McNaughton, Patrick. - The Mande Blacksmiths. Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa
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données, mais aussi parfois du fait que les diverses spécialités de la géologie du Quaternaire n'ont pu être représentées sur le terrain.

Malgré ces quelques imperfections, l'auteur atteint, pour ces périodes récentes, son premier objectif, celui de la définition des cultures précédant l'histoire. Le deuxième objectif, plus ambitieux, doit nécessairement attendre le développement des recherches dans cette région. Quoi qu'il en soit, il ne fait aucun doute, dès à présent, que les multiples informations abondamment illustrées que présente Alain Marliac constituent des éléments solides qui pourront servir de référence lors d'études archéologiques ultérieures en Afrique centrale.

Dominique Commelin et Olivier Dutour


In *The Mande Blacksmiths,* Patrick McNaughton introduces a western audience to concepts at the heart of Mande society, challenging preconceived notions and misconceptions about the nature of good and evil, occult power and sorcery, art and craft. The central theme is one of articulation, used as a metaphor for the critical way in which blacksmiths function at the intersections of Mande artistic, social and spiritual life.

The most visible role of the blacksmith is that of the consummate craftsman, providing his services to the farmers and hunters who are his primary clientele. McNaughton begins with those skills and tasks first tackled by an apprentice, providing detailed descriptions of all aspects of the technological process. He identifies the broad range of agricultural and household tools and weapons most in demand from the blacksmith’s forge. Throughout, McNaughton does not allow the reader to lose sight of the aesthetic dimension in both process and product, from the distinctive rhythms of playing the bellows and beating the iron, to the beauty of the final result. The lesson learned is that even in the most mundane of tasks, smiths are valued for their exceptional abilities to manipulate form.

Indeed, it is as sculptors that Mande blacksmiths are especially acclaimed in the west. However, the art forms on which McNaughton chooses to focus are not those with which the Western museum-going audience is most familiar. Spear blades, oil lamps, small iron figures, and the powerful masks of Komo are as rare in European and American collections as they have become in Mande life. These are not easy categories to discuss given the secrecy which appears to have surrounded their manufacture and use. McNaughton weaves together accounts by early colonial writers with bits of information elicited during fieldwork. Most compelling is his discussion of the dramatic acts accomplished with sculptural forms by the most exceptional of blacksmiths as leaders of Komo. Less successful as narrative, but nonetheless important for the information provided, is his discussion of the other less well known artistic forms.

McNaughton shifts easily from the tangible realities of craftsmanship to blacksmiths as articulators of the Mande social and spiritual world. McNaughton examines the multiple roles blacksmiths play in the social and spiritual life of
others: as mediators, rain-makers, healers, diviners, protectors and circumcisers. He argues that these activities should not be seen as antithetical to nor removed from their profession as artists. In fact, it is the blacksmith’s central position in the civilizing process which in turn makes them ideal as artists. McNaughton suggests that the process by which Mande sculptors visualize and distill physical form parallels their actions in controlling and focusing social and spiritual energies in Mande life, ultimately resolving and integrating them into human experience.

McNaughton’s aim is not one of demystification, but rather of drawing the reader into a realm where occult power and artistic facility are equally understood as exceptional. His frequent use of the term “supernatural” corresponds to Western ideas of a spiritual realm beyond or apart from the world of men. However, what comes across strongly is the notion that Mande peoples tend to perceive spirits and occult forces to be part of the natural environment, as real as sand, water or animate life. While the reader is not required to take that same leap of faith, one nevertheless emerges with a profound respect for Mande patterns of belief and the unique position of blacksmiths within this system.

In the final chapter, McNaughton muses about a variety of unresolved issues concerning the smiths—the ambiguity of their status in Mande society, the conceptual and ideological links among their artistic endeavors and the social and spiritual missions with which they are charged, and the difficulty of explaining how this situation came to be. In fact, my strongest criticism of the book is its rather timeless quality, a sense of history is largely absent. Thus, the question McNaughton poses—which came first, sorcery or smithing?—is a rhetorical one. Rather than providing a framework for seeking historical clues, it presents an opportunity to explore elements common to both. Similarly, periodic references to the accounts of early travelers, missionaries and colonial administrators, serve to emphasize the continuity of Mande beliefs and practices, rather than to reveal the extent of change over time. McNaughton leaves open for future inquiry the question of historical reconstruction, a topic he himself has addressed in more recent publications.

It is recognition of the centrality of blacksmiths to the fabric of Mande society that causes McNaughton to return to the issue of “caste” (introduced in the first chapter) and the ambiguity of the social status of smiths and other artist groups in Mande society. As McNaughton suggests, there is much contradiction in the literature concerning attitudes towards blacksmiths and their potter wives, as well as leatherworkers and oral artists or bards. They are said to be simultaneously respected, feared, disdained and even despised. McNaughton’s approach is to examine the concept of caste as defined in the Indian context around the themes of endogamy, division of labor, social separation due to notions of purity and pollution, and social hierarchy. Despite the apparent correspondence of some of these features, McNaughton, like most Africanist scholars, ultimately rejects the use of this concept to define the social matrix within

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which the smiths are embedded. While I would agree that examining the Mande phenomenon through the dichotomy of purity and pollution provides little in the way of insight into Mande thinking, I would like to take issue with McNaughton's conclusion that hierarchy is not applicable to the Mande context. It has been my experience that social rank pervades Mande discussions of relationships among different categories of peoples. I would argue that the lack of a clear ideological rationale for such differentiation and ranking, which McNaughton gives as a reason for discounting the relevance of hierarchy, is due in part to the multiple perspectives from which to view these relationships.

In fact, perhaps the greatest strength of this book is the way in which McNaughton himself gives voice to the particular smiths with whom he worked. His insight is based primarily on his own apprenticeship and friendship with the blacksmith-sculptor Sedu Traore. The text is peppered with anecdotes, incidents and exchanges of his field experience. It is in these passages that the high regard the author has for his informants and for Mande society generally comes across most clearly, and where his own role as articulator is most effective. As a result, the book is at once scholarly and personal, full of information written in an easily readable narrative structure. In short, it is an engaging work written in an accessible style which contributes much to our understanding of Mande beliefs and artistry.

Barbara E. Frank


Cet opuscule fait partie d’une collection qui a pour ambition d’offrir, en une cinquantaine de pages, une sorte de mise au point à la fois objective et personnelle d’un domaine de la recherche, en l’occurrence de la littérature orale africaine. Ce genre de pari est toujours difficile à tenir, mais Isidore Okpewho réussit, dans une large mesure, à honorer son contrat. On peut lui reprocher toutefois de s’appuyer presque exclusivement sur le domaine anglophone et de négliger les travaux de langue française (sauf certains travaux qui sont traduits en anglais), accomplis dans les trente dernières années, pourtant importants et innovateurs dans cette branche d’étude.

Dans son premier chapitre, l'auteur évoque l'origine de la discipline, notamment ses liens avec la science-mère, c'est-à-dire l'éthnologie, pour situer ses débuts dans le contexte historique du xixe siècle, et il se réfère à l'investissement de ce champ par le personnel colonial, pour lequel une certaine connaissance des langues et des cultures des sociétés africaines était une nécessité.

Dans la plupart des cas, les premières publications topiques ont surtout une valeur documentaire et linguistique. Elles avaient aussi pour objectif de faire découvrir par les Européens « l’âme noire ». La vraie reconnaissance de l'importance de la littérature orale commence avec Malinowski et le travail de terrain