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LUKASA ! (THE DEVIL'S TOY) AFRICAN INSPIRATIONS AND WESTERN OBJECTS

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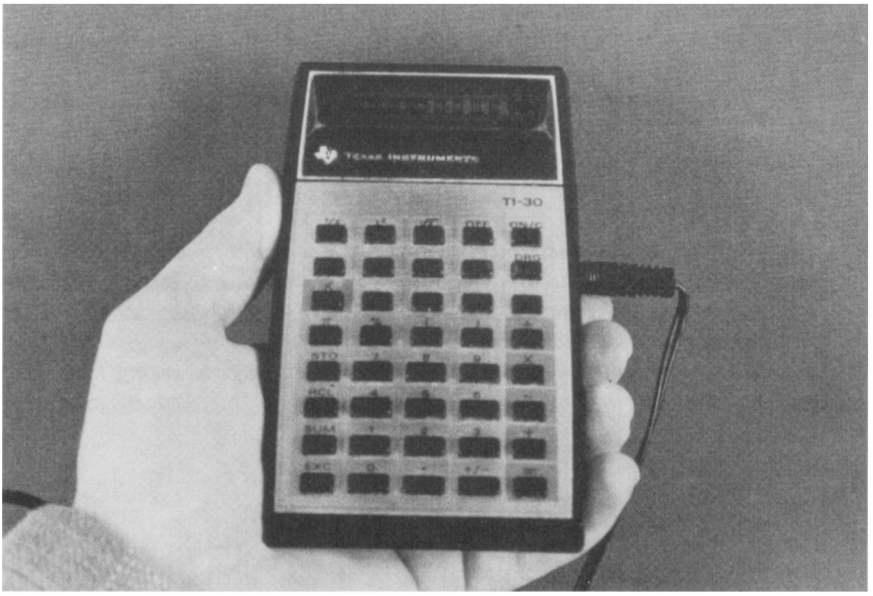
SUMMARY:

This paper shows the encounter between an object found among the Luba of Zaire and the art historical treatment of it by western scholars. In this encounter certain tendencies are pointed out which on one hand point to a greatly unackowledged bias of western scholars in their regarding of foreign objects as art, and on the other hand may work to refigure those ways of seeing to form a richer understanding of memory, beauty and history in western scholarly practice.

KEYS WORDS : object, memory, Gift (in its German and English senses à la Marcel Mauss)

FIGURE 1



the TI-30

INTRODUCTION

When I was about ten years old, as I remember it, once every so often I would go with my parents to a big discount store and, while they shopped, I would inevitably make my way alone to the electronics counter where I would linger, staring into the glass showcases at the transistor radios, binoculars, digital watches, poloroid
cameras and so on, fascinated at portable wonders, the gadgets of the space age. The fascination began as one of an aesthetic sort (one might say). I remember being fascinated by the mysterious, finely molded plastic and metal shapes of these devices and by the finely tuned electronic magic contained with them. Among these 'devices' I remember in particular the display of newly invented pocket calculators, my favorite of which was the Texas Instruments TI-30. In turning it on I would see the very fine lined block-shaped red zero, so small but glowing there before me in firey red light ***[see figure 1].*** *There was something diabolical in this bright rectangular zero followed by a fine red decimal point. If one stared at it for more than say a minute the zero would disappear and the tiny red decimal point would begin to run from the far left of the little window to the right continuously until someone pushed one of the small black buttons (set against a golden background) causing the display to change. I remember punching in numbers of all values and sizes 'into' this new invention, while I stood there, adding and subtracting huge sums with lightning speed; as I watched the fine, glowing red figures change revealing the secrets of numbers to me. I remember being amazed at all of the different mysterious functions represented by abbrevaiations like 'sin', 'cos', and 'log', being and doing I did not know what as I played with them.*

As time went on I would come with other kids from the neighborhood who would show me how to further unlock the secrets of this 'device'. Pressing the 'on' button and then the numbers 7734, one only needed to rotate the device so that it was standing on its head to see the tiny glowing red 7734 was actually 'hELL'. The device, with its little Texas Instruments logo (the shape of Texas with a little 't' and 'i' in it) in the upper lefthand corner was a great source of revelation into not only the mysterious dark corners of science, but into the world which this science represented. Even though the greeting 'hELLO' would seem to also be a possibility, the device would yield no such pleasantry for no number could start with zero and, if a decimal point was used, the greeting just somehow would not be whole and true. The real revelation provided by this machine (and others following it), known to children all over America as I have come to learn, was a game in which one added certain figures as one gave a corporate inventory in the following way: 'Which company has 69,000 employees, 6000

trucks, 345 limosines, 500 ships and 1500 offices all over the country'? By adding each number with the device turned on its head as one went along, the riddle one was narrating slowly came to a sum/series of letters which revealed that the huge corporation described was 'ShELL'. I remember above all the feel against my fingertips as I ran them accross the little plastic buttons, holding the TI-30 in my hands, looking at the fine red lights as it reveald secret after secret. Beyond its being a 'storehouse of information' its beauty lay in its mystery, something strangely related to the object which I have just now tried to convey by means of story.

From Marcel Mauss' classic work *The Gift* we are burdened with the powerful notion that each gift contains an element which is in a sense poison to the one receiving it. In the long history of exchanges between cultures objects of all sorts have been the agents of the gift's poison. My general focus in this work will be on objects which, in the period of European conquest and colonization, have come to be thought of as objects of art. Using one such object in particular I intend to relate a certain mode of relation found in the consciousness of a great many colonialist and post-colonialist scholars and within the ideology which surrounds them (us?).

A main focus of this examination is on the powerful notion of memory and how our understandings of it are and can be altered (poisoned) by other understandings. There exists a certain tendency in the forms of exchange described above for those on the European side to not fully take part in the spirit of gift as Mauss describes it. With every such exchange the main element involved is that of loss. This element is all too often overlooked. The tendency I will continue to describe and refer to in what follows is a tendency to ignore this element of loss or, in cases in which it is admitted, a tendency to falsely recognize it. To recognize a gift is to at one time recognize the power of the giver over oneself and to experience a loss[1]. Most people in the world live in situations in which this recognition and loss are part of daily life (i.e. having endured colonization), but many of the ideologies describing these situations (often coming from colonial centers of knowledge) seem to resist such recognition with all their might (or weakness). In the class of gift objects under consideration here the colonial or post-colonial scholar almost always, as if out of necessity, attempts to recognize the spirit of the gift not in terms in which it is given, but rather on his or her own terms. In this way no loss can be experienced or, if it is sensed in some way, can be written off as a problem of translation.
Such objects are therefore not truly recognized as gifts, for in the giving (exchange) nothing is truly lost[2]. We refuse to recognize this certain class of objects as gifts and refer to them instead as objects of art and/or as objects of

beauty. Just as gifting is an experiencing of the other directly (as Mauss describes it), the recognition, reception and perception of beauty in objects may be seen as an imitation of experiencing, but total refusal to actually experience, the other directly.

GIFTED EXPERIENCE

Concerning such an indirect experience and recognition of the other Walter Benjamin, in his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', has a good many relevant observations. Addressing the notion of correspondences in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* and their relationship to ritual (to which we will return later), Benjamin tells us that the realm of the beautiful is where the ritual value of art appears[3]. Following this he goes on to give two ways in which beauty can be defined: the first being its relationship to history and the second its relationship to nature. 'Let us indicate the first relationship briefly' writes Benjamin.

'On the basis of its *historical* existence, beauty is an appeal to join those who admired it at an earlier time. Being moved by beauty is an *ad plures ire*, as the Romans called dying'[4].

Here Benjamin points to one of the foundation stones of art history proper, admitted or not, which is the notion that one, through historical understanding, can experience an object in a similar way in which (temporal) others in the past experienced it5. This 'historical' sense of beauty, as described by Benjamin, is a sort of gift in which we at one time experience loss and some form of communion with the (temporal) others who are the givers of the gift. This sense of beauty is that on which primitivism most heavily relies, primitivism being the move of living peoples in present times and spaces into a temporal and spacial location in the past. The beauty of the primitive 'art object' is a sort of gift in which we at one time experience loss and some sort of communion with the (temporal/primitive) others who are the givers of the gift.
'Among the 'devices' I remember in particular the display of newly invented pocket calculators, my favorite of which was the Texas Instrument TI 30'.

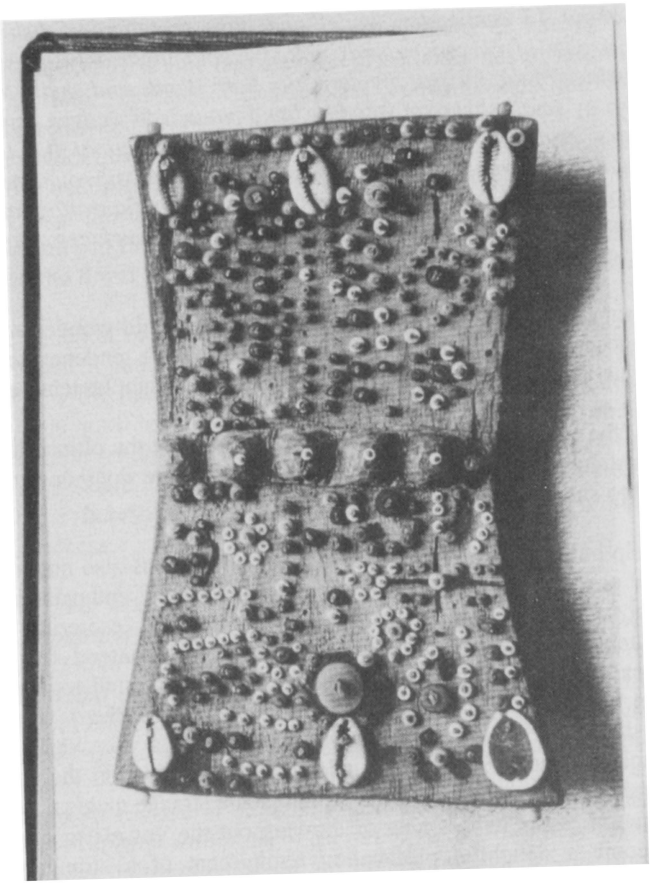
But it is how we experience this sort of gift we are calling beauty which is at issue here. For an art historian, as an historian, to honestly experience this beauty he or she would need to experience loss and some sort of communion with those (temporal) others who gave it to him or her, i.e. with those who 'admired it at an earlier time'. But the whole point of primitivism tells us that those givers from an earlier time are, at the same time, in the here and now (in the eternal past which is

eternally present) and thus such a loss and some sort of communion with those past givers is immediately possible. The requirements of such an exchange, however, are not compatible with the history of art as we know it. For what would historical understanding mean if, as in this case, it is immediately available and not in 'the past' or in 'memory'as we know it? Such an exchange would demand, first of all, that the notion of history be understood in a way other than the way in which it now is. Instead of rejecting the primitive outright it would be necessary to embrace it in a certain sense, to recognize it. Here it is the primitive which is the spirit of the gift that we must fully accept and to which we must in a certain sense admit validity. If beauty in its historical existence, as Benjamin tells us, is 'an appeal to join those who admired it at an earlier time', we must not resort to history for it in itself is not a 'joining' with others of an earlier time but rather a description of them in ones own terms[6]. In doing such history there is much gain, but no loss and no communion. If there is any hope in experiencing the true 'historical' beauty of an object of art, it must lie in an understanding which would be a syncretic fusion of our own terms with the terms of the (temporal) other. We must allow the object to work its gifted powers on us and admit the loss which this experience brings about. Through this we may come to see not only the history and beauty of the object justly, but come to understand the history out of which it came and in which it exists.

GIFTED OBJECT

Another way of thinking about the problem above would be in terms of memory and forgetting. If an honest gifting exchange involves loss and some sort of joining of the other and oneself, we could also think of this gifting in terms of for-getting (which could be read as 'losing') and re-membering (which could be read as 'joining'). If we proceed from here, our avoidance of loss would be an avoidance of forgetting ourselves, and our avoidance of joining would be an avoidance of the memory of the other[7]. But it is exactly this avoidance which we find in most historical relations to objects of art. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in discussions of West African art. In the work surrounding the Luba object-become-art object called the ***lukasa*** we see the topics of memory, forgetting, history and beauty all come together in ways which clearly illustrate the tendencies outlined above.

FIGURE 2



"the lukasa"

In an article by Thomas Q. Reefe, an historian and African art enthusiast, the ***lukasa*** is described as follows:

'The devil's toy: the lukasa'

All the examples I have seen are approximately the same size (20-25 centimeters long and about 13 centimeters wide) and have rectangular dish shape ***[see figure 2]****. A row of carved mounds called lukala invariably runs across the concave surface of the lukasa, dividing it in half. Beads and shells are attached to the board by small slivers of wood or hand made iron wedges driven through their centers, and cowrie shells are frequently attached at the top and the bottom. Beads are arranged in three ways: a large bead surrounded by smaller beads, a line of beads, and one isolated bead. Each configuration lends itself to the transmission of certain kinds of information. Board surfaces also have holes and lines cut into them.*

In considering this strange, multi-colored object we should wonder why many of us tend to describe it as beautiful. At first this descriptive tendency seems simple enough: it just simply is beautiful in a certain way, we might be tempted to say.

The colors, the wooden background and substantiality of the object, the strangely ordered configurations of the beads, shells... what more does one in some real sense need to simply say it is beautiful?

I cannot help but feel, however, that while it is simple, it is also not simple. From some other perspective, than the one found among many enthusiasts of African art, it is possible to recognize this object as diabolical, esoteric, 'fetishistic', spooky, dangerous, and in some sense grotesque. I contend that these two perspectives, which seem mutually exclusive, are often found together, secretly working in synthesis. I urge the reader to try viewing the l ukasa as it is displayed, discussed and, in many senses, used here, in a way which is beautiful and grotesque at once. For the remainder of this examination the strange word *lukasa* should be reminiscent of 'lu-cifer' and some strange magical expression in our imagination 'kasa!' Shortening or drawing out the vowels to one's liking, it should become a delightful profanation reminiscent of a strangely beautiful, enchanting instrument, like the pipes of Pan, blowing soft tones in some other-worldly Arcadia.

GIFTED FUNCTION

But we are jarred from our sylvan reminiscence when this object, which we would like to remain in awe of, is described as a 'device', demanding that we consider not only its form, but its function as well. The ***lukasa***, we are told, is (used as) a 'mnemonic device' among the Luba of Zaire. Its function, we are told by scholars like Reefe, is 'the transmission of certain kinds of information.' The board, we are told, 'contains,' 'shares,' and 'communicates' information. This small, hand sized wooden object, Reefe tells us, 'is a storehouse of information.' Having to consider this we are moved into the realm of design, where an aesthetic of form and function become one. The beauty, we are told, is not solely in its appearance, as a mix of color, shape, (maybe tactility) and a certain uncanny order, but equally in the tactile, mental use of the object as it connects body to mind through the finger tips, hands and eyes in its 'retrieval of information.'

Beyond the function of the ***lukasa***, described above, Reefe stresses the secret society in which it functions. We are told of a secret society within a larger society and how the ***lukasa***'s functions of transmission, retrieval, storage and so on work within it. It is 'the function of sculpture within the society' which collectors, and the art historians who study their collections, have not yet come to appreciate, says Reefe. In a passage near the beginning of his essay Reefe tells us more about the ***lukasa***, mixing its history and function with problems in its ethnographic access:

Lukasa, 'the long hand' (or claw), is an esoteric memory device that was created, manipulated and protected by the Bambudye, a once powerful secret society of the Luba. Although it cannot be compared exclusively on aesthetic grounds with Luba political and religious art such as royal stools and canes, statues of deities and culture heroes, and religious masks, it was an integral part of the inventory of carved artifacts that served the needs of the political and religious system. Very few examples of lukasa came to light during the colonial period because their secret functions caused them to be hidden. Certain developments occuring within the past thirty years, however, have made it possible to gather information about this object. First of all, the Bambudye has been defunct as a secret society since the end of World War II, and people no longer fear its power. Second, because the device is not used now, Luba individuals and families are willing to show their lukasa to an investigator. Third, examples have not been snatched up by art collectors or smugglers in recent years because they do not fit into the more marketable categories of statues, masks and stools[9].

The story of the ***lukasa***, we are told, 'is intimately associated with the history of the Luba empire' which, during the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries was a dominant power in the northern Shaba portion of what is today Zaire. All chiefs and possible candidates for office were required to be members of the Bambudye society and the king of the empire was its highest ranking member. The age of the ***lukasa*** itself, we are told, is not clear.

We are further told that ***lukasa*** were made by standardized design and that they came in three distinct types, each having a different function. These functions were: (a) to 'bear information' on 'mythical heroes and early rulers and mythical trade routes of the Luba,' which are found in and gotten from the great genesis story of the Luba (which the board serves 'as a memory aid for.'), (b) to bear information on the organization of the Bambudye society itself, which included its initiation rituals and spacial arrangements within its initiation lodges, and to remind and teach members of secrecy and morality in and outside the society, and (c) to 'contain secret information about divine kingship,' about which he writes:

The lukasa also helped senior Bambudye titleholders to remember deities and ancestral spirits. The bambudye society was an important religious institution closely associated with the concept of divine rule. Rulers entered the pantheon of ancestral spirits when they died. High-ranking Bambudye title holders engaged in spirit possession, and some claimed they were possessed by the spirits of dead Luba rulers[10].

In this last, crucial quote we are told that the ***lukasa*** was intimately associated with rule. Indeed the whole concern with the ***lukasa*** in the thinking surrounding it, and in this paper which is a critique of that thinking, is inseparably bound with the concept of rule and its relationship to possession. There is a struggle going on here, in these thoughts and facts about the ***lukasa***, which is a struggle for rule in general. This struggle, when viewed in the context of colonial influence and exchange in West Africa, and through the ritual objects of its ever attendant fictionally real 'secret societies' (such as Bambudye), takes on a power equally as great as the old rulers of the Luba themselves. The key here, as we have been told, is memory; and the key to this key is the ***lukasa***. We must come to see the ***lukasa*** not as a key to the memories of origins, secrets, spacial relationships, ancestors and so on which make up the power of rule among the Luba alone, but as a key to the memories of these as they exist, at this point in time, inseparably mixed with our own memories. These memories form (and are a key to) the concept of our own colonial 'divine rule'.

This problem, which is here expressed in terms of rule (and resistance) can also been seen on the level of the ***lukasa*** as a 'mnemonic device'. In referring to the

lukasa in this technical way what are we actually doing? A good many of the facts which Reefe obtained for, and used in his study of the Bambudye and the ***lukasa*** come from two missionaries who did work among the Luba some 60 years ago. He writes:
My first informants were two missionaries who had carried out research on the Bambudye initiates who revealed some, but not all, of the mysteries of the 'long hand'[11].

The words 'my first,' pointing to a primary role in Reefe's 'investigations,' lead us back to the very same problem as above, i.e. the concept of our own colonial 'divine rule'. My point here is not to question the validity of starting research on a subject with the assumptions given to one by missionaries (whatever one may think of this). The role of the two missionaries must, rather, serve a more important purpose here, which is to emphasize the preexistence of a 'divine rule' not only within our practices and language, but within our memories and imagination themselves. These two unnamed missionaries are the sentinels who stand at the gates of cultural exchange guarding our own understanding from any loss and/or poisonous agents which may try to enter and undermine our own concept of 'divine rule'.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE GIFT

Now let us consider this so called mnemonic device as a device. To do this I refer the reader to another object from my own experience, which is a bit like the ***lukasa***. Most all examples I have seen of this object are between 15-20 centimeters in length, between 10 and 17 centimeters wide, and vary from 1-10 centimeters in depth. These objects most often have a solid rectangular shape and may contain a great many separate parts all attached at one end. These separate parts, enclosed on three sides by parts of similar make but greater thickness, are thin flexible substances made of rags, wood-fibre, grass or similar materials. All parts are of equal size. On each of the thin parts, which are tactile and must be manipulated to retrieve information from the object as a whole, are units patterned in many different ways, often reflecting the speech of the group using it, but occasionally reflecting those of other groups as well. These whole patterned units are composed of some one hundred (to my best count) smaller units, each having its own particular shape, which take the form of some particular twist or combination of drawn lines. These whole patterned units usually have no tactile quality though they are permanently affixed in black die to the varying light brown to white, thin, flexible, rag and wood-fibre substances. Within the object as a whole, as within most all of its sub-parts each patterned unit or configuration,

as we are told in the case of the ***lukasa*** as well, 'lends itself to the transmission of certain kinds of information'.

The reader may be aware by now that the object I am describing is none other than that which we call the Bible. The Bible or 'the good book'[12] is (paraphrasing Reefe) an esoteric memory device that was created, manipulated and protected by the Church, a once powerful secret society of the Christians. Although most examples cannot be compared exclusively on aesthetic grounds with Christian political and religious art such as crucifixes and chalices, statues of saints and martyrs, and religious paraphernalia, it was an integral part of the inventory of manufactured artifacts that served the needs of the political and religious system. Very few examples came to light during the middle ages because their secret functions caused them to be hidden. Certain developments occurring within the last 400 years, however, have made it possible to gather information about this object. First of all, the Church has been defunct as a secret society for hundreds of years in many areas, and people no longer fear its power. Second, because the device is now owned by many, Christian individuals are more than willing to show their Bible to an investigator. Third, examples have not been snatched up by art collectors or smugglers in recent years because they do not fit into the more marketable categories of paintings, sculptures and altarpieces.

What exactly is the difference between the ***lukasa*** and the Bible?

Are we not forced to ask this question? Its answer is crucial here, where what we are told of the ***lukasa***, Bambudye, and their relationship to divine rule comes from the an understanding based upon the Bible, the Church, and their relationship to colonial divine rule (coming through our two missionaries). But it is equally as crucial to all investigations of primitive art objects, secret societies and their relationship to any rule in general. The missionaries, be they actual or metaphorical, will not let the other pass, and will only allow loss and communion to the extent that they occur within the ritual practices of the Bible and church.

One could say, in response to this: 'Okay. So the Bible is a mnemonic device, and thus you have shown that the different is really the same, but still different, thereby allowing us to transcend our current understandings - right?' And the answer to this question would be strongly against such a transcendence. The ***lukasa***, I would say, mimics our object of understanding (our Bible) and creates a dialectical estrangement of that understanding. We can see the ***lukasa*** defying the imposition of our understanding if we look closely enough. In looking closer we see both understandings working to negate one another, moving together in synthesis. This is a view of the everyday syncretic reality of those people forming

the Luba, and (though unacknowledged) moving together, or desperately begging to, in our own everyday reality as we read about African arts.

GIFTED MEMORY

Memory, like beauty, is and is not a simple matter. In thinking about memory in a reflective, philosophical way we soon become so mired in complexity and contradiction that we often end up falling back on our intuition and working from there. It is exactly this intuitive understanding that I wish to address here, for it seems that in talking about memory among the Luba, especially in a a nonreflexive way, we cannot help but assume some sort of universal intuitive understanding which is based solely upon our own.

When we turn to page one of the Bible what do we see? An arrangement of units we call words, made up of sub-units we call letters, numbers, and punctuation marks. How do we retrieve the information 'contained in' these units? We read them. What could be more intuitively basic than this? When we were five years old or so we all began to be taught how to read these units. We learned how to recognize each letter by a process of memorization, and then, from there, we learned how to recognize larger units through a similar process. What is reading, in its most basic sense, if not remembering? 'But wait,' many of us feel immediately compelled to say in a corrective fashion, 'reading is not so simple.' To many it just seems intuitively inadequate to describe such a complex and, in our culture, divine activity as reading in terms of remembering. But who says so; and who says that saying reading is remembering is simple or a simplification of reading? What is it that priveleges our own intuitive understanding in such a way? The missionaries at the gates cross their spears, blocking these questions. 'You shall not pass,' they bellow. 'But why?' we ask. 'Because it just isn't right.' This is the reception which the ***lukasa*** is receiving at the gates of western scholarship.

Consider how Jan Vansina defines mnemonic devices as:
Objects which... had certain memories attached to them that facilitated remembrance of... [a] tradition.[13]

Following Vansina here, we must look at this description closely and ask which certain memories are attached to the Bible that facilitate remembrance of a tradition? This question may strike us as strange. To most of the New Testament are attached certain memories of the lives of Jesus and the Apostles, and these do facilitate remembrance, one could say, of certain traditions like baptism, prayer and so forth. But when we consider the Old Testament, say the book of Genesis,

for example, which certain memories are attached to the Bible here that facilitate remembrance of a tradition? It is here, in the 'memories' of relations between God and man, man and woman, man, woman and sin, and so on, that culture comes into play, and with it, those great traditional relations with which we describe ourselves (and others). In all of the memories attached to the Bible, and this first part in particular, that of 'in the beginning was the word' facilitates remembrance of traditions not only of speaking and listening, but more importantly, of reading and writing which we hold most dear.

But how does this all work? Vansina tells us that the key to the mnemonic device is that it is not the object/device itself but rather the memories attached to the device which facilitate remembrance of a tradition. Mnemonic devices, therefore, function in a two step process in which we are reminded of something which helps us to remember something much larger, like a tradition. These traditions, we must never forget, are essentially oral (and aural) in nature, a point, which in our intellectual practices of intertextual reading and writing, is often forgotten and may come to form a false intuitive understanding of ourselves and the (temporal) other[14].

These observations by Vansina bring us to look more closely at the way the activity we call reading works under the poisonous influence of the other (seen in the ***lukasa***). Let us imagine the sound of a drum (a mnemonic device in West Africa). We can imagine each unit we call a letter as one particularly sounding beat on a drum, or we can imagine each unit we call a word in such a way. When I beat out 'rum, ta, ta, tum, tat, ta, tum, rum, ta' which is to say or read: 'in the beginning was the word,' the mnemonic device of the drum (or the Bible) (or was it my drumming/reading)[15] facilitates the remembrance of a certain tradition[16]. But as you and I sit here in the last years of twentienth century America our minds wondering and wandering, remembering what we can about the meaning of this Bible passage, remembering historical references, maybe what recent scholars have said about logocentrism, remembering our Greek, Roman and Scholastic forefathers, no doubt vaguely, thinking we should go to some other books to further 'facilitate our remembrance' (of this tradition), we have the opportunity, here and now, to get an idea of what this 'tradition' being remembered is all about. It is amazing what one phrase, like 'in the beginning was the word' in a certain historical and ritual context (like this paper you are reading) can do. When a series of remembered (or read) words on a page, or drumbeats, elicits remembrance like this why should we not look upon this with wonder. It is even more fascinating to think that in the Bible as a whole there are probably tens of thousands of such 'memories' available to facilitate remembrance of traditions in a great many of us.

GIFTED EXPERIENCE II

But is this what this object the Bible is all about? As a mnemonic device, which has memories attached to it which help facilitate remembrance of a tradition, is it not the object itself which is most valued? The many evenly cut pages with their many letter and word units attached, bound and covered, would seem to be that which we most basically possess when we possess a Bible. One could say that if we possess the object which we call the Bible, we possess the memories attached to it and thereby a tradition which these memories, in strange and mysterious ways, help us to remember. This leads us to the question of what exactly we possess when we possess the ***lukasa***. It would seem, following what has come before, that in posessing any object like the ***lukasa*** we at once hope to possess the memories attached to it and the tradition which they help the members of the 'secret' Bambudye society to remember. This should loudly point out the ignorance with which many have sought such a possession, for how can one have memories of and remember a tradition of something in which one never has and never will have a part?[17] To assume that one can understand the 'reading' of the ***lukasa***, even partially, is to say that one has taken part. It is believed that in possessing the object, holding it in the arms of ones own words and making it ones own, that one has in some sense taken part in that which the object reminds others of, and the tradition which others remember from it. In other words, one would need nothing less than the experiences of the other; one would need to experience the object as the other. One would need to not only have experienced, or to know the oral tradition of the other, but one would further have had to in some sense experienced the collective experiences which those words or drumbeats are memories of. This coming together of individual and collective memory is most often achieved through taking part in that which ethnology has traditionally refered to as ritual. But this in itself says very little, for it is how we view ritual in relation to the ***lukasa*** which as at issue here rather than a simple assertion of the ritual element in itself.[18]

When we look at the Bible or ***lukasa*** as mnemonic devices we see objects which, through the patterning, design and general arrangement of smaller units, divisons and so on, have had memories attached to them which facilitate remembrance of a tradition.

Though this is clear enough, we may further ask why, exactly, the Bible or ***lukasa*** exist in these forms and not in another. What if, instead of using the phrase to elicit memory, one simply refered to the phrase? What if the Bible, using the book of Genesis for example, were not an object but simply the numbers 1-50, not

written down, but just remembered in order[19]. This series of numbers could have had memories attached to each number which facilitated remembrance of a tradition. If we need a device to remind us of something which, logically, we must have heard or experienced at some time there is no reason, it would seem, why it need be so elaborate.

But there is a reason, and it is with it that we move to the concluding points of this examination. That reason has to do with the place of the story in our thought as compared with that of the 'secret society' of Bambudye. The views expressed above are only thinkable in terms of what Benjamin refers to as information and sensation. According to Benjamin, members of our own society have, in modern times, become less and less able to relate experiences in the form of story and, as a result, are less able to actually experience things in this form as well. He writes: *Historically, the various modes of communication have competed with one another. The replacement of the older narration by information, by information by sensation, reflects the increasing atrophy of experience.*[20]

Today we are very aware of the descriptive power of the term information, and we should admit that this power expresses something which, although for many undesireable, is nevertheless quite real. The term sensation, however, adds a whole, as of yet unpopular, dimension to the description of our own experience.

When Benjamin writes that information is being replaced by 'sensation,' he means that information is being replaced by material objects which 'contain' information or, put another way, in which information is 'present.' Those participatory rituals and the objects they work with like the ***lukasa*** or the Bible, which we call storytelling, were replaced with facts or frozen events told or recorded in objects, and now it is these objects themselves which are becoming experience. Which is to say that these objects used to be a part of an activity called storytelling and not objects as containers of information as we (can barely help but) see them today.

The key point here, however, is not to point out (and lament) the atrophy of experience as seen in our treatment of art objects like the ***lukasa***. The greater point, having accepted this atrophy as somehow a real state of affairs throughout the world, is to see that our treatment of such art objects, our understanding of them on our own terms has provided a point of view which allows us to see our own terms in a wholly different critical light. By opposing a few of our commonly accepted conceptions, such as memory, reading and the ritual object (e.g.the Bible) to other conceptions made possible by considering the strange 'thing' (?) the Luba call ***lukasa***, I have attempted to establish the need to regard 'art objects' as much more complex than we had formerly assumed. In Benjamin's terms the

ritual value of art appears in that which we call its beauty. One of the main questions addressed above is how and in what form it appears in the so called 'mnemonic device'. As I think of the present age in which storytelling has become all but impossible, especially in areas of intellectual pursuit where it is most needed, my mind wanders back to my experience of the tiny glowing red lights of the discount store's pocket calculator, the TI-30, with its black buttons on a golden background, and I consider this Luba 'thing' called a ***lukasa*** which, by chance, I ran upon one day twenty years later while going about my affairs. Somehow, through something I can only call 'storytelling,' I want to encounter myself at ten years old, there with the TI-30 in my hand, by means of the disarray left of all such experience in the wake of the ***lukasa***. I want to join myself there in my own childhood where I seemed much closer to the beauty found in Benjamin's sense of the ritual value of art, and I want you to join me there in the poisoned state of understanding which this paper has been written to create. This would be a form of art historical and cultural understanding (of the everyday) which we have barely seen the likes of, and desperately need.

NOTES

1. Though it must be realized that a gift is also best thought of as a negation and such a negation can often work to in some sense enhance the positivity of the situation (if one wishes to think of negation in this way).

2. I refer the reader here to the German verb 'zugeben' which, like the English verb 'to grant,' has a sense of both giving and admitting, i.e. giving in, losing, conceding, letting another 'in,' and being negated in a positive and cooperative sense where something is learned.

3. Illuminations, p.182

4. Ibid., p.198

5. My reference to what I call 'temporal others' should be understood as an attempt to directly deal with a kind of primitivist imagination in which the Other is seen as ancestor, if you will, as one who is from a past form of human existence construed even more generally than primitivist and racist evolutionary doctrines and other such related outlooks still hiding behind terms such as 'primitive,' 'native,' and so on. A temporal Other could equally designate a man or woman whom a certain white westerner sees as his or her ancestors, familially, culturally or otherwise.

6.It should also be noted that a great deal of what we call history is not describing but ignoring.

7. That is, avoidance of both the other's form of memory and our memory of the other.

8.In an article entitled '*Lukasa*: A Luba Memory Device,' African Arts, Vol.10, no.4, (1977), pp.48-50, 88.

9. Ibid., p.48

10. Ibid., p.50

11. Reefe, African Arts, vol.10, no.4, (1977), p.48

12. 'The book.'

13. Oral Tradition, pp.36-37

14. In The Logic of Practice Pierre Bourdieu wants to focus on traditions in both our own and other societies. In his examination of ritual he stresses that our own ritual practices of scholarship become mixed up with and inevitably infuse our own practices with those we are observing. In this work I am attempting to take Bourdieu one step further and stress the need of not only becoming aware of how and where our own practices turn us away from understanding the other, but of becoming aware that if a mutually gifted encounter really took place, we would not only become aware of our own practices, but would also lose the ability to understand them with the same confidence we now do. In other words, one could say that I am imagining the Other as social philosopher/researcher and imagining the result when that Other uses Bourdieu's illuminating ideas in regarding us.

15. This all important distinction is very difficult to make, and lies at the heart of our problem with 'mnemonic devices.' The device does not stand alone; it is a part of action.

16. In this case maybe it would facilitate remembrance of what some would call the western logocentric tradition itself.

17. This is the inevitable position of the museum parton.

18. It strikes me that it may be said that the reading and writing of ethnography is, in a sense, a substitute for such ritual here, but this thought cannot be pursued here.

19. The 'book' of Genesis does, in fact, have fifty chapters as we know it today.

20. Illuminations, p.159