

# **African pottery –why archaeologists don't get it**

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**Roger Blench**

**Kay Williamson Educational Foundation**

# The present in the past

- Why do people do ethnoarchaeology? Presumably because present practice is supposed to illuminate the past
- But the problem is that the past is used to set the agenda, not the present
- So, not to exaggerate much, you find a lot of uninteresting pots in an excavation and go and ask potters uninteresting questions about them in the present
- A cloud of hi-tech language gives the whole thing an aura of science, which it isn't
- But the pottery (and other material culture) we find in the present has to have evolved in the past..
- And therefore we need to somehow invert this procedure and work back from the present to the past.

# The present in the past

Present practice [largely unknown, currently highly threatened]

Questions driven by hypotheses

Past practice [largely unknowable, marred by interpretative errors]

Excavations mediated through sociological hypotheses

Present practice known more fully through open-ended examination of ethnographic specimens and museum collections]

Models of present practice compared with known evolutions

Past practice slightly less, unknowable] illuminated by hypotheses from the present

Hypotheses about past practice informed by both excavation and ethnographic modelling



# The present in the past

- Between Central Nigeria and the Grassfields of Cameroun, ceramics/ terracotta are a key medium for the creation of elaborate figurative pottery which is a central focus for a wide variety of ritual activities.
- These traditions are stylistically extremely diverse, encompassing both the type of figurines characteristic of Nok, the anthropomorphic vessels in NE Nigeria and elaborate polychrome creations in the Grassfields.
- Apart from Nok, almost none of these have been excavated in context. The paper describes the geographical distribution of these forms of ceramic expression, with particular attention to the Grassfields.
- It suggests that stylistic diversity must be linked to extreme ethnolinguistic diversity and is thus an indicator for the antiquity of these traditions.

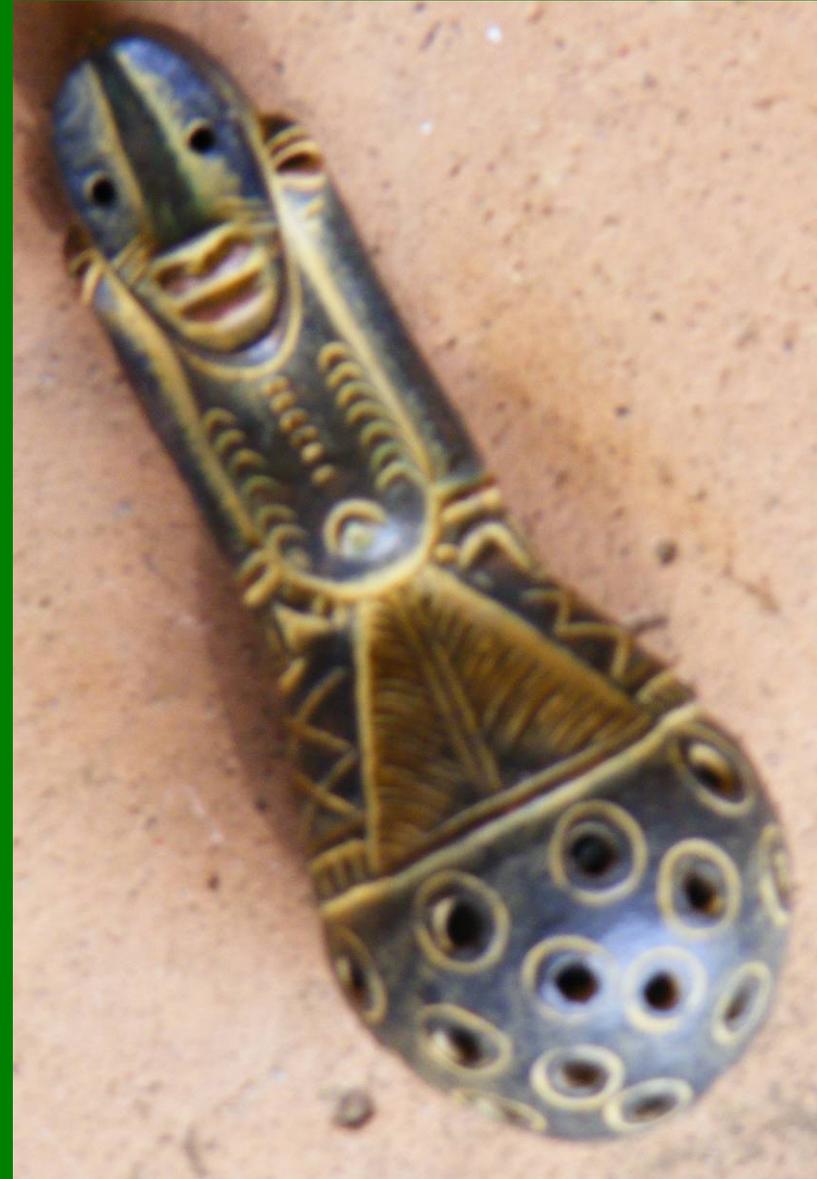
# The present in the past

- It presents some examples of what is known of the ritual uses of anthropomorphic pots, especially in NE Nigeria. It contrasts these striking traditions with the flat, two-dimensional functionalist presentation of the social context of pottery which so often emerges from archaeological monographs.
- This is the basis for a proposal to develop a more nuanced understanding of ethnographic pottery in order to build more convincing images of the significance of pottery in past societies.

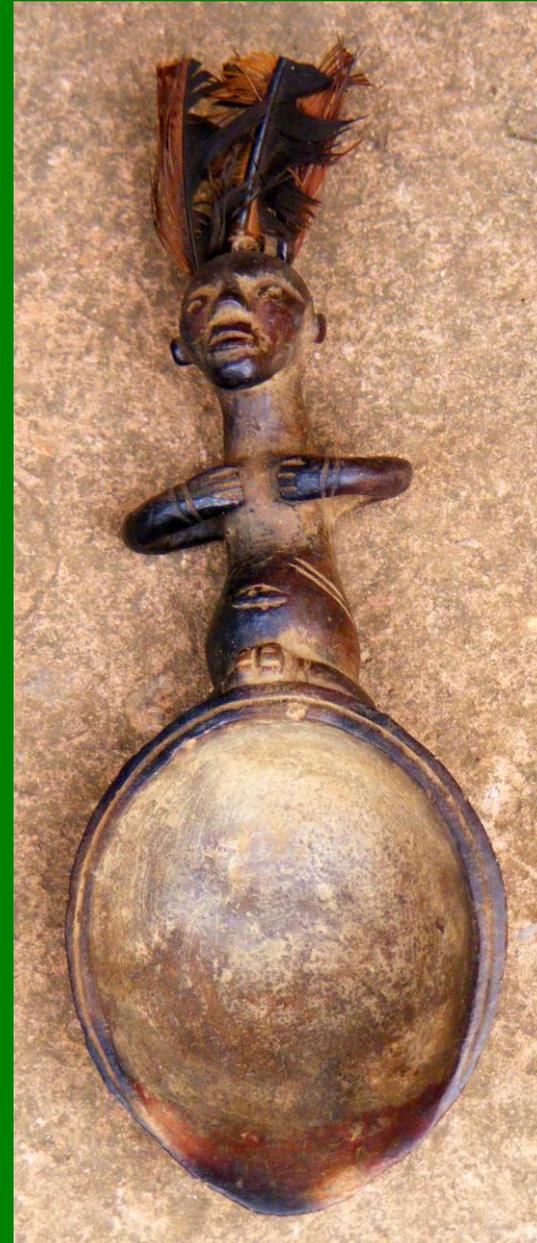
# The major zone of figurative pottery



# Rattling spoons: Cameroun Grassfields



# Libation spoons: Cameroun Grassfields



# Ancestor figures: Mambila



# Examples from the Cameroun Grassfields



# Modernising the polychrome tradition



# Offering pot: Cameroun Grassfields



# Terracotta drum from the Cameroun Grassfields

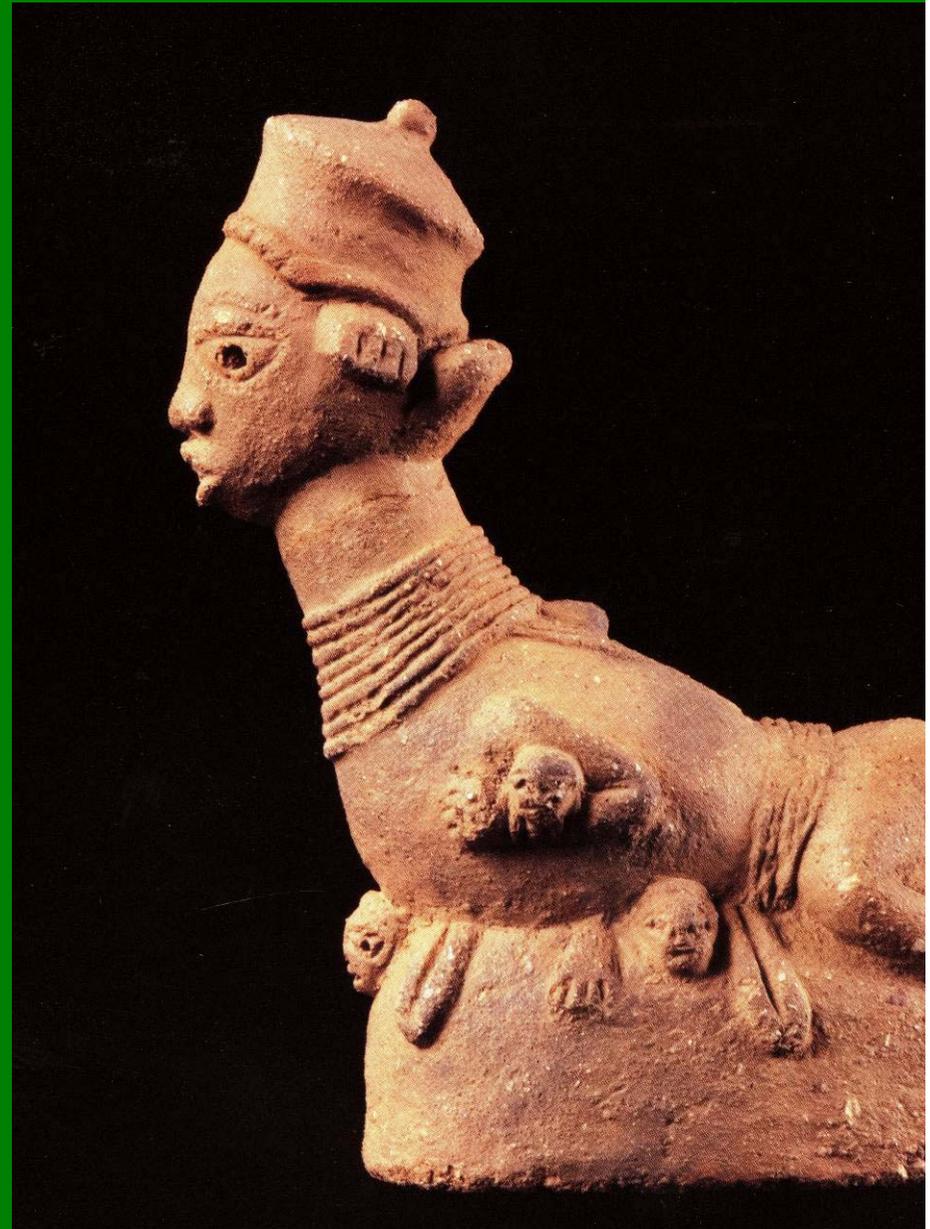
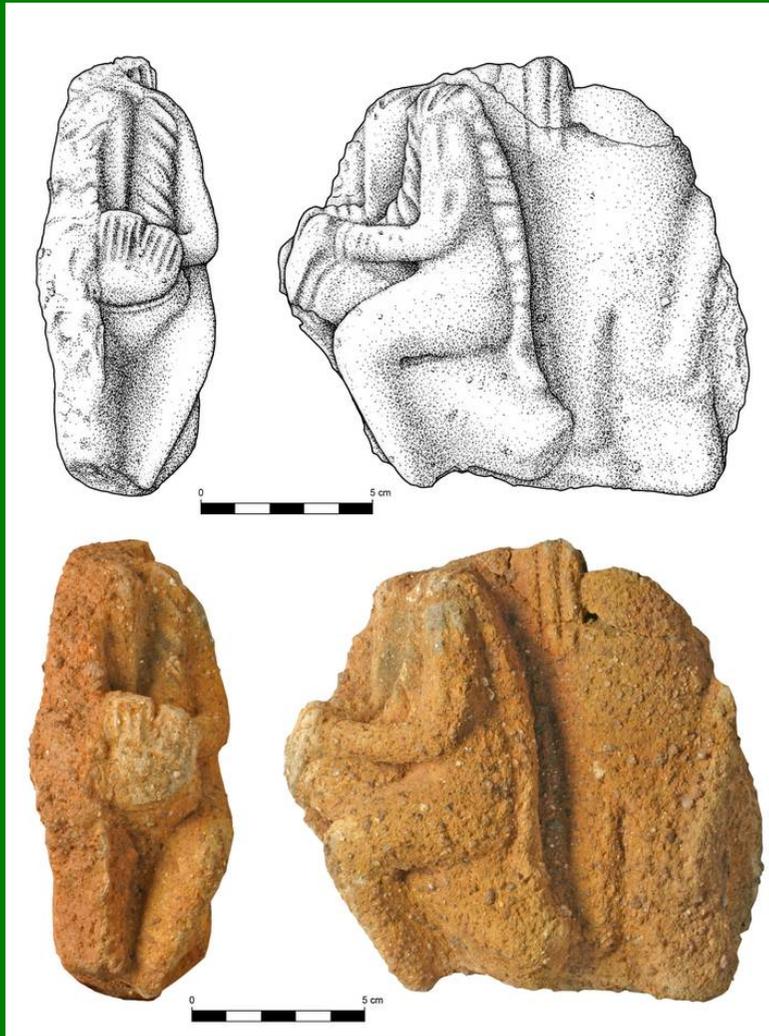


# Making pots in the Grassfields

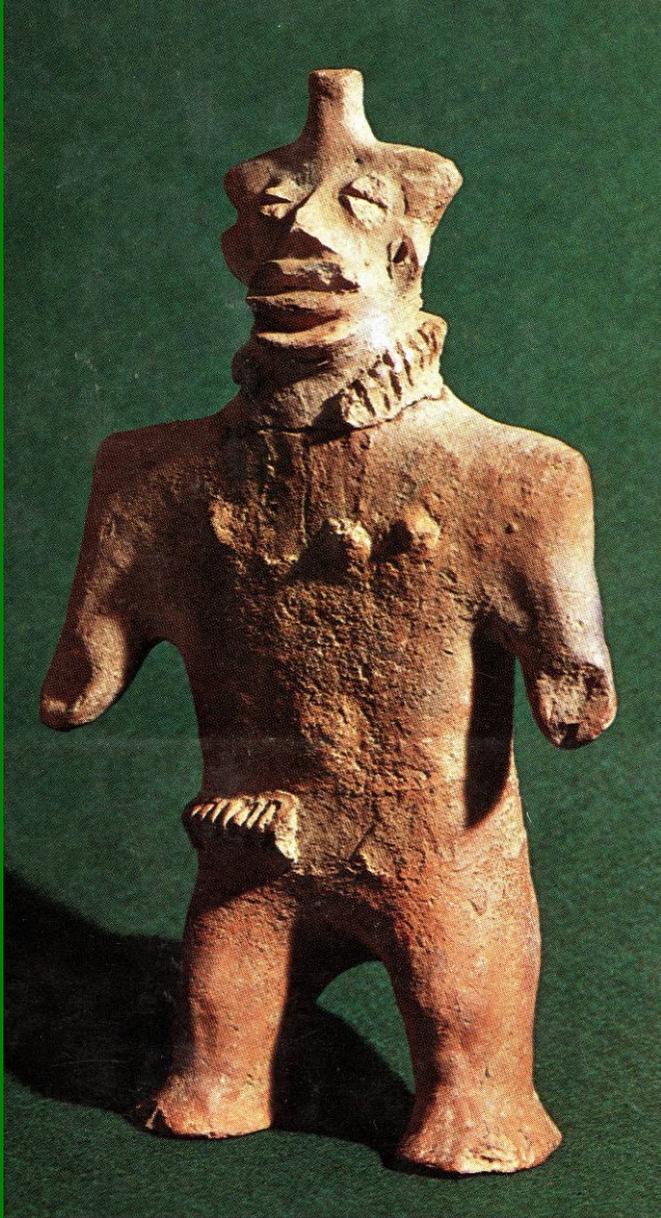


- The particular interest of the Cameroun Grassfields (and the Cross River) is that the traditional is still alive and the makers can be interviewed, the rituals and belief system understood

# Nok terracotta



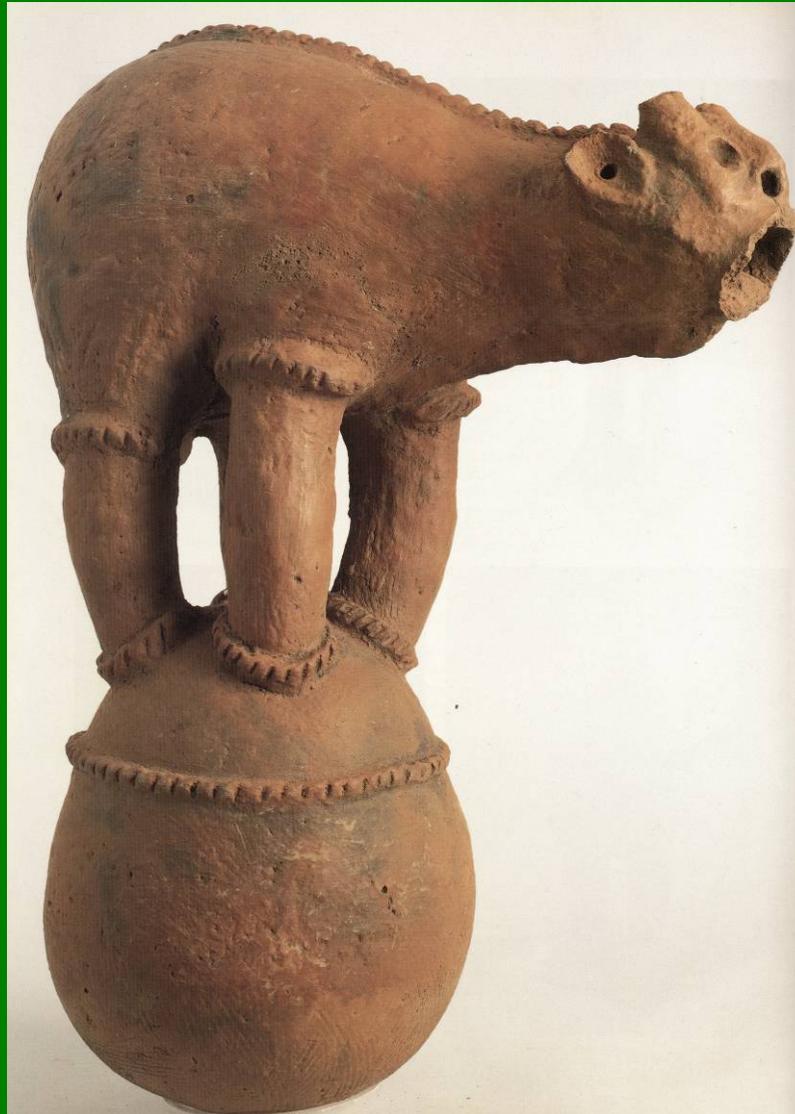
# Sao terracottas



# Nigeria: Longuda and Jukun ancestor figures



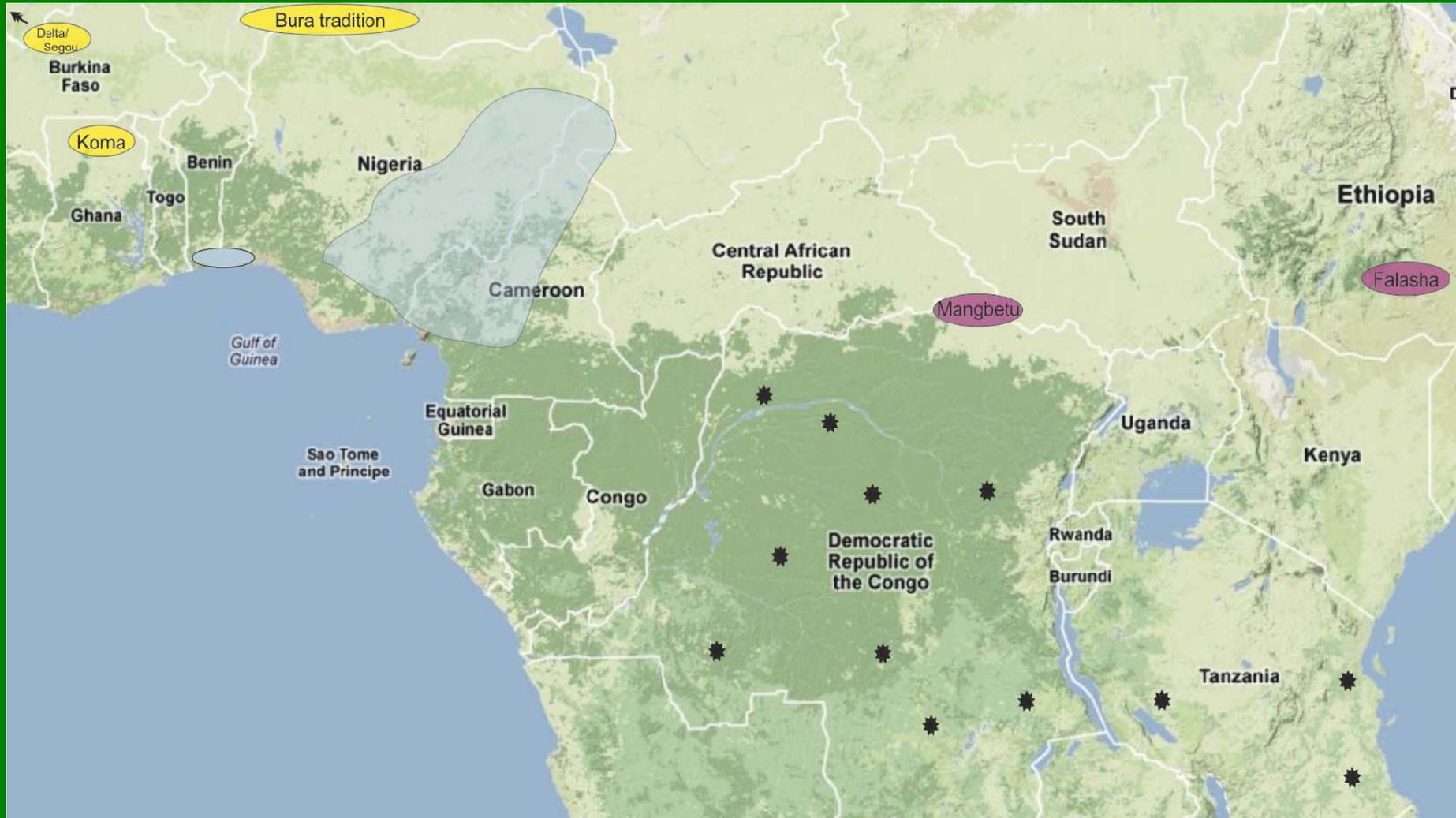
# Examples from the Cameroun Grassfields



# The wider African picture

- Apart from this region, anthropomorphic terracottas are found, largely in archaeological contexts
- The Segou/Niger Delta terracottas (much stolen, much forged)
- Bura terracottas of the Niger Valley
- The Koma sculptures in Northern Ghana
- The Mangbetu head pots in eastern CAR
- Scattered anthropomorphic terracottas across DRC and Tanzania
- Falasha terracotta heads (? Link with Axum)

# The bigger picture in Africa



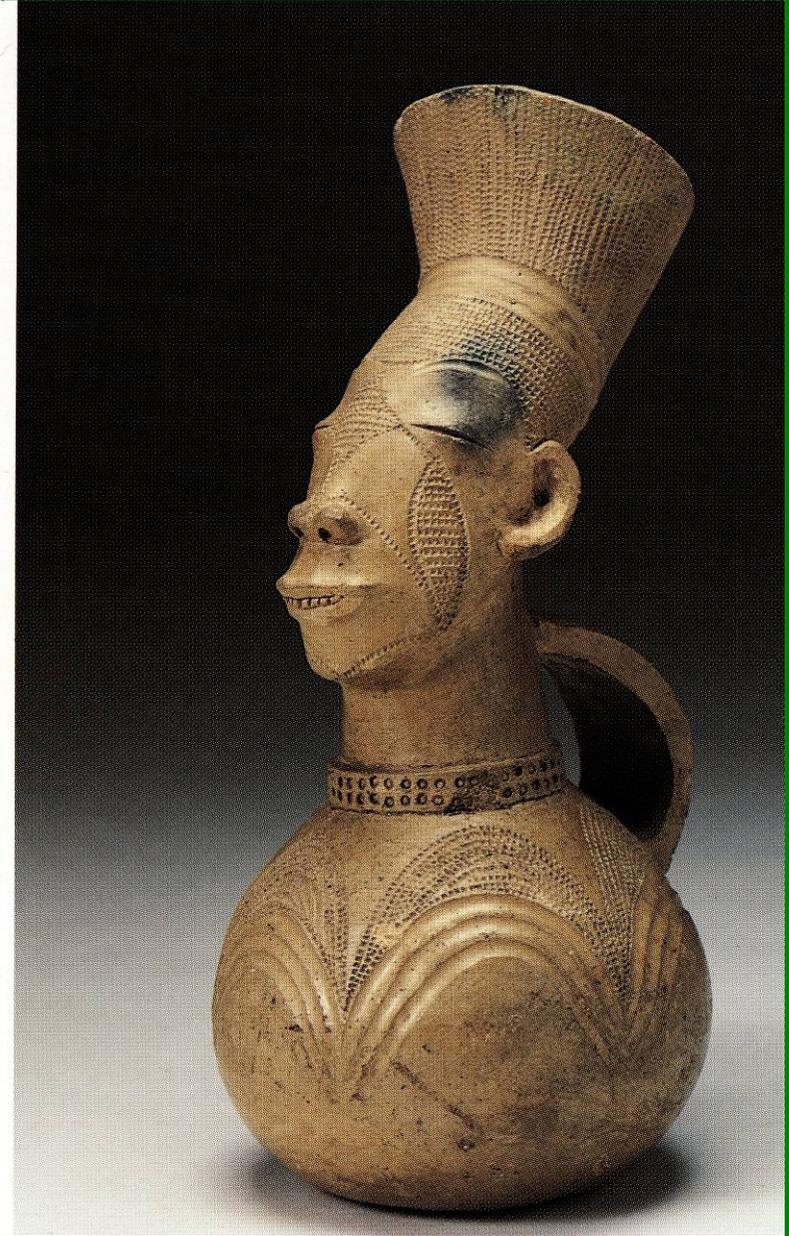
# Koma terracottas: Northern Ghana



# Segou figures



# Mangbetu vessels



# The global picture

- Anthropomorphic pots are fairly rare globally
- They only occur in one part of Melanesia, ethnographically
- And, exceptionally the Maitum 'portrait' pots in the Philippines
- They are important from Mexico to Peru in the archaeological tradition
- And in early Japan
  
- Which is why the African story is fairly important even in telling a global story

# The global picture: New Guinea Chambri Lakes face pottery



# The global picture: Maitum funerary pots



# The global picture: Nazca, Peru



# The global picture: Japan



## And so?

- In the figurative pottery zone identified here, ceramics/ terracotta are used as a central expressive tool for marking identity, ethnic boundaries and created for a central position in ceremonies
- Oh yes, and people use pots for cooking as well..
- For expressive creations, different materials are more or less important in different regions; bronze and iron can be used, wood is crucial
- These reflect cost, ecology and artistic choice.
- It is clear that the living traditions of anthropomorphic pottery are much less common than the archaeological ones
- This may be because materials such as iron have become cheaper and therefore are drawn into the expressive repertoire
- Which points to the importance of documenting the creative process while it is still alive

# Thinking about this historically

- Figurative pottery in Africa has scattered occurrences across much of the continent, but typically associated with settled communities and subhumid zones
- It is strongly cross-correlated with figurative art in other media, especially wood
- It is dying or has died in many places, but it has a creative heartland, which is the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland
- Where it is still alive and indeed apparently adapting to a modern commercial climate.



# Thinking about this methodologically

- Looking at a wider range of pottery in the present can surely help us better identify what is found in excavations
- However, more than that, we need to try and draw up models that credibly derive the present from the past
- For example, there is a region of complex figurative polychrome pottery in the Cameroun Grassfields; what are the pigments? Is this a recent development or an old tradition?
- Stylistic mapping (using synchronic pottery, museum collections, archaeological finds)

## And here's the big issue

- Too much work has gone into technical stuff, *chaine opératoire*, clays, firing procedures
- And when potters are interviewed, the questions typically focus on these questions
- But this is to miss the point in a big way. The question we are (I hope) trying to answer is what are ceramics (and by extension other types of material culture) doing in society?
- Cooking pots are for cooking, fine
- But people who make these complex and elaborate ceramics do it for multiple reasons and within stylistic paradigms
- We have a just a few chances to find out what these are

# A moral issue

- A problem arises, which is that so much of the most striking material, especially terracotta, is out of context.
- Collectors favour figurative ceramics
- They are being illegally excavated, or were even legally removed from the country in an earlier era.
- In the case of Nok, they have been restored in significantly wrong ways
- And there are increasing numbers of fakes around
- We can deplore it, and pass resolutions against labs which do the dating, but in the end it is evidence, sometimes striking, for past traditions.
- A moral GPS as well as an artistic/technical one

# THANKS

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