the baule culture

Today the Baule people live in the savannah region of central Ivory Coast. Originally indigenous to the Gold Coast – now Ghana – the Baule migrated to Ivory Coast some 300 years ago, and it is from these migrant families that their culture and society evolved. Baule is an Akan language, but many Baule cultural traditions, particularly their masks – which are unknown among the eastern Akan peoples – were adopted from their western and northern neighbours, the predecessors of the Guro and Senufo.

The families who came from the east to Ivory Coast formed minor principalities with court structures. The sculptors employed at these courts carved remarkably beautiful figures representing both auxiliary spirits and “spouses in the hereafter”. Today, everyday objects carved in the traditional manner, such as spoons, chairs, fly whisk handles and gong mallets, are regarded as status symbols, and wealthy Baule own large numbers of them. Sometimes these objects are overlaid with a finely hammered thin layer of sheet gold.
the dan culture

The Dan are slash-and-burn farmers living in north-western Ivory Coast and in neighbouring Liberia in the region where the tree savannah gives way to tropical rain forest. They were once notorious warriors and hunters of large game, and their villages were constantly at war with one another.

Common to all of the villages are the uniquely imposing gle masks, which are also called upon to make peace. Like all masks these are manifestations of spirits. They appear to specially chosen individuals in a dream and are then embodied by that person in order to play a particular role in the village. The more graceful feminine masks (with slit eyes) serve as intermediaries between the circumcision camps and those remaining in the village. Sometimes they are also used in masquerades at festivals to perform songs and dances. Aggressive masculine masks with round, tube-like eyes support the warriors, function as policemen or pronounce legal verdicts. Masks with animal faces perform socially critical pantomimes.

As well as masks, talented Dan sculptors also carve large ceremonial spoons. Like the male masks, these are manifestations of spirits and they also became the emblem of the most magnanimous and most hospitable woman in the village selected to be the main hostess. The figures are owned by wealthy people as status symbols and are put on show in front of their houses from time to time. The sculptors of these universally admired wooden objects are honoured with the title zo (master).
the guro culture

The Guro are traditionally crop farmers living in the region where the tree savannah gives way to the rain forest in central Ivory Coast. They migrated from the north to their present area of settlement six hundred years ago.

Today the Guro remain famous for their highly skilled mask carvers and dancers, having adopted their mask tradition from the neighbouring Baule. Like the Senufo, the Guro have large animal masks that can be slipped over the head like a helmet. These are regarded as auxiliary ancestral spirits and are related to the zamble, a holy being that is part antelope, part leopard, his grotesque brother zauli and his beautiful wife gu. In addition there is an array of “fashionable” masks which perform artful dances at festivals.

The Guro sculptors also carve smaller works of art, like weaving heddle pulleys – arched holders for rollers decorated with a little head, through which the cable connecting the two shafts of a loom runs. They are intended as aesthetic objects for weavers, for as a Guro once said: “Human beings do not like to live without beautiful things.”
the lagoon people

The population of south-eastern Ivory Coast consists of numerous small ethnic groups. They are known collectively as the lagoon people on account of the waterways that run through large parts of the coastal region.

The lagoon people regard carving as an inborn talent. Not only men but women, too, become sculptors if they possess the extraordinary creativity that already manifests itself in childhood. But rather than joining a workshop or being trained by a master or member of the family, they are left to develop their talent entirely independently and are highly respected for their artistic signatures.

The lagoon people have no mask tradition. Their sculptors produce figures, usually very small ones, commissioned by diviners as visible symbols of their links to the “other side”. Other “wooden people” guard the entrances to villages or personify a deceased twin or spouse. All sculptures with human forms are imbued with supernatural powers.
the Lobi and their subgroups

The Lobi are crop farmers who live mainly from growing millet and maize. They comprise a number of different cultural groups. Having migrated from Ghana to Burkina Faso in the eighteenth century, they later also settled in north-eastern Ivory Coast. Today two thirds of the roughly 400,000 Lobi live in the south-western tip of Burkina Faso and one third in Côte d’Ivoire.

Traditionally the Lobi live in mud houses which are reminiscent of small castles on account of their scarcely visible doors and roof terraces with high walls. These houses are built far apart, forming scattered settlements rather than villages.

In “Lobi” sculpture we can distinguish two categories of objects: būthiba, statues of different size associated with healing rituals and thilbià, statues that are needed for the installation of house shrines for ancestors. To this second group belong also the thilkòtina, anthropomorphic statues destined to receive the power of the ancestor protecting the domestic group.
The Senufo culture

The Senufo are a conglomerate of different ethnic groups who together have become the largest farming people of the northern Ivory Coast savannah. Senufo society is matrilineal, but is led by social groups whose members are divided into age-sets. When the *poro* male society performs rituals during funerals or community events, they use masks, large figures and sticks embellished with carved figures. Small figures are normally used by diviners.

The Senufo sculptures are made by both carvers and blacksmiths and use a striking range of iconography. Often they are carved by several people working together and can therefore be more readily attributed to workshops than to individual sculptors. We also know, however, that these workshops employed skilled specialists to fulfill more demanding orders.
the yaure culture

This small ethnic group living in the Savannah between the Baule and Guro east of the town of Buaflé comprises scarcely 25,000 people. They were probably driven into their present area of settlement by Baule migrants moving in from the east.

The masks carved by the Yaure bear a formal resemblance to Baule masks and are therefore often categorised as Baule art. However, the mask tradition in fact has ancient roots in Yaure culture, which is probably why Baule carvers adapted mask types from the Yaure repertoire for their dancers. But whereas for the Baule masks provide entertainment, for the Yaure, the figures that perform in masquerades are sacred and women are forbidden to look at them.

The graceful masks carved by Yaure sculptors are flatter than those of the Guro. The forehead of the oval face ends in a hairline formed out of three semi-circles. The forehead is usually free of scarification marks, the nose is narrow and the eyes are sickle-shaped slits framed by finely drawn, parallel arched eyebrows. The feature most likely to vary is the mouth, for this determines the facial expression. Above the forehead there is often an elaborate mount consisting of birds or figures – for the sculptor an opportunity to show off his talent.
contemporary artists from ivory coast

At first glance the works of the three artists presented here seem to differ radically—in terms of both form and subject matter—from those of the “old masters”. Indeed, to date, works by contemporary artists have rarely been exhibited alongside traditional art from the nineteenth or early twentieth century. One reason for this is that young African sculptors do not want to be perceived in the same context as their predecessors, since their works are supposed to be viewed from an artistic rather than an ethnographic perspective. Another reason is that there was indeed a break in tradition between the generations.

We should not forget that the so-called classical masters experienced at first hand all the invasions, waves of migration and global economic upheavals that came with the colonisation of West Africa. Even the “traditional” artists of the late nineteenth century were not isolated from the outside world.

Many of today’s African artists nevertheless take an interest in the work of earlier generations. The difference is that their creativity is no longer inspired by traditional beliefs, and the figures they create are not intended as intermediaries to the spirit world. Instead, they show a new kind of self-awareness.