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Mystery Objects of the Ghanaian Stone Age

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TRIBUTE TO OUR GREAT MASTERS
- Prof. J. C. de Graff and
- Prof. Michael Dei-Abrah (pages 10-12)
THE interpretations about the polished stone axe, popularly called Nyame akuma or So fa, are so varied and complicated that today it is difficult to positively consider any of these interpretations acceptable. The objects whenever found, handled or heard of have become some kind of mystery objects. But a more mysterious object has shown its head in the history and archaeology of Ghana and which for lack of better name is called 'rasps'.

These 'rasps' consist generally of cylindrical and oval-sectioned stone or terracotta with geometric scorings of different patterns on one or both faces. These objects have been recovered from later stone age sites of Kintampo, Niereso, Mumute, Chukoto, Bonoase, Boyasi and have been variously referred to as terracotta "cigars," "rasps" and "tablets."

'Rasp' finds in Ghana were reported as far back as 1912 but the objects were not closely studied till about 1952. They were called "terracotta cigars" because of their appearance as cigars. Later it was believed that they were made from some kind of soft sandstone, probably volcanic and used as a kind of rasping objects.

MYSTERY OBJECTS OF THE GHANAIAN STONE AGE

Recently in my research work at an early stone age site near Wenchi in Brong Ahafo, several of these objects were recovered and a few of them examined closely and sectioned. The result indicated that the 'rasps' were made of some type of fine clay which had some element of iron content. It seems some of the objects were baked after having been dried in the sun. The faces were then carefully scored with criss-cross or grid pattern, or single line decorations.

Parallels outside Ghana

Definite parallels for the 'rasps' have not been found outside Ghana, and it would seem to suggest that the objects were limited to Ghana. Stones, scored with similar designs from neolithic sites in the Republic of Guinea and from the northern savanna and the Sahara areas have been mentioned. Similar objects have been reported from Hoggar mountain areas of the Sudanic belt. From the Congo area have been reported similar but slightly curved objects.

Uses

No definite use is known for the 'rasps'. Kitson is reported to have called them 'message-sticks', and another geologist 'tablets', from their resemblance to Hitites tablets. Oliver Davies, the first archaeologist to study them thought they were too soft to be rasps for nut and vaguely called them 'ritual objects'. Thurstan Shaw, then of University of Ibadan, calls them hatched rubbers. Arkell also suggested the possibility of the 'rasps' connection with the making of bark cloth but Davies did not seem to support the idea. Anquandah of the Department of Archaeology, University of Ghana, seems to be of the opinion that the 'rasps' were used for making pottery, a suggestion which Davies seems to support. Shaw does not support suggestions that they were musical instruments or sweat removers. The name given to the objects as 'rasps' by Flight seems to suggest that they were used for rasping.

Any attempt to suggest any use for the 'rasps' should take into consideration the forms, sizes, the geometric patterns on the faces, the wear on the faces, and other associated finds and their abundance as well as the material wealth of the site. These considerations should throw some light on the problems connected with their function in the absence of any ethnographic parallel.

The general form of the 'rasps' has a significance. All of them have a fairly uniform shape, rather like flattened maize or millet cobs. The variations in shape probably indicate attempts to produce varied results. It is also possible that the differences in form were meant for use at different stages of the same process. Perhaps there were differences in shape because they were used by different classes of people. One could also suggest that the smaller-sized ones were used by young and very old people and the larger ones by the adult group. Perhaps it is better to suggest more concrete uses of the rasps.

That the rasps were significant as objects for decoration is indicated by the wide variety of geometric patterns scored on them. Some of them even have different patterns on each face. Of the 88 'rasps' recovered only eight did not have geometric patterns. Some of the eight were pecked or had become completely smooth through use.

Taking the very large proportion of the 'rasps' that have the geometric decorations and the whole lot of scoring into consideration, and especially the deep and wide variety of the designs, one suggestion is that the rasps seem to have been used for stamping patterns on skin of animals or on bark cloth (Kyenkyen). The traditions of various parts of Ghana relate that a wide variety of game existed in certain areas and that hunting was an important occupation. It was not difficult, therefore, for the inhabitants of
these stone age sites to obtain skins of animals which, with the use of the ‘rasps’, they decorated with ‘rasp’ patterns. Bark-cloth making was an important occupation in various parts of Ghana. There is evidence also that dyeing in certain parts of Ghana until very recently, was an important industry. Perhaps the popularity of the ‘Nsoko’ cloth which featured a great deal in the early trade between the area and the coast and mentioned in Dutch records of 1629 was a continuation from the time of the stone age sites.

In 1953 similar objects (but of bone) were excavated from the site of Sarkel in the U.S.S.R. The pattern of scorings on the bones were similar to those found on the Mumute ‘rasps’. These according to the excavator were used as s’amps, for decorating skins. Bark-cloth or skin of animal is not likely to be preserved in the archaeological record of Ghana especially considering the length of time involved.

Another use of the ‘rasps’ was possibly for making pottery in a similar way in which modern potters in the area use maize cobs for shaping vessels. But whether the ‘rasps’ could have been used for decorating vessels is difficult to tell. The reason behind this suggestion of the use of the ‘rasps’ for pottery making is that the introduction into West Africa in recent times of maize probably resulted in the abandonment of use of ‘rasps’ the making of which was more tedious, several generations before the modern potters, who do not seem to have any idea as to what the ‘rasps’ were and of what use they were made. The time gap is quite long. No evidence has yet been found for this assertion but it seems that if the ‘rasps’ were used for making pottery at all, it was more likely to have been used for shaping rather than decorating. Stamping could easily be done but rolling could not be done except on a soft plastic surface and under a fairly strong pressure in order to get the impressions. Stamping of patterns on pottery, however, does not seem to have needed the elaborate scoring and the shape of the ‘rasps’. Tried on plasticine, the ‘rasps’ have produced positive impressions which indicated that an object with the elasticity of plasticine could easily be decorated with patterns of the ‘rasps’. It was difficult to equate any of the decorations on the ‘rasps’ with designs on pottery from Mumute though initially in the field such a suggestion seemed plausible.

The abundance of the ‘rasps’ at the late Stone Age sites such as the Ntereso and Kintampo, suggests that they were related to something produced on a large scale. The overwhelming majority of them had been worn and abandoned only after they had broken, possibly by the force of pressure on them, though it is hard to tell how they were used. The wear patterns on the ‘rasps’ suggest that they could have been used for activities that involved pushing them back and forward lengthwise, perhaps as tools for grinding and shaping details on wood or stone or for grinding some kind of material, rather in the way that Flight’s name ‘rasps’ suggest. As is well known with modern steel ‘rasps’ the main work is done by the numerous teeth and projections produced by grooving the steel in a soft tempered material. The ‘terracotta rasps’ do not seem to have the hardness adequate enough for rasping even wood since the teeth would break off and fall away very quickly. The wear-patterns as mentioned above, however seem to support the use of the ‘rasps’ for rasping something which one cannot tell.

Bone rasps have been recovered in North-Eastern Sardinia Island in the Mediterranean in layers of Hellenistic period at the site of Olbia. Bone rasps are known from Scythian Neapol, ‘Thanagoria and other areas around the Black Sea. For use as rasps these bone objects seem to be more resistant to wear than the ‘rasps’ from Ghana.

Besides the original purpose for which the ‘rasps’ were made the objects seem to have been used for other secondary activities. ‘Rasps’ from Ntereso site have been found with conical holes perforated near one end and with grooves similar to grooved stones supposedly used for bead polishing. It appears that the original form of the rasp could be changed by using it for some other purposes. The perforated rasps could have been used as pendants such as finds from Ntereso, Ti-n-deh and El Kel areas of the Sahara seem to suggest. The use of the ‘rasps’ as magical objects at certain stages also seems to be a possibility. Perhaps this is the reason why conical holes are made in them for use as pendants.

No conclusion can be drawn at this stage of study of the function of the ‘rasps’. The objects seem to have been of great importance to the neolithic people as indicated by the abundance and the great effort taken in making the geometric patterns on them. The rasps may have been used for a variety of activities such as stamping patterns on skin of animals or bark-cloth, shaping pottery, possibly rasping, and for secondary uses such as polishing seed beads and pendants representing objects of magical significance.

These mystery objects are on display in the Ghana National Museum and Department of Archaeology, Legon, exhibition galleries. These two institutions are willing to collect any information that may lead to knowing the true provenance and uses for which they were made.