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THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN'S SCARIFICATION AMONG THE TIV*

BRUCE LINCOLN

AN elaborate and exceedingly beautiful pattern of scarification is found on the stomachs of Tiv women (see Figs. 1-8). These scars are applied around the time of puberty,¹ and the same basic pattern is placed on the stomach of each girl.² Occasionally these scars are referred to as 'the circumcision of women',³ but for the most part they are said to be meaningless, having only an aesthetic significance.⁴ Such statements need not necessarily be accepted at face value, though, as deeper meanings may be forgotten, deliberately concealed, or so commonly known as to be thought unworthy of mention. It is the purpose of this paper, written by a historian of religions, rather than an anthropologist or Africanist, to explore the possibility that these patterns carry some greater importance than is commonly recognized.

The key to understanding the significance of these patterns, it seems to me, is an appreciation of the *Akombo*, the sacred objects of the Tiv.⁵ An *Akombo* can be almost anything—a mound of earth, a special type of grass, or a decorated skull. Most literally, the *Akombo* are magic emblems, but are also the magic forces which lie behind these emblems. At the time of Creation, the Tiv were given the knowledge of ritual and the power (*Tsav*) needed to manipulate these forces, and through proper use of the *Akombo*, they can safeguard the welfare of individuals and of the community at large.

Each *Akombo* carries with it certain ritual regulations, however, and to trespass these is to make one's self vulnerable to the power of the *Akombo*, which will 'seize' him, and make him ill. In this event, he must seek the master of the violated *Akombo*, who will 'repair' the *Akombo*, thus setting the offence right, and restoring the offender's health. Such 'repairing' is normally done by pouring the blood of a sacrificed animal, usually a chicken, over the *Akombo*, and then dripping some of the blood on to the right hand of the trespasser, so as to bring him back into proper contact with the *Akombo*.⁶ This is the general procedure with the hundreds of minor *Akombo*, and

* I should like to express my deep gratitude to Mr. William O. Miles, who was kind enough to execute the drawings for this study.

¹ Bohannans, 1953: 66, East, 1939: 42 f.

² The basic pattern is that of three concentric circles around the navel, and a line running up the chest to the neck. Over the course of a woman's life, more scars may be added to make a more elaborate design, but this is the starting-point for all elaboration, and is the minimum scarification placed on any girl. Bohannans, op. cit., p. 66. East, op. cit., p. 43, contend that this was the only design applied by the Tiv at first, and that it was elaborated through history as successive generations introduced new fashions.

³ Bohannans, op. cit., p. 65. This knowledge is

preserved only in northern Tivland.

⁴ East, op. cit., p. 42; Bohannans (1956: 118); Rowe (1928: 179).

⁵ All the authors who have written on the Tiv have dealt with the *Akombo*. For their various treatments, see: Abraham (1933: 116 ff.), who treats them as 'cult emblems'; Downes (1933: 28, 63), who sees them as a means of contact with the ancestors, and of repelling sorcery; East, op. cit., pp. 176 ff., who seems to view them as charms (East sees them as related to a now-extinct ancestor cult). The best interpretation, however, is that of the Bohannans, op. cit., pp. 85 ff., which has been followed almost exclusively.

⁶ Bohannans, op. cit., p. 87 f.

with the great *Akombo*⁷ the procedure is much the same, with the important difference that a trespass against the great *Akombo* jeopardizes the fertility and well-being of the entire community, and much stronger measures, perhaps including human sacrifice, are necessary to 'repair' the damage.⁸

The most important of the great *Akombo* is the *Imborivungu*, or owl-pipe, a small object originally made from a human tibia, but more recently made out of brass.⁹ In a fascinating essay, Balfour demonstrated the relation of the *Imborivungu* to ritual voice-disguisers of the vibrating-membrane type, similar to kazoos, used throughout West Africa.¹⁰ There are serious differences, however, between the *Imborivungu* and the voice-disguisers, which Balfour was unable to explain without refuge in the unlikely hypothesis that the proper use of the instrument had been forgotten by the Tiv.¹¹ The pipes differ, first of all, in shape, as can be seen by comparing the plain instruments in use among other tribes (Figs. 9-11) with the elaborately decorated *Imborivungu*, which are seen to be statues, and for the most part, statues of women, complete with incisions or decorations corresponding to the stomach scarifications¹² (Figs. 12-15). Secondly, the use of these instruments is very different. Among other tribes, one speaks or blows into the pipes to produce a weird, unearthly sound, said to be the voice of the spirits or ancestors,¹³ while among the Tiv they are usually not blown into, and no sound is produced. Moreover, in some cases the hole through which sound would be made is *deliberately* plugged up.¹⁴ Among other tribes, knowledge of the voice-imitators is restricted to the men, who terrify the women with their sounds,¹⁵ but this is not the case with the Tiv. Rather, the *Imborivungu* are regarded as *Akombo*, and are regularly 'repaired', in order to 'repair the land'.¹⁶ Downes gives the following account of the *Imborivungu* rite:

The body [of the sacrificial victim, here a child] is placed on a special mat, for no blood must touch the ground, and the *imborivungu* is placed on the mat on the west side of the child. Not a word is spoken. The *Tor* (the chief officiant) makes a semicircular cut from the loins to the breast, and round to the loins again, and then takes a little blood from below the navel, which he mixes with blood taken from a menstruous woman. He pours this into the *imborivungu*, and then blows the *imborivungu* twice over the body. The body is then divided up, cooked, and eaten. The heart is preserved by the *Tor* and dried, in order to feed it to the next child given for the earth when the earth again needs revitalizing. The final act is that water is poured into the *imborivungu* and allowed to dribble on the ground; the wet

⁷ The distinction is the Bohannans, op. cit., pp. 88 f., and seems justified by Tiv usages.

⁸ This is a particularly thorny issue, as are all matters relating to the *MbaTsav* ('those of power'), who care for the great *Akombo*. The *MbaTsav* can be (and have been) viewed as either a secret society of witches, or as a group of ritual specialists who care for the sacred objects and preserve the community's well-being. From Akiga's account, it is also clear that there is considerable confusion among the Tiv themselves as to the nature of the *MbaTsav*. For presentation of varying views, see: Abraham, op. cit., pp. 73-105; Bohannans, op. cit., p. 90; and East, op. cit., pp. 248-61.

⁹ Abraham, op. cit., p. 66 *et passim*. The Bohannans, however, are inclined to attribute somewhat

less importance to the *Imborivungu*.

¹⁰ Balfour (1948: 45-70).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 55.

¹² Abraham, op. cit., p. 66; East, op. cit., p. 226.

¹³ Thus among the Ibo, Ibibio, Boki, Efik, Ekoi, etc. Balfour, op. cit., pp. 45-9.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁵ Thus among the Hausa and the Kagoma, *ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ The secret term for the *Imborivungu* in the language of the *MbaTsav* is *Tar*, 'land', and their rituals revolving around the *Imborivungu* are specifically said to be for the purpose of 'repairing the *Tar*'. See Abraham, op. cit., p. 67; East, op. cit., p. 225; Bohannans, op. cit., p. 90.

earth thus produced is taken up by the elders and scattered on the farms. The *imborivungu* is afterwards taken round, and dipped into every well so that women shall bear children.¹⁷

While knowledge of these practices is secret, it is not restricted to men,¹⁸ and the *Imborivungu* are never used to terrify women, as they *are* women, and as can be seen here, are used to promote the fertility of women as well as that of the land. In light of these differences, I am inclined to reject Balfour's view of a degeneration of meaning, and regard it as more likely that the Tiv accepted voice-disguising pipes as sacred objects from neighbouring tribes,¹⁹ but adapted the use of these objects to fit their own sense of sacrality, and deliberately rejected their neighbours' use of them.²⁰ Thus, the voice-disguisers associated with the ancestors became *Akombo* for the Tiv, intimately associated with the notion of fertility, and of Woman.

For, in the last analysis, Woman herself is the greatest of the *Akombo*. The fertility of the land depends upon her, as she both owns and works the fields,²¹ and the fertility of the lineage also depends upon her as the productress of new life.²² That this is recognized can be seen in the many rites accompanying pregnancy, where the woman is treated as *Akombo* are treated, with a libation of blood on her navel to 'repair' her, and to ensure a safe delivery.²³ It must be noted that it is Woman, and not merely female, that is an *Akombo*: girls are not sacred, as they cannot produce new life. Puberty is the point at which a girl is transformed into a sacred object, and I would contend that the scars placed on her belly at that time are the means whereby that transformation is accomplished.

These patterns can be interpreted using Tiv concepts, and their significance can be demonstrated.²⁴ Essentially, the patterns consist of a line descending from the throat to the navel, meeting there a set of concentric circles that surrounds the navel.²⁵ In my opinion the descending line can legitimately be seen as a *Nongo*, a Tiv term meaning 'row, line', and further, 'lineage'.²⁶ It is the diachronic component of society, that stretches back into the past to the mythic ancestors, and continues down

¹⁷ Downes, op. cit., pp. 51 f. The detail of blowing the pipe here is strange, being noted nowhere else. In fact, East, op. cit., p. 230, states that none of the Tiv know how to blow the pipes, and Balfour, op. cit., p. 51, indicates the same. With this exception, the other details of the account, though extreme, find some corroboration in accounts offered in Abraham, op. cit., p. 76; East, op. cit., pp. 227-9; and Bohannans, op. cit., p. 90. None, however, seem to have observed these rites firsthand, and one must preserve some scepticism about whether the reports were not exaggerated in their grisly details or, perhaps more likely, couched in a secret language of the *MbaTsav*. The possibility must be held open, though, that such rites do or did actually occur.

¹⁸ Abraham, op. cit., pp. 74 f.

¹⁹ Most reporters have noted the receptivity of the Tiv to new teachings, or even their 'gullibility'. At one point, Akiga bemoans: 'While other peoples of the world have been advancing in knowledge of how to make all kinds of new things, progress amongst the Tiv has consisted in learning how to make more and more *akombo*.' East, op. cit., pp. 223 f.

²⁰ This can be seen in the deliberate plugging of the holes, as noted above.

²¹ Bohannans, op. cit., pp. 18, 50 f.

²² For an excellent view of the sacrality of woman in another West African culture, see Calame-Griaule (1962: 75-87).

²³ See Abraham, op. cit., p. 121; Downes, op. cit., pp. 12 ff.; East, op. cit., pp. 296 ff. It seems particularly significant to me that the blood (or in many cases the excrement of the sacrificed animal) is placed on the woman's navel, rather than on her right hand, as would be the case if the *Akombo* were being repaired for her. (See above, note 6.) Rather, she is the *Akombo*, as can be seen from the fact that blood is poured on her navel, just as blood is poured into the 'navel' of the *Imborivungu*.

²⁴ I am ignoring the popular interpretations, 'mud-fish' and 'swallow' that the Tiv themselves offer, and will only concentrate on the forms themselves. An interesting methodological precedent can be found in Layard (1936: 123-70).

²⁵ See above, note 2.

²⁶ Bohannans, op. cit., p. 23.

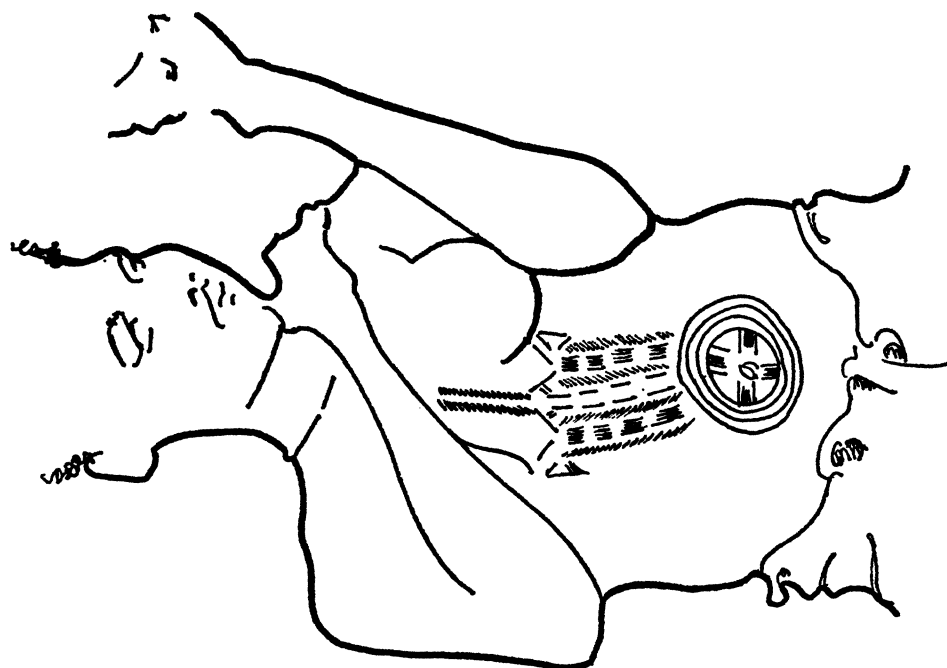


FIG. 2. From Simon and Phoebe Ottenberg, *Cultures and Societies in Africa*, following p. 182.

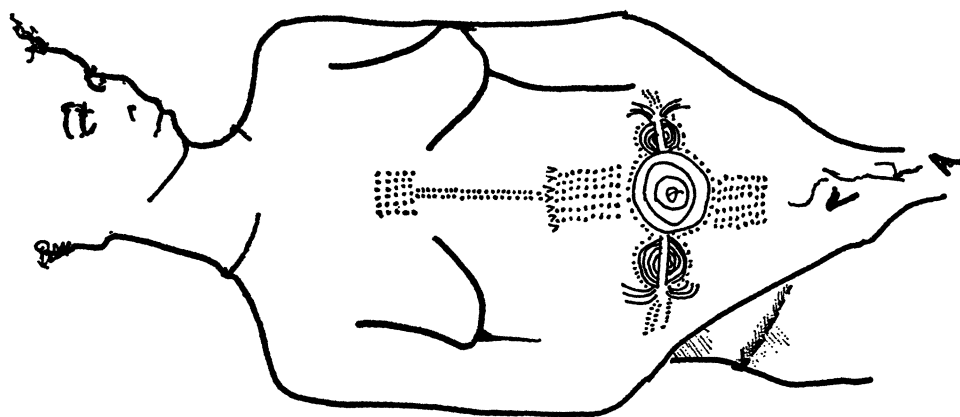


FIG. 1. From Charles F. Rowe, in *Man*, xxviii (1928), 179.

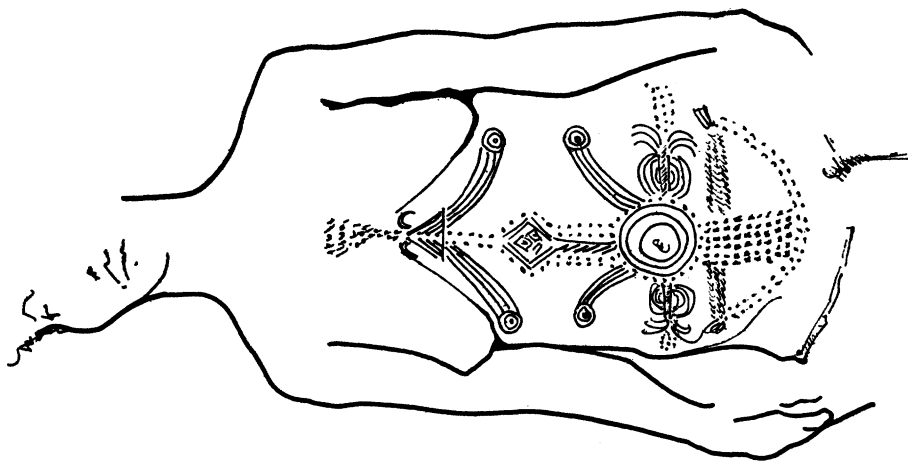


FIG. 4. From Charles F. Rowe, in *Man*, xxviii (1928), 179.

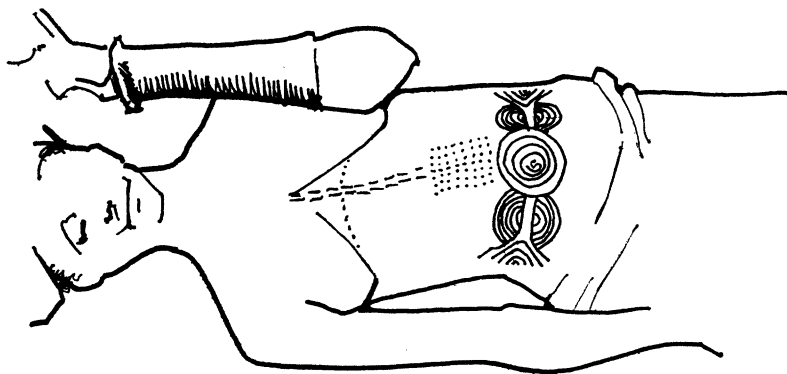


FIG. 3. From East, *Akiga's Story*, following p. 176.

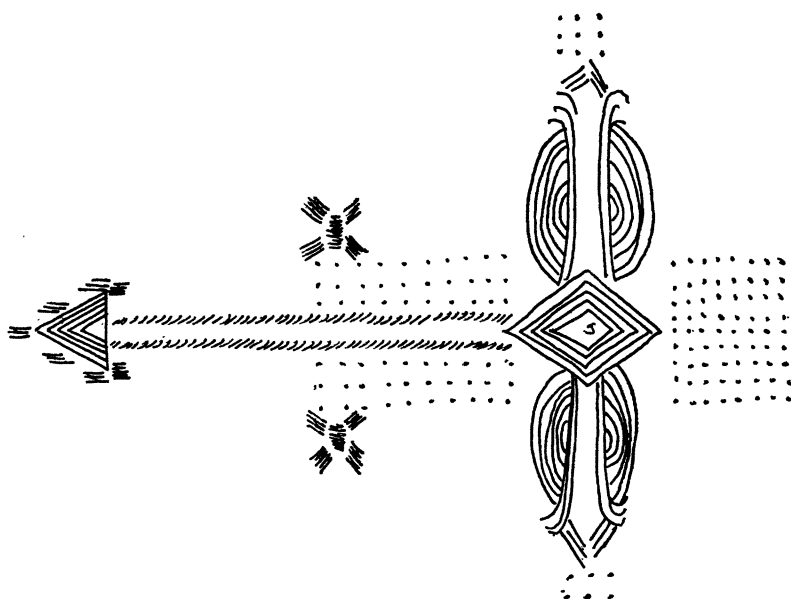


FIG. 6. From Paul Bohannan, in *Man*, lvi (1956), 120.

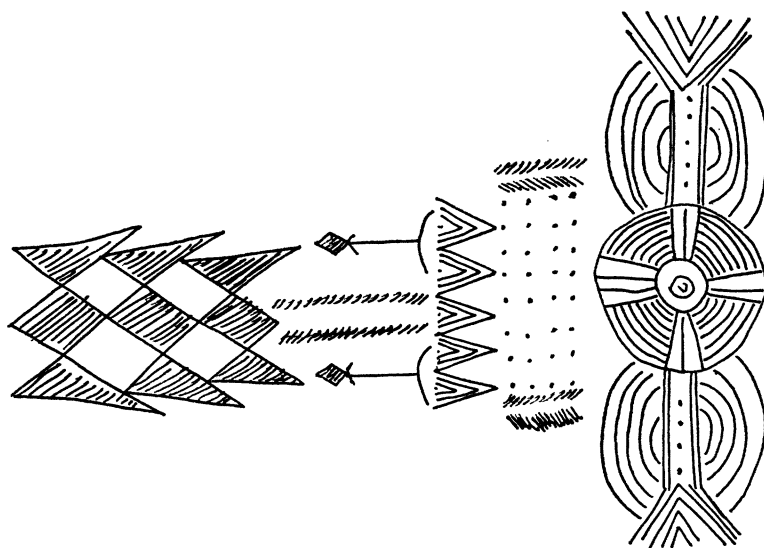


FIG. 5. From Paul Bohannan, in *Man*, lvi (1956), 120.

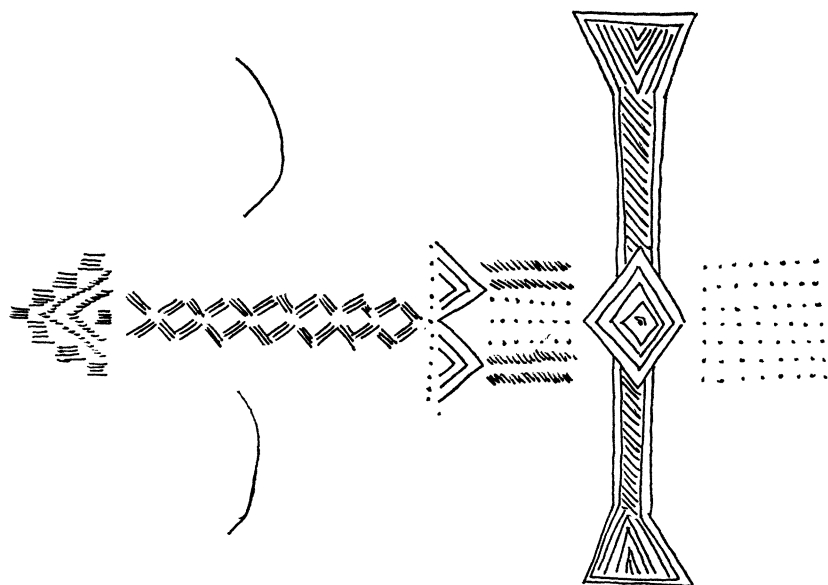


FIG. 7. From Paul Bohannan, in *Man*, lvi (1956), 120.

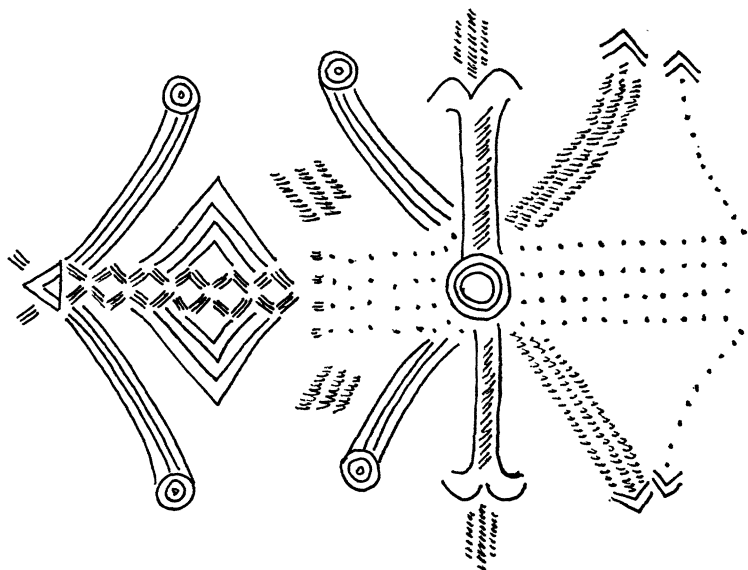


FIG. 8. From Paul Bohannan, in *Man*, lvi (1956), 120.

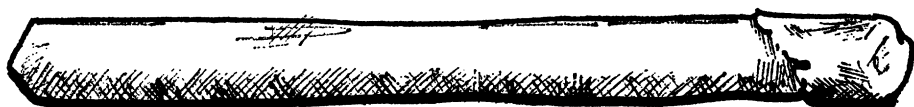


FIG. 9. Ibo Voice-disguiser of spear-grass. From Henry Balfour, in *JRAI*, lxxviii (1948), 47.

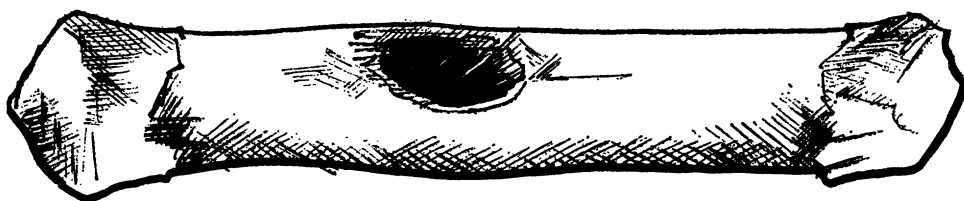


FIG. 10. Voice-disguiser of bone, Southern Nigeria. From Henry Balfour, in *JRAI*, lxxviii (1948), 49.

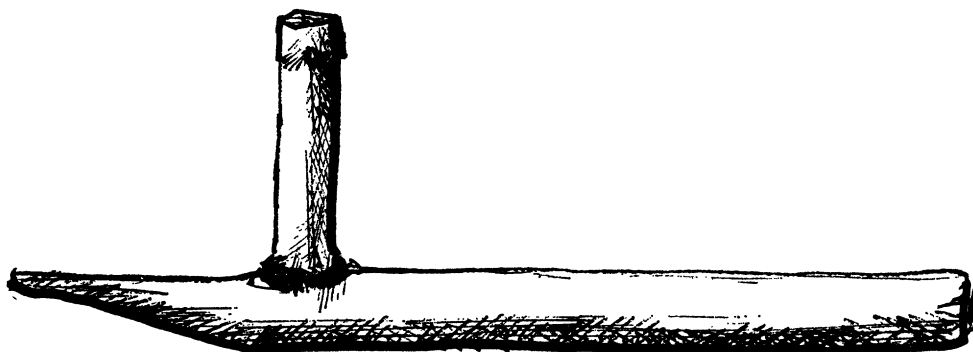


FIG. 11. Voice-disguiser from Southern Cameroon. From Henry Balfour, in *JRAI*, lxxviii (1948), 49.

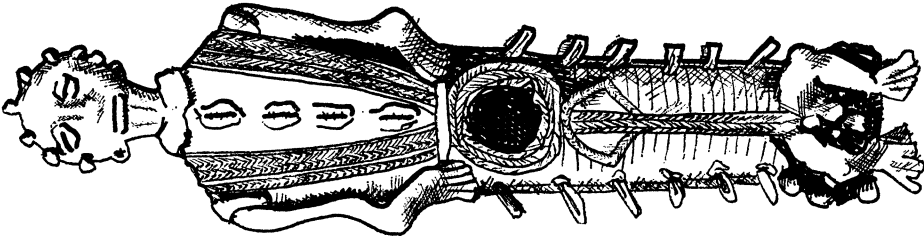


FIG. 15. Brass *Imboriungu*.
From Henry Balfour, in
JRAI, lxxviii (1948), 54.

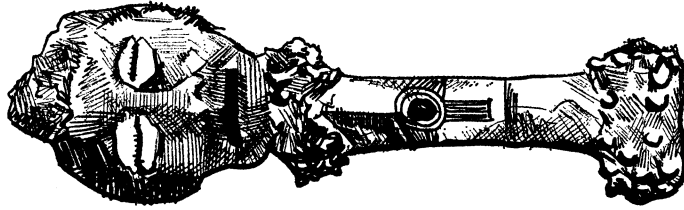


FIG. 14. *Imboriungu* of
bone. From Roy C. Abra-
ham, *The Tiv People*, 21.

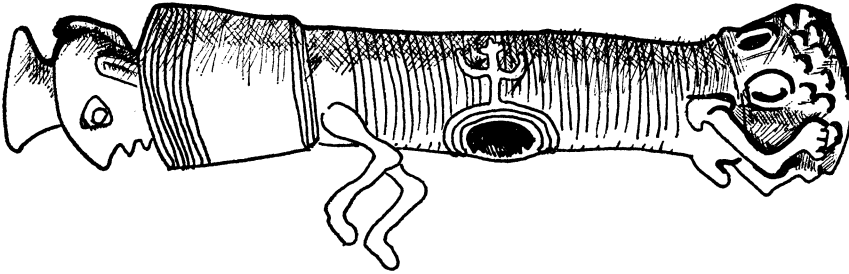


FIG. 13. *Imboriungu* of brass.
From Henry Balfour, in *JRAI*,
lxxviii (1948), 54.

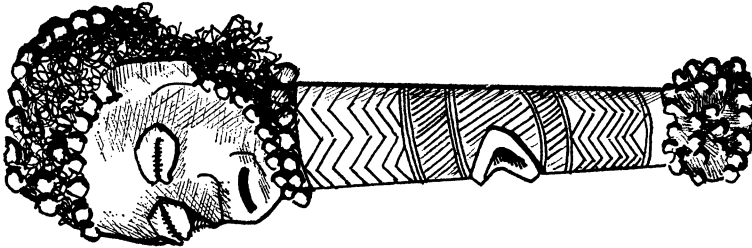


FIG. 12. *Imboriungu* of bone.
From Henry Balfour, in *JRAI*,
lxxviii (1948), 53.

to the present. The circles I understand as *Kwav* (sing. *Kwagh*), the name given concentric rings used in the construction of Tiv roofs, and applied by extension to the Tiv age-sets,²⁷ the synchronic units that form the basis of society in the present, and ripple out into the future as members of a *kwagh* age together and are replaced by other *kwav*. The true representation of the present, though, is the woman's navel, which stands at the centre, and is both part of the pattern and not part of it, as it is the woman's own from birth, and does not have to be added by scarification. At puberty it takes on a new significance, though, as the vital centre where life will be formed, and at that moment it becomes the centre and starting-point for the elaborate design that makes the girl into a woman and the woman into a sacred object.²⁸ The navel is the axis on which the pattern turns: the *Nongo* ends there, and the *Kwav* begin, just as the lineage of the past has produced this woman, who will in turn produce the lineage of the future. The pattern etched on her belly shows past and future meeting in her moment of creation, and it is this pattern that marks her and makes her an *Akombo* for all to see.

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Résumé

LA SIGNIFICATION RELIGIEUSE DE LA SCARIFICATION
DES FEMMES CHEZ LES TIV

CHEZ les Tiv, les femmes sont marquées avec un dessin compliqué des cicatrices abdominales au commencement de la puberté. Bien que les Tiv eux-mêmes insistent que ces marques n'importent rien, ils conforment toujours au même modèle et sont quelquefois appelés 'la circoncision des femmes'. Cet article essaye à établir un rapport entre ces cicatrices et les objets sacrés (*akombo*) des Tiv, en particulier le 'owl-pipe' (*imborivungu*) qui est démontré d'être une statue d'une femme, même avec des cicatrices. On emploie cet objet sacré pour 'réparer la terre', assurant la fertilité humaine et agricole. Donc, sa fonction est parallèle à celui de la femme, qui assure aussi la fertilité en donnant naissance et cultivant la terre. Par ces raisons, on peut suggérer que les femmes elles-mêmes sont regardées comme

²⁷ Abraham, op. cit., p. 211; Bohannans, op. cit.,
 p. 46; Downes, op. cit., pp. 24-6.

²⁸ See the description in East, op. cit., pp. 42 f.

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des objets sacrés, et que les cicatrices appliquées à puberté sont les moyens de transformer rituellement une jeune fille profane à une femme sacrée, capable de produire la vie nouvelle.

Puis, l'auteur tâche de faire une interprétation du dessin des cicatrices. Au fond, le dessin est composé d'une ligne descendante de l'espace entre les seins au nombril, et un groupe des cercles concentriques ayant le nombril dans le centre. Les termes tiv donnent le fond pour interprétation. La ligne descendante est *Nongo*, pas seulement une ligne, mais aussi une lignée. Les cercles sont *Kwav*, pas seulement des cercles, mais aussi les groupes d'âge. Ainsi, le dessin contient des générations passées (*Nongo* descendante) et futures (*Kwav* radiante); toutes les deux terminent au nombril de la femme, la source de tout la vie.

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