

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Makonde

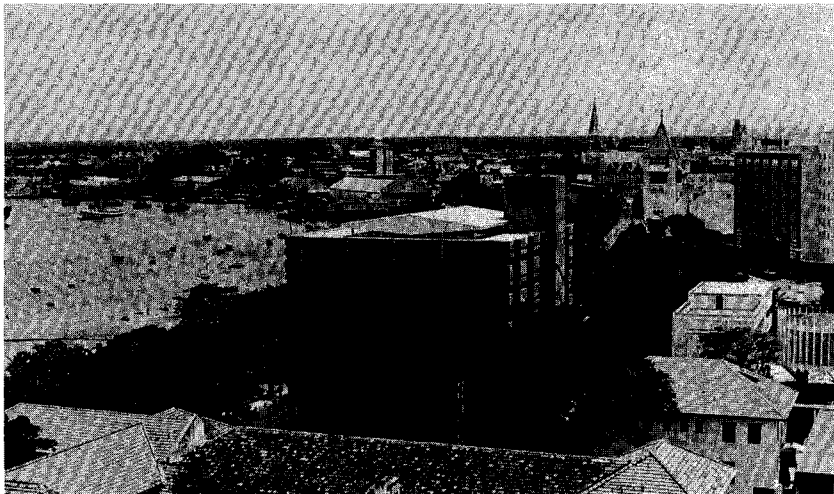
7 May 1970
Box 21262
Nairobi

Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

As one of the emerging and developing countries of Africa, Tanzania, in its struggle for autonomy, might well be considered a real success story. The spirit of "Uhuru na Ujumaa," freedom and unity, has moved it from a very unstable and uncertain beginning in the early sixties to a determined nation which is well on the way towards fulfilling a second term five year comprehensive planning program.

Tanzania is the largest of the East African Community countries (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda) in both land area and population. Its land covers over 360,000 square miles, while the population is well over 12½ million. The national language, Swahili, is spoken with much pride. Any visitor who attempts the language is most assuredly given preferential treatment as well as a quick tutoring session when his declinations are not correct.



Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania

Tanzania was never declared a national state under British rule. It did, however, become a Trusteeship Territory under British administration after World War I, through a mandate of the League of Nations. The absence of contending tribal units and the existence of a national language are considered by many to be the prime reasons behind the rapid unification of this East African country.

I would add another important reason why Tanzania has coalesced during the past decade: the leadership and guidance given to it in the person of Julius Kambarage Nyerere. The calibre of leadership which Nyerere has displayed is somewhat captured in a statement made by Professor Ali Mazrui, chairman of the Political Science Department at Makerere University College, Kampala. At a recent forum held at the University College, Nairobi, Mazrui acclaimed four types of leadership which are present in Africa today: intimidatory, patriarchal, reconciliatory, and mobilisatory. President Nyerere, he said, comes closest to being the mobilisatory. The mobilisatory leader is one who is "activated by ideological factors and requires more charisma to achieve his goals." One has but to see Mwalimu (teacher) Nyerere taking his place with the people of Tanzania, be it in the field, on the political platform, or on maneuvers with his Army personnel, to know that here is a man who executes his beliefs with personal involvement. The usual fanfare accorded people of his rank is most often omitted.

His greatest thrust towards keeping himself, as well as his high officials, in touch with the common man came about during February of 1967 in a document called The Arusha Declaration on "Socialism and Self-Reliance." In essence, the document is a blueprint for development based on the recognition of the equality of all men. As the title implies, it also encourages a certain degree of economic independence through cooperative efforts.

Besides issuing these somewhat global doctrines, President Nyerere also set out some concrete policies which were aimed at bridging the chasm between the common man and government officials. There were immediate cuts in the high "colonialized" salaries of all government employees starting with the President and going all the way down. He asserted that no civil servant, Member of Parliament, or Tanzanian African National Union officer should continue in this position if he insists upon maintaining any interests in private business or if he hires labourers (not including seasonal agriculture jobs).

Other changes include the initiation of Ujumaa Villages (cooperative farms in the rural area) and a revamping of the educational system to make it more meaningful to the Tanzanian youth who will be the future leaders of the country.

In order to get a first hand view of this new brand of socialism of President Nyerere, I ventured in my Land Rover the almost seven hundred miles to Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania. As the old saying goes, however, "The best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray." The trip to Dar es Salaam took place all right, but most of my attention was directed towards a small sub-group of the Tanzanian population called the Makonde Sculptors of Bagamoyo. These are a people who have not as yet been a part of the nationalistic movement.

The Makonde were first brought to my attention the day after my arrival in Dar es Salaam. By coincidence and good fortune, I ran across a former colleague of mine from Boulder, Colorado. After several years of globe-hopping, he had finally settled in Dar es Salaam. Like many who are interested in the art world, he found himself pursuing Makonde art objects as a full-time occupation.

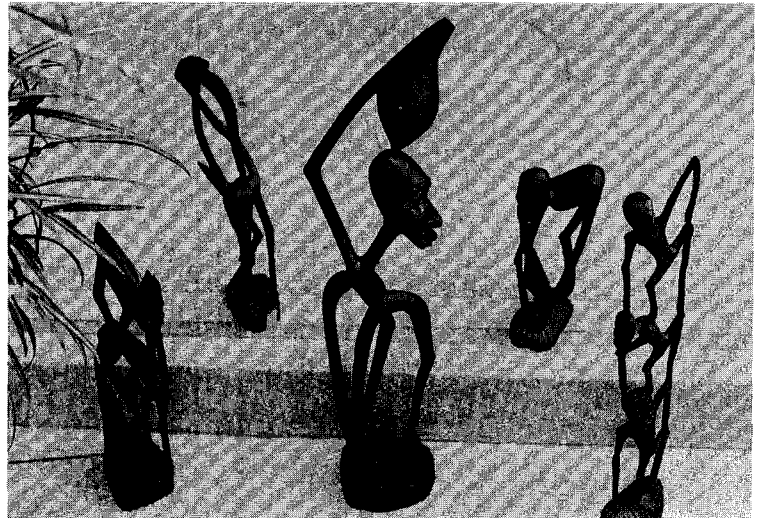
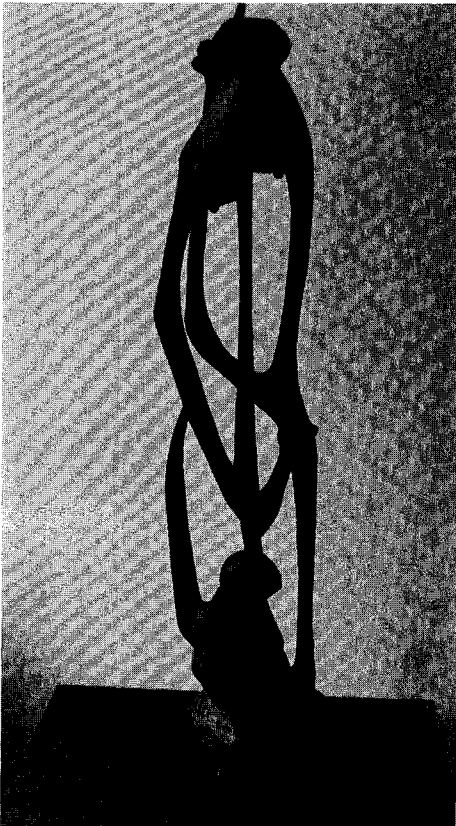
After much small talk on his adventures around the world, I began questioning my friend Solomon on the background and life-style of the Makonde people. Solomon offered two versions of the origin of the Makonde, one for the romanticist and the other for the more exacting student. For the romanticist, he tells that the first almost human male, located someplace in East Africa, carved a female out of a block of wood and placed it outside of his hut so that it might get as much sunshine as possible. The next morning, when he came out of his house, he found the carving to be very much alive. The story goes on that he married the woman; and after several unsuccessful attempts to have children, she finally gave birth to a son, the first Makonde Sculptor.

History tells us that the Makonde are Bantu Africans who for the most part originated in the northeastern corner of Mozambique. They were thought to be fierce and consequently were feared and avoided by most of the other tribes in their immediate vicinity. For many reasons, among them economic and safety factors, the Makonde migrated to many parts of Tanzania with the majority of them settling in the southern portion.

After visiting approximately ten settlements around Dar es Salaam, I became aware that a great portion of their rituals and daily activity stems around the extended family.



Makonde art forms



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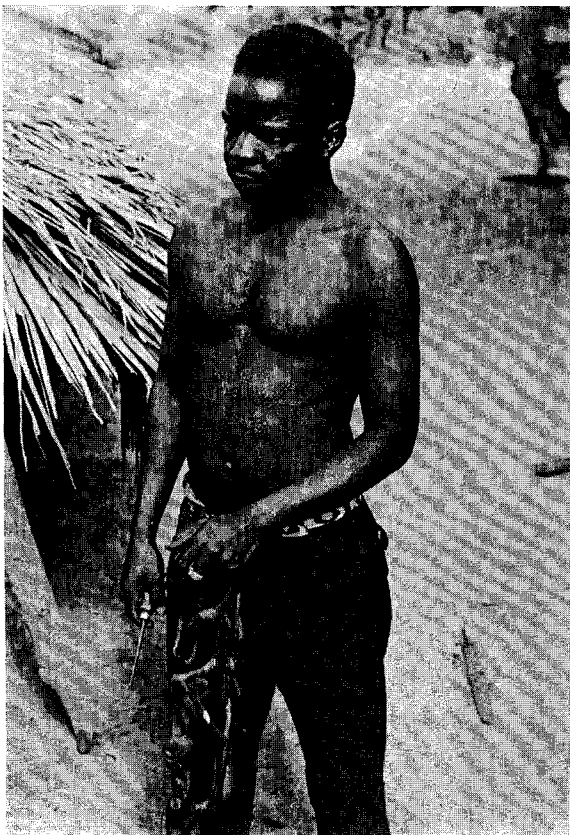
Most of the sculptors have set up their workshops within hearing distance of their homes. It is not uncommon to hear conversations being carried on between the houses with the men gathered in the work hut. I also noticed that several of the workers had portable radios which could be shared with members of the family while they worked. I vividly remember coming into one of the compounds and seeing the sculptors busily carving away listening to James Brown, the famous black American, singing "The Licking Stick."

For the most part, the Makonde men sell their art pieces in their compound. There are some, however, who take their works into Dar es Salaam, either to sell them to tourists or take them to a middleman who displays and sells the work. For most of the young relatively unknown artists, this process becomes one of exploitation; the middleman gets most of the profit while the artist gets very little.

The wood used by the Makonde is primarily ebony. Ebony is a very hard wood which usually has three distinct layers: an outer bark, grayish in color; a layer underneath the bark, light tan in color; and then the inner core, which is black. The use of ebony is somewhat of a recent innovation for the Makonde. In the past, most of their works were made out of a soft wood, especially the ceremonial mask, a specialty for many decades.

Curious as to how the sculptors arrive at the theme which their art piece usually reflects, I asked around. I was told there are many influences helping to determine the theme of an art piece. The shape of the ebony log might dictate the form, while sometimes the color striation of the light tan influences the sculptor. More often, however, the traditional tie with the past and the interpretation of modern man are the strongest impressions which the sculptors attempt to represent. Very often they link these two time periods with much humor or biting satire.

There are seven basic tools which each carver relies upon to complete a piece from start to finish. In order to get beneath the outer grayish bark, an axelike implement (mbedu) is used. After the general shaping and debarking with the mbedu, a smaller axelike tool (sigwaju) is used to give further form. It is at this point that the general contour of the emerging form can be recognized. The bulk of the work is performed with a chisel (namakwa) and a mallet (ing'ong'o). The finishing touches are provided with a knife (sepula), a file (yupaa), and a saw (msumeno). The saw is used to give the piece a substantial flat base upon which it can stand.



The sculptors
with art works
at different stages

Each sculptor is personally responsible for taking care of these instruments, and, more remarkably, for making them. Crude as they looked to this bystander, in the hands of these artists the tools took on an appearance of finely honed, precision instruments. It was very impressive to see such delicate and artistic sculptures produced with such archaic tools. In addition to fine tools, I expected to see blueprints, models, calipers and other aids; but after five days of watching these men perform, I could see that they really were not necessary. They are truly artists. Depending on the amount of intricate detail, it takes approximately one week to complete a piece.

As we traveled to the many Makonde settlements in the Bagamoyo district of Tanzania, we were invariably greeted with a chorus of, "Hamjambo", a general greeting. At this point, the spokesman for the group came forward giving a finer greeting. For the next few minutes he would be the person with whom we would have to deal if we wanted to purchase any of the art pieces which were usually lined up in front of the work hut. The act of buying becomes quite ritualistic and most enjoyable if one has the time and energy to play the bargaining game. The contest generally begins with the owner of the particular piece of your interest giving the bargainer a starting price, which is usually extraordinarily high. The response from the buyer at this point becomes most critical. If he appears outraged that he is being unjustly subjected to this unrealistic figure, he has a better chance of getting what he wants much cheaper--that is, much cheaper than the person who might ponder the price with the slightest possibility that he would be willing to pay the quoted sum. The interchange between buyer and seller might last anywhere from ten minutes to an hour. If the buyer is knowledgeable and has dealt with many Makonde artists, the interchange becomes more of a forum where the buyer is informed about the special techniques involved in creating the particular art form being discussed. It is also a time when the artist can get a critical evaluation of his personal techniques based on the assessment of other artists in the area. Each sculptor strives to be the most outstanding of the artists; the fame not only gives much personal pride, but also adds many more shillings to the asking price of an article. Although tempers sometimes fly and the debate becomes very intent, the relationship is usually one of mutual respect, especially if the buyer has been fair and candid in his observations. For the newcomer to this particular art form, it becomes an entertaining as well as an educational occasion.

Out of the group of ten settlements visited, there was only one area which did not offer the opportunity to bargain.

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These Makonde had set prices which were not altered for any reason. We were informed by the headman that the sculptors had no doubts about the quality of their workmanship, nor the market value of their pieces; accordingly, they had agreed upon a price which they felt to be most appropriate. His lecture was to the point and final!

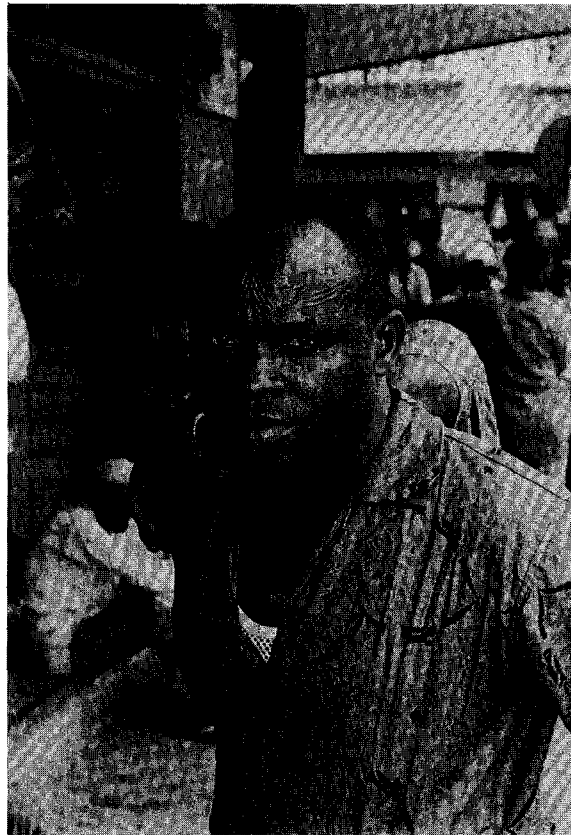
It is most difficult to place the Makonde style in a particular "school". Each viewer seems to see something a little different from the next. It is also debatable whether or not our formalized descriptions are appropriate to the Makonde art form. However, as I look at the Makonde pieces, I see a lot of naturalistic qualities as well as some impressionistic expression. One of the features which makes it more difficult to classify is the uniqueness of each piece. Although there is much similarity in general styles of individuals and groups, it is very rare that one finds two works exact in detail. I was informed that some of the more unique pieces have been created while the artist has been under the influence of local brew.

One of the art galleries at a recent Makonde art show in Nairobi had the following to say about the sculptors:

The most positive and uninhibited of all our East African contemporary artists are perhaps the Makonde sculptors of Tanzania. Their work is a vigorous comment on the human story of life and death in a tribal setting. It is also a direct response to the artists' new urban surroundings. . . Here is a daring victory of the so called African savage over the polite existence of the modern art-school trained artist. A closer study of modern Makonde sculpture will reveal latent seeds of an artistic renaissance in East Africa. To the traditional Makonde artist, art was a spiritual way of life and a means of projecting his ideas of beauty. But the traditional art that was once restricted only to rigid and religious rites of tribalism has now found its new liberating force and energy in Modern Makonde Sculptors. . .

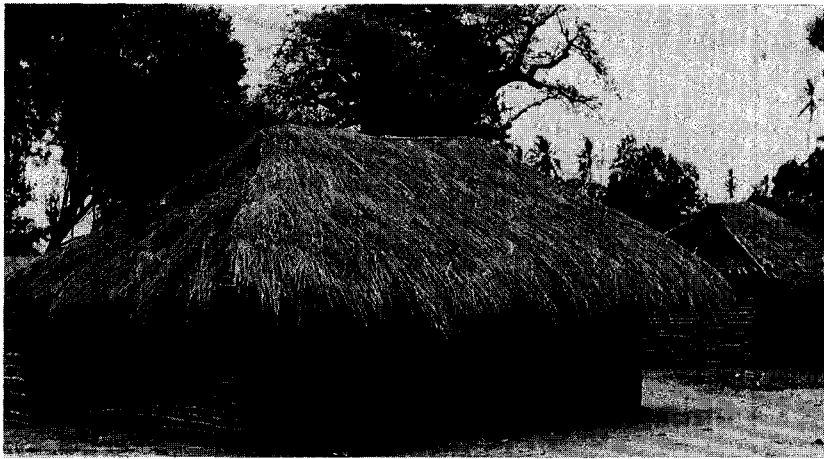
While visiting with one of the most famous of the sculptors in Tanzania, Pesa Yakobo, I jokingly asked him if he would be willing to teach me to become a sculptor. He replied that he would be delighted if I had at least twenty years to spend with him!

He went on to explain that the boys of his tribe are formally initiated into the sculptoring tradition at about age ten. Prior to this time, they are mostly observers who learn the rudimentary skills. When a boy reaches his tenth birthday, he is usually given his first set of tools which he dearly cherishes.

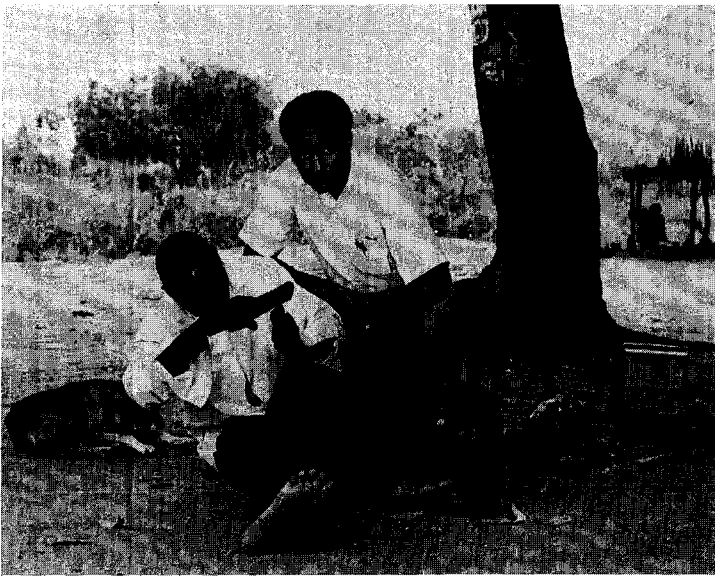


Pesa Yakobo

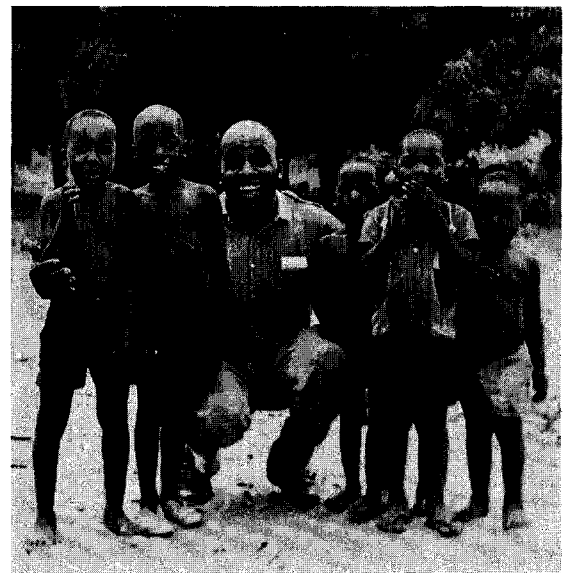
His first few years are spent doing copy work, while most of the men give frequent critique. By age fourteen, most of the boys are ready to create and place their works on the market. The self-discipline during this period is remarkable. Although there is much verbal exchange during the day, physical play in the compound is very limited and is noticeably prohibited around the work area. Yakobo sat smiling as he reminisced about his first piece that was sold in the market place. It was indeed a most memorable event.



A sleeping hut



The beginning of twenty years



Solomon and the future Makonde carvers



A work hut

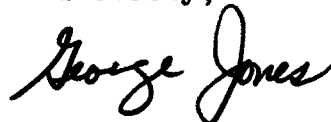
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The future of the Makonde in relation to the nation-building emphasis in Tanzania is uncertain. Although they have enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy and individuality in the past, the rapid urbanization as well as the growing tourist trade will surely bring them more in contact with the general public. These same phenomena have greatly affected other artists, especially the Makamba carvers of Nairobi. Their work no longer reflects the talent of the creative artist but suggests appeasement to a growing tourist market.

In an attempt to preserve the Makonde art form as well as to aid the artist in maintaining his own expression, companies are being formed to act as a buffer between the artist and the general public. These companies will also serve as price regulating mechanisms and a quality control system. It is hoped that the sculptors themselves will be the main stockholders in such ventures. I see the benefits derived from such a setup, such as an elimination of the middleman who now reaps the greatest profits from the works of these people; but I do hope companies will not mean total isolation for the sculptors. Contact with these artists has been both educational and inspiring for those who have had the privilege. Along with most of the other Makonde enthusiasts, I will be most distressed if companies go the way of many bureaucratic entities and stifle the spontaneity and originality which are the hallmarks of the Makonde tribe.

The several pieces of art which now grace our home will be a cherished reminder of these Makonde people who sit, unobtrusively, in their work huts producing some of the world's finest art forms.

Sincerely,



George Jones

Received in New York on May 21, 1970.

