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## Cement Funerary Sculpture: Historic Continuities in Central Guinea Coast Commemorative Art \*

by  
Nancy Toothman

Since the introduction of Portland cement at the turn of the century, cement has become an accepted art medium in the central Guinea coast region of West Africa. For many prominent Nigerian artists, including Adebisi Akangi, Festus Idehen, and Okku Ampofo, cement is a primary means of artistic expression.<sup>1</sup> Even formal training is available in the "new" medium.<sup>2</sup>

There is, however, an intriguing parallel development in the use of reinforced cement for monumental figurative sculpture by traditional artists who have received no formal, western-influenced art education. Deeply rooted in traditional practices and beliefs, this form of sculpture has been strongly influenced by western motifs and western technology. As a new technology, it offers important advantages over other media traditionally used for commemorative sculpture in terms of increased size (because cement does not need to be fired) and durability in the Guinea Coast climate, a major concern for commemorative sculpture. The use of cement logically progressed from prior traditional mud and terra-cotta figurative sculpture.

Scattered throughout the central Guinea coast are religious and military shrines, cemeteries and "healing gardens," embellished with life-size, painted, cement sculpture. This new and exciting art form represents a dynamic convergence of Christian imagery and ritual with traditional art and ceremony.<sup>3</sup>

Elaborate concrete shrines (posuban) are associated with traditional Fante military organizations (asafo), and created the necessary momentum for the sudden proliferation of figurative cement statuary that occurred after the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> The first conclusively documented example of a monumental posuban dates from 1888 at Abandzi, but the majority have been built since 1950.<sup>5</sup> With the later addition of figurative sculpture an amazing variety of motifs emerged, freely incorporating both traditional Ghanaian and western sources. Asafo posuban shrines enhance the reputations of individual asafo companies and serve to promote cultural and national continuity.<sup>6</sup>

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In a letter to the Editor, Ms. Toothman acknowledged the encouragement and assistance she received from the late Professor Arnold G. Rubin in the preparation of this paper. "Dr. Rubin", she writes, "was a dedicated and inspiring scholar and I feel fortunate to have been a student of his."

The same small group of artists were responsible for most of the cement sculpture in Fanteland. All of these artists were either trained or worked for the same mission-trained "church building contractor" and his son. Most Christian churches were generally free of sculpture, but there was this one major exception. Breidenback and Ross [1978] conclude that posuban shrines were the apparent training schools for artists working in the new medium of iron-reinforced concrete.<sup>7</sup>

While these sculptors were decorating asafo posuban they also began accepting commissions for other cement work, including the numerous Harrist "healing gardens" associated with the new Afro-Christian religious movement.<sup>8</sup> The Harrist movement, begun by a charismatic African evangelist from Liberia who was active in the Ivory Coast and Ghana around 1914, was well established among the Fante by the 1930's. Both healing gardens and posuban are showplaces for their respective institutions and both manifest a rather aggressive art and ritual.<sup>9</sup>

Harrist churches have been particularly successful in creating a dynamic fusion of Christian and traditional African art and ritual. Originally, modest and relatively plain shrines were constructed for the performance of the healing ritual and storage of holy medicine.<sup>10</sup> As many Harrist church members and some leaders are former Catholics, a Roman Catholic influence may account for the embellishment of their healing gardens with cement statuary.<sup>11</sup>

It is likely that the use of brightly painted cement figurative sculpture spread via the Harrist churches to commemorative grave monuments. A Christian model already existed in the form of European figural grave sculpture. And more importantly, another earlier and more relevant African funerary model existed. Funerals have always been the most important Akan rites of passage. Prior to the 20th century, posthumous terra-cotta "portrait" sculpture was a widespread tradition throughout southern Ghana and southeastern Ivory Coast. Bosman reported in 1705 that funerary art and associated rituals were already established along the coast by the end of the 17th century.<sup>12</sup>

Even ordinary people among the central Akan were commemorated with relief-decorated pottery, but ceramic figures and heads seem to have been reserved exclusively for "royals", an elite class within the aristocracy. At the death of one of these important people, several terra-cotta were commissioned. These were intended to record the execution of certain rites, and the images included heads, busts, torsos, and standing and seated figures of the deceased and others who assisted in the rites.<sup>13</sup> Additional figures represented slaves and other members of the burial party.<sup>14</sup>

The majority of portraits were idealized or generic.<sup>15</sup> Individuals could only be identified by their distinctive personalized coiffures, scarification patterns, personal items of adornment and badges of rank or office. Colored paint or slip was occasionally added to simulate the complexion of the deceased.<sup>16</sup> These terra-cotta "portraits" were not generally placed on the grave but were placed near the cemetery in the grove of the ancestral spirits or "place of pots."<sup>17</sup>

The Aowin, another Akan people who migrated in the late 17th century from the northeast to their present location in the western region of Ghana, report a tradition of making funerary terra-cotta [mma] prior to their migration, and also the existence of a prolific mma tradition in western Ghana prior to their arrival.<sup>18</sup> Libations are still offered each year at some Aowin sites, but the practice of passing on ancestral histories associated with each figure seems to be declining.

At one Aowin terra-cotta site, inhabitants of a nearby village claim that the fragments commemorate Nana Attabra, an indigenous Anyi ruler whose marriage to an in-migrating Aowin leader united their two groups. The presiding priestess of the commemorative grove specifically identified one terra-cotta head resting on a solid clay stool as that of Nana Attabra. The same priestess identified the surrounding fragments as members of Nana Attabra's court.<sup>19</sup>

Anyi [Akan] groups across the border in the Ivory Coast also used mma to commemorate their dead, a practice originating before migration to their present location.<sup>20</sup> Bohumil Holas [1951] says the Ivorian Anyi considered the commemorative figures actual receptacles for the souls of the deceased, and there is evidence that this view was held by other Akan.<sup>21</sup>

Although many Ghanaian Akan terra-cottas consist only of the head and neck, this is not true of Anyi and Aboure [a culturally related people] pieces from the southwestern Ivory Coast, most of which appear to have included bodies. According to Robert Soppelsa [1984], the large, seated figures among the Anyi and Aboure fragments represent "kings" or "queen-mothers"; he identifies the smaller, standing figures as members of the court. Soppelsa also discovered two unusually naturalistic Anyi pieces from Krinjabo. These pieces, however, may represent the last vestige of a dying tradition and probably reflect a European influence.<sup>22</sup> All of the figures were sculpted nude, but from the early 19th century on, published accounts record that they were lavishly dressed before being placed in mmasoo [place of pots] grouped as effigy courts.

Effigy courts functioned as historical tableaux, recording the royal genealogy of each Akan capital. Historical recitations were an integral part of annual visits to mmasoo during the new yam festival. Absolute accuracy was required, and errors were traditionally

punishable by death. This use of mma indicates that these sculptures were more to the Anyi and Aboure than commemorative portraits—they formed the "actual substance of Akan history in the Ivory Coast."<sup>23</sup> This usage is consistent with central Akan practice.

Other Anyi and Brong (another Akan people) groups migrated from Ghana to the Bondoukou region in the Ivory Coast between the 16th and 18th centuries. Consistent with old, central Akan policies, they selectively appropriated innovations and, whatever their sources, adapted these innovations to reinforce their own traditional values.<sup>24</sup> The continuity of their funerary traditions and the evolution of their commemorative sculpture reflects this accommodation of the new with the old, found throughout the central Guinea coast region. For example, Anyi and Brong people have long believed in the necessity of carefully preparing the deceased for rebirth into the next world. This includes display of the body in a three-sided courtyard room (*fa*) which is hung with colorful kente cloths. Funeral activities are designed to immortalize the deceased and his line ease the transition into the world of the ancestors. Funerals differ according to a person's status: royal funerals involve major displays of material wealth and political and spiritual power. For the Anyi and the Brong, as in many African societies, the world of the living and the world of the ancestors are interdependent. Human beings live by the benevolence of the ancestors and the ancestors live on in the memory of human beings through libations and other ritual.<sup>25</sup>

Among these groups, when commemorative terra-cotta production was suppressed or simply ended after the arrival of missionaries, many graves began to be marked by cement crosses, and later, by ceramic tile monuments. After the addition of statues, private burial sites evolved into public monuments, with the portrait statue of the deceased facing a main road. The form of the tomb also changed. Older, open pavilions were replaced by three-sided structures (a return to the original *fa* in which funerals take place) and were decorated with colorful cement statues.<sup>26</sup> As these Christian funeral monuments evolved into three-dimensional tableaux of the funeral itself, the traditional effigy courts were reinstated, in an elaborated and modern form. And reminiscent of earlier annual visits to the mmasoo, the new monuments are cleaned and repaired annually at the time of the new yam festival.<sup>27</sup>

The first of these new-style tombs appeared in the 1950's, the years of the spectacular boom in coffee and cocoa prices which made many planters rich. Ghanaian and Ghanaian-trained masons and sculptors were commissioned to build elaborate and expensive memorials. This newest evolution of commemorative sculpture also occurred in other parts of the region. In southeastern Ivory Coast, for

example, the "Lagoon" peoples, composed of twelve distinct ethnic groups clustered around Abidjan, have a lengthy exposure to Akan, Baule and European influences, and an equally long-standing tradition of appropriating art styles and objects from foreign sources. Occasionally, new art forms have replaced or reinstated long abandoned institutions. In the 19th century, for example, an Akan-style terra-cotta funerary tradition existed for influential men and women. Large cement portraits with similar functions appeared recently, related in concept to the now defunct terra-cotta images. This new, painted commemorative portraiture is associated with elaborate churches and cement tombs developed by the Harrists.<sup>28</sup>

In Sanwi (Ivory Coast), D'Aby also attributes the change and the elaboration in both the conception and the construction of masonry tombs to the impact of Harrist Christianity. The funerary terra-cotta tradition ended there in 1914 as a result of mass conversions to Christianity by William Wade Harris, the Liberian evangelist. Later, however, and reflecting the persistent practice by Akan peoples to Africanize adopted religious systems, the Anyi returned to their traditions with new materials and "they chose the tomb as the altar for a more visible focus for the cult of souls."<sup>29</sup>

Most monuments in the new style share the same principal motifs: policemen, angels, mourners, musicians, animals, and (within the *fa*) family portraits. The arrangement and interpretation of these motifs vary according to the skill of the artist and the tastes of the family. Policemen may be related to earlier Akan guardian figures.<sup>30</sup>; angels have been interpreted as linguists.<sup>31</sup> The figures with the *fa* are actually true portraits, despite their stylized postures. The sculptor, working from photographs, is expected to create good likenesses and to add conventional, idealized embellishments such as annular neck rings. The interior walls are painted to imitate *kente* cloth used during the actual funeral.<sup>32</sup> The acroterion embodies the personal religious beliefs of the deceased, although Islamic, Christian, and African symbols may appear elsewhere on the monument.

East of the Volta river, the Ewe create less well-known cement figural monuments. Although this art does not appear to be directly related to Akan funerary traditions, the Ewe sculptors are undoubtedly familiar with Fante cement sculpture.<sup>33</sup> Michelle Gilbert says that, considering Ewe traditions of migrations from the east and continued ties with people from the east, this art form probably derived from southern Nigeria.<sup>34</sup>

Beier says that Yoruba cement sculpture in southwestern Nigeria, appears to be neither funerary nor portraiture, but Bascom contradicts this when he writes: "Sculpture in cement adorns many graves and private houses. Wall painting in geometric and

representational patterns decorates some shrines and tombs."<sup>35</sup> In addition, there is a contemporary tradition of incorporating actual photographs of the deceased in the cement funerary moments in Yorubaland; and 14th century Yoruba life-size, terra-cotta "portrait" heads and figures are an even earlier precedent for this. Traces of paint have even been found on the terra-cottas.<sup>36</sup> There is also a recent tradition in southeastern Nigeria of cement grave sculpture which arose as a result of widespread missionary activity in the first three decades of this century.<sup>37</sup> The earliest monuments represented purely Christian subjects, but later and more numerous painted cement figures, modeled over wooden armatures and repetitive in style, were simple commemorations of the deceased.<sup>38</sup> The most recent and naturalistic sculptures, probably influenced by Afro-Christian spiritualist churches in the area, are the work of self-taught Ibibio artist/craftsmen working from photographs.<sup>39</sup>

The brightly painted Ewe commemorative sculpture, which seems to be transitional between the Akan and the southern Nigerian, can be seen in cemeteries around Anloga (Ghana) and on the coast road into Togo. Cement umbrellas or concrete shelters usually protect these life-size statues from rain.<sup>40</sup> Additional motifs can include a sacrificial ram, lions, a hawk holding a snake, a farmer hoeing, a drummer, a fisherman, etc. The figures are generally sculpted by part-time, self-taught Ewe artists who, in common with the Ibibio sculptors, also work from photographs.<sup>41</sup> Ewe funerary art may derive from the east as Gilbert suggests, but superficial consistencies with other contemporary Ghanaian sculpture make it equally clear that the Ewe have been subject to strong influences from the Akan and Fante styles to the west. Some Akan, Fante and Ewe reside within the same political borders: and in recent years, political and economic crises have surely disrupted travel to the east.

The most elaborate and dynamic of the new-style grave monuments being created in the Central Guinea Coast, however, are those most deeply rooted in "Akan-type" funerary traditions, specifically those terra-cotta "portrait" heads and figures displayed in commemorative groves. The redistribution of the varied functions of this funerary terra-cotta tradition among several new types of cement figurative sculptures is fascinating. The spiritually-related healing function has been appropriated by the Harrist "healing gardens." Traditional commemorative terra-cottas were believed to encourage fertility, and sterile women who wanted to have children showed their devotion by caring for the grove [mmasos] and making food offerings.<sup>42</sup> Breidenback and Ross say that the term "garden" refers both to the healer's concern with female fertility, dangers of childbearing, reproduction, and to the fruitfulness and increase that

result from healing such disorders.<sup>43</sup> It could also be argued that certain historical/ commemorative functions are being continued in the cement figurative sculpture associated with asafo posubans. The interrelationships involved between the new cement traditions are intriguing. However, the primary function served by the terra-cottas has clearly found new expression in the Africanization of European-style grave monuments introduced by missionaries, who, aided by the expansion of colonial authority in the early 19th century, largely succeeded in suppressing the indigenous terra-cottas. The Africanization of the monuments was, interestingly, also a result of Christian influence, but this time by Afro-Christian churches.

As historical records and as bids for immortality, the new-style monuments are more permanent and lasting than the earlier funerary terra-cottas. As testimonies of worldly success and of the prestige and power that glorify a man and his lineage, they are more visible. The brightly-polychromed, new-style grave monuments represent a logical progression in style. Post-war prosperity provided the means for this adaption of modern materials and practices which has led to both a new market for traditional artist/craftsmen and a dynamic revival of a moribund funerary art tradition.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Marshall Ward Mount. African Art: The Years Since 1920 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>Cement sculpture is actively taught at Wenneba Specialist Training College, and the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi (Breidenback and Ross 1968). And the Yaba Technical Institute, Lagos. (Mount 1973) The University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the Awka College of Education also offer instruction in this medium. (Cole 1988:58) And, of course Nigerian cement sculpture of the "Oshogbo school" is well-known. (See Beier 1968).

<sup>3</sup>Traditional religious shrines are an exception. They only occasionally use cement instead of mud or terra-cotta figures, and Christian iconography is not apparent. (Warren 1976).

<sup>4</sup>These civic monuments probably evolved from simple medicine mounds and a tree surrounded by a fence. (Cole and Ross 1977; 186).

<sup>5</sup>Herbert M. Cole and Doran Ross. The Arts of Ghana. (Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1977), pp. 186-187.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 189-191.

<sup>7</sup>Paul S. Breidenback and Doran H. Ross. "The Holy Place: Twelve Apostles Healing Gardens." African Arts 11, No.4 (July 1978:34-35).

<sup>8</sup>In Ghana, Harrist "healing gardens" can be found in nearly every small town and village along the coast from Half Assini in the west to Accra in the east, and as far



north as the Brong-Ahafo region and the urban center of Kumasi. (Breidenback 1979:99-100).

<sup>9</sup>Breidenback and Ross. "The Holy Place," *African Arts*, 11, no.4p.35.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>12</sup>Patricia Crane Coronel. "Aowin Terracotta Sculpture." *African Arts* 13, No.1 (1980):28.

<sup>13</sup>George Nelson Preston. "Memorial Figure," in *For Spirits and Kings*, ed. by Susan Vogel (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981).

<sup>14</sup>Cole and Ross. *The Arts of Ghana*, p.22.

<sup>15</sup>Artists in many parts of Africa felt it would be disrespectful, if not dangerous, to exactly copy nature. (Vogel 1981).

<sup>16</sup>Preston. "Memorial Figure," in *For Spirits and Kings*, p.81.

<sup>17</sup>In Fomena, However, terra-cotta statues were placed directly on the grave; this is a definite, if obscure, African precedent for the current placement of memorials directly over the grave.

<sup>18</sup>Coronel. "Aowin Terracotta Sculpture," in *African Arts*, 13, no.1, p.33.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p.34. These include the Sanwi of Krinjabo or Brafe, and the Moronou. The similarity of artistic forms among the Aowin and the Krinjabo Anyi is not surprising in view of their joint migrations and historical ties.

<sup>21</sup>F.J. Amon D'Aby. "Memorial Figure," in *For Spirits and Kings*, ed. by Susan Vogel (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981) p.79.

<sup>22</sup>Both pieces are modeled with an attempt to represent the underlying structure of the face. Soppelsa [1984] says that one of these, a male figure, bore a striking resemblance to the man living in the house where the pieces were shown. The man's father, uncles and grandfather had all been important men in Krinjabo around 1900.

<sup>23</sup>Robert T. Soppelsa. "Western Art Historical Methodology and Traditional African Art: Panofsky's Paradigm and Ivoirien MMA." Paper presented at the 27th annual meeting of the African Studies Association, Los Angeles, California, 25-28 October 1984.

<sup>24</sup>Susan Domowitz and Renzo Mandirola. "Grave Monuments in Ivory Coast." *African Arts* 14 (1984), p.46.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>28</sup>Monica Blackmun Visona. "The Lagoon Cultures and Their Neighbors." Paper presented at the 27th meeting of the African Studies Association, Los Angeles, California, 25-28 October 1984.

<sup>29</sup>D'Aby, "Memorial Figure," in *For Spirits and Kings*, p.79.

<sup>30</sup>Friedrich August Ramseyer. Four Years in Ashantee. (New York: R. Carter and Brothers, 1875) :54

<sup>31</sup>Breidenback and Ross, "The Holy Place," in African Arts, 11, no.4, p.33.

<sup>32</sup>Domowitz and Mandirola. "Grave Monuments in Ivory Coast," in African Arts, 14, P.50.

<sup>33</sup>Ife heads may well have been used in somewhat analogous (to Akan) funerary practices. In view of migration traditions among some southern Ghanaian peoples claiming eastern origins, the possibility of a historical connection between the terracotta sculptures of the Akan and Ife (Yoruba) should not be ruled out. (Cole and Ross 1977:127)

<sup>34</sup>Michelle V. Gilbert. "Ewe Funerary Sculpture." African Arts, No.4 (1984).

<sup>35</sup>William Bascom. The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) p.101.

<sup>36</sup>Frank Willet. "Ife and Its Archaeology." Journal of African History 1, No.2 (1960).

<sup>37</sup>The same general evolution of grave markers occurred in Calabar cemeteries in the Ivory Coast and elsewhere. After the arrival of missionaries, traditional funeral rites were suppressed and single cement crosses appeared in cemeteries. Later, a compromise was reached and the traditional Nwomo ceremony was followed by the erection of a complex monument that still satisfied Christian ideals. (Ibibio funerals traditionally involved a ceremonial "second burial".) The traditional ceremony included creating an appliqued cloth depicting events in the dead man's life. This was hung on a wooden frame like a tall hut, and animal sacrifices were placed in front. On the day of the ceremony, a mimed drama was performed to reenact the life of the deceased. (Butler 1963:117-118) See also D.R. Rosevear, "Cross River Tombstones," African Arts 18, No.1(November 1984):44-47, 94) Rosevear shows photographs taken between 1929 and 1931 of cement funerary sculpture in Ogoja Province that, although quite different in style and execution, is still sometimes figurative and representative.

<sup>38</sup>Vincent F. Butler. "Cement Funeral Sculpture in Eastern Nigeria." Nigeria Magazine 77 (June 1963). Herbert Cole also notes the existence of elaborate cement funerary monuments in southeastern Nigeria. Anang Ibibio sculptures sometimes included multiple figures placed on a pedestal. Igbo commemorative cement work mostly appeared after 1950, and by the 1970's cement was commonly used as an art medium in Igboland, for commemorative memorials as well as for governmental and corporate commissions. (Cole 1988:58-60)

<sup>39</sup>Keith Nicklin and Jill Salmons. "S.J. Akpan of Nigeria." African Arts 11, No.1 (October 1977)30-34.

<sup>40</sup>Monuments commemorating women in the Calabar region frequently include umbrellas. (Butler 1963:119)

<sup>41</sup>Gilbert. "Ewe Funerary Sculpture," in African Arts, 14, no.4.

<sup>42</sup>D'Aby. "Memorial Figure," in For Spirits and Kings, p.79.

<sup>43</sup>Breidenback and Ross. "The Holy Place," in African Arts, 11, no. 4, p.95.

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