

Preface

The immediate impetus for this illustrated essay may be found in the inability of one of its authors, on two occasions, to meet the reasonable request that he provide a note to accompany publication of Chamba statues in catalogues of African art. The requests must have seemed reasonable to those making them. I had undertaken fieldwork in Chamba communities intermittently between 1976 and 1990, with two longer stays: at the outset, predominantly in Mapeo, Nigeria, and in the mid 1980s in Yeli, Cameroon. However, I saw few wooden statues in the first place; none at all in the second; and precious little while travelling more widely to other Chamba places. Preoccupied by what was under my nose rather than what wasn't, I devoted scant attention to the matter of missing statuary, and certainly less than I now wish I had. Well aware how anthropologists have courted allegations of nostalgia by arriving, too often for coincidence, 'just too late' to record some vanishing facet of local lives—the very disappearance of which their presence indexed—I do venture such a claim in one limited sense. During the decade preceding my first fieldwork (roughly 1965–75) Chamba wooden statuary did almost vanish from Chambaland. So, while I was able to research the contexts from which the statues had been taken, I was unaware quite how big was the absence staring me in the face.

The less immediate impetus for the essay goes back to the late 1980s, when Arnold Rubin invited me to contribute a Chamba chapter to a projected survey of the sculpture of the Benue River valley. My main focus was to be Chamba masks, of which I had seen aplenty, but I also re-examined illustrations in Frobenius's record of his 1911 expedition's passage through Chambaland, and Arnold directed me towards a couple of published examples of statues in German museum collections that corresponded to the columnar sculptural conception that Frobenius reported. When Arnold died I continued comparative research into the masks of the Chamba and their neighbours—a project on the backburner

to which I turned when time permitted – but I left the question of statuary at that. It took the two invitations I spoke of earlier to galvanise my realisation there was a problem to be addressed: these invitations involved first a single female Chamba statue (in the Koenig collection, **Figure 1a**), and then a pair of figures standing upon a single base with a shared pair of legs in the Horstmann collection, **Figure 3b**. Both single and double figures were attested from German colonial Kamerun, however the execution of these Chamba statues was quite unlike any collected before the First World War.

Embarrassment about my own unfamiliarity with these pieces – having by then published two monographs on Chamba – was compounded by the tone of certainty with which they were presented not just as Chamba, but even as typically Chamba. Moreover, they were attributed functions that rang no bells for their sometime ethnographer – for instance, having something to do with a particularly marked Chamba reverence for twins of which I was unaware, or with an ancestor cult that I thought Chamba lacked. How could the ‘African art world’ – a set of institutions, individuals and the channels between them that cannot be unpicked much here – be so sure these were typical Chamba statues? And how did the denizens of that world know so confidently what they had been for? And on what grounds could they be proposing dates as early as the nineteenth century for their carving?

These conundrums deserved an investigation that I felt inadequately equipped to undertake. However, researching other matters in the collection and papers of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, I had the fortune to meet Christine Stelzig, who would later issue the second invitation to comment on a double Chamba statue that I failed to accept. Rather than take umbrage at this, as a fellow reader of whodunits, Christine allowed herself to be persuaded to accept my invitation to join her knowledge of the world of collections and collectors to my ethnographic experience of Chamba and carry out a forensic investigation of sources on, and examples of, Chamba statuary. In the classic manner of detection, we have questioned witnesses, examined evidence, and now stand, metaphorically in the drawing room, about to tell all in the final chapter.

Our argument – the evidence falls just short of certainty – made in detail in the following pages is that some Chamba statuary underwent hitherto unremarked formal change. Most statues in this new form were probably produced during the inter war years of the British and French Mandates in Cameroon. Coincidentally they were carved in the two Chamba places I know best – on the Cameroon Nigeria border – and they were predominantly the work of a single carver and of those whom he influenced. In the course of a single period of collection that more or less emptied this border area of collectable statuary, nearly all surviving examples of this form left Nigeria, predominantly via Cameroon, during the Biafran War. To judge by the frequency of their exhibition and publication – and not least the prices they command – these have been the most aesthetically appreciated of all Chamba statues in northern collections. However, this is the first study to pose questions about who made them,

where they were made, why they were made, and what they were used for. In offering it, we mean to restore some of the original cultural and social context lost by the manner of these statues leaving Africa, and to show how reconstructing the dispersion of a type of Chamba statuary sharing particular formal properties yields potentially valuable information about original provenance. Because there are fewer than a score known examples of the finest Chamba statues made by a single carver in this innovatory form, and most of their original American and European owners are still living and have been generous in their co operation, our method attempting to construct a dated collection history for each piece is well suited to our subject. Because Chamba statuary has hardly been found in 'Chambaland' for thirty years or more, our task indeed boils down to a kind of 'rescue' ethnography and art history. However, this need not be a pejorative label. Similar attention to historical sources to establish context, and successive ownerships to support provenance, would be quite standard in scholarship on the European masters, as even the most casual reading of any exhibition catalogue would attest. What particularly differs in this case is our use of oral evidence not just in relation to Africa, as an unplanned spin off from conventional ethnographic research, but also in accessing the knowledge of dealers and collectors in Europe and elsewhere. Not only the small scale of the Chamba collection, but also the relatively recent timing of its original acquisition has worked in our favour. Should there be other cases that would reward investigation in similar fashion, it is worth remarking that the opportunity for 'salvage' art ethnography in this case would probably have disappeared in another twenty years.

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