A000-Afr-Mali-Dogon-Bandiagara cliffs at Yaye Village-Tellem-Wood Figure-19th c



Figs. 1-2. Afr-Mali-Dogon-Bandiagara cliffs at Yaye Village-Tellem-Wood Figure-19th c

A Tellem weathered hard wood figure of an ancestral spirit, very rare, 18 cm. high, 1200-1600 CE, collected, mid-20th century, from the high caves on the Bandiagara cliffs at Yaye Village, Mali.

The Tellem people inhabited the Bandiagara cliffs prior to the Dogon people and occupied structures in some very inaccessible areas of the cliffs. The region is a sandstone plateau with an escarpment of high Bandiagara cliffs containing numerous natural caves above the sandy Seno plain. The cliffs are an ecological niche where precipitation is more abundant, evaporation is less rapid, and the soil is more fertile than in the low-lying surrounding area due to the sequestration of water occasioned by the elevation of the cliffs. Another advantage of the cliffs is their inaccessibility, which provided a refuge for the Tellem and the Dogon after them. The Tellem immigrated to the cliffs during the late eleventh century, at the beginning of a period of desiccation of lowlands as well as population movements caused by the decline of an­cient Ghana southward and eastward. Initially the Tellem population density was high but began to decrease after the thir­teenth century and by the sixteenth century their presence had disappeared, probably due to desiccation during the Little Ice Age.

The Tellem used the caves for three purposes: as a repository for the dead, as a site for funeral rituals, and as a storehouse for food. The dead were laid out in their clothes, wrapped in a blanket, and accompanied by grave goods.2 The entrance was then closed by a wall made of hand-molded, sun-dried mud bricks set in mud mortar. Sometimes old granaries were used for these purposes. Part of the funerary ritual took place in a special cave located below the one where the body lay; its floor was littered with a special kind of pottery, different from the usual kitchen ware. Some of the caves contained the skeletal remains of up to 3,000 people. The bones found in the various sites form a homogeneous group sharing recognizable cranial measurements.

The Tellem practiced hoe agriculture (millet and rice) and gathered edible wild plants. Animal husbandry (cattle, goats, or sheep) and hunting (buffalo, antelope, gazelle, bushbuck) also contributed to their food supply. It is difficult to estimate the relative importance of these different resources, because most evidence is derived from grave goods found in the caves.

Articles of Tellem material culture have been very well pre­served in the dry burial caves, the source of practically all such remains, and can be reckoned among the oldest-known ar­tifacts from sub-Saharan Africa. They consist of clothing (cotton tunics and coifs, cotton and woolen blankets, cotton bands, vegetable fiber skirts and belts, loin skins, girdles, leather sacks, sandals, boots), ornaments (leather bracelets, iron rings and bracelets, iron hairpins, carnelian beads, glass beads, quartz lip plugs), kitchen utensils (baskets, wooden bowls and spoons, calabashes, pottery, rope nets), hunting equipment (bows, ar­rows, quivers, leather knife-sheaths), agricultural implements (tanged and socketed hoes), musical instruments (iron finger-bells, wooden flutes, harps, drums), wooden and iron head­rests, ritual pottery, wooden and sandstone spirit figures.

Changes in the various aspects of the material culture as­sociated with Tellem occupation of the Bandiagara cliffs can be noted. Wooden headrests span the eleventh- and twelfth-centuries, supplanted by iron votive headrests in the fourteenth century after which headrests disappear from the archaeological record. Since headrests were intended to protect elaborate hairdos, their disappearance suggests a reduction in the expendable resources the people had for such personal effects as the climate worsened and famine and disease became more prominent concerns.

Textiles also follow a similar pattern that can be linked with a climatic downturn. From the eleventh through the tirteenth centuuries textiles followed traditional weav­ing techniques, decoration, and forms, but then beginning in the fifteenth woolen and vegetable fiber textiles become rare indicating a decline in sheep raising and farming. The fifteenth century, the nadir of the Little Ice Age, was marked by simplification of knitting and looping techniques and the production of the first trousers and the first leather boots as a protection from the cold

Tellem pottery also changed over time. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries ritual pottery was made on a convex mold and decorated with a characteristic plaited roulette. There are bowls on three or four feet, and pots with a ring base (Fig. 6). Ritual pots with a ring base, differing slightly from the earlier ones, continue up to the fifteenth century. From the thirteenth century onward we find kitchen pottery made by the paddle-and-anvil technique3 and decorated with impres­sions from woven mats. It is quite possible that this kind of utilitarian pottery was in use earlier, but neither caves with granaries attributable to the eleventh to twelfth century nor settlement sites have yet been found. The villages of the Tel­lem were probably situated at the foot of the cliffs. This implies that they are now either buried under the Dogon settlements or have been destroyed by them. The caves with Tellem re­mains were never inhabited on a regular basis.

A change in the architecture of the Tellem is visible after the fourteenth century. Earlier constructions are made of hand-molded, sun-dried mud bricks set in mud mortar). Be­ginning with the fifteenth century, constructions are in stone masonry. Archaeological investigation of the most recent Tellem burial cave revealed constructions in stone masonry and the pres­ence of atypical grave goods (skeletal remains of cranes and tur­tles); some customary grave goods were lacking. The stone masonry technique is like the traditional Dogon way of build­ing. According to Dogon myth it was the crane that showed them the way from their Mande homeland toward the cliffs. The turtle also has an important place in the mythology (Dieterlen 1982:72-73). The material in this cave can be dated to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and therefore coincides with the stated period of Dogon arrival. Nevertheless, mea surements of the human skeletal remains found in it are clearly within the range of variability of the Tellem group. Those from more recently used caves (seventeenth and eighteenth cen­turies) cannot be attributed to the Tellem (Bedaux et al. 1978). Therefore the results of the excavations in this most recent Tel­lem burial cave suggest that the Dogon exerted appreciable cultural influence on the contemporaneous Tellem group in terms of both architecture and mortuary practices.

The Tellem are not ancestral to the Dogon, so that their disappearance as a group from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries remains to be explained. A Dogon oral tradition asserts that the Tel­lem left the Bandiagara cliffs and migrated to Hombori and to Yatenga, where they were incorporated into the Kurumba (Griaule & Dieterlen 1965:17). Examination of several caves near Hombori (Bedaux et al. 1978; Bedaux & Lange 1983; Gallay 1981) indicates that the architecture, material culture and skeletal remains cannot be attributed to the Tellem (Huizinga 1968; Bedaux et al. 1978). Also, the physical anthropology of the Kurumba cannot be attributed to the Tellem. So is the Dogon oral tradition of the decline and disappearance of the Tellem a fabrication?

Probably not, because climatic change due to the inception of the Little Ice Age appears to be the root cause. Climatic change created competition for water resources, which were more plentiful in the Bandiagara cliffs where water was sequestered (as in other African inselbergs (like Uweinat in Libya and Brandberg in Namibia), while the surrounding lowlands became more intensively desiccated. Beginning in the thirteenth century there was an initial Tellem emigration from these cliff areas. These groups were probably small enough to be absorbed into outlying indigenous populations, so that a Tellem presence is not detectable from skeletal evidence. As the Little Ice Age ensued in the fifteenth century, famine intensified in the lowlands, and, according to Arab sources, the Bandiagara cliffs with their gardens became targets of raids by the Son­ghai and Mossi people, who forced further emigrations of the Tellem (Kati 1964; Es-Sa'di 1964). This is documented also by the diminishment of Tellem habitation caves and Tellem skeletal remains. Lack of water resources and famine were followed by the inception of disease including smallpox as reported in Arab sources (Cissoko 1968). These three successive causes account for the gradual disappearance of the Tellem, and the invisibility of the Telem in the archaeological record was due to their being incorporated into other groups such as the Kurumba as the Dogon oral tradition recounted.

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