

CENTRAL NIGERIAN ART REVISITED Mumuye and Surrounding Peoples

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In previous studies, Jan Strybol pointed out that - contrary to popular belief - sculpture flourished in northern Nigeria. Wood sculptures could be found just about everywhere, with the exception of part of the Far North. In this study, the author first examines the sculptural traditions of a number of peoples in central Nigeria, more specifically from the Jos Plateau and from the Middle Benue Valley to the source area of the Taraba River. These peoples can be described as non-centralised communities where art was mainly produced in perishable materials by part-time artists, in contrast to the centralised empires in the South (Ife, Benin) where full-time specialist sculptors created complex artefacts in durable materials (stone, bronze, iron).

Perhaps the most familiar ethnic group in the Central Benue region to lovers of African art are the Mumuye. Since the end of the last century, as a result of the advance of world religions, the traditional rites of the Mumuye have rapidly disappeared and with them the Mumuye sculptural tradition so much admired in Europe and America.

In addition to wood sculpture, Jan Strybol also pays attention to objects in bronze, iron, terracotta and other materials. These art forms have been very underexposed until now and have almost completely vanished. Finally, the author also delves into the artistic achievements of some little-known remnant groups within the Mumuye territory, which can boast of a rich art tradition.



Central Nigerian Art Revisited

Mumuye and Surrounding Peoples



Jan Strybol

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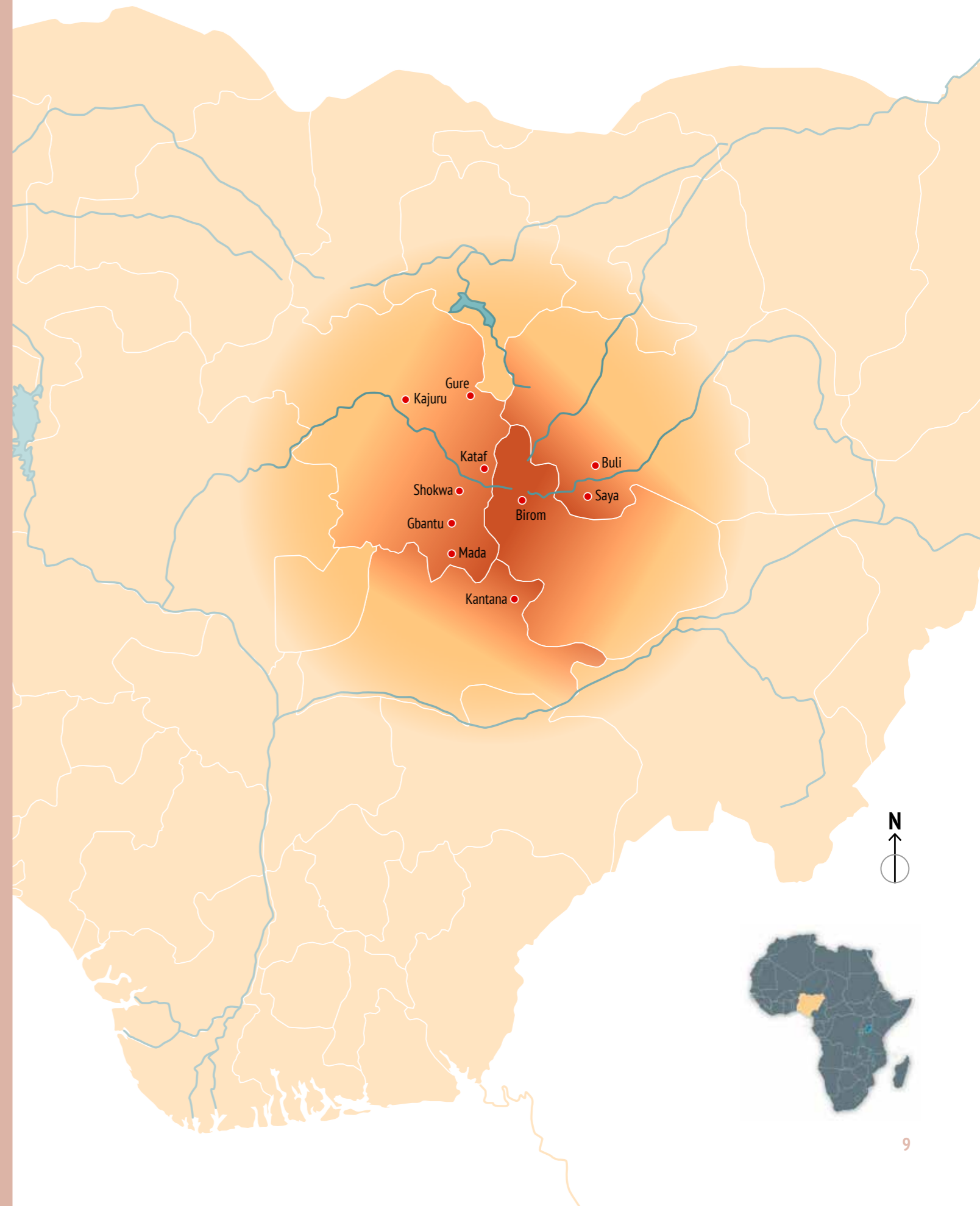


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Kaka female figure, detail

On and around the Jos Plateau





Kajuru

The Kajuru - autonym: Ajure - live in Kaduna State (Kajuru LGA). Their language belongs to the Plateau branch of the Niger-Congo language family. The Kajuru had their own small chiefdom until 1810, after which, like so many other peoples, they were overrun by the Fulani invaders.

Both massive sculptures (h: 66 and 64 cm) are virtually mirror images of each other. The expressive head with the large eyes and maw and the horns indicate that these are therianthrope figures, both male. In our opinion, the horns indicate an antelope. In side view, one clearly notices how gracefully the knee, head, torso and upper leg flow into one another. One leg is raised, the other continues horizontally behind the first. The maw rests on the raised knee. In one hand, the creature holds a child, in the other, a sceptre or similar ritual object.

We suspect that these heavily weathered sculptures were either part of a shrine or stood as guards at the entrance to a sacred hut.



A mancala game

Mancala games are very common in large parts of Africa. They are often undecorated boards, sometimes beautifully carved objects. In Nigeria, the Yoruba specimens especially are renowned. Very little is known about mancala games from Northern Nigeria. Sculptured games can be found, for example, among the Sukur in the north-east.

This remarkable board game (tile, 33x27x63 cm) is supported by two sets of three figurines that show all the morphological characteristics of Mumuye statuary: the sagittal crest, the long, pierced earlobes, and detached arms bent inwards. The shoulders resemble those of a sculpture from the former Barbier-Mueller collection⁵⁶. The six figures frame a base-board and are alternately male and female. Two reclining figures are also sculpted on the cover, one male and one female, in the same style as the supporting figurines. The cover is decorated across its entire surface with long lines alternating with triangular patterns.

This mancala game undoubtedly belonged to a man of great prestige within the community. We presume a rainmaker (*shomi*), a master of thunder (*kpanti giriri*), a cult leader (*kpanti va*), a diviner (*shoveriti*) or a *shomoro* (from *sho* 'man' and *mboro* 'with grey hair') belonging to the *vabung-* or *vasa-* society.





Bronzes and ritual artefacts in iron

Bronzes

C.O. Temple is the only one to give us some brief information about the foundry among the Mumuye⁶⁹. The ferruginous sand from the hills was melted in an earthen furnace pipe into which charcoal (*sheeke*) and ore were poured in succession. When the metal came out of the furnace, it was taken to the forge. To stir up the fire, the smith (*ranti*) used an earthen bellow wrapped in a goatskin (*barova*)⁷⁰.

Nowhere in Mumuye land were bronze casters still active in 1970-72. Blacksmiths did still work everywhere, but they limited themselves to the manufacture of implements and decorative objects in iron, such as adzes, axes, spears, knives, arrows, hooks, bracelets and rings, as well as ritual artefacts.

Until recently, bronze figures in the Middle Benue area were always attributed to the Verre, Tiv or Abakwariga.

This bronze sculpture (h: 39 cm) was presented as Mumuye (fig. 1). TL research indicates an age of 250 years (with a margin of error of about 30%), the most recent dating being 1835. Many Mumuye groups had already settled in their current territory by this time.

The head is slightly raised. The eyes, nose and mouth with puffed lips come into their own in profile especially. The long, narrow arms are separated from the torso and are only slightly bent. The legs are rendered in U shape, while the feet are completely missing (a rare occurrence). Scarifications are visible on the cheeks and arms. The sex is uncertain, but among the Mumuye, the long openwork ears usually indicate a woman.

We know of no similar figurative bronze figurines from the Middle Benue valley. Ethnic identification by the art dealers is based on the pierced earlobe, which is so common in Mumuye statuary. However, it should be noted that this custom was not limited to the Mumuye and can also be found in the sculptures of ethnic groups of the Jukunoid language group among others.

More convincing is a statue of 84 cm whose provenance and exact dating are not known (fig. 2). The head covering looks more like a headdress that turns into two openwork panels than a coiffure. The arms are detached from the long torso and enclose an inner space, while the zigzag legs rest on sturdy feet.

The face with the hollow eyes, the neck and torso covered with diamond-shaped patterns, the arms with small parallel lines and finally the lack of a navel make this figure very different from the morphology of the wood sculptures.

North-western residual groups

The far north-west of the Kpugbong region – in other words, the area to the west, north and south of Lankaviri – is ethnically very heterogeneous. During our research among the Kpugbong Mumuye, we therefore investigated these residual groups in connection with their artistic creations in wood and terracotta.



Jafow Kpe ('Jukunized Mumuye')

In a previous publication we described a sculpture (h: 120 cm) by Gavo, a sculptor of the Jafow Kpe ('the slaves of the Jibe') who had lived in symbiosis with the Jibe for a long time⁹⁴ (fig. 1). This effigy has a slim cylindrical frame, is middle-waisted and of middle density. The work, blacked with a red-hot iron, has large pierced earlobes. The borders of these are painted red, the lobe has been enhanced with kaolin as well as the mouth and the eyes. The protruding navel is distinctly asymmetrical with respect to the head and trunk. The ornament is limited to the red woollen braids around the neck and hips.

This figure (h: 115 cm) is slightly smaller (fig. 2). A tall cylindrical structure, it is of medium girth and density. The edges of the large openwork ears are painted red, while the surface has been heightened with kaolin, as have the mouth and eyes. There is a protruding navel below the slender torso. The decoration is limited to braids of red wool around the neck. This *jagana* statue is also the work of Gavo, whose compound was located along the bush trail from Kona to Minda.

Like the previous one, this sculpture was also used for therapeutic purposes.

Three other sculptures come from an area north-west of Kona village, in the direction of Zingra and Merikuni. They were made by a sculptor whose name we could not find out. Their height varies between 100 and 120 cm and all are of rather rudimentary quality.



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