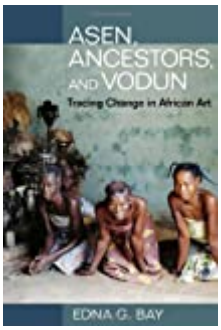
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Edna G. Bay. *Asen, Ancestors, and Vodun: Tracing Change in African Art.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xiv + 186 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03255-4.

Reviewed by Lisa Aronson (Associate Professor, Art History - Skidmore College)

Published on H-AfrArts (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti (Clark Univeristy)

The Changing Face of Asen

Much of our understanding of Fon *asen* comes from Edna G. Bayâs seminal 1986 catalog, *Asen: Iron Altars of the Fon People of Benin*, in which she presents a well-documented, though largely ahistorical, analysis of these iron sculptural staffs used for memorializing the dead. Bayâs new book on the subject traces the history of asen over more than two hundred years from their pre-nineteenth-century Yoruba roots, when they functioned solely in the context of *Vodun* (the Fon word for spirits), to their demise in the face of Christianity and the growing popularity of photography for memorializing the dead. Bayâs main point is that asen have transformed significantly over time with their ancestral association being essentially a nineteenth-century invention.

The first of the seven chapters of her book ("Vodun, Sacrifice, and the Sinuka") looks at asen prior to1800, when iron staffs were non-ancestral and used primarily in the context of Vodun. Present everywhere in the environment, Vodun were venerated through objects, shrines, and even the human body when manifested through public performance. Though the majority of Vodun shrines at that time were furnished with objects made from wood, unbaked clay, or terracotta, an occasional non-figurative iron staff was also noted. Bay suggests that the latter were rooted in Yoruba staffs associated with their god of medicine, Osanyin, a connection evident not only in their shared shapes and uses but also in the similarity of their names (Osanyin vs. asen).

Chapter 2 ("The Invention of Ancestral Altars") takes us to the late precolonial period of the nineteenth century when Fon kings, responding to rising imperialism and changing dynamics of trade, expanded and enhanced their authority by moving their power base southward from inland Abomey to the coastal town of Ouidah and drawing attention to and celebrating their royal ancestry. Asen were among the props kings used to attract attention to their lineage. Drawing on a rich array of contemporary written sources, including the writings of J. A. Skertchly and Sir Richard Burton, Bay paints a detailed picture of contemporary politics and the artistic developments involving asen that helped to support it.

King Gezo, the great nineteenth-century innovator and patron of the arts, used asen and other inventions to strengthen his royal status. During the time of his rule (1818-38), Gezo oversaw the construction of thatch-roofed commemorative shrines (*deho*) in which asen staffs were placed to pay homage to the spirit of dead kings. Royal asen also figured prominently in a ceremony known as Sin Kwain (meaning âwater sprinklingâ) that called for the living king to sprinkle water on asen dedicated to each deceased monarch. Other nineteenth-century inventions aimed at enhancing royalty included the royal ceremonial cycle of Hwetanu and the rise of Fa divination.

The Hountondji lineage of metalsmiths, the subject of Bayâs next chapter, was key in this transformative process. Working in a variety of imported materials (iron, silver, brass, glass), these metalsmiths copied a range of European artifacts, from guns and swords to animals and chariots, to which they assigned meanings specific to Fon royalty. The ship became a symbol of foreigners frequenting the Fon area, while crucified crocodiles, cats, or hawks became communicative devices directed at Vodun spirits. The Hountondji metalsmiths even copied European brass casting techniques to create these sculptural forms, a claim Bay supports by comparing their lost wax technique to that of Akan immigrant brass casters, whose casting techniques are more indigenously African in feel.

Bay then turns to the impact of colonialism, which brought with it the imposition of the French language, European school systems, and Christianity, as well as the demise of royalty. This shift, Bay argues, led to a kind of democratization of Fon material culture. Once the prerogative of royalty, asen were now available to any individual of rank and power, including chiefs, royal descendents, and the educated. Bay delves deeply into the peculiar form that colonialism took in Dahomey. Compared to other West African colonies, Dahomey, as it was then named, had relatively few natural resources, making colonial powers less brutal and more tolerant of local practices. Reverend Father Francis Aupiais was among those who recognized the importance of embracing local customs and combining them with Western ones. Likening this change to the Negritude movement in Senegal, Bay sees it leading the way for Dahomey's modernity while celebrating Fon history and culture.

The next two chapters turn our attention to the changing iconography and meaning of asen over time. Bay begins with a useful discussion of how the Fon read visual imagery, noting the strong relationship they saw between it and the spoken word and its potential ambiguities and multiple meanings. Not surprising, the images on nineteenth-century asen emphasized the supremacy and invincibility of royalty. Centralized images of animals, people, or objects functioned as mnemonic devices for particular kings. For example, an asen featuring a hand holding an egg evoked the Fon proverb âa world holds the egg that the earth desires,â calling to mind King Behanzin whose accession to power had been strongly challenged.

During the colonial period, when asen became available to anyone of high rank, deho were transformed from shrines devoted to royalty into a family space for the display of lineage asen. The asen also changed, with figural groups replacing individuals, and ânarrativeâ replacing the âallusional.â Hountondji descendents abandoned the static, singular figured asen of the nineteenth century in favor of animated figures engaged in narrative scenes of modern life. The Hountondji were also now using a vast array of materials, everything from aluminum and iron to brass and silver depending on what the patron could afford. As would be expected, asen commissioned by the wealthy or better educated were more elaborate in their materials and imagery.

Sometime during the colonial period, appliquÃ©d cloth usurped the asenâs role as a visual means for commemorating the dead. According to oral tradition, the late eighteenth-century King Agonglo introduced appliquÃ©d cloths for use as flags, banners, and umbrellas to honor royal ancestors. The deho structures invented by Gezo were covered by richly appliquÃ©d cloths made from newly introduced imported cloth. Like asen, cloth appliquÃ©s experienced a kind of democratization during the colonial period. The wealthy and educated were decorating their walls with appliquÃ©s bearing âroyalâ imagery to celebrate their status. Other forms of appliquÃ© bore narrative imagery that commemorated and memorialized ancestry.

But whereas appliquÃ© production has persisted until today, largely for tourists, asen are vanishing. In her last chapter ("Death and the Culture Wars"), Bay offers several reasons as to why asen are now disappearing. One important one is the impact of rising capitalism, with its emphasis on individuality over kin solidarity, a cash economy, and individual wealth. During the late precolonial period, when kingship was strong, a kingâs strength depended on the allegiance of family; during the colonial period, the patrilineal household replaced kingship, with asen staffs serving as the anchor that held the family

together. Now the traditional family structure is breaking down with growing tension between individual and family. Among the evidence Bay cites is a common taxi sign that reads âI fear my friends, including you,â and to a Fongbe song (âMe Dida," meaning bad person) that warns people to be cautious of family members who may kill you and then claim your ancestors were responsible. She also notes the impact of Roman Catholicism, with its emphasis on the church as the focus of devotion at all levels, including ancestry and its incorporation of asen-like imagery as part of church dÃ©cor. Even the Vodun religion, today strongly encouraged by the government as a form of national identity, has taken on a new form that emphasizes individual wealth and success over kin solidarity.

Bayâs photographs, though small and monochrome, are very effective in illustrating her points. For example, she begins the chapter discussing the recent demise of asen with a photo of a shrine-like room decorated only with framed photographs of deceased family members and ends it with a photo of discarded asen near the same familyâs abandoned deho.

The real strength of Bayâs book is its rich array of written sources, and the thorough and judicious way that she draws on and analyzes them to build and support her arguments. Bayâs study of the evolution of Fon asen is one of the best historical studies of an African art form I have yet to see in the field of art history, and one that I strongly recommend for anyone looking for good scholarship on the âhistoryâ of African art.