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The Sacred Sculpture of the Chocó in the Context of the Aesthetic Memory of Africa and her Diaspora: Ritual and Art

← MARTHA LUZ MACHADO CAICEDO →

Summary

This is a book on the sacred sculpture of the *Chocó*, an Amerindian indigenous people who dwell in the Colombian shores of the Pacific Ocean. I put forth here my analysis of the aesthetics and history of the *Chocó*, as well as my exploration of their spiritual and sculptural memory. Simultaneously, I point out how in the religion, myths and aesthetics of those people who are the subject of my inquiry there is a manifest presence of the arts of African civilizations – namely those of peoples who are cognate with linguistic families such as the Akan, which includes the Mina, Fanti and the Bran or Abren; the Gur group, as in the Chamba; the Ewe, including the Arará, Popo and Chala; the Yoruba, as in the Lukumi; the Igbo or Ibibio, for the Carabalí or Calabar; and the speakers of the Bantu language, that is, the Kongo, Loango, Chokwe, the Bambara or Bamba, and the *Manyomba*.

The tradition of sacred sculptures marks the everyday life of the *Chocó* people. Their carvings make up an ensemble of objects inscribed in the religious-therapeutic system known as the *Canto de Jai* [Jai chants] – an ancestral cult officiated by priests known as the *jaibanás*. This is a vital art form within which the human figure has a recurrent role. Every piece is the sacred representation of the *familiars* [the kinfolk]. Hence it also merges ritual, symbolic and institutional dimensions around their religious-therapeutic practices.

Even though the sculptures of this people are part of an Amerindian religious system, as far back as 1940 the Swedish ethnographer Henry Wassén ventured to propose



the presence of African aesthetic motives in those sculptures, and declared that the similarities between the objects created by the peoples from one and the other continent might well respond to the influences that African captives – brought mainly from Angola, but also from regions that now belong to Ghana and the Ivory Coast – had on the local cultures. That hypothesis arises from the fact that the religious system of the Bantu peoples (to whom Wassén makes a reference) and those of the Akan, the Ewe and the Fon, among other groups, are founded on the cult of the ancestors, who are represented in those cultures – just as they are with the Chocó – by way of wooden anthropomorphic sculptures.

The history that the Chocó people foster may explicate Wassén's assumption: the colonial mining economy of those lands was grounded on the labor force of thousands of captives from diverse regions of Central and West Africa, who transformed the cultural landscape of the Colombian Pacific littoral with their particular modes of thinking, their epistemologies, their distinct ways of being and acting – while that influence was implicitly framed by singular circumstances of dominance and intimidation at the hands of the colonial masters.

While most anthropologists and historians recognize the presence of the descendants of Africans enslaved in that region, relatively few of them have attempted to comprehend the impact generated by the encounter between the indigenous peoples who inhabited those lands and the newly arrived Africans as well as their descendants. The hypothesis offered by Wassén was in fact effaced amidst the many silences that keep the Afro-Colombians in obscurity. Even today we face a persistent explanatory gap, which does not correspond to the actuality of a logical consistency that has held on in the relation between those two peoples who make up the region's ancestry. It is for these reasons that I have included – notwithstanding all its implications – the historical variable of the Africans' presence, as a necessity for a comprehensive study of the Chocó people. That presence is disclosed in the documents that refer to those peoples, and in the collections of their objects that museums and universities have gathered.

In accordance with Wassén's assumption, and bearing in mind the inter-ethnic links between the Africans, their descendants, and the aboriginal Chocó that prevailed – and still stand – from colonial times, my inquiry offers a historical association between America and Africa. Hence, in order to elucidate the Canto de Jai sculptures, this essay incorporates the concept Africa in the Latin American indigenous context. Moreover, I pose the actual probability that the Chocó sculpture may have taken its nourishment from the local realities, the social schemes, the myths and images of its times.

The present document examines the region of the Colombian Pacific littoral, so as to conceptualize the material culture of the Chocó in a different manner, starting from an argument that accounts for the spiritual, cultural and epistemological values of the Africans and their descendants. My study gives its right place to the recorded memories



of those men and women who were uprooted from Africa and exported to America by the slave trade. I begin with the idea that in the context of subjection and shackling, of a consistently threatened life, of suffering and uncertainty, the native religious system as much as the mystical traditions that African men and women were bound to bring with them across the Atlantic could not fail to be present in one and the same setting. Consequently, I put forth as a hypothesis the possibility that the relations built on the basis of daily coexistence – while restricted by the narrow limits of colonial domination, and arising through the crevices of clandestine freedom – generated bonds of mutual assistance and solidarity between the Chocó and the Africans.

In order to support my hypothesis, I bring two inquiries into play. On one hand, I examine the mythical history of the Chocó, since I reckon that it must reveal the way in which the *jaibanás* from oldest times acquired their knowledge and insights. I search there as well for data which may account for possible encounters that the ancestors of the present-day Chocó had with the Africans or with their descendants. In reviewing the ancient Chocó traditions, recorded in their primeval myths of medicine and healing, I make clear how the *negros* appear there relaying their religious and therapeutic knowledge to the natives, and I lay emphasis on that historical relationship between the two peoples. On the other hand, I assume that those oral histories have got to provide the necessary data to understand the religious memory of the Africans and their children. In order to do just that, I wade – in the full sense of that word – into the concept of *los espíritus del agua* [the water spirits] with which the Chocó endow their esculptures; thus to compare that notion with a similar feature, which is deeply anchored in the African epistemology and closely related to the pan-African worldview of the Muntu: a system of thought that integrates the living with their ancestors, with nature and with space-time. So, just as it occurs in the religious system of the Chocó, among the Africans the *espíritus del agua*, the ancestors, the wood carvings and the word foster prosperity and well-being.

For the following exercise regarding the ethnic parallels, I resort to the tradition of the Chocó cultural hero *hijo de la pierna* [child of the leg], who is intimately linked with the medical and healing arts. I compare that one with a similar myth that has been alive in Africa up to the present, among the Ewe-Fon, those ancestors of the Afro-Colombians whose origins go back to the countries known today as Benin and Togo. Over there, the *hijo de la pierna*, who – curiously – has the same name as his Chocó counterpart, is embedded in their religious system, where it is the most important spirit for healing and stands as an integral part of their complex of religious beliefs and practices. Subsequently, I point out that the concept of *puercos de monte* [wild pigs] of the Chocó religious system may perhaps be likened to a similar “metaphor,” which the Bakongo (kin of the Bantus) use to name the wise handlers of herbs. This component factor overruns the association between the Chocó and African captives such as the



Ewe, Fon and Bantu, and brings into our discussion their descendants, the black *médicos raiceros* [herbal healers] of the Colombian Pacific. I come to the conclusion that these myths on the origins of the *Canto de Jai*, and the characters that make them possible, seem to point out that there have been intimate links between the indigenous peoples and the new generations of Africans; and that, accordingly, the African diaspora would have bequeathed its own legacy to the spirituality of the Chocó.

I carry out the second inquiry by comparing the morphological features of the Chocó ritual batons with their counterparts among the wood carvings from those African ethno-nations that – due to the violence unleashed upon them by European enterprises – ended up as providers of captives to be transported to the region that is now Colombia. I focus on the diverse sculptural aesthetics that exist in the native places of the ancestors of the Afro-Colombians, and I then figure a possible ethno-aesthetic parallel with the Chocó sculptures. To bring such task to completion, I follow the assumption that those sculptures (and the African ones as well) are qualified as creditable documents that represent *los familiares* (the kinfolk, as they call them), and that they entail the possibility of a temporary permanence in their aesthetics: inasmuch as they are symbols, the carvings situate the ancient ancestry in an ever-present time. Presuming that the Chocó iconography may be conceived as a depository of the aesthetic memory of the African diaspora, I resort to an “imaginary archaeology” in order to explore the iconographic memory of the Africans in the Colombian Pacific. I anchor the document on the question regarding the beginnings and the evolutionary process of the Chocó sculptural arts. Then, knowing that one of the ways to answer it is by inscribing the art form in its historical and sociocultural context, I put forth my hypothesis around the probable memories of the Africans who were taken by force to cohabit with the natives during several centuries.

This project, *The Sacred Sculpture of the Chocó in the Context of the Aesthetic Memory of Africa and her Diaspora: Ritual and Art*, expands the registers of the Colombian artistic memory. As well, it focuses on the Chocó sculptors and points out how their trade is confined by a composition that has multiple schemes of the technical and stylistic orders, while it entails profound religious and cultural constructs. As one approaches the experience of the carver of ancestral figures, there come into view the technological, social, cultural and political tracks that stand as the emergence point for the persons now represented in wood, who simultaneously recall the socio-historical structure that is their cradle, the culture that they belong to, and the environment that sustains it. At the same time, the document is a testimonial to the uncertain future that stands before the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities of the Colombian shores on the Pacific, as they face the brutal impact of an internecine war, the expropriation of their lands and the consequent ejection: calamities that cast dire uncertainty on the continuity of aesthetic and symbolic systems that are intimately bound to the territory.



My reflection on the Chocó sculpture led into a “translation” of that people’s aesthetics, which fully respects the local canons for beauty. In this case, “translation” literally connotes the act of “expressing in one language what has been orally expressed or written previously in another” (paraphrased from the dictionary of the *Real Academia Española*). By the same token, said musing turned out to be an interpretation of the spatial concept of “measure,” according to the parameters for proportions favored by the Chocó sculptors.

The sacred batons of the Chocó people are not made at random: every one of their features has a reason for being there, and it is soaked in culture, in beliefs and traditions. Starting from a notion of style understood as an aesthetic pattern that is extracted from an artistic piece of work, a regularity, a repetition of signs, this essay establishes the styles of the Chocó tutelar batons. For instance, the *jai sarra* or *porría*, which is a hieratic sculpture – the representation of spirits, of the kinfolk – and at the same time a work of art attached to the religious system of the *Canto de Jai*. Thus, the conclusion stating that those statues, besides being works of art, are ritual materials, symbols and, finally, *an institution*: they are indeed the chosen expression of an Amerindian religious-therapeutic institution.

Moreover, this thesis includes the recovery of *Un siglo de registro de la memoria estética escultórica de los emberás y los waunanas* [A Century of Records of the Aesthetic/Sculptoric Memory of the *Emberá* and the *Waunana*], by way of a visual collection, brought together for the first time the artistic/religious patrimony of certain indigenous peoples; the explanation for that cultural gear, compiled on the basis of photographs, reveals the possible aesthetic legacy of the Afro-descendants whose beneficiary has been the art of the Chocó nation.

To sum it up, in the context of the African diaspora, this textual work presents the opulence of their aesthetic legacy, which has been previously denied and disallowed. This dissertation recognizes the human dimension of the enslaved Africans: beings with a history, with origins, with a memory, with their own value systems, with a substantive cultural estate and with an infinite aesthetic wealth. Rescuing the discourse on absence and suppression, as well as the Africans’ iconographic memories in their exile, is a contribution to the acts of historical and epistemological reparation owed to the Africans and their descendants, as per the outlines of the “World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Modes of Intolerance,” which met in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. Likewise, being able to count on the Africans and their children, and to re-examine their relationship with the Chocó, may perhaps rectify the falacious discourse that has been upheld until today regarding the African diaspora, the people under this study, and Colombia itself.

Translated from the Spanish original by Juan Julián Caicedo

