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96. Shongo Staffs

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ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

Africa, West.

With Plate L.

Scott Macfie.

Shongo Staffs. By J. W. Scott Macfie, M.A., B.Sc.

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Very long ago, so tradition relates, Shongo, the god of thunder and lightning, visited the earth in the person of an old man. He carried for his support a staff, the height of a man's shoulder, on the head of which were carved two faces. A reduced copy of this staff is still used in the rites of Shongo.

During my residence at Ilorin, Northern Nigeria, in 1912, I was fortunate enough to see two of these staffs and to obtain the following notes regarding their use. The first was obtained at Iloffa, an Igbona town in the south-eastern part of Ilorin, by Mr. P. M. Dwyer, the resident in charge of the province, whose knowledge of the customs of the native peoples is unique, and to whom I am indebted for much interesting information concerning the worship of Shongo. This staff was 30 cm. long, and consisted of a short handle and a Janus-like head carved out of a single piece of soft wood. In the free end of the handle a small hole had been pierced. The head was flattened laterally, and was carved with two human faces placed back to back, and each surmounted by a curious peaked projection. In a lateral view the staff looked like an X resting on the top of an I, the peaked projections and the profiles of the faces representing respectively the upper and the lower parts of the limbs of the X, and the common neck and the handle of the staff forming the I. Between the peaked projection and the brow of each face there intervened a broad fillet marked with a number of vertical cuts which probably represented hair, and on each side of the staff, from the point where these fillets would have met down to the root of the neck, extended a vertical band carved with horizontal lines. The faces were remarkable inasmuch as they were certainly not negroid. The noses were prominent, the profile of the brow continuous with the line of the bridge of the nose, the lips thin and pouting, and the chins narrow. It is difficult to determine, however, to what extent these features were the result of design, as the carver may have been influenced by the shape of the block of wood on which he was at work. On each cheek there were three incisions similar to the Yoruba tribal markings, but these varied, it was said, in different districts.

FIG. 1.

The second staff (Plate L) was brought to me from Oke Odde, and like the first had been carved out of a single piece of wood. It measured 37 cm. in length, and consisted of a head, a body, and a handle. The head, as in the previous example, consisted of two faces looking in opposite directions, each surmounted by a peaked projection. In this case, however, the faces were grotesque, with enormous misplaced ears and slanting eyes. The body was formed by two figures placed back to back, and facing in directions at right angles to those of the faces on the head. The one figure represented a man playing a flute, and the other a bearded woman kneeling and holding forward her breasts. The latter the natives called by the Hausa name, *mai yi*,* affirming that they feared bearded women greatly because they killed men

* Probably *mai yi*, sorcerer; fem. *mayia*.

SHONGO STAFFS.

whilst they slept and ate them. There were no tribal marks on the cheeks of the four faces of this staff.

My native dresser, an intelligent Yoruba of Ilorin, on being shown one of these staffs called it *osi*, and gave me the following account of its uses which was afterwards confirmed both by other natives and by Mr. Dwyer. If a woman were barren, he said, she would pray to Shongo for a child. Should she thereafter conceive, the child when born would be dedicated to Shongo. At about the age of puberty he would be dressed in fine clothes and taken to one of the shrines of Shongo by his mother,

who would say; "Look, Shongo, this is the child you gave me." A ram would then be killed, and for seven days there would be feasting; and the child would be smeared with camwood, his head covered with indigo, and he would be given a staff and enjoined to keep silent for a period variously stated as seven days, one month, and three months. During this period nothing would induce him to speak; should he be accosted he would simply hold up his staff as a sign that he might not answer.

Adults also carry these staffs. For example, my dresser said that if he himself were ill he would go to a man in the town who would make *juju* and might advise him to "get Shongo." In this case he would procure a staff and carry it, never speaking all the time. At the end of a certain period, being better, he would take some special stones and put them with the staff in a wooden vessel shaped like a mortar, and would kill a ram or a goat beside the vessel, and pour the blood over the stones in it, and for seven days there would be feasting. He would not part with the staff, but he might lend it to his children "for Shongo." The stones used in this rite proved to be "celts," which are venerated as thunderbolts from Shongo, and some

FIG. 2.

of those I procured bore traces of blood. In Fig. 1 one of the wooden vessels referred to above is seen. The centre was hollowed out and in shape it resembled the wooden mortars in which yams are pounded, but from the positions of the rude figures carved on it, it was evidently intended to stand bottom uppermost. Two "Shongo stones," "celts," are shown lying on it.

Fig. 2 illustrates what appear to be developments of the smaller staffs. These staffs are not carried in the hand, but are kept in the houses of the worshippers of Shongo. I was told that a ram or a sheep was sacrificed before them, and that thereafter they were considered as *juju*. Their owners were certainly loth to part

with them, and owing to this prejudice I was unable to obtain specimens actually taken from the houses of natives, the two illustrated being freshly carved. Each consisted of a terminal portion which was especially pointed out to me as indicative of Shongo, a short handle, and an intermediate curved and painted part. The latter portion was decorated, from above downwards in the one case with figures representing a man with a drum, a leopard, a bird feeding another bird, and a coiled snake; and in the other a man riding a horse and holding in his right hand a long snake-headed stick, a bird, a monkey, and two little drummers placed back to back. The taller of the two staffs measured 83 cm. and the shorter 71 cm.

J. W. SCOTT MACFIE, M.A., B.Sc.

New Zealand.

Keith.

Mori in New Zealand. *By Arthur Keith, M.D., F.R.S.*

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On his present visit to England, the Rev. H. Mason, of New Zealand, brought with him two human skulls which were found in an old deposit at Wanganui,

FIG. 1.—PROFILE DRAWING OF THE CRANIUM OF THE WOMAN'S SKULL ($\frac{1}{3}$ NAT. SIZE).

FIG. 2.—FULL FACE DRAWING OF THE SAME ($\frac{1}{3}$ NAT. SIZE).

near the south end of the North Island. The crania were sent to the Royal Anthropological Institute for examination and report. The crania belonged unmistakably to the Mori race, and differ markedly from the crania of the Maori. Although the exact degree of antiquity which must be ascribed to the two crania is not at present ascertainable, all the evidence points to their belonging to a pre-Maori date. Mr. Mason's discovery thus supports the contention that the Mori, now confined—a mere remnant—to the Chatham Islands, were the inhabitants of New Zealand before the arrival of the Maori.

Of the two skulls, one is of an adult, a woman; the other is the cranium of a child about eight or nine years of age. The drawings of the skull of the adult (Figs. 1, 2, 3) show the very distinctive race marks of the Mori—as pointed out some years ago by Dr. Duckworth—the narrow, rather receding forehead, and the extremely prominent characteristic parietal eminences. The details relating to the measurements

FIG. 3.—VERTEBRAL VIEW OF THE SAME ($\frac{1}{3}$ NAT. SIZE).