

CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN WEST AFRICA

Dem OMOKHODION

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Benin

ABSTRACT A Late Stone Age tradition characterized by microlithic tools appears to have originated in the forest region of West Africa. This was later influenced by waves of pottery making and iron technology from across the Sahara. Associated with these influences was the domestication of animals and cultivation of plants. At first, these West African communities were probably composed of sedentary village farmers or nomadic pastoralists who also practiced hunting and collecting. Agriculture appears to have led to population growth and long distance mercantile activities. There is a steady concern with abstract representations beginning with engravings on rocks and ostrich eggshells in the Sahara, followed by the making of clay models of domesticated animals in the grassland zones and then clay figures in human form as represented in Nok art. The evidence indicates that the art traditions were connected with the use of magic or witchcraft and with cosmological beliefs as social markers and as agents of social control.

INTRODUCTION

This essay develops a perspective for West African Prehistory from the Late Stone Age through the Early Iron Age to recent societies. A correlation is drawn between technical innovation and new social formation, characterized by status differentiation and magic. Evidence is drawn from archaeology, ethnography and history. The prehistory of West Africa is unlike that of East Africa, Southern Africa, or North Africa. Knowledge of the Early and Middle Stone Ages in West Africa is minimal partly because early Pleistocene sediments or rock formations there are not exposed for study as they are in East Africa. In addition, the nature of ancient West African climate or environment was such as to discourage human settlement. In the later Quaternary or Holocene, however, there appear to have been shifts in climatic conditions and later Stone Age cultures were well represented as the savanna and the forest environments were progressively populated. It is becoming increasingly clear that the traditions of the recent West African societies are of considerable antiquity and that it may be possible to construct models that can explain the relationships of the archaic institutions and the later Islamic and European influences.

CLIMATIC CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT

It was previously thought that glacial conditions in the northern latitudes were contemporary with wet phases or pluvials in Africa (Brooks, 1914; Leakey, 1950). The oscillation of wet and dry phases, comparable to the glacial and interglacial periods, was thought to have influenced the pattern of physical and biological formation of the continent, and to have effected Stone Age cultures. Later studies (e.g., Burke et al., 1971) revealed that the pattern of climatic change on the continent was more complex than had been thought. There were, for example, regional variations partly determined by wind patterns. At the time of the Wurm-Wisconsin glacial maximum, between 18,000 and 20,000 B.P., for example, the lower Senegal River valley was blocked by sand blown from the Sahara. This aeolian activity proved that the northern ice cap caused the dry northeast winds to blow further south (Burke et al., 1971:

1). The wet and dry phases for West Africa especially have therefore been revised. South of the Sahara, the condition about 10,000 B.P. was wet, followed by a minor dry period about 7000 to 5000 B.P.; it was wetter between 5000 B.P. and 3000 B.P. than at present (Burke et al., 1971: 1). In short, the period post 7000 B.P. to the present has been marked by progressive aridity (McIntosh and McIntosh, 1981: 604). The period of post 10,000 B.P. coincides with the major cultural development in West Africa, at first characterized by later Stone Age sites, within the pattern of precipitation and desiccation of the Sahara.

The effect of climatic oscillation in West Africa was the contraction and expansion of the forest from or into the savanna grassland. In general, the grassland is characterized by low rainfall varying from about 1,400 mm on the forest margin to about 200 mm annually on the Saharan frontier (McIntosh and McIntosh, 1981: 603). Grasses, too, follow this gradient and become shorter as one moves north. The tree species include the fire resistant thorny plants such as the acacia. The animals may vary from short grass browsers such as the gazelle to the tall giraffe. The forest supports a greater diversity of plant and animal species and has a high annual rainfall, which is conducive to the growth of high canopy trees, such as *iroko* (*Chlorophora excelsa*) and *obeche* (*Triplochiton scleroxylon*), and climbers, herbs and wild roots. Ground and tree game includes ground rodents, squirrel, antelope and burrow animals. The swamps of the coastal deltas support plant species adapted for aerial breathing and generally small animals and birds.

ACERAMIC LATE STONE AGE ADAPTATION

This section briefly presents some representative evidence and then summarises the general picture of adaptation. The earliest Late Stone Age site in West Africa is in southwest Nigeria, about 50 kilometres into the rain forest. This is the Iwo Eleru site near Akure (Shaw, 1969: 191; 1984). Its earliest pre-pottery phase spans a period of 9000 to 3000 B.C. and is characterized by a high proportion of microliths most of which are made of quartz. This microlithic tradition is also associated with a human skeleton which is the earliest from West Africa and may represent an ancestral population (Daniels, 1975: 27). The Iwo Eleru site is important in the Late Stone Age context because it is quite early and may suggest local origin within the forest environment.

An aceramic level is also represented at the Old Oyo site, in southwest Nigeria slightly north of the forest belt (Willet, 1960) and at the Rop rock shelter (Fagg, 1972; Rosenfield, 1972; Eyo, 1965). The pattern in these sites is similar to that of Iwo Eleru. There is high proportion of geometrics. In modern Ghana, there is a pre-pottery site at Bosumpra dated to $3270 \pm$ B.C. where the artifacts include microliths, a few scrapers, and some burins. In western Bourkina Tasso is the Rim site. The assemblage from the Rim I aceramic level is composed of 35 per cent microliths, large choppers, knives, pointed tools, burins, chisels, and cores as well as isolated examples of flaked axes. Although there is no date for Rim I, it predates a period of aeolian activity which buried it at about 4000 B.P. (Andah, 1978: 101, 114).

For the Yengema cave in south central Sierra Leone, Coon (1968) described three cultural phases. Lower Yengema or Phase A includes a large variety of choppers, scrapers, and cores on quartz with occasional burins and hammer stones. There is no date for this early Yengema cave but it could be contemporary with Lower Kamabai (Atherton, 1972), situated in the north central Sierra Leone. Lower Kamabai yielded microliths, points, burins and choppers with a radiometric date of $2,560 \pm 115$ B.C. Another nearby contemporary site—the Yagala rock shelter was dated $1,070 \pm 100$ B.C. (Atherton, 1972: 73).

The evidence indicates that the Late Stone Age microlithic tradition probably originated in the west African forest or forest-savanna ecotone, most likely in its eastern zone. It appears that humid and forest belts were probably further north than they are at present. At the Iwo Eleru site, the large number (over half a million) microliths (Shaw, 1969: 191) appears to indicate a large population concentration which exploited forest resources such as rhizomes, vegetables, and ground and tree game. Towards the west of this area, the tradition appears to lag but it was probably within the context of new influences such as the spread of pot making and the domestication of plants and animals.

CERAMIC OR NEOLITHIC LATE STONE AGE

The later west African Iron Age societies may have started to take shape in the Neolithic period. This Neolithic period occurred during a dry phase, and the change in weather probably gave rise to a movement of population to the more humid south or to permanent water places such as lakes and rivers. This movement created contacts between previously isolated groups. This process is attested to by influences that appear to originate from the Sahara. These influences include two Neolithic traditions, one originating from the Maghreb in the north-west Sahara and the other appearing to come from the eastern Sudan. From the highlands of Maghreb is a tradition called the Neolithic of Capsian Tradition characterized by a Late Stone Age assemblage: geometrics, mixed with bifacially flaked arrowheads; polished stone axes; and pottery, ovoid in shape, with conical or 'appendicular' bases, decorated with a simple comb motif (Camps, 1977: 7) and perhaps also with incised rim decoration. Ostrich eggshells, sometimes with decorative engravings, were also found. The dates of the Neolithic of Capsian Tradition are between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C.

South of the Maghreb, the sites of Dhar Tichitt in south central Mauritania span a Neolithic settlement in wet to dry conditions (Muson, 1968, 1971). There are eight phases of Tichitt tradition. The lithic assemblage includes end scrapers, small stemmed projectiles, highly polished axes, and milling stones. Pottery is decorated with dentate stamping, fabric marking, and diagonal cord impression, suggesting affinities with Neolithic of Capsian Tradition. Early Tichitt food sources included fish, crocodile, and aquatic molluscs which were replaced later by large mammals. The Chebka phase or phase 6 marks the beginning of cultivation during a period of relative drought as indicated by the abundance of *Pennisetum* impressions on pottery. The date for this period is about 1000 B.C.

Formally called the Neolithic of Sudanic Tradition, the Saharo-Sudanic Neolithic is widespread in the central and southern Sahara. Unlike in the Neolithic of Capsian Tradition, ostrich eggshells in this tradition are rare and never decorated. Also, true geometrics are rare or absent (Camps, 1977: 8). Characteristically, the pottery is decorated with wavy-line and dotted wavy-line. There are also grindstones or millstones. The Saharo-Sudanic Neolithic is recognized in several Saharan sites such as Khartoum, where bone harpoons form part of the cultural complex (McIntosh and McIntosh, 1981: 605). In the Tenerean facie there is evidence of wild zebra, hippopotamus, pigs, mudfish, and crocodiles as well as domesticated cattle and perhaps *Pennisetum* (Camps, 1977: 8). The site of Amekni in southern Algeria contains ceramics although no evidence of food production has yet been reported. It dates to 8670±150 and 8050±80 B.P. (Smith, 1984: 85).

The pattern of Late Stone Age adaptation in the Sahara appears to be initially characterized by hunting and fishing groups near the ancient lakes and rivers prior to 8000 B.P. The introduction of cattle (*Bos*) to this region is put at between 5952±120 B.P. and 6754±290 B.P.

(Smith, 1984: 86) suggesting that, as desiccation set in on the Sahara, subsistence strategies changed to a nomadic pastoralism. Although pottery impressed with *Pennisetum* is known, direct evidence for plant cultivation in the Sahara at this period is minimal. Sahara rock art and mobiliary engravings on ostrich eggshells provide evidence for pastoral nomadism between 5000 and 2500 B.C. (McIntosh and McIntosh, 1981: 606), but the magico-religious aspects of these items should also be noted (Camps, 1977: 9–10) because in later West African societies, the role of magic assumes a dominant place, especially in the institution of divine kingship.

In West Africa, these Neolithic influences from both the east and the west of the Sahara were reworked. At the northernmost bend of the Niger, in Mali, the sites of Karkarichinkat produced groundstone axes, projectile points, grindstones and bone harpoons. Pottery includes simple jars decorated with wavy-line, rocker stamping, and fibre rouletting (Smith, 1972). The fibre rouletting has not been noted in the Sahara, so it is probably of southern origin. There are also clay figurines of cattle, including domesticated *Bos*, and goat bones. This tradition was probably in existence about the third and second centuries B.C., at which time the high water table in the Tilemsi Valley provided a refuge area in the face of the desiccated Sahara. If so, the groups subsisted on herding as well as hunting and collecting.

At Iwo Eleru site, there is a ceramic level in the post 3000 B.C. period, associated with trapezoids made of chalcedony showing a gloss behind the cutting edge. This artifact is similar to a 'sickle flint' (Shaw, 1984: 153) and is perhaps evidence of grass or cereal harvesting. The evidence for agriculture from Iwo Eleru is not conclusive. Iwo Eleru ceramics are, however, continuous with present day Yoruba ware. In modern Ghana, there are Neolithic sites at Kintampo, Ntereso and Begho. The Kintampo Neolithic is preceded by an initial Punpun phase in which pottery is present, although scarce, and is decorated with twisted rouletting. Kintampo is associated with artifacts such as chisels, lip plugs, bone harpoons, and arrow heads. Pottery is decorated with comb-stamping and rocker impression or 'walking comb' (Rahz and Flingt, 1974: 15). The associated 'terra cotta cigars' are thought to have been used as potting tools (Posnansky, 1984: 147), but it may be that they were used in cult rituals. There appears to be some evidence for dwarf cattle and dwarf goats on some of the Ghanaian sites (Posnansky, 1984: 149–157), sometimes in the form of terra cotta art objects. These Neolithic sites cluster in the middle and later half of the second century B.C. Some of the Kintampo materials are located close to major Iron Age sites which are continuous with historic societies. Such sites include Begho, a medieval town founded about A.D. 1000 whose legend speaks of founding ancestors having emerged 'from a hole in the ground within a grassy plain' (Posnansky, 1984: 149).

Other Neolithic sites are known from the upper levels of Rim (Andah, 1978: 75), Yengema Phase B (Coon, 1968), Kamabai in Sierra Leone (Atherton, 1972), and the broad delta of the Casamance River in the southwestern corner of Senegal (Linares, 1971: 23). The cultural assemblages for Yengema, Kamabai, Yagala and Rim may be regarded as broadly similar, with GSA and ceramics, and as contemporaneous. The levels may have been occupied from the middle of the third century B.C. to the middle of the second century B.C. or even longer. The ceramics of Rim show twisted rouletting similar to those of Karkarichinkat and perhaps to those of Punpun in Ghana which further emphasizes the southern origin of this technique. These western West African sites are sometimes described as 'Guinea Neolithic' (Atherton, 1972: 39), probably representing a neolithic facie lacking direct evidence for agriculture. The site of Casamance has pottery with decorations of punctations, wavy-line incisions and grid-stamping. That the group that occupied the Casamance delta intensively exploited water resources is indicated by the huge accumulation of bivalve shells on the site (Linares, 1971: 23).

The West African ceramic Late Stone Age or Neolithic is important for several reasons. Apart from the influences coming in from the Sahara. The people at this time appear to be adjusting to local ecological conditions. The problem of domestication and agriculture is unlikely to be easily answered for West Africa partly because some of West African plant domesticates are archaeologically problematic since their remains do not survive well in the soil. An example of such a domesticate is the yam which is a West African mainstay. Even so, as Professor Shaw (1984: 154) insists, efforts to solve this riddle should not be abandoned. Until this is done, the adaptations of indigenous and introduced cultigens cannot be fully appreciated. Animal domestication, however, is fairly well represented during the period post-3000 B.C. Depending on the extent of forest and tsetse fly, cattle herding was usually restricted to the Sudan savanna zone. The presence or absence of livestock in the grassland played an important role in the succeeding Iron Age cultures.

EARLY IRON AGE

Like pottery, iron technology was probably introduced from across the Sahara but in what pattern and at what time remain matters of debate. However iron got to West Africa, there is no doubt that it led to direct population growth relative to agricultural productivity or to a competitive manipulation or monopoly of long distance trade routes involving elements in the cultural complex all leading to the formation of town centers. Status hierarchy in such centers is reflected in magico-symbolic art, such as terra cotta figurines, and in great burial structures attesting to temporal status concerns as well as to beliefs in an afterlife.

Although iron was the dominant metal, there is evidence for early mining of copper. It is possible that other metals such as tin, zinc, and lead were also exploited in antiquity in West Africa. Copper was smelted, for example, at the Sekkiret sites, near Aselik in Niger during the second millennium B.C. (Calvocoressi and David, 1979: 9-10). Another copper mine was located in Mauritania near Akjoujt in the first century B.C. Iron sites are more widespread and the series of dates indicates that early iron technology in West Africa was contemporaneous with that of Meroe, the capital of ancient Kush (McIntosh and McIntosh, 1981: 610) and that introduction could have been via Libya-Egyptian routes (Calvocoressi and David, 1978: 9). It could also have been through the northwest African coast in response to the Phoenician founding of Mediterranean cities such as Carthage from the 9th to the 7th centuries B.C. New dates from the Nok sites of Taruga in Nigeria indicate that iron was used this far south by about the 6th century B.C. The sites of Begho in Ghana has a date of 130 ± 80 B.C. and Bono Manso produced a date of A.D. 320 ± 30 . The basal levels of Jenne-Jeno in Mali have a 210 ± 180 B.C. date, while Koumbi Saleh, the capital city of medieval Ghana produced 9th and 10th century A.D. dates.

In Nigeria, the Nok culture complex provides for good evidence for the continuity of Late Stone Age and iron-using people. Nok culture is remarkable for the distinctive art styles in terra cotta that have come to light in the area of the Middle Belt, dating from the 8th Century B.C. to perhaps A.D. 200 (Shaw, 1981: 157, 159; Connah, 1975: 30-36). Nok figures come from a context of redeposition as the artifacts were washed down the Jos Plateau. Angela Fagg has, however, excavated an occupation level of the period and she reports (1972) that the Nok people must have lived in villages of huts erected on stone bases, much like those of modern people of the area. In association with terra cotta figurines, were found stone grinding tools, stone beads, stone lip plugs, hooks, bracelets, pieces of knives, arrowheads, spearheads, and pottery decorated with carved dot roulette (Fagg, 1972: 77-78, Shaw, 1981: 159) and incising.

These people must have lived in non-centralized villages practising some form of agriculture and perhaps exploiting cereal and oil palm in addition to hunting and collecting. Contemporary villages were linked by this distinctive art tradition which has been recognized over an expanse of about 900 kilometres, east to west.

The art itself is made in the technique of pottery, an established practice. Clay models of domesticated animals were found on the Daima sites on Lake Chad (Connah, 1975: 34, 1981) and on other Late Stone Age sites such as Karkarichinkat (Smith, 1974) and Kintampo (Posnansky, 1984: 147-149), but Nok shows the first evidence of human figures in plastic art south of the Sahara. The Nok art styles later influenced those of Igbo Ukwu, Ife, and Benin in the forest region (Eyo, 1977). The magico-ritual purposes of this art form should not be in doubt because the traditions have continued to modern times.

Another dominant Early Iron Age motif comes from the Mauratania-Senegal area. This is the construction of funerary megaliths and *tumuli*. The *tumulus* is a burial mound constructed with gravel and varying in height from 1 to 10 metres and in diameter from 3 to 8 metres. Thousands of these are known in the western Sahara as far as Senegal (Camps, 1977: 7; McIntosh and McIntosh, 1981: 611). In the excavated site of Rao in Senegal, an individual is buried with a crafted gold pectoral and other gold objects. Megaliths, on the other hand, are single stone structures shaped from rock. Hundreds of these are known from Senegal alone. Megaliths are also associated with burials, sometimes along with pots, iron objects, and beads. These structures were erected in a period contemporary with the founding of the medieval towns of Awdaghost which have been associated with the Tegdaoust site (Es'Andah, 1976: 4) and Koumbi Saleh, reputed to be the capital city of ancient Ghana. The site of Tegdaoust in Mauritania has a rich cultural deposit from about A.D. 810 to 1800 and associated with brick and stone architecture, local and imported ceramics, and stone and metal artifacts. The evidence suggests that this was an important trading centre in addition to which agriculture, smithing, hunting, and tailoring were all practiced (Es'Andah, 1976:4). Apart from the debates about whether these innovations were indigenous or associated with Arab influence in the post-7th century A.D., it is clear that there was at this time a marked degree of social distinction as attested to by reports on the protohistoric period:

But in this case the idea that burial treatment reflects status is supported by an Arab chronicle written in A.D. 1067 which describes the construction of a large tumulus for the African King of the empire of Ghana. According to this account, the dead king's body his ornaments, weapons, food, drink, and slaves (still living), were placed in a wooden chamber with a domed roof. The chamber was then closed and earth heaped upon it until it resembled a hill (McIntosh and McIntosh, 1981: 612).

In the states that later developed in the forest region of West Africa, these marked social patterns were followed. Because of the nature of social organization or because of magical prerequisites, the city centres often contrasted markedly with the immediate rural districts. Archaeological artifacts have reflected this pattern. The purpose in citing this evidence is to show that technical innovations in West Africa were closely associated with magical elements: the same holds true for succeeding societies.

LATER IRON AGE SOCIETIES

The illuminated studies of Jack Goody (1971) concerning the 'means of production' and 'means of destruction' in West Africa during the historic period are central to this section. In the context of Arab and Islamic influence, from about A.D. 700, West African agricultural productive techniques became mixed with trading or mercantile activities. The long distance trading networks across the Sahara involved the exchange of salt, cloth and beads for West

African gold, ivory and slaves. Well-known trading centres of this period include: Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne Jenou in modern Mali; Audagost, Walata and Koumbi Saleh in Mauritania; Bilma and Agades in Niger; Sokoto, Katsina, and Kano in northern Nigeria and perhaps as far south as the forest state of Benin in Nigeria; and Begho in modern Ghana (Davidson, 1968: 62; Calvocoressi and David, 1979: 2). West African currencies included gold, brass, salt and cowrie shells, which were used up to colonial period and which were traded from the Maldivian Islands of Sri Lanka. Accompanying this mercantile influence was the use of horses, spears and swords, but the plow, the wheel, and the shaduf (a lever device for drawing water from the well) although they penetrated into the Sahara, did not reach West Africa. Agricultural production techniques, therefore, remained simple with the use of the hoe and slash and burn method. The land use system was also simple; vassalage and landed fiefs were either absent or very unlike those of feudal Europe. During European contact, the mercantile economy was intensified first by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and later by trade in palm produce (Davidson, 1968: 193). European contact brought with it the use of the gun but it never achieved significant local manufacture.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS

Acephalous Societies

The social and political systems during this period can be divided into several types. The acephalous societies consisted of segmentary groups whose important cultural equipment included the bow and arrow, as well as hoe for agriculture. Because of the ease with which the bow and arrow were obtained, the groups were necessarily egalitarian in organization and lacked centralized government. Such groups include the LoDagaa, the Kpembe, the Bole in modern Ghana, and the Segou and the Kaarta in Mali.

Mass Dynasties of the Savanna

The savanna states were more centrally organized around control over trade routes. The states depended on mobile cavalry forces which were used to raid the ill-equipped infantries of acephalous peoples. The production or smithing of spears and swords was controlled as it was in the state of the Mossi (Bourkina Fasso), which had a special royal guild of blacksmiths. Leadership was in the form of a 'dominant estate' within which political office rotated. This 'dominant estate,' usually of immigrant origin, reigned over the peasant farmers. But this relationship was dramatically emphasized in the ritual prohibition against horses, observed in much of West Africa. Several shrines were devoted to anti-horse cults. For example, at the 'fetish' village of Senyon in northwest Ghana, a colonial district Commissioner was asked to leave his horse outside 'because there is a tree which no horse may see and survive' (Goody: 60). The religion of the horse invaders was Islam while that of those they invaded centered on earth gods. The Muslims knew 'about the things of God,' while the autochthones knew 'about the things of the Earth.' This cleavage was related to differences in technology and status already noted. The categories of autochthones, Muslims, and Christians, although useful analytical tools, becloud efforts to understand the use of magic in social control and, hence, status differentiation. In reality, all are associated with magic or witchcraft. For example, in describing West African Muslims, Professor Shaw says:

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Muslim West Africans were in Cairo—some living there, practising 'black magic' and writing about it. They had access to Coptic material culture—especially as Copts like West Africans, were thought to have arcane expertise. (Shaw, 1983: 3)

Centralized Kingdoms of the Forest

The forest kingdoms were relatively immobile since they lacked horses, mules, and donkeys. Their powers grew in response to the Atlantic trade in slaves, guns, and gunpowder. It was easy for these coastal states to control the possession and the use of the gun; this was later to facilitate the despotic nature of these kingdoms. In the powerful empire of Dahomey, commoners could not own a table or an umbrella or plant sugar cane, rice and tobacco as these were all symbols of the state.

Perhaps no forest kingdom in West Africa better illustrates the close association of social status and magical implements than Benin in southwestern Nigeria. The origin of Benin is still a matter of conjecture (Connah, 1975: 247–253), but archaeological evidence, which includes radiocarbon dates, datable European imports, the bronze art tradition, pottery styles and the great walling system, indicates that the Benin area was populated by at least the 13th century A.D. There is evidence for solid bronze working and smithing at that time. The 14th to the 16th centuries may be called the golden age and are represented in the archaeological evidence by city walls, hollow bronze casts and potsherd pavements. European influence in the 17th to the 19th centuries is indicated by the presence of imported smoking pipes and leaded brass (Shaw, 1975: 232–233). In 1897, the colonial period set in as the *oba* (king) was banished to Calabar by a British punitive force. This punitive expedition was in response to the ambush of a British political and trade mission to the ancient city in which Acting Consul General Phillips, seven other Europeans, and African messengers were killed. Thereafter, fear gripped the *oba* and his people. As Goodwin (1957) pictures the situation:

In December 1896, following the murder of a small British trade delegation halfway along the Gwato road, against the orders of the Oba Overami, a curious religious panic led (allegedly) to the daily sacrificing of some 300 slaves, in a lunatic effort to ward off and frustrate the expected British punitive expedition. When this expedition did arrive with remarkable speed, in February 1897, there was little resistance.... The troops found a city of blood. Benin (city of strife) has reached its climax of horror. Crucified women hung on the trees, armies of decapitated and butchered slaves lined the narrow roads.... In the religious fervour of propitiating the gods, a city had been depleted to a level of hopeless collapse (1957: 71).

There is very little parallel to the Benin situation, in the other forest kingdoms of West Africa. This kind of magic exists in Benin today, largely underground in the form of secret societies, but a casual observer will still notice frequent sacrificing of animals especially at crossroads. Explaining the belief in magic in Benin, Thomas indicates that this was comparable to European folk belief.

In connection with magic, mention may also be made of witchcraft, ceremonies of purification, and other rites. The belief in witches appears to be almost universal, and in more than one place complaints were made to me that since the white man has forbidden the use of the sass wood ordeal, the number of witches is greatly on the increase.... Witches are believed to meet at night in precisely the same way as European folk belief suppose them to come together (Thomas, 1910: 34).

The role of magic in status formation and social control can not be overemphasized. In a related example, the Benin walling system can be seen as an ambitious design to retain political power through the use of magic. The Benin walls are 'dump rampart' (Connah, 1967: 494), in that materials forming the walls were dug from the ditch or moat and heaped on its inner side, forming a bank. Two of the major walls of Benin City form concentric rings around the city centre enclosing the Oba's palace on its southern side. Legend has it that the innermost or first concentric walls was built by Oba Ewuare between A.D. 1450–1500, while the second concentric wall was built earlier by Oba Oguola about A.D. 1280–1295 (Egharevba, 1968). The third wall forms a network outside the first and second. The first wall is considered defensive while the second and third walls are considered territorial or agricultural boundaries. In

a chain and compass survey, Connah (1967: 606, 1975: 105) estimated that the inner wall was about 15 metres high and 9 kilometres in circumference. The second wall is about three times this in circumference. The walls can be compared to the great walls of ancient China.

Besides enabling the ruler to control his subjects more effectively, the wall offered them magical protection, for Ewuare made powerful charms and had them buried at each of the nine gateways to the city, to nullify any evil charms which might be brought by people of other countries to injure his subjects (Ryder, 1975: 244).

In present day Benin, it is common for people to bury charms around dwellings to protect their houses against thieves and armed robbers.

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Author's Name and Address: Dem OMOKHODION, *Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria.*