

## DWARFS AND DIVINITY IN WEST AFRICA

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THIS grotesque figure in high relief on what remains of a small shieldlike bronze plaque has certain well marked characters which, clearly brought out in the two views published here, connect it with a small group of bronzes representing dwarfs such as are known to have been maintained at the court of the king of Benin in the seventeenth century.

The object belongs to a class of bronze ornaments one of which appears as fig. 268 in the late Henry Ling Roth's *Great Benin*. That example is rather inappropriately called an "aegis,"<sup>1</sup> and though its decoration in relief is of quite a different character and the object itself much larger, it has a loop for suspension like that at the top of the head of the figure on the University Museum plaque, the general shape of the latter when intact must have been much the same, and similar eyelets (in the former case in three separate groups) occur on the curved margin of the ornament in both cases. Ling Roth believed, on the analogy of other articles from the Niger Delta, that these formerly held "little hawk's bells." Whether or no this holds good for all objects of this class, the conjecture is verified for some of them at least by the presence of a few crotals hanging from the marginal loops of one figured by Pitt-Rivers.<sup>2</sup> In most cases the eyelets or loops form a continuous border of the curved margin, the straight upper edge of the object, which is shaped like a simple form of heraldic shield, being without them. A considerable number of these ornaments is known.<sup>3</sup> The Benin collection of the University Museum includes several small ones.

Though they are all evidently intended for suspension, the ground of those which have not a loop or loops for that purpose being either non-existent between or about the figures or pierced in several places, it is not known how they were worn, if, as seems most likely, they were intended for the adornment of the person. Marquart

<sup>1</sup> P. 225.

<sup>2</sup> *Antique Works of Art from Benin*, pl. 19.

<sup>3</sup> See, e. g., F. von Luschan, *Die Altertümer von Benin*, pp. 135, 284-286; A. Pitt-Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin*, plates 4, 19, 32, 36, 38; C. H. Read and O. M. Dalton, *Antiquities from the City of Benin*, pl. XI; J. Marquart, *Die Benin-Sammlung des Reichsmuseums in Leiden*, pl. III and pp. 34-37. The term aegis seems to have been first applied to these objects by Pitt-Rivers.

thinks, that, like the small bronze masks, they were worn at the girdle and points to figs. 164 and 165 in Pitt-Rivers's *Antique Works of Art from Benin* and to *Great Benin*, p. 200, fig. 216. These represent the same object, a large ivory statuette of a woman with "a row of five leopards' heads hanging from the waist-belt, edged



Figure of a dwarf on a small, fragmentary bronze plaque from Benin.

with rows of pellets, or perhaps eyelets, but much defaced." A comparison of this with the leopard masks figured by Pitt-Rivers on plates X and XXV leaves little room for doubt, in spite of the defacement referred to, that Pitt-Rivers's interpretation of what Marquart calls "ornaments in semicircular form" is the true one, in view especially of the fact that we have, in the bronzes, many in-

stances of the wearing of masks at the girdle. Marquart seems here to have been misled by a superficial resemblance in form between the two classes of objects.

Although the greater part of the field or ground against which the figure stands in relief has been broken away, the curve of the margin at the right shows that this was a small plaque bearing a single figure. An unusual feature is the carrying up of the line of the upper margin, which is usually straight, symmetrically on both sides of the head of the figure as if to form a support—structurally unnecessary—for the head. A raised band consisting of a stripe of beaded decoration between two plain stripes forms a border which evidently surrounded the plaque, interrupted only by the head of the figure. A similar device forms the decoration of the figure's loin cloth, and, with doubling of the beaded stripe, that of its wide and loosely fitting collar. The outer surface of the loop by which the object was suspended is divided into three slightly raised stripes. The loop starts at the top of the narrow retreating forehead of the figure and takes the place of a headdress. The row of eyelets on the outer edge of the border of the plaque was probably continuous along the lower, curved margin.

The modelling of the figure is extremely simple, almost diagrammatic, and careless as compared with the best work of Benin sculptors. The left arm, for example, issues as it should from below the margin of the heavy, wide collar which hides the angle of the shoulder, while the right is, as it were, stuck on to the collar itself. In spite of this and the almost complete neglect in other respects of normal anatomical detail, the figure as a whole manages to leave a very vivid impression of deformity and also, in view of the fact that the head is actually longer, in a vertical direction, than the diminutive trunk, of dwarfishness.

Two typical marks of the Benin people of the XVIIth century were vertical cicatrizations over the eyes and down the middle and sides of the body. These consist most often of two groups of three stripes each on the forehead and of five long stripes on the front and sides of the trunk. Sometimes, as here, there are eight stripes on the forehead and three on the body. Three stripes on the body seems to be the rule for figures in half, or lower, relief and is probably only a matter of convenience in representation.

The collar of beadwork worn by the figure is a mark of rank and probably indicates that the wearer, in virtue of his physical peculiarities, held some official post about the court. Bracelets also

were a mark of official or hereditary dignity. In this case each is a spiral, apparently of stout wire, of one complete and two half turns.

The kilt or loin cloth is of the type worn by women of the period in question; but it is also found in contemporary representations of men. Probably it was for men the older fashion, succeeded, without being entirely superseded, by the loin cloth opening at the side and having the peculiar ornamental extension of the ends by which it was fastened that appears in so many of the bronzes. That this figure is not that of a woman is evident from the fact that the bare bosom does not show even the well marked development of the breasts that characterizes many of the male figures and, in the case of some of the bronzes, makes the determination of sex doubtful. The object held in the right hand is never, to my knowledge, represented as carried by a woman.

What is this object? It is necessary to abandon the opinion, expressed in a former article, which followed that of Read and Dalton, that this cylinder between two discs represents a peculiar form of drum. In view of Von Luschan's discussion of the subject it seems clear that it was a kind of casket, which was also a stool or seat. The objects carried by so many of the plaque figures are, however, small by comparison with the known size of stools from this region, and there is a short-barrelled variety of the casket which appears unsuitable for a seat. But the stools of the seated figures of the bronze plaques on which Von Luschan relies for his determination of the caskets as stools are, so far as one can judge from the illustrations, certainly decisive.<sup>1</sup> Von Luschan insists that, since the individuals who are shown on the plaques seated on these casket-stools are evidently persons of rank, therefore the persons shown carrying them are always of a menial order, stool-bearers to dignitaries.<sup>2</sup> The crucial case, in which a richly dressed warrior on a plaque carries one of the objects in question, he dismisses with a declaration, unsupported by any evidence, that this personage is not a warrior at all but somebody in a servant's livery. But, as we shall see, in Ashanti, a state which in many matters of custom and general culture closely resembled Benin, functionaries of no little importance at court carried their own stools, and this is specially affirmed of a class of functionaries who resembled our dwarf in their physical peculiarities.

<sup>1</sup> Figs. 158, 159, and pl. 38E.

<sup>2</sup> See Von Luschan, pp. 199-201, 425.

Though these objects are not drums, there is still, I think, reason to suspect that they were used, secondarily, as a kind of percussion instrument. The posture of some of the bearers of these caskets on the bronze plaques, who appear to be striking the top of the vessel or, in at least one case,<sup>1</sup> the side with one hand, and the posture of



Another view of the same figure.

the individual with whom we are here chiefly concerned seem to indicate this.

He grasps the cylinder, held horizontally, from above so as to press it against his pigeon-breast, at the same time leaving the greater part of a disc exposed and in a position which certainly

<sup>1</sup> Von Luschan, fig. 324.

gives the impression of its being presented for the reception of blows from the uplifted left hand or from something which may have been held in it—for the hand itself is missing, though from the position of the upward curving portion of the arm on which the bracelet marks roughly the place of the wrist it must have extended beyond the edge of the plaque. If the widely parted lips indicate, as probably they do, that he is singing or shouting, there is no doubt that his whole posture suggests the attitude of one energetically beating a drum to the accompaniment of shouts or song. Sculptors in Benin did not usually attempt to represent movement by the posture of the lower extremities. Though some of the bronze groups evidently picture individuals in a procession or in scenes which involve at least some degree of pedestrian activity this is certainly not as a rule suggested by the position of legs or feet. So there is no means of knowing whether this individual's rhythmic noises were accompanied by rhythmic movements of his legs, though I think it very likely that they were, arguing both from what we know of negroes in general and of dwarfish negroes in Guinea as well as elsewhere in Africa. Is this a dwarf and is he dancing? To the second question probably a positive answer cannot be given; there is no doubt that the first is to be answered in the affirmative.

Dr. F. N. Roth, a medical officer attached to the punitive expedition which captured the city of Benin in 1897, wrote in his diary: "While I was still in the city two solid cast brass figures were brought in. They represented dwarfs typical of cretinism." These are most likely two of the figures shown in a photograph made at that time by another medical officer, Dr. Allman. They are now in Vienna.<sup>1</sup> One of these figures Von Luschan believes to be that of a female dwarf, whose stunted stature, marked by the extreme shortness of her legs and arms, he considers to be due to achondroplasia, a condition which used to be attributed to "foetal rachitis" but which is now known to be a different disease and not rickets at all. The head of this Vienna statuette bears a close resemblance to a damaged bronze head in the Berlin Museum, and Von Luschan believed that both were portraits of the same person<sup>2</sup> "who probably played a great rôle at the court of Benin."<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> H. L. Roth, *Great Benin*, pp. 218, 219, and fig. 255; Von Luschan, pp. 299, 300 and figs. 445, 446; F. Heger, *Drei merkwürdige Metallfiguren von Benin, Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft zu Wien*, vol. 46 (1916).

<sup>2</sup> Von Luschan, p. 363.

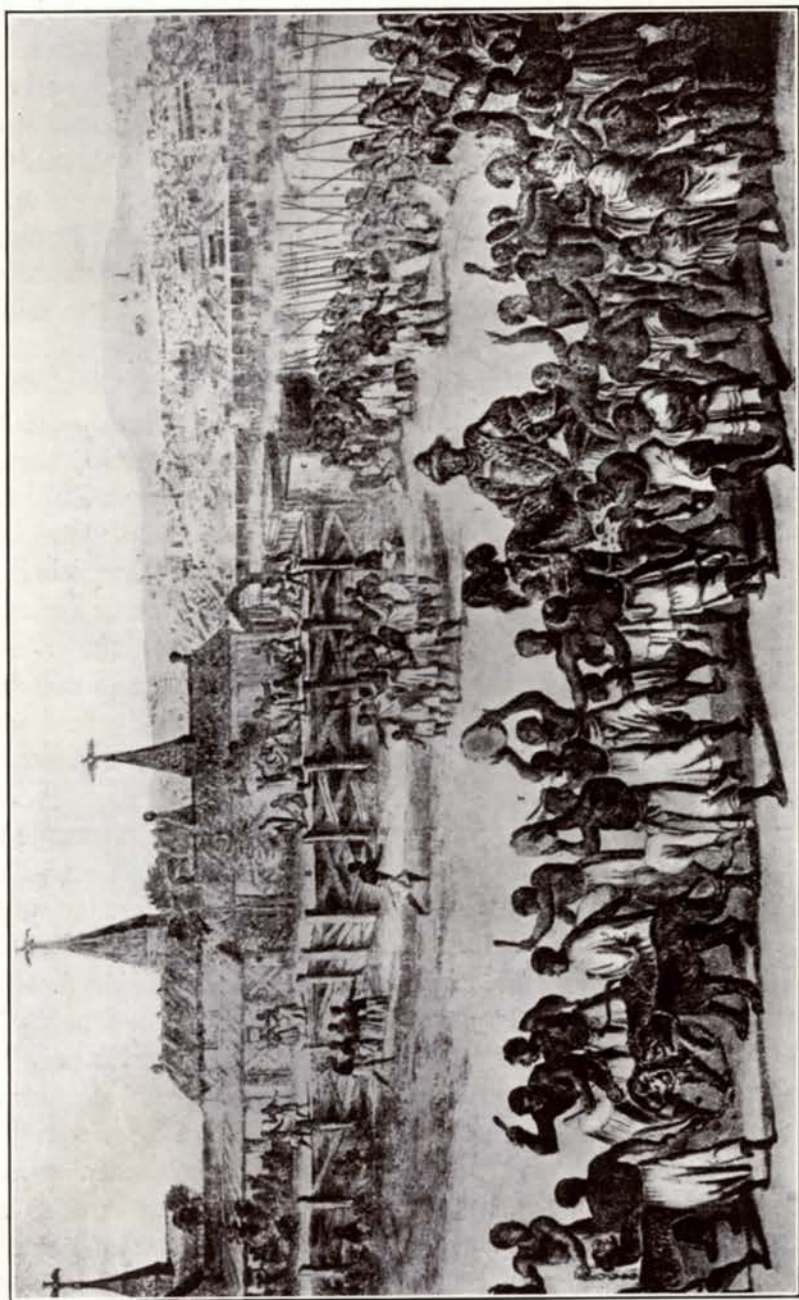
<sup>3</sup> P. 300.

Berlin head is figured in the Album of Von Luschan's *Allertümer* on plate 65. The resemblance between the profiles of the two heads is certainly striking but the conclusion drawn from this likeness is hazardous, to say the least. It is true that achondroplasia is said not to affect the mental ability of persons afflicted by it but there is no reason to suppose that any woman, except the queen mother, who had a court of her own, would have the opportunity of "playing a great rôle" at the court of Benin, and although, as we shall see, deformed and dwarfish persons certainly played rôles of one kind or another at numerous African courts, we have no grounds for believing that these rôles were in any mundane sense "great."

A remarkable feature of both these heads is the shelflike protuberance of the upper eyelids. Such thick projecting eyelids are characteristic rather of the condition known as cretinism, a condition which is accompanied by serious mental impairment, than of rickets or achondroplasia. There is some confusion in Von Luschan's conception of the characters concerned. The legend to plate 65 of the Album describes the head in question as that of a "rachitic girl," or girl suffering from rickets, while a rachitic condition is expressly excluded from his discussion of these figures, and it is contended that they all represent "Mikromelen," or persons afflicted with achondroplasia.

It is in respect of the eyes that the individual portrayed on the small Museum plaque resembles Von Luschan's "Mikromelen." Bini sculptors usually represent the eyes of their models as prominent but also well opened, while the peculiarity insisted on in this small figure, in which the upper eyelids positively overshadow the rest of the face, is surely indicative of something pathological, probably cretinous, about this also otherwise deformed individual.

For not only the facial region proper, with the peculiarity just described, and the retreating forehead, whose abnormal height is probably due to the wish to make ample room for the forehead cicatrizations, mark the little figure as abnormal, but also it presents an exaggerated case of pigeon-breast. It is this feature, as strongly insisted on by the sculptor as the peculiar eyelids, which, apart from the abnormal relative proportions of head and trunk and the weakly appearance of the limbs, is most strongly indicative of the dwarfish character of the person depicted and gives the strongest clue to the nature of his deformity. In rickets one of the characteristic deformities affecting the trunk of the body is due to the flat-



A royal progress in Benin. Dwarfs and hunchbacks near the king, who is on horseback.



tening of the lateral curves of the ribs and the projection forward of the sternum. This condition is commonly accompanied and accentuated by a curvature of the spine, so that extreme cases approach, front and rear, the appearance of the genial Mr. Punch, the literary successor of the hunchbacked dwarfs who jested and capered once for European princes and nobles. Rickets is a disease of the bones due to faulty nutrition in infancy. Children who have had it grow up with some degree of deformity and dwarfing. A good example of the extreme type with which we are here concerned may be seen in a photograph reproduced in the *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, as an illustration to a study of *Nano-infantilisme et folie* by Dr. A. Marie in vol. X (1909), p. 111.

This pigeon-breasted condition is accompanied and emphasized in the photograph just referred to, as it is in our figure also, by another characteristic feature of rachitic dwarfism. "The weight of the trunk on the summit of the sacrum is so much the most effective and continuous force applied as the growing child walks or stands that the whole pelvis is tilted forward on its transverse axis" so that the pubic region is displaced backwards.<sup>1</sup> If the figure of our plaque is regarded from the side, precisely this double deformity is obvious. It is no mere paunchiness that is intended to be shown here. The protrusion of the front of the trunk affects only the portion above the navel, which is represented on the steeply receding abdomen, the lower portion of which runs back almost horizontally towards the pubic region, the evident displacement backward of which is most marked. We have here certainly a case of rachitic dwarfism in an individual who also appears to be something of a cretin.

Examples of the representation, actual or alleged, of dwarfs on the bronze plaques or in bronze statuettes in the round are as follows: The two statuettes already mentioned; the head, also previously referred to, which Von Luschan connects with one of those two figures; several figures on small plaques illustrated by Von Luschan in the first of the two volumes of plates accompanying his *Altertümer* (plate 41), which he describes as "Dwarfs and Hunchbacks from the Suite of the King"; and the pigeon-breasted dwarf figured here. In Pitt-Rivers's *Antique Works of Art from Benin*, there appears on plate 22 a brass or bronze armlet "with four upright figures and four horizontal heads." All these heads, whether in their

<sup>1</sup> *Human Anatomy*, edited by G. A. Piersol, Philadelphia and London, pp. 167, 348.

places on top of the vertical figures or in their horizontal detachment, resemble, especially in the matter of eyelids, the head of our dwarf; they have weak-looking legs and pear-shaped bodies, but these last characters may be simply conventions of a rather grotesque mode and do not necessarily correspond closely enough to a possible model to make it anything but hazardous to attempt to assign these figures to this class of representations. Only two of the seven figures of Von Luschan's plate 41 are unquestionably deformed. Both of these are pigeon-breasted, one markedly so.

Apart from the evidence of the old bronzes themselves we have, to my knowledge, only one source of information which enables us to state positively that the King of Benin kept deformed persons and dwarfs at his court. This information is definite, but unfortunately there is not enough of it to give us much knowledge of the functions of these unfortunate creatures at the court.

Dr. Olfert Dapper, a Dutchman who wrote in the earlier part of the second half of the seventeenth century, from information supplied by an African traveller whose journals must have borne a somewhat earlier date, says that the King of Benin, who spent most of his life shut away within the walls of his compound from the gaze of his humbler subjects, showed himself once a year to the latter when he rode out into the city on horseback, "accompanied by three or four hundred noblemen on horseback and on foot, and a great number of musicians before and behind him, playing merry tunes on all sorts of musical instruments. . . . Then the king causes some tame leopards that he keeps for his pleasure to be led about in chains; he also shows many dwarfs and deaf people, whom he likes to keep at his court."<sup>1</sup> In the illustration of this scene supplied by Dapper, which is reproduced here, from Dr. Von Luschan's invaluable *Altertümer*, several dwarfs appear in the midst of the musicians and dancers who precede and follow the king. The dwarfs are close beside the king, on either side of his horse. Two, at any rate, are hunchbacks and one is pigeon-breasted. It is not to be supposed, of course, that this picture was drawn on the spot, but it is sufficiently true in other respects to known details to make it evident that it was drawn under competent direction. An earlier writer, also a Dutchman, known only by his initials, D. R., whose account of Benin Ling Roth took from the 1604 edition of De Bry's famous compilation,<sup>2</sup> tells us that the king's progress took place on

<sup>1</sup> H. Ling Roth, *Great Benin*, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> *India Orientalis*, part VI, Frankfurt, 1604.

two days in the year, when "he goes out of his court to view here and there, and visits the town. He then shows all his power, wealth, and all merrymaking things and amusements he can think of, and can bring forth." Dapper's expression "once a year" evidently means "at one festival during the year," for he expressly says in another passage, evidently referring to the occasion which D. R. had in mind, that there was "also a day on which the king makes a great show of all his riches,"<sup>1</sup> etc. The allusion is evidently to the annual festival at which the king, as it was expressed in later times, "made father," i. e. celebrated with human sacrifices and other offerings the memory of his ancestors. There is a close parallel in the notorious "Customs" of Dahomey. D. R.'s "merrymaking things and amusements" no doubt included dwarfs and other deformities. Dapper's addition of "deaf people" to the other human curiosities illustrates the peculiar fascination which any obvious abnormality in otherwise familiar fellow-creatures had for potentates and their subjects.

Further to illustrate this and thus to throw some light on the functions of dwarfs and the beliefs concerning them in Benin, a summary review of our information on this subject will be necessary.

To begin with certain states of Upper Guinea, which have had a similar cultural development, and some of which are known to have had close relations with Benin:

Yoruba gave to Benin some hundreds of years ago the dynasty whose last representative was deposed by England in 1897. Here persons who were physically abnormal were maintained not only in the households of kings but also of lesser magnates, as we learn from the following tradition. A certain King Abipa, whose ancestors had reigned at Oyo, the ancient capital of the land, was determined to make Oyo once more the royal seat against the wishes of his principal chiefs. The latter, despairing of turning him from his purpose by persuasion or force, resorted to stratagem. Abipa was preparing to send persons to inspect the abandoned sites at Oyo, when the chiefs, learning of his purpose, chose from among their followers a hunchback, a dwarf, a cripple, and an albino, and sent them to occupy a hill outside the old town. When the king's emissaries arrived and were about to offer sacrifices to make the gods propitious to his plan, shouts of "No room, no room!" greeted them from the hill, which, during the night that followed, the messengers

<sup>1</sup> *Great Benin*, p. 74.

saw was occupied by what they took to be the spirits of the hill roaming about with torches and warning them not to attempt to carry out their design. The king then sent six hunters, intrepid men who were not likely to be frightened by shadows. Discovering the imposture, they brought in the counterfeit spirits, who were then questioned and disclosed the details of the fraud. Thereupon the king invited the traitorous chiefs to a banquet and caused them to be served with drink each by his own monstrosity. Consternation of the naughty officials and triumph of the king! He was henceforth known as Oba Moro, "King Ghost-Snarer."<sup>1</sup>

Dwarfs, albinos, and others who differed strikingly from the physical norms of their fellow-countrymen we see, then, to have been regarded by the Yorubas as uncanny in some rather undefined way, having a form similar to certain potent spirits who carry out the will of the gods. From the narrator of the same legend we also learn that they are considered "as unnatural beings, suffering the vengeance of the gods" and "are usually kept as priests and priestesses to Obatala [deputy creator or collaborator with the high god, Olorun] and other gods, especially the albinos, dwarfs, and hunchbacks."<sup>2</sup> Both in their bodily and in their ghostly forms, then, they are instruments of the will of the gods and especially of the creator, who has in anger misshapen them and bound them to execute his will. Obatala, we are told, "forms the child in the mother's womb," deformity is regarded as his work, as punishment for neglect of the god, or as a reminder to his worshippers of his power.<sup>3</sup>

Bearing in mind the original close connection of the royal houses in Yorubaland and in Benin, we may suspect a similar relation between dwarfs and the gods in the two kingdoms. Further, since in Benin, the holy city of the latter kingdom, the king was in some sense a god, if the Yoruba conception of the proper functions of dwarfs survived in seventeenth century Benin, it would be peculiarly fitting that dwarfs should be servants of the king. In Yoruba the reason given for the special relationship of deformed persons to the king is singularly like that assigned for their relationship to the god: "Such beings, being considered unnatural, were the king's peculiar property;" while of hunchbacks, albinos, lepers, dwarfs, etc., it is

<sup>1</sup> S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, pp. 164, 165.

<sup>2</sup> P. 165.

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, pp. 39, 40.

said that since they are "unnatural beings" they are the peculiar property of the gods and have a special name given to them for this reason, Eni Orisa, "the belongings of the gods."<sup>1</sup>

Why then does the legend assign to great chiefs other than the king certain of these unfortunates as servants? Practice does not always follow theory exclusively, not excepting the practices which follow the principles laid down in myths. Perhaps these dwarfs, etc., were a sort of private chaplains attached to shrines in the jurisdiction of these chiefs. Or, since the great chiefs were deputies of the king, he may have delegated some of his sacredness to them as sanction of their departmental acts. There is evidence of such delegation in Benin.

In Dahomey, where, before the French occupation, at the annual Customs, hundreds of human victims were sacrificed in honour of the king's ancestors as they were in the similar celebration at Benin City, dwarfs and other deformed persons were maintained at the king's court and were in evidence, as at Benin, during the performance of the attendant rites. Their presence is remarked by several European witnesses of the ceremonies. R. Norris, whose account of Dahomey was published in 1789, and who visited the king during the performance of the Customs, says: "We dined as before in the market place, and in the evening, when I went to wait on the king, a female dwarf was introduced to dance before him, in which she acquitted herself very well; she seemed to be about thirty years old and measured only 2 feet, 7 inches, high, was without any deformity and tolerably well shaped."<sup>2</sup> This was evidently a true dwarf, like "General" Tom Thumb, and her only abnormality was in her extremely diminutive stature. At the Display of the King's Wealth [Cf. Benin], an incident of the Customs, F. E. Forbes relates that "on the neutral ground where we stood, facing the pavilion . . . roamed an ostrich, an emu (?), several dwarfs, hunchbacks, and albinos, besides troops of dogs almost of every country and variety." At the Custom of Firing the Guns—evidently the military parade of amazons and other troops which always formed part of the festivities—"the whole nation was military; mother, wife, daughter, minister, even the hunchbacks and dwarfs were strutting by in all the pride of military array." Forbes must have confused some of the spectators with the participants in march and countermarch and

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Yoruba*, pp. 103, 165.

<sup>2</sup> *Memoirs of Bossa Ahadée, King of Dahomey*, London, 1789, p. 112.

skirmish; or else, impressed by the large number of amazons in the army, he may have thought, as indeed his opening phrase implies, that the whole female population was, at least for the occasion, enrolled in the military forces: amazons were not allowed to marry, nor, overtly, to have lovers. At the distribution of cowries to officials during the Customs he saw "all the sublime and the ridiculous of the Court . . . assembled in the palace yard to-day: men of all heights, from giants to the dwarf of inches, hunchbacks, albinos and all that is hideous in the human race, besides beautiful birds, the gazelles, and dogs of all kinds."<sup>1</sup> R. F. Burton, not yet Sir Richard, at the "So-Sin" Custom, observed "the chief of the hunchbacks . . . wielding a circinal-edged hide whip and, assisted by his attendants" cutting his way through the throng. Four other hunchbacks and "a small troop of she-hunchbacks" also appeared at this ceremony. In a footnote to the first passage he says: "The Gobbo is here an institution. These deformities . . . are of both sexes and of all ages. We repeatedly saw troops of little she-hunchbacks."<sup>2</sup>

The general impression we get from much of this, so far as Dahomey is concerned, is that these hunchbacks, dwarfs, etc., were kept as mere curiosities, associated as they are probably, in fact, accidentally, with ostriches, dogs, and what not. Burton is characteristically literary, with his "Gobbos," and coarse, with his "she-hunchbacks," but though, like the other visitors quoted, he had no opportunity for a close study of Dahoman customs, he was, as always, a keen observer and noted, as we have seen, at least one hunchback in a position of authority.

A closer and more recent student of life in Dahomey throws a curious light on the subject. We shall return to him; for the present noting only that deformed infants were commonly exposed in Dahomey, and that a peculiar ritual in connection with their exposure was instituted, apparently to give official and divine sanction to, while controlling, a custom the indiscriminating practice of which for some reason it was felt necessary to check. Since, obviously, not a few of the deformed were spared and took a prominent part in the principal religious ceremonies of the year, I suggest that the official control of the brutal custom of exposure was instituted in order to secure a supply of hunchbacks and dwarfs for ritual purposes. The ghostly counterparts of these unfortunates who were

<sup>1</sup> *Dahomey and the Dahomans*, II, pp. 35, 78, London, 1851.

<sup>2</sup> *A Mission to Gelele*, London, 1864, pp. 5, 54-55.

left to die in prescribed localities were spirits potent for evil, a circumstance which recalls the Yoruban belief previously recorded. An offering of water was made at the Customs by the princesses of royal descent, who went in procession to secure it from the sacred ravine where the infants in question were exposed and which was haunted by these spirits.<sup>1</sup> There is some complex of beliefs and customs connected with the procreation of abnormal human beings, or of human beings regarded by the people as abnormal, which is quite widespread on the Guinea Coast, and which, if we had more details, might enable us to understand more clearly the attitude of West African negroes towards dwarfs and other monstrosities. Among the Ibo-speaking tribes of Southern Nigeria, who are neighbours on the east of the Bini, new-born infants which are regarded as peculiar from an Ibo point of view, e. g. those which are deformed, born with teeth, born as twins, etc., are exposed under the sanction of certain bans or taboos connected with a divine or supernatural power of the earth, to whom the exposed appear to be offerings.<sup>2</sup>

Passing to Ashanti, which is west of Dahomey and connected with it and with Yoruba and Benin by not a few similarities in customs and beliefs, we find again a certain prominence given to dwarfs and hunchbacks among the following of the king. In Ashanti, "the Creator made a herald, a drummer, and an executioner, and the precedence of these officials in an Ashanti Court is in that order." In a chant it is said of a herald "your heritage was a good master, your heritage was [the death dance] Atōpere." The herald, then, was an important court official, ranking even the executioner, who, in these countries where human sacrifices were an essential feature of the principal religious ceremonies, was a functionary of considerable importance; and he had also his share in ritual, which was not confined to that just alluded to. At the *adae* or Wednesday ceremonies when the spirit of departed rulers of the clan are propitiated, it is the time-honoured privilege of the herald to drink first from the ceremonial cup. He had access to the sacred groves. Our author was guided to the one at Santemanso by a group of official personages who included the Queen Mother, several elders, and the herald, who was "a little hunchback." For in Ashanti "in olden times hunchbacks were usually heralds."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A Le Herissé, *L'Ancien Royaume de Dahomey*, Paris, 1911, pp. 120 ff.

<sup>2</sup> N. W. Thomas, *Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking Peoples*, I, pp. 10-11, 59-60, 12.

<sup>3</sup> R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, Oxford, 1923, pp. 263, 282, 127, 97, 122.

These heralds, or court criers, we learn from another source, were distinguished by special headgear: "The criers, all deformed and with monkey-skin caps [were] seated in front" at the Yam Custom, which was celebrated annually when the yams were ripe in September. We hear again of albinos, who, as in Yoruba and Dahomey, seem to have had a special standing here: "The king [at the Yam Custom] had about a hundred negroes of different colours through the shades of red and pink to white; they were collected for state but were generally disgusting objects, diseased and emaciated . . . their eyes blinked in the light."<sup>1</sup> Bowditch tells us something of the function of these criers at court ceremonies. They accompanied the "linguists," or king's spokesmen. They were all deformed or maimed, their monkey-skin caps had a gold plate in front and the tail hanging down behind. "Their common exclamations are, Tehoo! Tehing! Odiddee! Be silent! Be quiet! Pray hear! and these are so incessantly uttered, that they are themselves the only interruption."<sup>2</sup> We may suspect Bowditch of a certain unfamiliarity with the language, but no doubt somebody told him what the cries meant. They suggest the Oyez! Hear ye! of English criers.

The missionaries Ramseyer and Kühne, long before Rattray, were informed of the official importance of the criers or heralds. They tell us that "the head of the court criers is a dignitary of the fourth rank." They also refer to the monkey-skin cap with its golden ornament: "The great monarch himself approached. He was heralded by some eighty individuals each wearing a cap of monkey's skin adorned by a gold plate, and each holding his seat in his hand." The last detail is interesting, considering the similarities in customs in these four adjacent negro states, since, as we have seen, our Benin dwarf is carrying a stool. Was he, too, a herald, and do the widely parted lips signify that he is calling for silence and the attention of the crowd to some ceremonial proclamation?

The missionaries do not mention the deformity of the heralds, which is, however, sufficiently attested by the other witnesses. They speak of dwarfs following, and buffoons in shirts of red flannel, in the company of the "officials of the harem."<sup>3</sup> Probably they had got their classification of the members of the festival train confused.

<sup>1</sup> T. E. Bowditch, *A Mission to Ashantee*, London, 1922, pp. 276, 292.

<sup>2</sup> P. 298.

<sup>3</sup> Ramseyer and Kühne, *Four Years in Ashantee*, pp. 71, 309.



The similarity in the attitude of the people of Yoruba, Dahomey, and Ashanti towards the deformed, and especially to those of less than normal stature, and the general similarity of culture which links these states together and with Benin, make it likely that the position of dwarfs in Benin, as a result of the mental attitude of the people towards them, was substantially the same, whatever the particular office or offices which they may have held at court or juju house or shrine of the gods.

Circumstances revealing a similar state of things are reported from parts of Guinea more remote from Benin, and indeed from still more distant parts of Africa.

In Sierra Leone, among the Upper Mendi people, Alldridge mentions a female dwarf, apparently, to judge from her photograph, a victim of achondroplasia, to whom "a certain amount of fetich was attached." "She accompanied the chief when he went about the country, was treated with every mark of respect and was looked upon as something more than an ordinary mortal . . ." Another "big chief" kept a male dwarf of the same type who "was also regarded in the same light as the other." He was strong and healthy and had two wives.<sup>1</sup> We do not find in Sierra Leone highly organized and strong states with powerful sovereigns as we do further east, but, making allowance for different political circumstances, we find the same general attitude—dwarfs are attached to the person of the chief and they are regarded with a superstitious respect.

In Loango, in the maritime Congo region, far to the south, both albinos and dwarfs were kept at the court. The latter, however, may have been racial dwarfs, or pygmies, and a consideration of the relations of pygmies to the peoples of larger stature who are or were their neighbours, while it is of interest in connection with our subject, would take us too far afield. As an interesting coincidence, however, if it is nothing more, it may be set down here that Commander Cameron, in 1874, came upon the institution of dwarf heralds, who were probably pygmies, among the Manyema in the east. "Many chiefs," he says, "called on us, and two of them each brought a dwarf, who carried a rattle, and shouted his master's name after this style, 'Ohé Moéné Booté, Ohé, Ohé!' and rattled the while. . . . Moéné Booté came shuffling up to me with a sort of sliding, half-dancing step, which did not get him ahead much more

<sup>1</sup> J. T. Alldridge, *The Sherbro and Its Hinterland*, London, 1901, pp. 120, 121.

than a yard a minute; and every two or three minutes he halted, while his marimba player and dwarf extolled his greatness."<sup>1</sup>

To follow the pygmies would lead us to Egypt with its two great dwarf-deities, and the dancing dwarfs, presumably African pygmies, who on two recorded occasions were brought north for the dance of the god. The beginning of the story of how dwarfs became gods (or gods, dwarfs) in Egypt is lost in the screenings from the archæologist's sieve; but the process can be partly seen, partly inferred, in West Africa.

We have seen how, in Dahomey, deformed infants left to die became malignant spirits who had to be propitiated. The story is of sufficient importance, in the present connection, to be told in greater detail. The Tohosu are a particular class of spirits of the deceased. They frequent certain springs and lagoons, and the name is said to mean "kings of the waters." Near Abomey, the capital, the place specially consecrated to them was a ravine, with a spring, known as Dido. During the reign of a certain Tegbesu, a multitude of manikins, smaller than a new-born child, made their appearance. They ravaged the crops, caused a drought, and brought about so much distress that the people abandoned their homes and fled. A bedridden man, who was left behind, near Abomey, found himself surrounded by these dwarfs, who called themselves by a name which means "abortion," and explained their existence by saying that one of them was produced whenever a Dahoman man and woman came together. They said that they were indignant at not receiving the attention of infants normally brought into the world, and that they wished to have paid to them a cult like that with which their kind were already honoured among the Mahi of the mountains north of Abomey and that of the other spirits of the deceased in Dahomey. After this the Dahomans returned to their dwellings and Tegbesu sent priests to the Mahi to learn the forms of the cult of the Tohosu. When a Tohosu takes on visible form he does so in order to injure men. They are conjured by their worshippers not to leave their own place except to enter the temples set apart for the cult. Sometimes this entreaty is disregarded and a deformed infant is born, which must then be taken back to the haunt of the Tohosu from which it issued and there sacrifices must be offered to it. Eventually each sovereign set up a temple and a cult for an individual Tohosu, "either to avert the incarnation of these mon-

<sup>1</sup> V. L. Cameron, *Across Africa*, New York, 1877, p. 248.

strosities in the wombs of his wives or because one had in fact been born to him." The Customs, at which human victims were dispatched to serve the deceased kings in the other world and to inform them concerning the course of Dahoman affairs, began with the assembling of the descendants of the kings at the royal dwelling in Abomey. The night before the beginning of the public ceremonies which followed was to be spent by the princesses apart from their husbands. The next morning they went to the ravine of the Tohosu and fetched water, which each princess poured into a great jar placed before the altar or tomb of the king who was her ancestor.<sup>1</sup> If these Tohosu are not quite gods, they have almost reached that eminence, and they are at the same time dwarfs or manikins produced by the same physical causes which beget the dwarfs and other monstrosities whom, in Dahomey, we have seen spared to take part in the cult of ancestors at the Customs, while in Yoruba they became at once priests and spirits and in Ashanti were given at least a certain precedence in some of the ceremonies pertaining to ancestral cults and a prominent part in others.

There must be a relationship between these spirits and those reported by A. W. Cardinall from the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. Ancient stone axes and hoes are called "axes of the evil spirits." These spirits are sometimes "visible to men, and in appearance resemble the *mmotia* of the Ashanti, ill-shapen dwarfs. Frequently they are born of women" and "their influence is evil. They must be killed."<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the actual steps by which these unfortunate victims of the divine anger, in each case, climbed up themselves to share, as by some malicious irony of history, the very seats of the angry gods, the soil, in which the seeds were sown of this compensatory harvest, was ready, wherever we have looked, in the superstitious respect in which monstrosities were held, as something strange, outside of normal human experience, hence belonging to that eerie, half-formless realm which rings the solid enclave of familiar day-to-day living about, and the inhabitants of which are spirits of varying potency and malignity made in the more or less distorted image of the average humdrum creatures of the enclave.

It is not easy to draw a line, if, indeed, one is to be drawn, between spirits powerful enough to be propitiated by sacrifice and

<sup>1</sup> A. Le Herissé, *op. cit.*, pp. 120 ff.; pp. 182-184.

<sup>2</sup> *The Natives of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast*, p. 27.

gods. That Gold Coast, behind which lies the old Ashanti state, supplies several examples of dwarf-gods who seem to be quite up to the mark. Adzianim, a local god of the Cape Coast district, is one such, of human shape and black in colour. He is a provider of good water. Cudjo also is of diminutive stature and black. He is god of a shoal or reef near Cape Coast Castle and prevents the approach of enemies by sea. Abrokhu, the god of the surf which breaks upon the landing place, is of the colour of wood-ashes, and his form is that of a small, rotund man, with a short, broad face. Formerly, like Cudjo, he was malicious but is now benignant. He raises the wave that brings canoes safe in to shore.<sup>1</sup>

In Yoruba, Aja, a goddess of the healing art, was a forest dweller. She was of human form but only one or two feet high.<sup>2</sup>

From the same region we have stories of two child-gods who may have some connection with the cult of the anthropomorphic diminutive. Tando, a god of the Tshi-Speaking peoples protects especially Ashanti. "Sometimes, to assist them, he will assume the appearance of a male child; and putting himself in the way of the enemy, will suffer them to take him as a captive to their towns, which he then devastates with a pestilence." Ellis believes that Tando—wielder of the lightning, god of storms, pestilence and floods—was, before Nyankupon, the high god of the Tshi-Speaking peoples. Another link in the chain of custom and belief between the states of the Gold and Slave Coasts, may here be noted in the fact that deputations of worshippers from Dahomey used periodically to attend the shrine of Tando.<sup>3</sup>

Slender information tending to establish no more than the mere existence of another, or perhaps the same, child-god of the Gold Coast is supplied by a traveller who visited Coromantin eighty years ago. As befitted a stalwart ex-Lifeguardsman, not to be misled by any nigger chicanery, he forced his way into the fetish-house where this "wonderful child" was said to have his shrine, thrusting aside the aged priestess who tried to bar his way, and found—nothing except the shrine.<sup>4</sup>

The connection of several of these dwarfish divinities with water is interesting. It finds a parallel in southeastern Africa among the

<sup>1</sup> A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples*, pp. 40, 45.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> J. Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa in 1845 and 1846*, I, pp. 51-54.

Baronga of Delagoa Bay. In great rains white dwarfs fall from the sky. They are called by a diminutive form of the name for "god" which is applied to all white men.<sup>1</sup> This is probably no more than a coincidental resemblance, and if the legend has any foundation in reality it may refer to pygmies who have a way in Africa of persisting in the legends of a people after disappearing from their actual horizon. Whether grounded in a former acquaintance with pygmies or in an actual acquaintance with pathological dwarfs, there is evidently a widespread cult of dwarfs in negro Africa, the details of which and their resemblances and differences would repay further study in the literature and in the field.

The Romans are said to have practiced the manufacture of dwarfs and of what Burton calls Gobbos through the infliction of ghastly cruelties upon children. Where there is a demand there will usually be an attempt to augment the supply; and a curious story narrated by Nassau seems to point to the existence of a dwarf factory in the Gabun which had got itself surrounded, probably through the influence of the manufacturers, with a fog of mystery. The negroes here told Nassau a story of "Asiki, or Little Beings," which once were human, but being caught in infancy by sorcerers, had their tongues cut out so that they could only make inarticulate guttural sounds. They were subjected also to other cruelties which had the effect of checking "their entire physical, mental, and moral growth." "They cease to remember or care for their former homes or their human relatives, and they accept all the witchcraft of their captors." They wear a curious ornament like a comb at the back of the head. If this is taken from one of them, it will bring wealth but the taker will be haunted by the dwarf. The Asiki are immortal; they can propagate their kind.<sup>2</sup> The association of the Asiki with treasure, their changeling character, their forgetfulness of home and friends are perhaps too reminiscent of European tales of fairies and of the kidnapping of mortal children by the Little People to smack quite authentically of Africa. The coastal people of the Gabun had been—long before Nassau's time—in touch with European traders and sailors, and it is possible that there may be here an example of the corruption, through the grafting on of alien elements, of a genuine negro legend based on facts.

<sup>1</sup> H. A. Junod, *Les Baronga*, Neuchatel, 1908. Notice in *Folk-Lore*, X (1899), pp. 227-228.

<sup>2</sup> R. H. Nassau, *Fetichism in West Africa*, London, 1904, pp. 299-302.