enjoy the power of Gb, a power that would enable them to secure food, cover their bodies, and protect themselves from the elements (Mercier 1954: 233).

Among the most common iron objects are miniature implements that serve as insignia of Gb (Williams 1973: 148-52). They are sometimes hung on iron necklaces or bracelets or attached to clothing, crowns (Fig. 8), or standards—all to signify the power of the iron deity. These miniatures include blacksmiths' hammers, tongs, pickers, and pokers; farmers' hoes, cutlasses, or knives; warriors' swords, spears, or bows and arrows; and such items as bells, gongs, state swords, scrapers, tattooing knives, and eventually guns. All of them carried supernatural forces in that they protected the wearer, harmed his enemies, or brought good fortune.

In art, the tools of Gb become emblems of his varied capacities; indeed they become a kind of short-hand or code that extends into many domains. In Benin, for example, representations of tools commonly appear on wrought iron staffs used by herbalists (Fig. 9). On the top of these staffs is a bird representing the mystical powers of the herbalist and below the bird are depictions of hoes, swords, and other iron implements. The staff itself is seen as flames shooting upward. Its praise name in Edo is osun n'igioji, osun meaning the power inherent in herbs and igioji meaning burning up with heat. In former times an herbalist used to accompany soldiers to war to assure success against their enemies, taking with him an iron staff as his means of protection. In the words of one Benin herbalist, "When an herbalist goes to battle, he cannot be caught because he will turn into a staff and spark fire, and nobody can come near" (Ben-Amos 1976: 240).
Through their intimate connection with agriculture, hunting, craft skills, and even warfare, iron implements become a metaphor for civilization itself. This can be seen most vividly in the patterning of an 18th-century Benin royal brass stool (Fig. 10a). The seat of the stool (Fig. 10b) is divided into three zones. At the top is the cosmos represented by the sun, the moon, and the cross, a Benin symbol of creation. At the bottom are depictions of the powers of the forest, the untamed wilderness: monkeys with snakes issuing from their nostrils, an image indicating terrifying supernatural powers, and the trunks of elephants grasping leaves, representing the herbal knowledge possessed by creatures of the forest. In the middle zone are symbols of civilization: the products of the smith. These symbols read out from the center towards the periphery. At the very center is the ax—the ritual and technological heart of the smithy, the place where the heat of Ogun is tempered and controlled. On either side are the tools of the smith: hammer, knife, pliers, tongs, bellows, and blade. At the peripheries are the two main Benin ceremonial swords: emblems of the social status and powers of rulers who control life and death (Ben-Amos 1980: 30-1, 37).

Ogun himself is “a symbol of the superior, conquering culture” (Beier 1959: 43). Many oral traditions of the area capture the essence of the Ogun concept through the almost paradoxical themes of aggression and civilization. Thus Ogun in Yoruba and Edo liturgies is depicted as the aggressive, violent warrior who “strikes suddenly and devastatingly,” who “has water but washes with blood.” In Benin shrines, he is always depicted in a war costume, wearing or holding the tools and weapons of his varied occupations (Fig. 11). Often his costume and, significantly, his eyes are painted red. To describe someone as always having red eyes is a way of indicating his violent temper and capacity for causing harm (Ben-Amos 1999: 31). The ferocity of Ogun is captured in the following Yoruba praise poem:

Where does one meet him?  
One meets him in the place of battle;  
One meets him in the place of wrangling;  
One meets him in the place where torrents of blood  
Fill with longing as a cup of water does the thirsty  
(Idowu 1962: 89).

Although the deity is fierce and terrible, he is not evil, for, as a civilized being, he demands justice, fair play, and integrity. If appeased, he is tolerant and protective, especially of the poor and dispossessed. After all, Ogun is the deity who taught human beings to hunt game, clear fields, open roads, and build towns. When the Fon creator finished his work he instructed humans that to overcome obstacles they must learn to use iron. For them, the sword embodied their beginnings. From the day of creation onwards the sword was given the praise name ali-su-gbo-ku-kle, the road is closed and Cu opens it (Herskovits 1958: 134-5).

The iron sword of Ogun encapsulates the twin meanings of aggression and civilisation (Fig. 12). It clears the forest and builds the house. More significantly, it vanquishes the enemy and crowns the king. The culmination of the coronation ceremony of the king of Oyo occurs when the Great Sword, the Sword of Justice, is placed in the king’s hands. Without it he cannot wield the supreme power over life and death.

After an interval of five days, the king proceeds to the shrine of Ogun, the ultimate source of the sword; only after this may he enter the palace as ruler of his kingdom (Johnson 1969: 45).
The use of ceremonial swords and the dramatization of warfare are important features of kingship rituals throughout the Guinean Coast. In Benin, for example, this is an ancient practice. The annual Ogum ceremony, faoloon, a mock battle, is said to date to the first dynasty of kings who ruled perhaps until the 13th or 14th century. It is through this intimate relationship with kingship that the power and character of Ogum acquire a profoundly historic dimension. For these kingdoms of the Guinean Coast, Ogum—progenitor of iron and warrior king—sums up a long rise to political supremacy.

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**Early Italian Pottery**

Five Vessels from a Neolithic Household in Calabria

ALBERT J. AMMERMAN

Pottery is a standard item for archaeological analysis—it was made by most later prehistoric and historic societies, it displays a wide range of variation in manufacture form and decoration, and it survives well. However, the interpretation of pottery on residential sites is often difficult, since it occurs only as a scatter of sherds, the by-product of use, breakage, and discard. Thus, the discovery of a group of almost complete pots, apparently in a primary household context, offers unusual opportunities to the archaeologist.

This article details the first stages of an analysis of a group of five decorated pots from the Early Italian Neolithic site of Piana di Curinga, where the collapse of a burnt wattle-and-daub house is responsible for the remarkable preservation. Like most Stentinellito pottery, these pots have a wealth of variation in decorative design. Unlike most Stentinellito pottery, however, they are almost complete, so that we may see what decorative methods and motifs occur together on the same pot—a task often impossible when dealing only with residual sherds. By examining in detail how the stamped and incised decorations on a vessel are made, we can begin to perceive a certain order underlying the apparent wealth of variation. At the same time, one of the factors contributing to diversity among the decorative designs seen at the household level (as opposed to the settlement as a whole) may be the exchange of vessels between households and, as in the case of cauldrons from the island of Lipari, perhaps even between settlements in different parts of Calabria.

Decoration obtained by impressing the surface of a vessel with the edge of a shell or some other tool is the hallmark of the earliest pottery in the western Mediterranean. The term impresso is often used for this reason to refer to the early Neolithic cultures in the area extending from Italy to Spain. Within the western Mediterranean, several regional traditions of impressed Ware Neolithic pottery can be distinguished on stylistic grounds. The one that stands out from the others in the degree of elaboration of its decorative motifs is the Stentinellino tradition of southern Italy and Sicily. Specially prepared stamps are commonly employed for making impressions and as many as five different stamps or tools may be used on a single vessel to produce a complex decorative design. Recent excavations at the site of Piana di Curinga in Calabria have brought out one of the best good series of dates dating to the Stentinellino period. Found associated with one of the wattle-and-daub houses (in Area II) were five more or less whole fine ware bowls. As a group, these vessels afford a rare opportunity for studying the refinement and richness of one of the earliest ceramic traditions in Europe. The name Stentinellino comes from the settlement, near Syracuse in Sicily, that Paolo Orsi excavated at the end of the last century. Within the exception of the work done by Bernabò Brea at the site of...