

Background reading for

**Akamba *Mavisa* Carving a local art world in East Africa** [9.09.11, British Library]

Herein, my object entry from the NMK/BM catalogue *Hazina: Traditions, Trade and Transitions in Eastern Africa*, 2006: pp 38-40, with a few, highlighted modifications to indicate an up-date or correction. During my 2006 fieldwork in the cooperatives at Gikomba and Wamunyu, this *Hazina* text was used as a starting point for discussions with their respective committees and interviews with several master carvers including *Mzee Kithitu* (Samson Ngila) and the entrepreneur 'vundi' mzee Musau Mulinge. Their responses and subsequent follow-ups generated considerable new material, some of which was readily absorbed into my specific education-in-art project. Indeed, the development of the Akamba apprenticeship system is instrumental in the construction of their modern art movement, a local art world (Becker: 2008) which emerged following WW1 through several phases to challenging modifications in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This temporal dimension of the movement provides evidence of its remarkable sustainability and serves as grist for an Akamba counter-narrative which is the current objective of my investigation.

**“Soldier figure and bicycling policeman (*askari*)**



**(left) Askari (with no rifle)**

wooden figure of a soldier  
stained/painted, metal eye discs  
1920's –1930's  
H 30cm, W 9cm, x 7cm  
Given by M. Sandys BM: Af 1936, 0603.1

**(right) Bicycling askari**

Wooden figure of a policeman  
Stained/painted, metal eye discs  
1920's –1930's  
H 28cm, W 15cm, x 7cm  
Given by HRH Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester BM: AF 1982, 02.3

These two small, delicately carved wooden sculptures known as *askari* figures are typical of colonial production between the World Wars by Kamba craftsmen. These artisans (*fundi* in Swahili) were people who had skills in any art, craft or profession and were able to train others. In the British Museum collections, this kind of souvenir art is represented by some twenty-five figurative objects, mostly figurines of which more than half portray females. They include westernized *askari*; local warriors; maternity figures; but mainly carvings of men, portrayed wrestling or hunting animals. All were produced many years before the influences of nationalism and mass tourism.

*Askari* is a Swahili word with an Arabic root that refers to an armed attendant or guard, which in East African colonial contexts can denote the Kings' African Rifles (left), 'native policeman' (right) or the Carrier Corps. Their duties involve a wider society than a particular ethnicity. By the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

Christian missionaries, European trade companies and Asian traders had settled in East Africa and were extending their immediate spheres of contact. These new influences were assimilated readily by the Kamba people, who were already well established as long distance traders and carvers of domestic and figurative objects, including combinations such as a figure on a staff.

Contrary to most accounts of Kamba visual culture, a review of historical sources indicates their early 20<sup>th</sup> century practices did include the making and using of power or metaphysical figures known in the Kamba language as *kithitu*. Based upon her 1929-30 research in UKambani, art educator M. K. Trowell wrote: "...an old man explained... that the figures now turned out in mass as curios had their origin in those carried into battle, 'that the eyes of the enemy might be drawn toward them, so that they (the enemy) would lose power...' (1937: 171). A few years later in Kampala, the same Trowell co-opted two or more Kamba to teach woodcarving in what became the Makerere University School of Art. One of their paintings with imagery derived from material culture is labeled "Probably the earliest picture by a Kenyan African now in existence". It is dated 1929 [on permanent view in the Brunei Gallery, SOAS]. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, a continuity in the gallery art is evident in a recent Nairobi publication, in the sculptures of Samuel Wanjau and his sons Anthony and Jackson, and in the sculptural quality and subject matter of paintings by Kivuthi Mbuno and Ancient Soi.

Mutisya Munge (b c.1892 – d. ?1927-52), a renowned maker of ceremonial sticks, was instrumental in initiating change in the Kamba wood carving traditions. During World War I Mutisya was with the British Carrier Corps in Tanganyika. While on a visit to a Lutheran mission near Dar-es-Salaam, he encountered the commercial and innovative potential of carving in a Lutheran mission and learned new forms of practice from Zaramo sculptors in the hardwoods of ebony and mahogany. Once home in Wamunyu, Mutisya started a family business in the carving and trading of figurines. While the Kamba figures in the British Museum are without signatures, Mutisya did sign some of his and these provide the basic standard, a study guide, for this genre.

The key characteristics of these figures are: a frontal pose like a stick or column; schematic representation of features like those of *soldier* (unlike the more naturalistic representation of *bicycling askari*); a relatively large head, often with shining eyes and protuberant ears; fine execution and finish; subtle colouring, more like a stain than paint and strong attention to detail in clothing and other aspects of adornment. Such details are observed in the depiction of *askari* uniforms, replete with chord lanyard, shoulder epaulets, puttee/leggings and even further definition in the accessories -- badge, hat shape, arm stripes -- to specify status.

That the clothes fit the figures so very well conveys an attitude of confidence, that in turn suggests these *askari*'s have assimilated or mastered their particular confrontation with western modernity. The cool, almost classic demeanor of the *bicycling askari* offers an apt metaphor for self-reliant development, for going somewhere! The bicycle is a recurring motif that is also employed in other media such as wire models and fabric design, and is found across the continent.

These *askari* figures are forebears of modern art practices in East Africa and have particular significance to the development of visual art in Kenya. The number of *fundi* involved in production has soared from a few hundred in 1963 to 10,000 in 1989 to 70,000-80,000 in 2005. Over the same period, Kamba carving co-operatives have spread out from Wamunyu in search of wood supplies and markets. The market for these objects is global and local: in Kenya they are found in every kind of household like the *kanga* and *kiondo*. The movement remains flexible and, typical of our era, it is engaged with the challenge of resource sustainability because of the depletion of forest hardwoods. This means the carvers need urgently to switch to what their advisors term 'good woods' like jacaranda from the plantation. Carvers are changing – and similarly may *Hazina* inspire writers to make 'good words' to sustain Kenya's art history and criticism.

#### References

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The author and Mzee Kithitu, Gikomba, 11.06



Moses talking about the carving process with Munuve Mutisya, Wamunyu, 11.06