

Tschokwe Whistles Instruments of Communication and Marks of Prestige

By Dominique Remondino

« We were always surprised to remark how efficiently and quickly news got around. The “indigenous peoples” were aware of the country’s news — sometimes of news from as far away as the Congo — well before us and well before the official modes of communication reached us. They sent each other messages in a host of different ways, notably using these whistles. »

This account, transcribed directly from an oral testimony given by Mrs. Henrique Quirino da Fonesca* more than sixty years after leaving Angola, is extremely valuable. Indeed, we know very little of the precise use made of these small, refined wood or ivory objects whose beauty is often complemented by magnificently polished heads. These whistles are often featured in monographs and museum catalogs dealing with Tschokwe art but the subject of their purpose is hardly ever raised.

José Redinha¹, a Portuguese ethnologist who started researching in Angola in the middle of the 1930’s, gave the following account of his observations at the beginning of his stay: « According to the natives, during the period of the tribal wars, there were individuals who were able to convey rather long and precise messages using these whistles. This was generally done at night and across opposite banks of large rivers through imitation of night birds’ songs. » In addition, according to Jean-Sébastien Laurenty², these whistles are primarily used as purveyors of messages and used during hunts, wars or in secret societies.

A succession of « high » and « low » sounds produced through the whistle stand for certain set phrases that are common to a « group of populations ». In the introduction to his important study of central African aerophones, Laurenty recounts the anecdote of a « government official who was concerned with preventing the full-blown scattering of inhabitants of a town where he was to go collect taxes and

be a general nuisance for he had learned that news of his arrival had spread from village to village ». Far more effective than the whistle, slit-gong drums, horns and even « shrieked words » were considered the most dangerously efficient forms of « rupestral telephony ». In this sense, the tax collector of Laurenty’s story had confiscated all the slit-gong drums of the region yet the people of the countryside were nonetheless still aware of his imminent arrival...

Marie-Louise Bastin³ defines the whistle as an instrument whose « primary purpose is to call people »; to call them back from the bush or to the village, for example, or to call for help during the hunt.

Whistles were also used during wartime in the hopes of intimidating the enemy by making as much noise as possible.

A large diversity of shapes

Using the immense collection housed at the Tervuren Museum, Laurenty (1974) has identified fifteen or so different shapes of wooden whistles. To this catalog he also added as many shapes of ivory instruments and identified still other forms of whistles made of hollowed raffia nuts, crab claws or cow horns.

What is most important to retain from Laurenty’s tremendously meticulous study is that the distribution of figurative whistles decorated with heads or even sometimes entire figurines seems to sum up the whole of Angolan whistle production.

With the exception of pieces that can be

Fig. 1: Tschokwe whistle, *Cikunza* mask, R.D.C., Angola.
Wood. H.: 9,4 cm.
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Photo H. Dubois.





Fig. 2: Whistle adorned with two sculpted antelope horns.
O. Cohen
Collection, Geneva.



Fig. 3: Whistle showing a mask.
Wood. H.: 9,5 cm.
Ex-coll. Henrique
Quirino da Fonseca.



Fig. 4: Tschokwe whistle without any figurative ornamentation.
Wood. H.: 13,2 cm.
Ex-coll. Henrique
Quirino da Fonseca.



Fig. 5 (face and back): Figurative whistle with a beautiful headdress. This object was collected before 1910.
Ex-coll. Vicomte
d'Ouvrier, before
1935.
Exposed at the
Exposition
Internationale de
Paris, section
coloniale Belge,
1938.
Private Coll.

Fig. 6: Plate of objects from H. Baumann, 1935, p. 91.



1. „Jupembe.“ Kleines Rhythylophon für den Wärsager. Pano. Tlokwe. 2. „kasrogotengo.“ Trillerpfeifen. Mahakabolo. Tlokwe. 3. „ngona.“ Bedecktrönnel. Mahakabolo. Tlokwe. 4. „mukupela.“ Sanduhrtrönnel. Tliawwa. Tlokwe. 5. „manjata.“ Fußrassel für Zauberer. Mwandoli. Tlokwe. 6. „kafala.“ Wirbeltaute. Bula. Tlokwe.

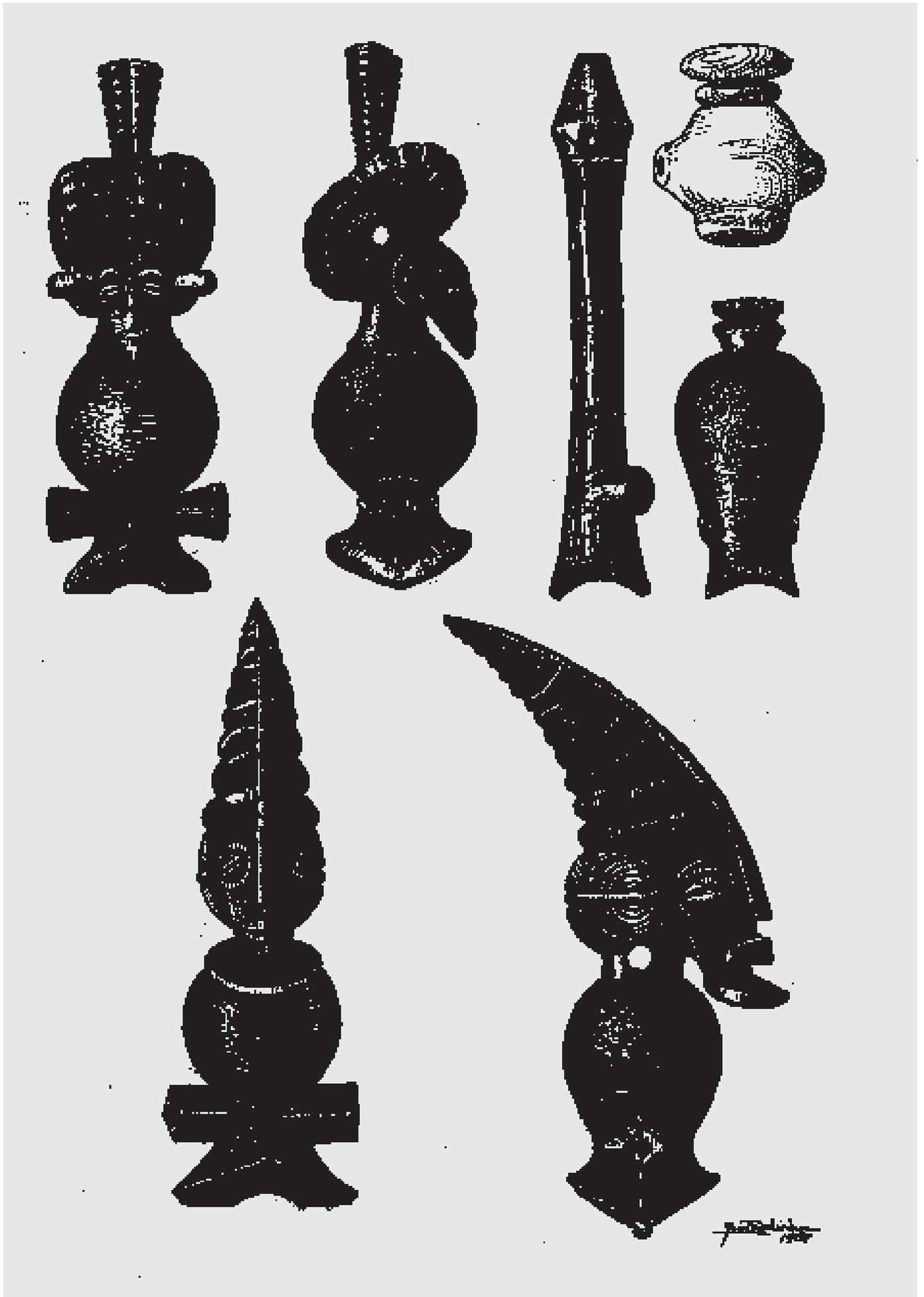


Fig. 7: Plate of drawings from *Album Etnografico* (no date of publication), J. Redinha. The plate is signed and dated 1937.

Fig. 8: Tschokwe whistle, R.D.C., Angola. Wood. H.: 10,2 cm.

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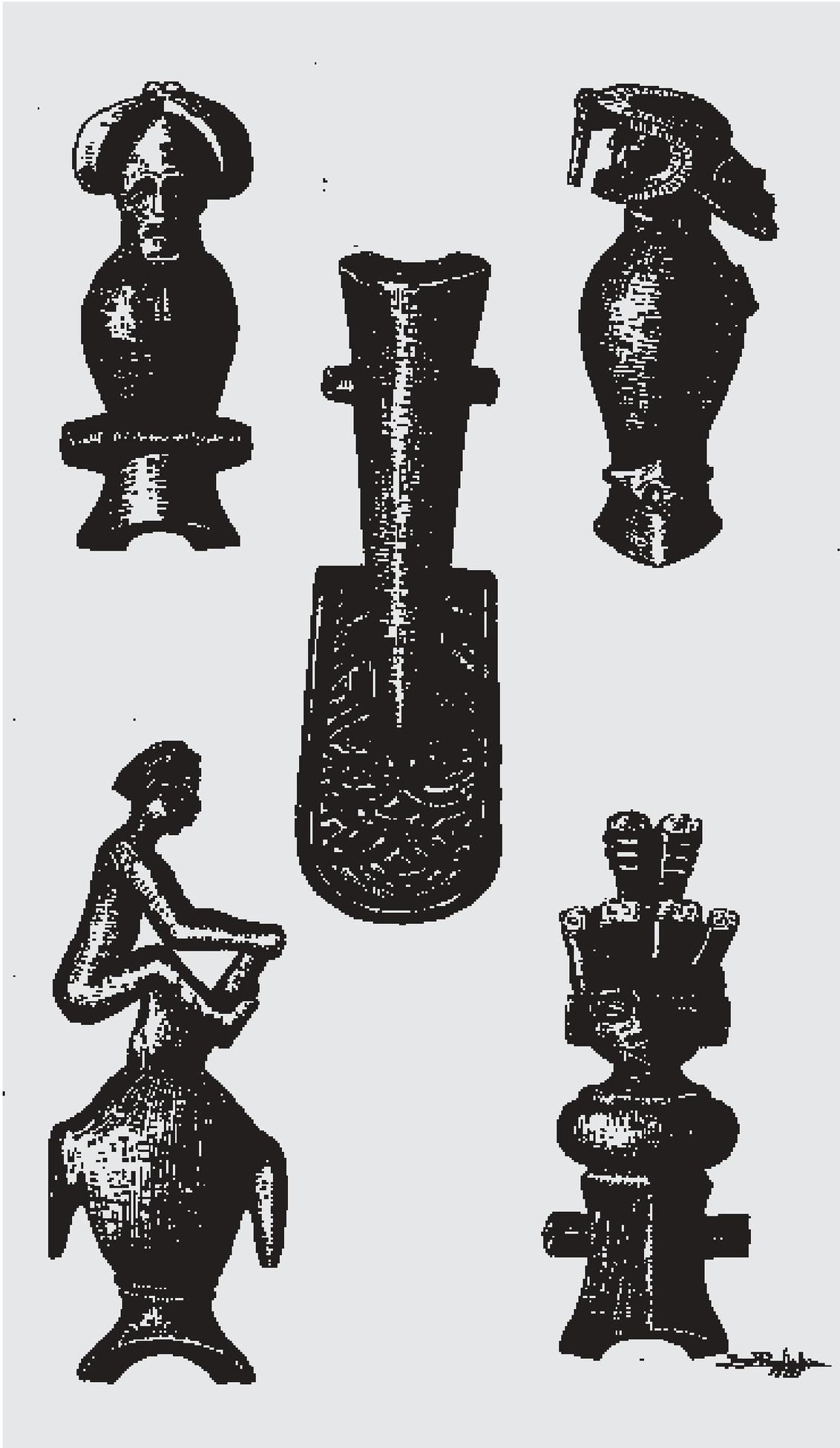


Fig. 9: Plate of drawings from *Album Ethnografico* (no date of publication), J. Redinha. The plate is signed and dated 1937.

Fig. 10: Whistle in a shape of a head with a standing figure. This motif, of which the interpretation remains difficult, is near a whistle drawn by J. Redinha (see fig. 9), described by him as a « cyclist ».

In : Laurenty, Jean-Sébastien, *La systématique des aérophones de l'Afrique centrale*, 1974.

Collection Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren.



Fig. 11: Two whistle showing hairdresses with horns. On left, this whistle was drawn by par J. Redinha in 9137 (voir fig. 7), described by him as « representing a chief ».
Wood. H.: 10,5 and 10 cm.
Private Coll.

attributed to the Pende, Yaka or Luluwa peoples, they are for the most part the work of Tschokwe sculptors working on either side of the border between the Lunda, the north-western part of Angola, and the southern regions of the Congo. In this sense, we can recognize the figurative whistle as mode of artistic expression proper to the Tschokwe peoples and more specifically those in the Lunda region that is the richest in sculpture of all Tschokwe zones.

Laurenty's study focuses most specifically on formal aspects of the whistle as a wind instrument and does not attempt an ample interpretive iconographical analysis. We can nonetheless surmise that Tschokwe whistles can be separated into two main categories. First, there are purely utilitarian instruments that can nevertheless be very beautiful on a formal level. Next, some whistles seem to be objects demonstrative of a certain prestige. « As we

often observe when studying personal objects », notes José Redinha, « whistles belonging to masters of ceremonies, hunters, war chiefs and other people of a certain social rank are often very finely finished, artistically speaking ». Redinha also relates another anecdote that supports this claim: « Once, when we were participating in a hunters' festival, we saw the war chiefs use the whistles during combat simulations and their habit and experience with the instruments was obvious: they nimbly blew into their whistles and created signals by covering the tone holes with their fingers and then proudly and emphatically held the whistles in front of their chest ».

The difficulty of interpreting the whistles' iconography

In some circumstances, we can make speculations regarding the social status of a person





Fig. 12 (face and profile): Whistle showing a masked dancer. Two small antelope horns can be seen on the chest, and on the back of the headdress. This whistle is the same drawn by J. Redinha (see fig. 9). Wood. H.: 8 cm. Ex-coll. Henrique Quirino da Fonseca.

through analysis of the heads or figurines that adorn a whistle belonging to him. For example, whistles decorated with a *Cikunza* mask (fig. 1 and 8, bottom) were probably crafted for a hunter. This particular mask represents a kindly spirit, particularly beneficial in matters of fecundity or hunting⁵. Redinha describes a whistle sketched in 1937 (fig. 10 and 11) that seemingly represents a masked dancer and supposedly belonged to a tribal chief⁶. He bases his hypothesis on the presence of a particular style of antelope horns that also adorn the chief's headdress and chest. This is probably also the case of the fine specimen presented in figure 15, especially considering the headdress and the hieratic purity of the subject's face. The whistle presented in figure 14 shows a person who is sitting, holding his chin; this is a motif that can be identified on other pieces, notably staves and batons, combs or divinatory figurines. Hermann Baumann⁷ interprets this motif as a representative reference to ancestors. Apparently little certainty abounds in this particular domain. Authors are sparing of commentaries and we are left with the impression that the better-quality whistles, finely sculpted and evidently quite old — exam-

ples of which Redinha could still come across during the 1930's —, belonged to « castes » of warriors and hunters that had, by the time when Redinha was in the field, largely disappeared: « A few miserable states — if we can even call them such — subsist from the time of this region's great history, less than 50 years ago! The rulers' role has been reduced to that of derisory village chiefs [...] » (Baumann, Lunda, 1935)⁸.

Among ethnologists who have done in situ research in Angola, one in particular has certainly not been duly recognized for his work, and I am speaking of Hermann Baumann. A German ethnologist, Baumann first traveled to Angola in 1930 at a time when the country was very poorly explored yet was known to Westerners through the writings of Carvalho, Cameron, Capello-Ivens, and Pogge among others.

The focus of his initial voyage was to study Angolan peoples and, more importantly, to collect ethnographic objects for Berlin's museum. These objects were published in 1935 along with a selection of Baumann's photographs in a book that is practically impossible to track down today entitled *Lunda. Bei Bauern und*

Fig. 13: Ivory whistle. This type is also known among the Pende, Congo. The model drawn by J. Redinha (see fig. 9) is more elaborated. Ivory. H.: 12 cm. Ex-coll. Henrique Quirino da Fonseca.

Fig. 14: Whistle with a seating figure, the elbows on the knees and the head supporting by the hands. Wood. H.: 12 cm. Ex-coll. Henrique Quirino da Fonseca.



Jägern im Inner-Angola (« Lunda. The farmers' and hunters' lands of central Angola »). We will not hazard a judgment as to whether or not the book's title — not indicative of its content — or simply its language and the political climate at the time of its publication contributed to the surprising lack of interest that it generated. We must nevertheless recognize the value of the profound study it offers of the material and spiritual life of the Tschokwe people of the Lunda region. In fact, the outline of Marie-Louise Bastin's forthcoming research is already present here. In the interest of this

study we will not discuss Baumann's conclusions yet it behooves us to examine the nature, quality and diversity of the objects he amassed in 1930. A large number of masks are presented as well as the contents of divination baskets, a large number of chairs and figurative chairs, fine yet modest snuffboxes, figurative combs and finally several small statues and utilitarian objects. One sole yet pretty whistle is presented amid other musical instruments (fig. 6). As to be expected, there are, in Baumann's catalog, no imposing sculptures of Tschokwe chiefs and no scepters either — just like in the



Dundo Museum's collection, constituted shortly thereafter.

Throughout his book, Baumann complains about the long hikes — far from the trodden paths and railways — that he had to undertake in order to secure ancient and authentic accounts of the region's indigenous culture. This voyage lasted only a few months yet he brought back nearly 1,400 objects as well as many rolls of still- and movie-films. All of this material was entrusted to the Ethnographic Museum of Berlin yet much of it was destroyed by allied bombing during World War II. Our German author tells us that the Portuguese colonists had stripped the formerly all-powerful chiefs of any real authority. During the 1930's, surely no more formal « courts » of dignitaries or warriors existed: the social structure was seemingly defined by the new colonial administration. All that remained were village chiefs who were instilled with a strange aura of dignity, informed by a century-old tradition and the reminiscence of bygone glory. The ethnographic materials that Baumann brought back to Berlin reflect this reality: there are no objects that could be qualified as « courtly » or « royal ». On the other hand, the Portuguese were far less concerned with the ritual and animist activities of the Angolan tribes. For this reason, masks, divinatory objects and magical tools of all sorts abound in these museum collections of the 1930's. At this time, these objects were still being created and used, just like traditional musical instruments and various decorative jewelry, etc.

In this way, we can view the figurative whistles as attributes of social class. Their production flourished but then faded and gradually disappeared concurrently with the decline of the chieftaincy courts as early as the end of the nineteenth century. It is true all the same the Redinha still found some impressive examples in the field during the second half of the 1930's, but with the exception of those that he qualified as « modern », the whistles were for the most sculpted part in the nineteenth century. The oral accounts that he collected also make reference to the century past: memories of war practices from a bygone era and reenactments of tribal wars dating from a bellicose and glorious past.

*Henrique Quirino da Fonseca¹ worked for the Angolan Diamond Company (the "Diamang") starting in 1924 and become its Director in 1932. Intrigued and attracted by the indigenous culture of Angola, this high-placed civil servant was the impetus behind the construction and the collections of the Dundo Museum. His widow recalls that he employed two full-time « specialized » assistants to amass indigenous objects in the bush: « Sometimes they came back empty-handed from expeditions that sometimes lasted for weeks. Other times the expedition was particularly fruitful and we would admire the pieces they brought back and listen to the telling of their adventures ». According to evidence available to us, one of these assistants was none other than José Redinha, the famous Portuguese ethnologist and director of the Angola Museum since 1959 and author of many scientific publications. In a book entitled *Album ethnografico*, he relates stories about collecting objects in the bush and gives detailed accounts of the circumstances surrounding their finding. This book also includes plates of remarkably precise sketches made between 1936 and 1940 (fig. 8 and 11). In these sketches we can make out many famous objects and notably several having belonged to Henrique Quirino da Fonseca.

Notes :

1. Redinha, *Album Ethnografico*, pp. 5-14.
2. Voir Laurenty, 1974, p. 13.
3. Bastin, 1961, p. 352.
4. Remondino, 2002.
5. Bastin, 1961, p. 371.
6. Redinha, *Album Ethnografico*, p. 30.
7. Baumann, 1935, p. 67.
8. Heintze, 1999, p. 139.

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Fig. 15: Whistle ornamented with a head of a chief. Wood. H.: 8 cm.
 Ex-coll. Henrique Quirino da Fonseca.

Fig. 16: Figurative tschokwe whistle, R.D.C., Angola. Wood. H.: 6,8 cm.
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