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Writing Architecture

The Mousgoum *Tòlék* and Cultural Self-Fashioning at the New *Fin de Siècle*

STEVEN NELSON

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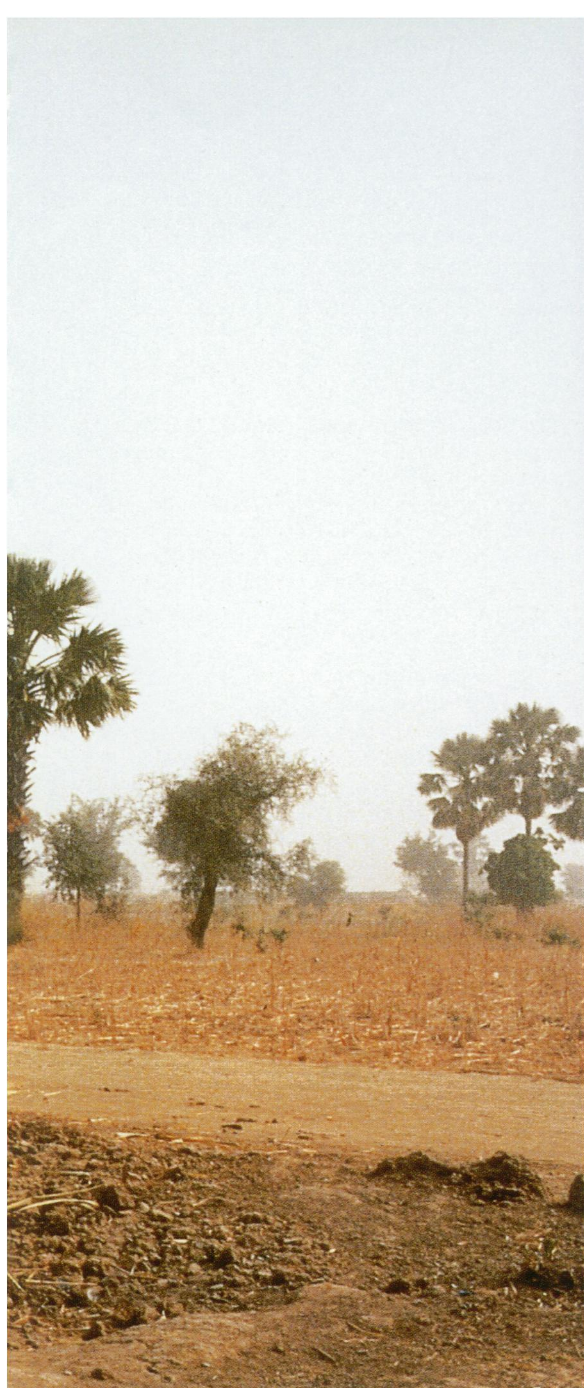

11. Cases-obus du village de Bangadgi sur le Logone (Région de Bongor)

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For the past three centuries the Mousgoum have made their home in the flood plains that straddle the border between northern Cameroon and Chad. The Mousgoum and their celebrated house, referred to in Munjuk as *tòlék* (pl. *tòlékakay*),[1] have been known in the West since at least the 1850s, when the German explorer Heinrich Barth journeyed to north and central Africa (Figs. 1–3).

In one of the interviews which were the staple of my field research in the Mousgoum village of Pouss, Cameroon, my research assistant, Hamat Gring, invoked the author Amadou Hampâté Bâ's famous assertion, "In Africa, an elder who dies is a library that burns." He was talking to the late Azao Dogo, considered by many to be the village historian. Gring went on to ask, "If we do not know our elders, will our culture be on its knees?" The image raised by the discussion between Gring and Dogo vividly illustrates the fears surrounding the relationship between the past and the present as well as the belief that in order to survive in the present, one must know one's past. Gring's invocation of Bâ presented a poignant, complex set of connections which highlight the central place of Mousgoum cultural knowledge in the construction of contemporary Mousgoum identities.

For the Mousgoum, as for many cultures around the globe, art and architecture have become important vehicles for sustaining—in tangible, visible forms—a knowledge of the past which is embedded in ideas about cultural heritage. In that sense, Bâ's elder and the *tòlék* have

Clockwise from opposite page:

1. Mousgoum house, *tòlék* (pl. *tòlékakay).* Mourlà, Cameroon, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson.

By the 1930s these striking structures were disappearing from the landscape of northern Cameroon and Chad. Recognizing the loss of cultural heritage, Mousgoum began to build new *tòlékakay* in the mid-1990s.

2. *Tòlék* built ca. 1990 by Mme. Djaoro Bara Bara Abourgadï. Mourlà, Cameroon, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson.

These houses are built primarily by men. Mme. Abourgadï, who was trained by her father, is one of the only female masons in Mousgoum country.

3. Postcard of Mousgoum family enclosures, Bangadgi, Chad, ca. 1910.

"Cases-obus" is the French term for *tòlékakay.* The structures have been of interest to Westerners since European exploration in the area more than 150 years ago.

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much in common. The Mousgoum *tòlék*, a freestanding dome made of clay, was said to have been disappearing as early as the 1930s—through the combination of forced labor under French colonialism, Mousgoum emigration, changes in societal structures, illness, and death. Indeed, during my preliminary fieldwork in and around Pouss in 1994, I saw few *tòlékakay* still standing.

However, since 1995 there has been a resurgence in the building of these houses. Nearly twenty new ones stand today in Pouss and its environs. Alongside this development, the end of 1995 saw a virtual explosion in wall painting, and much of this work depicts the *tòlék*. Fundamentally, the contemporary revival of the *tòlék* and its mural imagery shows how Mousgoum historical consciousness has been informed by their fear of irrevocable cultural loss, how they acutely understand the importance of the connection between architecture and cultural heritage, and how the *tòlék* has been regarded by both the Cameroonian government and the West. At the end of the twentieth century, this structure has become a syncretic form—indigenous in its genesis and charged with a Mousgoum comprehension and interpretation of outside ideas. It is this crossroads of meaning at what I call "the new *fin de siècle*" that serves as the foundation for this examination of the murals on the façade of Lamido (Sultan) Mbang Yaya Oumar's palace (Fig. 4).

The apotheosis of this inquiry is perhaps the celebration of the opening of the 1996 tourist season in Northern Cameroon, which took place in Pouss on December 30, 1995. It was, literally and symbolically, the meeting of the local and the national, the "traditional" and the "(post)modern," the past and the present, and the Mousgoum and the Western tourist. The celebration was a multilayered borderland where performance, art, and architecture expressed messages whose meanings differed depending upon the observer's position. For the Mousgoum it was a production and articulation of their cultural heritage, a celebration of Mousgoum agency which merged with the presence of outsiders. For the Western tourists who were brought in by the dozens, it was the opportunity to see the practices and images of an "authentic" African "tribe." For the Cameroonian officials it was an expression of a small part of what defines modern-day Cameroon. And for the itinerant researcher it was an incredible opportunity for analysis as well as an unbelievably lucky break. During this day-long celebration, the Mousgoum were defining themselves to both themselves and the outside world.

The process of defining oneself is relative, necessarily weaving the threads of the past and the present as well as the self and non-self into a unitary cloth. For the Mousgoum it is not only their own past but also that of the West that has figured in their contemporary self-representation. One of the threads in this cloth is André Gide's renowned 1925 journey to central Africa. Inarguably the best-known Westerner to visit the Mousgoum (whom he identifies as "Massa," a neighboring people), Gide wrote an extraordinary passage on the *tòlék* that is the most often quoted text on the structure (Gide 1994 [1927]:217–18):

> The Massa's hut, it is true, resembles no other; but it is not strange, it is *beautiful;* and it is not its strangeness so much as its beauty that moves me. A beauty so perfect, so accomplished, that it seems natural. No ornament, no superfluity. The pure curve of its line, which is uninterrupted from base to summit, seems to have been arrived at mathematically, by ineluctable necessity; one instinctively realizes how exactly the resistance of the materials must have been calculated...[its easy spring terminates] in the circular opening that alone gives light to the inside of the hut, in the manner of Agrippa's Pantheon. On the outside a number of regular flutings give life and accent to these geometrical forms and afford a foothold by which the summit of the hut...can be reached; they enabled it to be built without the aid of scaffolding; this hut is made by hand like a vase; it is the work, not of a mason, but of a potter. Its colour is the very colour of the earth—a pinkish-grey clay, like the clay of which the old walls of Biskra are made.

The Mousgoum themselves have used Gide's description of the *tòlék* in order to attract attention to their Cultural and Tourist Center (Fig. 5), and the French association Patrimoine sans Frontières (Heritage without Borders) has also used the author's words in its brochures as a means of gaining financial support to rebuild *tòlékakay* in and around Pouss (see "Mousgoum Cultural Center," 1995; "Reconstruction des cases-obus," 1995:2). Gide's passage is an extraordinary example of a Westerner's simultaneous identification with and disavowal of the "primitive" Other, achieved through the marriage of the languages of high modernism and primitivism. While Gide marvels at the *tòlék*'s technological sophistication and "classical" form, it is not, as would be the case with a Western edifice, the product of architectural genius (coded as European and male); rather it is that of potters, who for Gide can only imitate that which their ancestors had already been doing for centuries. Such a view implies not only that the *tòlék* is "craft," as opposed to "architecture," but also that its makers, masons who are predominantly men, are somehow "female."

4. Entrance to the palace of Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar. Except for Figure 11, all images in photographs shown here of the Lamido's palace wall were painted in 1995 by the women of the community for the opening of the 1996 tourist season. Pouss, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson.
Large depictions of *tòlékakay* flank the doorway. The mural paintings and bas-reliefs allude to the spiritual and political power of the Lamido (Sultan) and other aspects of Mousgoum belief and culture.

Nevertheless, perhaps the attraction of this description for the Mousgoum is embedded in the ways outside factors affect one's perception of oneself. V. S. Naipaul articulates this idea in his novel *A Bend in the River* (1979:15):

> Small things can start us off in new ways of thinking, and I was started off by the postage stamps of our area. The British administration gave us beautiful stamps. These stamps depicted local scenes and local things; there was one called "Arab Dhow." It was as though, in those stamps, a foreigner had said, "This is what is most striking about this place." Without that stamp of the dhow I might have taken the dhows for granted. As it was, I learned to look at them. Whenever I saw them tied up at the waterfront I thought of them as something peculiar to our region, quaint, something the foreigner would remark on...[2]

With respect to the Mousgoum and the formation of contemporary identities, the perspectives of those outside the culture—conveyed in texts as well as ephemera—become a powerful means of re-evaluating the self. Gide's passage reintroduces the *tòlék* to the Mousgoum. In a broad sense it has played a part in making the house understood as the most extraordinary thing about Mousgoum country. And this understanding constitutes an important part of the structure's attraction for both the Mousgoum and the Western traveler (or scholar, as the case may be).

In 1993 the Cameroonian poet Baskouda Shelley wrote *Kirdi est mon nom* (Kirdi is my name), a volume that extols the unique natures of the twenty-six cultures—including the Mousgoum—formerly grouped together under the problematic term "Kirdi." Europeans applied that designation to the various peoples of the area who had not converted to Islam at the time of colonization. Although the term today has pejorative connotations for some, Shelley, who is from the region and identifies himself as Kirdi, has reappropriated it for his book.

A highly complex text, merging indigenous oral history and beliefs with French language, French literature, and Nietzchian philosophy, *Kirdi est mon nom*

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attempts to rectify through writing what its author sees as "a [Kirdi] world often superficially approached and profoundly misunderstood" (1993:5).[3] Shelley views his tome as half poetry and half coat of arms. The latter is especially important here. A coat of arms is usually defined as a design on a shield used as an emblem by a family, city, or institution. This emblem in turn is a symbol of identity, of a group's (or individual's) unique place in the world. It is with this understanding that Shelley frames his text, and invoking language as emblem, he seeks to "open a door into the immense and complex Kirdi universe" (p. 5). This universe exists through a series of twenty-six odes which create portraits of each of the Kirdi cultures.

Each ode opens with the standard greeting "Ephata! My people Ephata! Kirdi is my name," and then a more specific declaration of Kirdi identity: "I am____." The ode beginning "I am Mousgoum" (p. 43) marks the commencement of a poetic history of this culture, starting with a myth of origin. In Shelley's account the Mousgoum were said to have come into being on the banks of the Logone as the result of a marriage between a Kotoko prince and a Massa woman.

After setting forth the myth of origin and Mousgoum perseverance in the face of adversity, the poet focuses on the relations between spouses and the way indigenous spirits aid in progeniture. The important issues here revolve around nobility and beauty. In addition to conjugal relations and connections to spirits, the author uses the cleanliness and proper ritual and eating habits of the Mousgoum as tools to construct an image of them that is noble and humane. Expanding on such tropes, Shelley then asks (p. 45):

> Do you know my celebrated
> Mousgoum house which is in
> the form of a cylindrical obus?
> This house which displays the
> genius of Africa to the world?
> It is perfect, mathematically
> thought out, geometrically
> flawless.
> In the manner of the Pantheon of
> Agrippa, it exhibits a well
> formed curve.
> As a beautiful vase, it is built
> without scaffolding.
> From the base to the summit, it
> carries an earthen color
> without paint.
> In the interior, its smooth,
> lustrous, glazed walls offer
> with grace,
> A rare sweet coolness which
> chases the heat and replaces
> it...

Although the references in this ode to the Mousgoum are practically identical to those in Gide's passage, rhetorically they are vastly different. Shelley, like Gide, connects beauty to technology and classical form. For the Kirdi poet, however, this connection becomes a source for celebrating the genius of the Mousgoum in particular and Africa in general. This genius is an integral part of Mousgoum identity, of what makes them unique among the twenty-six Kirdi cultures. In essence, Shelley has intervened in Gide's description of the *tòlék*. He has rewritten it, reordering its semantic underpinnings to reveal the arbitrary and mutable nature of the *tòlék as sign*. This reconfiguration gives the structure another signification, another underpinning ordered by a new voice. The dome, as a product of Mousgoum agency, now underscores the similarity between the role of the Mousgoum mason and that of the celebrated modernist architect. Moreover, Shelley's insistence on Mousgoum ownership of the *tòlék* removes it from the otherworldly, ambiguous territory of "nonpedigreed" architecture, de-exoticizes it, and places it within its own historical as well as contemporary cultural contexts.

In his foreword, Shelley (pp. 6, 9), invoking Aimé Césaire (1983), uses castration as a metaphor for oppression and psychological slavery. In tandem with a

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5. Cultural and Tourist Center. Pouss, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson.

The *tòlék*, seen as a symbol of Mousgoum identity, is being used in the effort to attract tourists to Pouss. This house form plays a visibly important role at the village's tourist center, both as built structures and mural images. The latter were painted in 1995.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left:

6. Postage stamp issued by the Federal Republic of Cameroon, ca. 1965, designed by Decaris. It reads, in translation, "Folklore and Tourism. Mousgoum houses in Pouss."

7. Official stamp of Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar. The swords are an explicit reference to the ruler's power, which is also linked to the *tòlék* below.

8. Façade of Mme. Boukar Patcha Alouakou's house. Pouss, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson.

Mme. Alouakou painted the wall in 1995. Her painting of the *tòlék*, which she labeled a *"symbole,"* was consciously meant to call attention to the house as an important Mousgoum tradition.

reconstitution of the self, an operation Césaire describes as "de-castration," the exaltation of genius enables psychic restoration. By invoking the *tòlék* as the display of genius and indigenous agency, the structure becomes not only a marker but also an aggressive symbol of contemporary identity, metaphorically and literally built through what Charles Binam Bikoï calls "the mastery of the verb." This notion, for Bikoï, underscores the active transmission of history and cultural values through oral means (1985:92).

Moreover, the Mousgoum structure squarely confronts ingrained myths which insist upon African inferiority. Here, the deployment of the *tòlék* serves as an integral part of an African reference point in the operation of self-evaluation and reconstruction. Abiola Irele explains this process with respect to the ways in which African reference points, put into the service of self-exploration, first constitute a polemic, a counternarrative fundamentally opposed to imperialist ideology. In this action, the *tòlék* allows the articulation of a cultural identity, one that is steeped in what Irele calls "counteracculturation." This identity exists in opposition to imperialist ideology, simultaneously striving to divest it of its symbolic and psychic force (Irele 1986:124–25). Hence this new symbol, which helps Shelley reach an empowering catharsis, proclaims the two words that mark the completion of Shelley's—as well as the Kirdi's—healing process: "Homo sum" (p. 82).

Tourism and Self-Reinvention

Dean MacCannell has convincingly argued, "Tourism today occupies the gap between primitive and modern, routinely placing modernized and primitive peoples in direct face-to-face interaction…" (1992:17). This interaction occurs in Pouss on an almost daily basis. Western tourists—led there by travel stories, travelogues, advertising, and images on ephemera such as postage stamps (Fig. 6)—arrive to see the *tòlékakay*, visit Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar, wander through the market, and go on "hippo watches" on the neighboring Logone or Lake Maga. After this brief sojourn, the travelers return to the Coca-Colas and Fanta sodas which await them in the well-equipped minivan, and drive the sixty or so miles back to the city of Maroua, satisfied that Pouss and its environs are exactly as the travel guides had said they would be. While MacCannell rigorously explains and analyzes the often exploitative encounter between the tourist and what he calls the "ex-primitive," his account ignores the fact that while the ex-primitive is, in a large sense, putting on a performance predicated on Western perception and desire, it is possible that in the performance of dances, the staging of festivals, the construction of new *tòlékakay*, and the appearance of figural wall painting, there is a rewriting of history not only for Westerners but also for the Mousgoum themselves. This oversight in MacCannell's analysis robs non-Westerners of their agency and obscures the fact that many of these encounters have multiple layers of meaning.

Paul Lane, in his work on the Dogon of Mali, notes, "Despite a history of colonial administration, and, more lately, growing tourist activity, it would be entirely inappropriate to regard all these changes as comparable parts of Westernization." Within this framework, he writes that indigenous responses are viewed "at worst as…passive reception and at best as opportunistic adaptation to events beyond the control of local inhabitants" (1988:66; see also Van Beek 1991:56–73). MacCannell's overemphasis on outside forces of change in non-Western cultures and his failure to seriously consider indigenous agency cause his analysis to come dangerously close to reinscribing the very tropes that he seeks to deconstruct.

Stephen Greenblatt has recognized the danger in such thinking about the meeting of non-Western and Western cultures. In his exploration of Europeans in the New World (1991), he begins by noting his experience as a Western tourist to the island of Bali, witnessing the assimilation of Western technology by a group of local residents. He found that the VCR and the television monitor had become a powerful alternative means of self-representation. Greenblatt then emphasizes the need to "resist what we may call an *a priori* ideological determinism, that is, the notion that particular modes of representation are inherently and necessarily bound to a given culture, and that their effects are unidirectional" (1991:3–4). For Greenblatt it is important to acknowledge that people have powerful mechanisms for assimilating and recasting things from within and without (1991:4). His encounter also shows that the assimilation of things foreign serves at once those inside and outside a culture. In this vein, the reappropriation of the *tòlék* and its representation by the Mousgoum have been neither passive responses to outside forces nor opportunistic means of accumulating wealth at the expense of the Western tourist: they are instead an active, powerful way of reinventing themselves for themselves.

Moreover, in many regions of sub-Saharan Africa, the "gap" between the traditional and the modern has its genesis not only in tourism but also in traces of colonialism, in religious conversion, and in the connection of contemporary Africa to a global economy. Within all of

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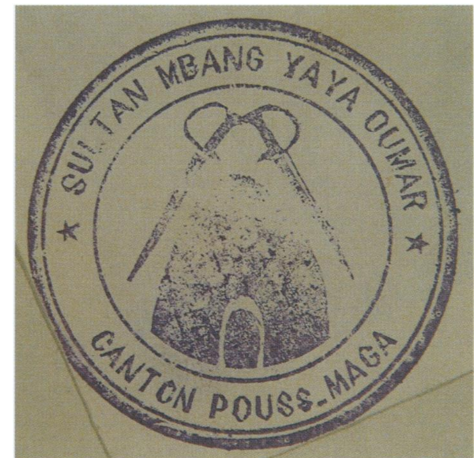


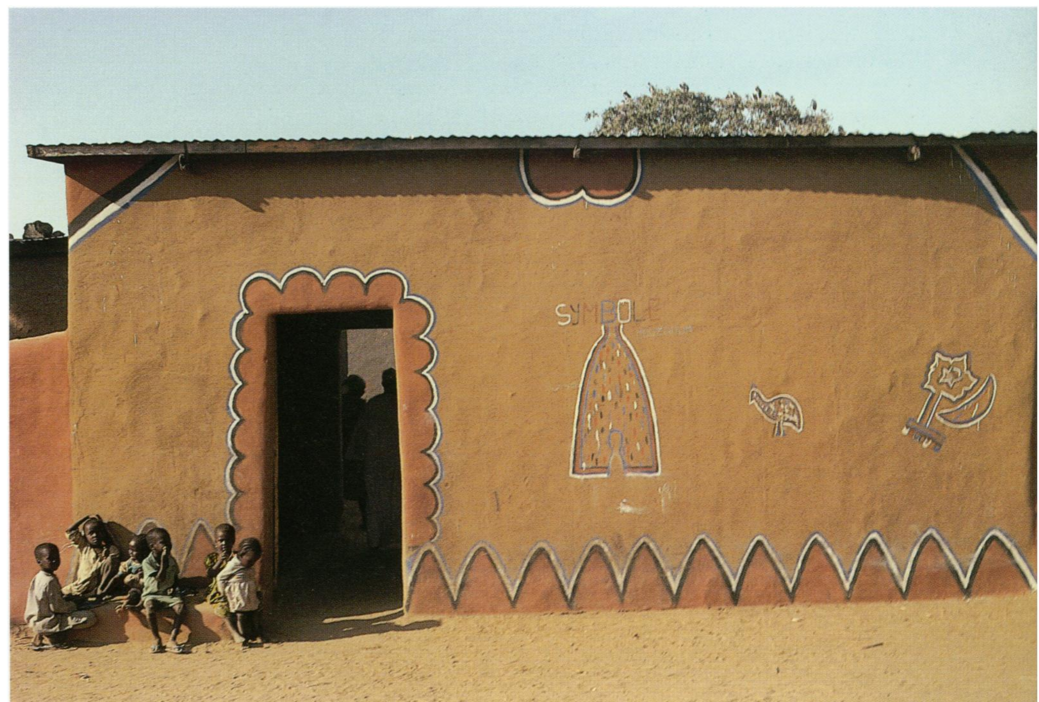
these factors, as well as the complexities surrounding the formation of national identities, many African cultures have sought to refashion themselves so that the past and the present are not in complete opposition to one another. Shelley's text is a dramatic form of this fashioning of the self, showing the self as having multiple reference points and constructing a modern Mousgoum (and African) person as a sentient, rational being who has a syncretic world-view. This self-fashioning has resonance in the architectural and visual realms as well.

The Palace Mural Decoration

When one comes to Pouss, one can easily find the palace of Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar. His residence dwarfs those around it, and vivid paintings on its façade emphasize the centrality of the entrance. The palace was first painted in the early 1990s, but it was repainted in December 1995 in preparation for the aforementioned celebration marking the opening of the tourist season. The task was accomplished by communities of women. Grouped by their neighborhoods, they were each given an area to paint. Groups from the eastern side of Pouss had the wall to the right of the entrance; those from Pouss Center (the area abutting the square in front of the palace) had the entrance, its immediate vicinity, and interior court; and those from the western side of Pouss, the wall to the left of the entrance. Each woman was paid about 200 Central African francs (about 40 cents).

The *tòlék* is depicted on both sides of the palace's entrance, among an array of representational and abstract images. Shelley celebrated the color of the house as being the same as that of the ground, but the *tòlékakay* on the Lamido's palace are a pastiche of colorful contrasts in paint and low relief in clay. As with the Western representations of the *tòlék*, much attention is given to the pattern of its outer walls; however, these bas-relief multicolored ovals give the houses a tactility and sumptuousness lacking in Western descriptions and images. As in Shelley's ode, the reappropriation of the *tòlék* transforms it into a sign which undeniably attests to the desire of Mousgoums to portray their culture as vital and contemporary, and the position of the houses on both sides of the entrance calls attention to the ruler's power and wealth. The capacity of the *tòlék* to relay such qualities is emphasized in the image on the Lamido's official stamp, where the house appears under two swords (Fig. 7). This pictogram identifies the Lamido and his dominion. The words "SULTAN MBANG YAYA OUMAR / CANTON POUSS, MAGA" appear within the surrounding ring. Working as part of the frame itself, the written name of the Lamido and the place ground the *tòlék* within the Mousgoum vocabulary of royal power.

The sultan's brother and spokesperson, Salman Mbang Oumar, called the *tòlék* the Mousgoum "symbol of tradition," adding that it is the "card of identity of the Mousgoum." This view of the house as a cultural symbol was indeed echoed by many people in and around



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Pouss.[4] Ousman Assoua was very explicit about such a connection, insisting: "The appearance of the *tòlék*, [a] symbol of Mousgoum culture which is nearly lost, on the wall of the Lamido not only stirs the curiosity of the Mousgoum but also [attracts] the attention of tourists for the sake of joy." Évélé Douniya contended that the construction of the new *tòlékakay* articulates "the memory of the past." These connections are also found pictorially on the wall of Mme. Boukar Patcha Alouakou's house, where the word *symbole* is written above a drawing of a *tòlék* (Fig. 8). She states, "I have revived or drawn the *tòlék* on my wall because it is something from [our] tradition which is in the process of disappearing." As these references reveal, the *tòlék*'s reappropriation and reinterpretation recall a Mousgoum past whose symbolic import is very much a part of the present.

When I interviewed the Lamido in 1995, he elaborated even further in his description of the *tòlék*, comparing it to writing. He also claimed that the Mousgoum are a people who "appeared on the earth several millions of years ago," and then added, "They are a people who come from the Sudan; [they are] a civilized people *because* of having built the *tòlék*" (emphasis mine). In these statements, the Lamido consciously attaches the *tòlék* to his own ideas of civilization, and within this connection places emphasis upon Mousgoum ingenuity and agency, reminding us once again of Bikoï's "mastery of the verb." In his novel *No Longer at Ease* (1988:275–76), the celebrated Nigerian author Chinua Achebe wrote:

> And the symbol of the white man's power was the written word, or better still, the printed word. Once before he went to England, Obi heard his father talk with deep feeling about the mystery of the printed word to an illiterate kinsman:
> Our women made black patterns on their bodies with the juice of the *uli* tree…but it soon faded….But sometimes our elders spoke about *uli* that never faded, although no one had ever seen it. We see it today in the writing of the white man. If you go to the native court and look at the books which clerks wrote twenty years ago or more, they are still as they wrote them. They do not say one thing today and another tomorrow, or one thing this year and another next year….In the Bible, Pilate said, 'What is written is written.' It is the *uli* that never fades.[5]

In these conscious connections of African visual art forms to writing—indeed, these forms *as* writing—the Lamido and Achebe each reveal a perception of civilization and power rooted in the written word, and for the Mousgoum this connection is part of the way the *tòlék* becomes both product and symbol of not only the Mousgoum civilization in particular but also the very idea of civilization in general.

Writing has many other meanings with respect to the construction of the self that are steeped in different ideas of "culture" as well as civilization. In a framework largely dictated by Hegelian notions of civilization and the self, writing—and, by extension, the book—became understood as the ultimate tool which Africans could deploy to eradicate the intellectual and cultural alienation resulting from the colonizer's denial of the particularities of African cultures and, moreover, of the colonizer's wholesale negation of African humanity. It is in this spirit that the Cameroonian scholar André-Marie Ntsobe passionately insists (1985:234–35):

> The book is the universal word, the word of the man of culture. It offers him the ultimate privilege of becoming aware of the weakness of what has been said in the past, its contradictions and even its contingency. It enables him to have a history of vast dimensions, a definitive structure of his social organization, to take charge of his life and fix it in an immutable form. The new language permits him to formulate his ultimate goals explicitly, it is the liberating word, an [eruption] into the world and history….By consigning their

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9. Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar at the celebration of the opening of the 1996 tourist season. Pouss, December 30, 1995. Photo: Steven Nelson.

The turban worn by the ruler parallels the "straw hat" covering at the top of the *tòlék* (see Fig. 1).

This page:

10. *Airplane-Shaped Coffin* by Kane Kwei. Accra, Ghana, 1989. Wood, enamel paint; length 274.3cm (108"). Museum of International Folk Art, Gift of Vivian Burns.

Imagery like this coffin sculpture from Ghana and the airplane represented on the palace wall in Pouss (see Fig. 4) can be said to represent both tradition and modernity, linking this modern and powerful means of transportation to the prestige and authority of the traditional ruler (Vogel 1991:100; Cole 1989:116).

> knowledge to the printed page they counteract the alienation of Cameroonians...Hence the book is a sacred heritage, since it is a means for Cameroon to conserve its cultural characteristics, a means of expression for restoring fullness and meaning to its culture, since it crystallizes the riches of the centuries.[6]

The many issues articulated by Ntsobe also find expression in the provocative analogy the Lamido draws between the *tòlék* and writing. It is explicitly that which, like the work of Shelley, connects the Mousgoum to history, civilization, and full personhood. Herbert Cole (1989:155) also addresses the link between art and writing in Africa, expounding on the importance of the word in showing the literacy of artists and rulers. According to him, the power of the word amplifies the ruler's authority and prestige. The *tòlék*, as structure and as representation in painting, like Achebe's written word and Ntsobe's books, assumes a position of permanence tantamount to both a declaration of civilization and a résumé of history for the Mousgoum people.

Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar is not only the political leader of the Sultanate of Pouss but also the spiritual leader of its Muslims. The Sultanate itself converted to Islam by the turn of the twentieth century under the influence and domination of the Bagirmi who live in Chad (Lembezat 1961:67; see also Goodhue 1995:3). By the 1930s and '40s a large proportion of its subjects had converted as well. The crescent moon and star—one of the paradigmatic signs of Islamic affiliation as well as an allusion to beginnings and endings—also appear on the façade of the palace, overtly showing the paramount importance of Islam as part of the Lamido's identity. This symbol works with the other images to construct the representation of his power and dominion.

The symbols on the Lamido's wall point to the spiritual dimension of both his person and his power, which derive from his being seen by Muslims as the earthly representative of the Prophet, a characterization that legitimates his rule. Here the crescent and star bear a striking symbolic resemblance to the turban of the ruler. As one hadith said, "...as long as the Islamic community wears the turban, it will not go astray" (in Nasr 1993:112).[7] Hence the spirituality of the cloth serves as a metaphor for the spirituality of the Sultanate. The images on the wall articulate the same message.

However, the turban finds analogies not only in the symbol of the crescent and star but also in the *tòlék* and its image on the palace wall. As is the case with many architectural forms throughout the world, the parts of the *tòlék* can be likened to parts of the human body, and within this framework the head takes on paramount significance. The covering for the hole at the top of the *tòlék* is called a "straw hat" *(gidigilik).* The architectural metaphors it engenders easily accommodate and assimilate Islamic practices and beliefs. As such, the importance of the turban in dress and the head in Mousgoum architecture creates a milieu in which the *tòlékakay* on the Lamido's façade articulate similar values in political and spiritual realms. The multicolored representations of the *tòlék* work

HERBERT LOTZ

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Top to bottom:

11. Detail of the mural, painted ca. 1991, on the palace wall of Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar. Pouss, 1994. Photo: Steven Nelson.

The flag and map of Cameroon and the line locating the Sultanate of Pouss within Cameroon suggest a concern with not only Mousgoum identity but the identity of the larger state.

12. Detail of the mural painted in 1995 by Mme. Elhadj Abdramane for her own house wall. Pouss, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson.

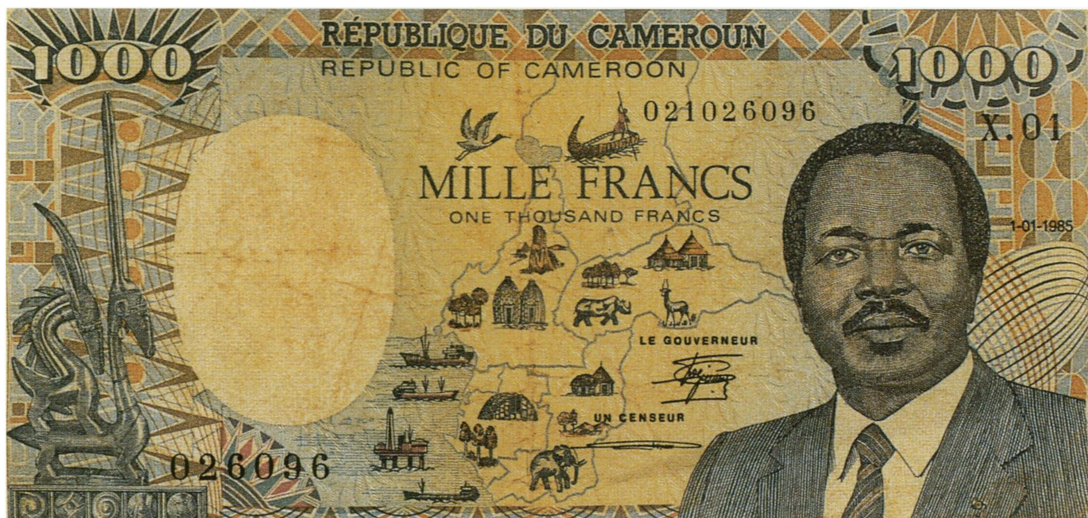
13. 1,000 Central African franc note.

By placing the *tòlék* on its currency, the Cameroonian government is aiming to promote a national identity and unification. Paul Biya, President of Cameroon, is also pictured.

along with this. The combination of the white background with the colored *aziy*, or "feet," of the house on the left finds its metaphor in the Mousgoum *fantasia* (Fig. 9). In both cases, the contrast of white and color serves to highlight the power and importance of the ruler.

The ability of the *tòlék* to become a reflection of the present as well as a mnemonic key to the past is reinforced by other paintings on the palace façade, such as the images of the airplane and the map of Cameroon. With respect to the Western veneration of the *tòlék* and the move throughout Cameroon to develop tourism, the airplane serves to represent contemporary industry and modern transit.

The image of the airplane appears frequently in developing countries as a symbol of modernity. It would be shortsighted, however, to see it merely as such. Susan Vogel convincingly argues that images of airplanes, Mercedes-Benzes, and the like in contemporary African art can at times be understood as both "traditional" and "modern." In the case of the late Ghanaian artist Kane Kwei, who created *Airplane-Shaped Coffin* in 1989 (Fig.



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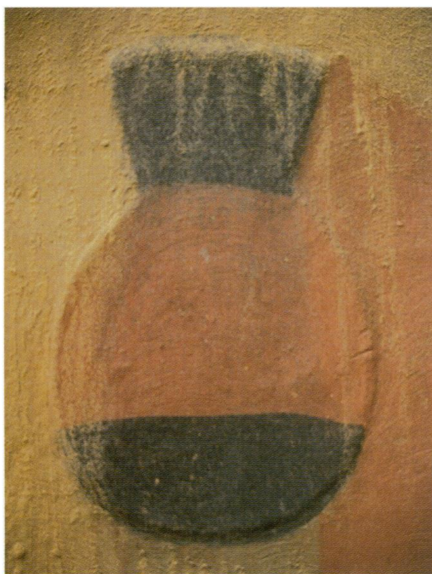
10), she stresses that the artist's work "permits his patrons to uphold traditional values publicly through a conspicuously untraditional means" (1991:100).

If we consider the airplane on the Lamido's wall together with his own ceremonial appearances on an elaborately outfitted horse, as well as the representation of the horse on the earlier and present façades, we can then see these two mural images as striking metaphors for the ruler. Cole emphasizes how the horse underscores the superiority of rulers, helping to fashion them as "aggrandized, forceful males." He suggests that they are "faster, richer, more visually and psychologically impressive, and thus in a more commanding position to lead" (1989:116). Cole then draws analogies to wheeled vehicles and their capacity to signify similar ideas of wealth and prestige. The airplane calls to mind the same analogy. While this means of transport speaks to the present as a symbol of tourism, or indeed "modernity" itself, it is multifaceted, addressing at once the Lamido's cosmopolitanism and his superiority and ability to rule his subjects.



Top: 14. Wall of the palace of Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar. Pouss, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson. Ideas about Mousgoum agency and well-being are communicated by the image of two men fishing, while the umbrella may be seen as a reference to both the Lamido's umbrella and the domed *tòlék*.

Bottom: 15. Detail of the wall of the Lamido's palace. Pouss, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson. The pot also signifies collective well-being.

Perhaps the façade's most obvious image suggestive of contemporary life and identity is the map and flag of Cameroon. On an earlier façade, a dot with a leader line showing the location of the Mousgoum—specifically the Sultanate of Pouss—within the modern nation-state illustrated a Mousgoum concern with connecting themselves to a larger political entity and showing their allegiance to it (Fig. 11). As Mme. Elhadj Abdramane said about the Cameroonian flag on her own wall, "The flag is [there] because I am in my country" (Fig. 12). The idea of Cameroon as a unified polity is rooted in the nationalist movements for independence which developed throughout the African continent during the 1950s and 1960s. Cameroon gained independence in 1960, and creating a unified national identity in a country containing over one hundred different cultures is still quite a contested issue.[8] The 1,000 Central African franc (CFA) note (Fig. 13) is an example of how the Cameroonian government has used the *tòlék* to further this process. Considering that many of today's Mousgoum live in Chad, their alignment with Mousgoum in Cameroon shows how, in

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This page:

Top: 16. Wall of the palace of Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar. Pouss, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson.

The converging triangles represent the shield critical to Mousgoum survival.

Bottom: 17. Wall painting ca. 1996 by an unknown artist. Pouss, 1996. Photo: Steven Nelson.

The spear also evokes a history of warfare and strength.

Opposite page:

18. Lamido Mbang Yaya Oumar and residents of Pouss celebrate the opening of the tourist season. Pouss, December 30, 1995. Photo: Steven Nelson.

postcolonial Africa, formerly arbitrary boundaries have helped constitute contemporary identities which are considered both viable and "real." In the case of the Lamido's wall, as in Shelley's work, there are multiple reference points: here they not only are ethnic and national but also connect to colonial and Western perception.

In this vein as well, the depiction of the map of Cameroon brings to the fore the relationship between the national government and the Sultanate of Pouss. In many regions of Cameroon, particularly the north, the nation-state allows many local chiefs to maintain their powers in their historical regions. In Pouss the power structure defined by the Lamido and his guards has remained largely intact. People often go to the Lamido—as opposed to Cameroonian governmental authorities—in order to resolve their disputes. In many respects the government has allowed the northern sultanates to apply their own laws in their dominions, and in return the leaders of these ministates lend their support to national governmental structures.[9] Images of the map and flag allude to this reciprocity. We see not only an articulation of the Sultanate's literal position within Cameroon but also a symbol of the connectedness of local and national power.

Other depictions on the wall suggest how fully the image of the Lamido in particular and the cultural identity of the Mousgoum more generally has been constituted here. Immediately to the right of the *tòlékakay,* the airplane, the map, and the crescent and star, one finds representations of a lion, a teapot, and a giraffe eating the leaves from the top of a tree. These latter portrayals elucidate and amplify important qualities of the *tòlék* as well as important aspects of Mousgoum life.

In Mousgoum country, teapots are a staple of many homes. Certain ones are reserved for performing ritual ablution before prayer: others are used for entertaining guests. A meeting of friends or associates at a home or the market will often involve the sharing of tea. Through this act, old bonds are reaffirmed and new ones are made. During my own stay in Pouss, the sharing of tea became one of the main ways I was able to extend friendship, respect, and appreciation to my Mousgoum family, friends, and associates. Embedded in this activity are tropes of good will and the social importance of "home." On the façade, the position of the teapot between the *tòlék* and the giraffe and tree creates an idea of "home" that is not only the house but also the land, or perhaps more appropriately, all of Mousgoum country. This narrative of "home," however, expresses more than affiliation and belonging; it also declares ownership. As the late Abdoulaye Malbourg insisted, the things on the palace façade are those "which belong to the Mousgoum."

The animal images, too, evoke narratives of home and the self. They also appear, imbued with human attributes, in myths and fables, making them key agents in the teaching of indigenous manners and codes of behavior. They also play integral roles in stories that explain the world. The centrality of animals, for Salman Mbang Oumar, lies in the fact that in stories and myth, "the Mousgoum...can make animals and things speak and give them a description which is believed to be true."

The depiction of two men fishing to the left of the entrance, past the crescent and star, illustrates one of the primary occupations of the Mousgoum, an activity of the past that continues into the

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present day (Fig. 14). This image of industriousness—echoed in various forms on walls throughout the village—also underscores indigenous agency. Here, male agency is represented as one of the things that insures collective and familial well-being. This idea of well-being, couched in ideas of heritage and progeniture, is echoed by the appearance of a pot—an item made by women—on the wall (Fig. 15).

In a related context, some of the seemingly abstract images on the Lamido's façade express ideas of survival. Moving left from the fishermen, one sees a number of shapes that look like two converging triangles (Fig. 16). These signify the Mousgoum shield, an important item because of its ability to protect in war and to close off the *tòlék* to outside invaders. On another wall this abstract image is given definitive form. The artist has painted a shape in red ochre and black that is almost identical to the painted and raised abstract images on the palace. Next to it is a smaller version of the image, above which the artist has written the Munjuk word *gamar*, meaning "shield" (Fig. 17). A spear painted between the two like shapes underscores the importance of past warfare in Mousgoum consciousness. In travelers' accounts and in field interviews, the Mousgoum and war are often connected. In the past, Salman Mbang Oumar says, "There was war. The Mousgoum often waged war." This attachment of warfare to indigenous history and ideals concerning Mousgoum strength become part and parcel of the wall's imagery.

A bas-relief of an umbrella, lying under the scene of the fishermen (Fig. 14), recalls the *fantasias* and fêtes that are a staple of life in Mousgoum country (Fig. 18). Like the Lamido's blue umbrella seen in the tourist celebration, the shields and other objects represented on the palace wall help to codify the umbrella's importance in the presentation and definition of kingship. The umbrella, through its domical associations, also finds analogy with the *tòlék*, each confirming the other's status as part of the Lamido's language of power. Ultimately, the palace façade in all of its elements constructs a complex diagram not only of the Lamido and his power in particular but of Mousgoum country more generally.

In the realm of the (post)modern, on a palace façade where art simultaneously asserts a cultural identity and gives the tourist an "authentic" experience, the Mousgoum can counteract what many in Pouss see as a loss of culture and ancestral knowledge. Here we are reminded of Évélé Douniya's characterization of the newly constructed *tòlékakay* as invoking "the memory of the past." Hence, the issues of the Mousgoum connection with the past and the tourist who may well feel that she or he has stepped into the past are completely intertwined. For the Mousgoum, tourism has worked neither as a means to salvage a dying form nor as a jolt to jump-start a timeless culture. Instead, while images on postcards, souvenirs, and other commercial items appeal to the Western tourist and become records of experience—my own included—they also open a space for the Mousgoum to reappropriate their own cultural imagery and re-create it in ways that articulate their ideas of their past and their perception of their present. Most important, this ability of the *tòlék* to signify multiple meanings has allowed the Mousgoum to reshape and reinvigorate the structure on their own terms as a way of constructing their cultural identity at the new *fin de siècle*. □

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notes

SPRING, BARLEY, & HUDSON: *Notes, from page 37*

[This article was accepted for publication in June 2001.]

1. A book accompanies the gallery display: *Africa: Arts and Cultures* (ed. John Mack, British Museum Press, London, 2000).
A major African conference is being planned to take place in the new Clore Education Centre at the British Museum, probably during Easter 2004. At the time of writing we are still seeking funding for the conference, but if you wish to be kept informed of developments, please let us know by e-mail: cspring@british-museum.ac.uk.
2. "Spirits in Steel: The Art of the Kalabari Masquerade," American Museum of Natural History, New York, April 1998–January 1999.
3. Many of these exhibitions were mounted at the Museum of Mankind for *africa 95*, a celebration of African arts held throughout Britain in August–December 1995.

NELSON: *Notes, from page 49*

[This article was accepted for publication in June 2001.]

1. The Mousgoum speak Munjuk, but the most common designation for the *tòlék* is the French term *case-obus*, which is used by French-speaking Mousgoum.
2. The French government issued a postage stamp depicting the *tòlék* in 1938. See Figure 6 for another example of a stamp bearing the image of this structure.
3. Shelley does not tell his reader to which "Kirdi" culture he belongs. I have translated the quotations from his book that appear here.
4. I interviewed those Mousgoum quoted in this article between October 1995 and May 1996.
5. *Uli* are the impermanent markings that some Igbo women of Nigeria paint onto their bodies.
6. In a response to Ntsobe, Joseph-Marie Essomba added, "In books there are other aspects—pictorial, iconographical—that can bear witness to our culture." See *The Cultural Identity of Cameroon* (1985:289).
7. Nasr points out that the turban signifies that one's head is straight and makes the male wearer remember his function as Allah's servant on earth (Nasr 1993:112–13).
8. For discussions surrounding various aspects in the construction of a "Cameroonian identity," see the essays in *The Cultural Identity of Cameroon* (1985).
9. Amnesty International, Network Africa, and other local and international organizations have sharply criticized this policy, claiming that it has led to the abuse of power by local rulers. This abuse is allegedly being ignored by the president of Cameroon, Paul Biya, who is said to rely heavily on the influence and cooperation of traditional rulers in manipulating the electorate.

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LIONNET: *Notes, from page 59*

[This article was accepted for publication in February 2001.]

1. The terms *heterodiegetic* and *homodiegetic* are used in narrative theory to classify stories. A heterodiegetic narrative is one told by a narrator who is not a character in the story; a homodiegetic narrative, on the other hand, features a narrator who also participates in the events she or he recounts. To the extent that museum exhibits and other forms of installations and performances tell "stories" about peoples and cultures, I feel that it is appropriate to borrow these two narratological terms to distinguish between exhibits mounted by peoples who are representing themselves and exhibits prepared by experts who are external to the story they tell.

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HYNES: *Notes, from page 65*

[This article was accepted for publication in June 2001.]

1. From a talk by Yinka Shonibare at "Yoruba: Diaspora and Identities." Conference held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, November 1997.
2. For a further discussion of this, see Mercer 1995.
3. *Feather Pink*, *Deep Blue*, and *Baby Blue* are illustrated in Ikon Gallery 1999: 16, 50–53.
4. Chris Ofili is one of the few YBAs who did not study at the theoretical hothouse of Goldsmiths; he trained at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.
5. For a discussion of land, heads, and identity in Gainsborough and Shonibare, see Gould 2001.
6. *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, funded by the Institute of International Visual Arts, was shortlisted for the Citibank 1999 Photography Prize.
7. The women agreed to allow images of their unborn children to be used for the piece. It explores one of the moral dilemmas introduced with advances in medical technology—whether or not to carry to full term a child who is developing medical problems or "defects" while in the womb.
8. Gallery talk given by Yinka Shonibare during the exhibition "Rhapsodies in Black: Art in the Harlem Renaissance," Hayward Gallery, London, 1997.
9. His "Portable Personal Histories" (1997) project emphasizes the malleable, fictional aspects of identity. It involved eight people from Birmingham, each of whom made his or her own museum display case, selecting their own materials. At first the displays seem quite straightforward, a cross between an American-style "memory box" and something from a local history museum. But then doubt creeps in. Are they describing themselves? Or a fictional someone else, whose life is portrayed in the box? Shonibare himself created the box of "Mary Beth Regan," an imaginary African American cowgirl.

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PICTON: *Notes, from page 73*

[This article was accepted for publication in June 2001.]

1. Stephen Friedman has been representing Yinka Shonibare since 1996. A complete list of exhibitions and publications of his work is available from the Stephen Friedman Gallery, 25-28 Old Burlington Street, London W1S 3AN. Tel: 44-20-7494-1434, fax: 44-020-7494-1431; e-mail: info@stephenfriedman.com; website: www.stephenfriedman.com.
2. I was first introduced to Yinka Shonibare by Dr. Clémentine Deliss, who at my suggestion organized a series of artists' talks and seminars at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London) during the autumn and winter of 1991–92. This project was funded by the Research Committee of the School, to which we were most grateful. It had been the intention to publish their proceedings, but completion of the editorial work was displaced by the research that led to *africa 95* (the celebration of African art held throughout the UK in fall 1995) and *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (Deliss et al. 1995), which, in any case, could be said to have provided the culmination of our project. The March 6, 1992, interview with Yinka Shonibare, referred to in this paper, was to have been published with the proceedings. Publication might yet happen, but in the meantime a copy of the complete interview is available on request from jp17@soas.ac.uk.
3. You will find William Kentridge, an African within South Africa's definition of the term, in London's Tate Modern, for example.
4. The successes of Chris Ofili and Steve McQueen in winning the Turner Prize in 1998 and 1999 respectively (see Picton 2000) have been widely reported; and in 2001 Isaac Julien was among those selected. Yinka Shonibare, though taking another path, is equally among those artists of African descent who represent a breach in the walls of that Citadel. In contrast, very few artists living and working primarily in west Africa can yet claim to be part of an international art world. There are exceptions, of course, a dozen at the most: artists such as Bruce Onobrakpeya, El Anatsui (see Picton 1997, 1998), and Atta Kwami (on show at the Kunsthalle, Basel, August and September 2001).
5. There is, I presume, a difference, for modernism can be taken to refer to more-or-less overt art movements, as in Europe where in retrospect we attribute a coherence by capitalizing its initial consonant. On the other hand, modernity refers to the developments that bring social practice to the period of "just now" (the root meaning of modern; see Williams 1976:174–75), whenever that "just now" is. We must, however, put away the idea that modernism/modernity comes to Africa from Europe. There are, of course, a series of engagements between these continents, as also with the Islamic nations of the world, to engender a series of local modernities that are quite specific to their particular locations in Africa, given the manner of the domestication of alien forms and practices within local frameworks of reference; and in that context there have of course also been local visual modernisms, such as Natural Synthesis in Nigeria and Negritude in Senegal.
6. Onabolu was, of course, a contemporary of Areogun (ca. 1880–1954), although they would never have met: Areogun had no reason to travel to Lagos, and Onabolu had no reason, as far as we know, to visit the Opin village of Osi-Ilorin.
7. This installation comprised two groups of figures, each including two adults and two children. One set is dressed in a predominantly yellow fabric, a Vlisco/Dutch Wax in a largely geometric pattern that Kathleen Bickford Berzock tells me is known in Côte d'Ivoire as "Men Are Not Grateful" (but I, at least, am grateful to her for this information). The other set is dressed in a blue-green fabric decorated with red eyes. I understand (from an anonymous reviewer of this paper) that they have been acquired by the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art. The complete set of eight figures was, as far as I know, published for the first time in Hassan & Oguibe 2001:220–22. The original *Alien Obsessives* show was accompanied by a limited-edition artist's book (Shonibare 1998) and the screening of science fiction movies.

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