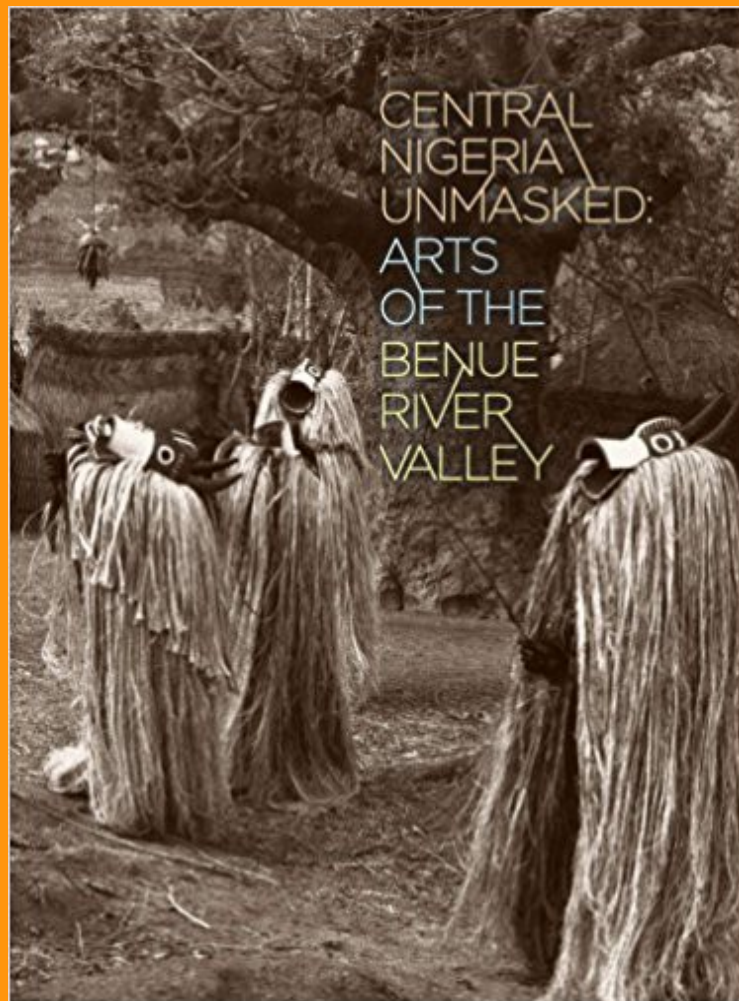


IZIBONGO

Celebrating Art in Africa and the Diaspora

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Baba Daloba

a review of **Central Nigeria Unmasked :Arts of the Benue River Valley**

edited by Marla C. Berns, Richard Fardon and Sidney Littlefield Kasfir

Natty Mark Samuels

Editorial

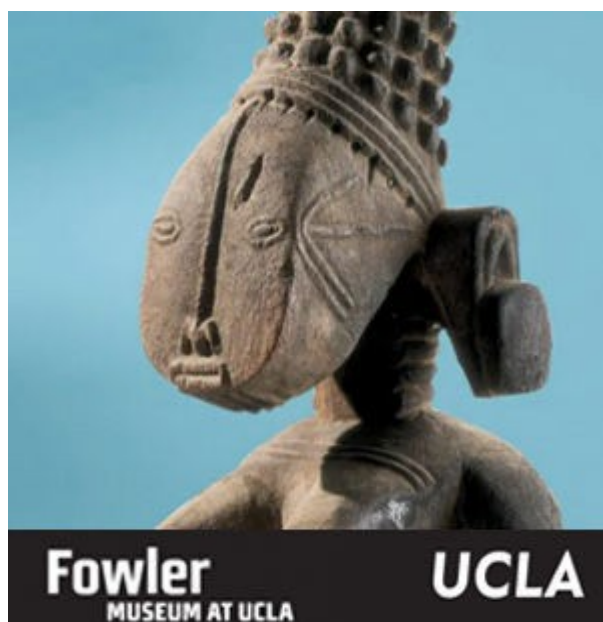
This book must be standard issue in the art schools of Nigeria: Yaba, Nsuuka, Benin, Ibadan and the others. To the three editors, the ten essayists – especially Arnold Rubin - and seven contributors, stand and take your applause: every reader of this book must want to give you a standing ovation. For giving us something gargantuan in scope, as well as size: for the gift of something crucial.

Celebrating the art of the Benue Valley Region, I am happy to present to you, *Central Nigeria Unmasked*, published by Fowler Museum at UCLA.

Editor – Natty Mark Samuels – africanschool.weebly.com - An African School Production

Front Cover photograph from *Fowler Museum*

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<https://reggaediscography.blogspot.co.uk/2018/01/izibongo-magazine-2018.html>

<http://rastaites.com/izibongo-issues-64-71/>



Afo Maternity Figure

from *SFGate*



Anjenu Figure

from Fowler Museum

Chant With Me Of The Master Carver

She sits somewhere in the Lower Benue,

I cannot pinpoint where.

Someone took their time with her,

Yes someone took great care.

Chant with me of the Master Carver.

Seated on a stool with straightened back,

Dressed in dignity.

A child at breast and on her back,

Motherhood's epitome.

Chant with me of the Master Carver.

There are bangles on her forearms,

We see a scarified chest.

In homage to maternity,

Someone did their very best.

Chant with me of the Master Carver.

Although I appreciated the preceding text – about the Idoma ancestral chants and the Anjenu water spirits – it was the maternity figure on page 46 of this 600 page tome (which inspired the poem), that began my engulfment in this publication. Wouldn't it have been a perfect gift, to have given to your expectant wife, sister or daughter? After receiving it from the master carver, you would have thanked him profusely – and wished that daily blessings, would fall upon his head.

This book is crucial; not just for the wealth of information embedded in the pages or the great choice of illustrations, but for the region of research. When we think of the art of central Nigeria, we tend to think of the Nok culture, but not much thereafter. From the Nok, we tend to go elsewhere in the nation; to villages and cities, such as Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin. But through this publication, some balance has been added to the telling of the story of Nigerian art. Whereas we normally hear about the artistry of the Igbo, Yoruba and Urhobo – especially the first two – we are here captivated by the traditions and artistry of the lesser known, such as the Jukun, Igala and Tiv. Instead of Nsuuka and Ibadan, we hear of Wukari and Idah. This book offers so much, in generous amounts; history, geography, religious education, as well as art. Dear reader, if you're ever searching for a study on Benue Valley art and culture, this is the one: this book is crucial.

We hear about the songs sung to yam and sorghum; the moonlit rehearsal dance of girls; the gourd of Eka medicine; usage of the feathers of the scarlet love bird. We hear about *Aiuta*; *'this system arose as a strategy on the part of the elders to control the youthfulness excesses of the warrior associations'*. The youth were given the task of policing their communities; to keep the headstrong and reckless in place; and I guess, to encourage a sense of societal responsibility. Be good to get opinion about this aspect of Idoma society, from a group comprised of youth workers, criminologists, social workers and the police.

Another characteristic of the society, is the exhumation of an individual, so he or she can be re-buried. Sad to hear that second burials take much longer to present - and that it often has to be a group event, rather than an individual commemoration. This is due to the fact that *'people in Nigeria are poorer than they were a generation ago, despite the country's oil wealth'*.

But whatever the changes, the creativity remained outstanding. Pages 50 to 53 show caryatid and maternity figures - in colour and black and white - made by the Afo, Tiv, Jukun and Egbira-Igu peoples. Whatever the disruption, whether brought by the Muslim Fulani from the north or the Christian English from the south, the artists amongst the four aforementioned ethnicities, continued to produce quality art, such as the Ekotame figure, where we are shown how it was *'displayed and carried during special events'*.

In contrast to the figures above, the Ihambe ones are of a more basic design and decoration. Female, they were the sentinels standing at the entrances, where the women of marriage exchange resided.

Interesting to hear about the Hausa influence in the area. When we think of these people, we think of Kano and Katsina, of great scholars and traders: we think of Islam. So it was very informative to read that they were *'major actors in Benue Valley ritual systems and any discussion of Idoma masking north of the Benue has to acknowledge their influence'*.

Further on, we hear of Jukun, Alago and Igala people '*drawing upon specialized Hausa knowledge of medicines and magic as well as the Hausa veneration of ancestors*'. These are the Abakwariga, the Hausa who have held on to original belief, who administer the *Aljanu* healing.

When we think of Euthanasia, we think of it as an opinion from European thinking, then we encounter Odumu, which we are told had widespread influence throughout Idomoland. Its purpose was to '*euthanize babies born with serious physical defects that would render them unable to survive in a harsh environment*'. It is aspects such as this, the youthful police force and the second burials, which give us a picture of Benue Valley life.

A couple of pages on, we come to *Ungulali*, meaning flute. The jury is still out as to whether this is an original Idoma styling, or was influenced by others coming into Idomaland. Its one of the most unique stylings of wood sculpture I've seen. Three spherical heads, one on top of two others. The one on top looks to the front, the other two look sideways. This mask head dress was described to the scholar Roy Sieber as a '*harvest and Christmas "play" mask*'.

From a head dress, we return to statuettes – and names. Quite often, we just get the name of the workshop/atelier that is associated with a certain artist or regional artistic difference, but here we learn the name of the individual artists. Since the mid-20th century, we've known of Ben Enwonwu (Igbo), Solomon Wangboje (Yoruba) and Bruce Onobrakpeya (Urhobo); after reading this book, I can add the names Ochai of Otabi (Idoma), Aba of Agagbe (Tiv) and Umale Oganegi (Igala). One of the artists, Ojiji Igumale, was an Anjenu priest as well as sculptor; so he made the items that he would use in the rituals of protection and fertility; he paid homage to the Anjenu spirits, via what he had created for them.

We are shown a geometrically-decorated cosmetic box, by the aforementioned Igala artist, which recalled for me the Kuba and their cosmetic boxes of geometric patterning. Interesting to hear also, that both containers held the same substance. I don't know what they call it in Igalaland, but amongst the Kuba it is called *tukula*; a mixture of powdered camwood bark and palm oil; popular as a moisturiser, as well as its multi-purpose usage.

Alongside the visual, we were introduced to the verbal: the songs of praise. As the Malinke jali in Mali sang of Sundiata, the Idoma singer paid homage to Alekwu; one sang of their first great King; the other of their ancestral spirit. Talking of praise song, here is something dedicated to the elders, past and present...

The Tourist and the Master

English Tourist: What are you doing Man of Embira?

Master Carver: I'm making a staff for an esteemed elder.

Villagers: Made for one of wide renown,

Known in the villages and the nearest town.

Master Carver: I will embellish it with cowrie shells,

Selected rows of little white bells.

English Tourist: Is that a leopard emerging at the top?

The big cat, cream of the crop?

Master Carver: Yes, important in our symbology,

A signifier of authority.

English Tourist: I'm sure the elder will be happy with it.

Master Carver: Hope the ancestors bless each little bit.

Villagers: Made for one of wide renown,

Known in the villages and the nearest town.

It is in chapter four that we see the first staffs, carved by those such as the Uneme, Akoko-Edo and Embira peoples. On page 146, we see a photo of a '*senior titled man*' holding one; page 150 shows the staff and text that generated *The Tourist and the Master*.

And that's the basic essence of this book, the care and veneration of ancestors; and the elders who are closest to them, who mediate with them on behalf of their petitioning communities. Throughout the Benue Valley region, they honoured the ancestor with masquerades. Not just the figure draped in cloth and tunic, but with prayer, drums, dance, songs, yam, chicken and beer. There are many commonalities shared throughout the area, demonstrating migration and its subsequent influences; the heightened masquerades known as "tall ghosts"; cloths of indigo and white, of red and yellow; of the feathers of the nightjar and violet plaintain eater. Everyone seems to influence everyone else, especially where the Niger and Benue meet - that great confluence – and at the borders of ethnicity; Nupe, Yoruba, Jukun, Hausa, Chamba, Mumuye...

From wood to metal. When I think of lost-wax casting in Nigeria, I think first of all of Benin and Ife; so another reason for calling this book crucial, is the introduction to the metal working, in copper alloy, in the Benue Valley. There's a fantastic staff finial, Janus-headed: one face bearded, the other without facial hair. Looking at it, you know that it could only have been cast by a master; attributed to either an Igala or Egbira artist. In this the sixth chapter, we see a Tiv voice disguiser, Jukun axe, Verre sword and Igala and Longuda bells. Some bells were sacred, so were kept in shrines. We are told that '*The Longuda also kept cast clapper-bells with a sloped roof (gilaungla) so that when a hunter killed a leopard or a lion, such a bell could be hung around his neck in a dance celebrating his prowess*'. A statuette of a standing male, is said to be over 400 years old.

Moving from metal we go back to wood; to the '*Chamba double-figure statues, joined at a hip-level plinth*' and to those of their neighbours, the Mumuye, such as my favourites on page 246 and 268, There's an almost otherworldliness to the Jukun sculpture. The Wurbo figures '*display an intriguing gender ambiguity, with males and females wearing beards and only one wife, Agbadu (see fig.E.6), carved with breasts*'. These two peoples, as well as the Sura, Montol and others, take us into the world of Theranthropy – the fusion of animal and human forms. These masks had the appearance of baboons, crocodiles, buffalos and birds, alongside the human features. They were used in ceremonies such as those for manhood initiation and those for agricultural fertility.

The Mumuye would go to their mountain in Yoro, their spiritual centre, to ask for rain; reminding me of the Shona, who would send their ambassador of rain, the manyusa, to Mantonjeni Shrine in the Matopo Hills.

Baba Daloba

I would like to go there one day,
Walking through the scared forest,
Contemplating Baba Daloba.
As he sits on the stones of the elders,
Speaking and listening,
In the aura of the ancestor.

Voices: Shonshina, Shonshina;
They began and ended with Shonshina.

To watch the harvest festival,
See the hut of the revered drum,
Take me to the people called Mumuye.
If prayer came with wings,
You know I would go there;
Flying south of the River Benue.

Voices: Shonshina, Shonshina;
They began and ended with Shonshina.

From wood, we return to metal: to the creativity in iron. Focusing on the Chamba smiths who also smelted, we read of the double-hand gong which heralded and went where the masquerade led; the sickle of the priests; hoe blades and hoe of the women's cults and cult leaders, respectively; spears and clappers of the male associations. The spear and rattle on page 386, which *'formed part of the chiefly regalia used by Chamba Daka speakers'*, are particularly impressive, as are the Mumuye rainmaking wands, in *'distinctive zigzag form... They represented a flash of lightning or the sudden strike of a snake, both harbingers of thunder and rain'*.

Chapter 12 returns us to wood and the masks of the 'Kantana and other peoples, such as the *'Kulene, Sha, Rindre, Mada, Ron of Sha, Bu and Chesu'*. The masks featured antelope and buffalo as *'carved wooden dance crests or cap masks'*, in an all-embracing masquerade called *Mangan*, used in healing: *'leprosy, skin complaints and sometimes fevers'*.

The only problem with this book, is knowing what to share – and what regretfully, has to be omitted; knowledge presents itself from every paragraph. What Arnold Rubin began, Marla C. Berns and others have completed.

From wood to metal, back to wood, then more metal: now its time for clay, as the penultimate and final chapters focus on pottery. In the Benue Valley region, ceramics in ritual usage, seemed to have been used mainly for healing and divination purposes. A caption on page 478 says *'The nine Longuda healing vessels (kwandalha) displayed here were made successively in an effort to cure a hunter from the village of Dangir who suffered from the avenging spirit of a leopard he had slain'*. A vessel called *kwandal'zwungwa*, was used to treat and conquer mental illness. These vessels are still in use as remedy today. The same with the Cham-Mwana, Waja, Sula, they all used their creativity in clay for healing purposes. The Ga'anda, Bena and Yungur used their ceramics to *'focus, contain or facilitate contact with ancestral and tutelary spirits'*. A spirit vessel of the former shown on page 513 and an ancestor vessel from the Yungur people on 541, are my personal favourites from the ceramic repertoire.

This book must be standard issue in the art schools of Nigeria: Yaba, Nsuuka, Benin, Ibadan and others. To the three editors, the ten essayists – especially Arnold Rubin - and seven contributors, stand and take your applause: every reader of this book must want to give you a standing ovation. For giving us something gargantuan in scope, as well as size: for the gift of something crucial.

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Double Caryatid Figure

from *Pinterest*