

NATURALISTIC TERRA COTTA HEADS OF THE INSTITUTE
OF AFRICAN STUDIES

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We have reported on general pottery in the Research Review volume 3, number 1, page 63; some ritual pottery in volume 2, number 1; tobacco pipes, decorative and other useful clay artifacts, and on the remnants of 'Old Tafo', (Kumasi) pottery in volume 3, number 2, page 83.¹

We are, in this issue, putting a note on naturalistic terra cotta heads of Ghana in response to enquiries sent to us about this art.

As far as we are aware, the tradition of naturalistic terra cottas, like the stylistically symbolic ones, appears to exist in the art and art history of Ghana. Although we have yet to do a very extensive archaeological work on, and a large-scale ethnographic collection of, what is referred to in the literature, as the "Ife" type of naturalistic terra cotta heads, the slim evidence that is available points to the fact that such heads are not strangers to ancient clay sculpture of Ghana. The bulk of our present collections were obtained from all parts of Ghana but especially, from Kwahu and Ahinsan. Some of the funerary terra cottas from the Kwahu I.A.S. 1/64.93, 1/64.9, illustrated in the Ghana Notes of Queries, number 8 of January, 1966, page 13 and described by our collector and Research Assistant, K. Ameyaw, are naturalistic in style. However, the round hollow or solid heads, which are like the "Ife" types, are not too many in our collections. Recently, a Ph.D. Archaeology research student, Mr. J. Bellis,² from the University of Indiana, United States of America, has discovered a few heads similar to those we have in the I.A.S. museum. His collections are very outstanding and he contends that there is evidence of deposits of his 'finds' in the Twifo area where he is currently working.

Writing on funerary terra cottas of the Kwahu of Ghana, Roy Seiber,³ who has done on-the-spot study, suggested an apparently valid reason why the historical and stylistic analysis of terra cottas in Ghana present some difficulty. At the point of his research when he wrote this paper, the evidence he had led him to suspect that the art of terra cotta heads was aristocratic, and by aristocratic, he was referring to a group in the category of royals, which by general definition, he says, should be called an 'aristocratic sub-group'. Like him, we are unable to be specific on the question of whether Ghanaian terra cotta heads used to be restricted to the royalty as they appear largely to be now.

By and large, it appears, a highly naturalistic round pottery type of terra cotta heads were largely made after the death of the 'great people' - the people Seiber calls aristocrats. This might have been one of the reasons for the paucity of these heads which we are studying. The present quantity of these heads may possibly, but not necessarily, be an index to the presence or absence of the tradition of the "Ife" type of head in Ghana. We are calling it the "Ife" type, only because it is, in the literature of West African sculpture, the known example of the style of the head we are considering. It is pertinent to note that the present work of some of my colleagues at the Department of Archaeology, Legon, tend to prove that it is rather too early to suggest, especially without further research, that there is no ancient tradition in Ghana of the round, naturalistic potrait type of head. For not only in Akan from where the bulk of our examples come, but also in Ga-Adangme areas of Ghana, there are very ancient oral traditions which refer to this type of art. In some shrines, still not open to all and sundry, such heads form part of the ritual artifacts.

Mr. David Calvocoressi of the Archaeology Department, for example, has found a few such heads in Hani, west of Nsakaw, Ghana. He says his 'finds' are purely 'surface' collections, and they look neolithic. The fabric of the pottery (cat. 66.37, archaeology) is superficially identical to the fabric, he contends, of the head. He may be reporting more fully on it later. The evidence so far, therefore, suggests that further and more serious



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research on this art may not only be worthwhile but fruitful.

A note needs to be made immediately here on our information that in Agona area, deceased persons notwithstanding their statuses, could be commemorated by such funerary figures. Kwahu, of course, is the other area where naturalistic funerary terra cottas are still being used. In Agona, 'collective funerals' are not uncommon and when such funerals are observed, one 'figure' may be used to represent all the deceased persons. At the end of the celebration, the figure representing all the deceased, may be deposited on the tomb of the eldest or most outstanding of them all. Such figures are often naturalistic, but they are not necessarily 'photo copies' of any of the deceased people. (see example in picture, cat. 165.166. Height 8.16 inches).

The specific terra cottas on which we write the following notes are I.A.S./167.18, 165.111a - b, and 1.66.38. One of the 'finds' of Mr. J. Bellis is a large edition of 1.67.18, which was collected from Kusa, Adansi near Fomena.⁴ This figure, cat. 1.67.18, was used for the funeral of Nana Kofi Amoabeng, Sixth in the line of their chiefs.⁵ The figure was meant to be the naturalistic representation of the chief; hence the style, which according to our informant, was no stranger to the community. This figure was in the stool room and before the black stools, until it was given to us. Our donor was Nana Owia Akora Ababio, of course, with the consent of his elders.

Cat. I.A.S. 165/111a - b, height 6 3/10 inches was obtained from Nana Akuamoa Akyeampong I, Omanhene of Kwahu. It represented one in the retinue of a past chief - not the chief himself. This suggests a broader category of people other than chiefs, who were represented by that type of terra cotta head. This piece is similar to the head, cat. I.A.S. 1.66.38, which we regard as the most classical piece of our collections. The figure has a high forehead and ridged neck. The head is hollow and but for its rotundity it could be an example of a typical Ekuaba.

I.A.S. cat. 166.38 was used in the funeral observance of Nana Kusi Boadum (1807 - 1866) and we collected it from Assin Nyamkumasi near Fosu in the Central Region of Ghana. Our donor was Nana Kwaku Apute II of Assin Nyakumasi. The height of the head is eleven inches. The style of the hair is a sort of applique work. Round bits of clay pegs are stuck into little round holes made in the head and wherever the artist desired to show hair. But for the holes on the chin unmistakably showing holes for the clay pegs to indicate the figure's beard, it would not be wrong for an observer to regard the figure as a female piece. The suggestion derives its validity from the fact that the style of the hair is very much like the initial style of hairdo of young, indigenous Ghanaian girls when they begin plaiting their hair. In parts of Adangbeland, Ghana, it is a style for girls about to begin their puberty rites. This style is called 'Ntakoa' in Akan; 'Gbodwegbodwe' in Ewe, and 'Akokro' in Ga.

Other noteworthy points of the features of the figure are, the big protruding eyes, which are regarded as beautiful in many parts of Ghana, and the long forehead reminiscent of the famous Akuaba doll of the Akan. Having regard to the height of the piece, the neck could be described as long and, of course, ringed. The high forehead, in addition to the long neck, shows the features that are, even today, regarded in all Akanland, but especially in Ashanti, as beauty. Although this example is stylistically similar to the "Ife head" the features are typically Ghanaian.

We note that according to our data, the Kwahu heads are historically and stylistically linked with Ahinsan. An unmarked piece in our 'finds', collected by Paul Ozanne, a former archaeologist of this Institute, comes from the 15th or 16th century site of Aduoku, (Shai) or Ahinsan. Our collections in I.A.S., other studies of my colleagues in the Archaeology Department, and the thrilling 'finds' of Mr. Bellis, re-affirm our hypothesis that there may be a long and quite 'separate' tradition of this type of terra cotta art in Ghana.

1. There are a few back copies of some of the Reviews named in the I.A.S., Legon.
2. Mr. Bellis is attached to the Archaeology Department of the University of Ghana while he continues his research in Ghana. His collections, which are at present with him in the Archaeology Department, University of Ghana, are inspiring.
3. Roy Seiber is one of my greatest inspirers in the field of visual arts. He is an advocate of the African interdisciplinary approach to the study of visual arts. He is now the Acting Chairman of the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Indiana, U.S.A.
4. Collector was K. Ameyaw.
5. This chief is believed to be a contemporary of the Asantehene, Nana Osei Akoto 1824 - 1838.



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