

Of Sex, Silence and Misrepresentation: Cut Figures in Ethnographic Museums

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The research investigated cut figures in tribal art looking at the extent to which ethnographic museums and, the curators take in to consideration emasculated tribal figures in collections. Looking at why the cutting of tribal figure has gone largely unmentioned in museum records, back catalogues and ethnographic literature. In addition to this there was enquiry into, the incident rates of emasculation, by whom this was carried out by, at what time did emasculation occur and the areas from which these figures originate. Alongside museum curators, art dealers, collectors and auction houses were contacted and interviewed. This was to gain a clearer view of, the level at which these figures appear within the market and, whether there is in fact a market of such objects.

Findings from interviews, collection surveys and systematic back checking show that there has been very little comment made and in some cases, none at all on the cut figures in ethnographic literature, museum collections and its auction catalogues. If all is, as it seems it implies that exceptionally few have ever contemplated this subject and the majority regard emasculation as a phenomenon of the past. It was far more difficult locating emasculated figures within collections than thought prior to research. However, some examples were to be found through various museum and collectors. Even so the issue with many of these pieces is that there is no hard evidence or record of deliberate cutting having taken place, a common explanation given for missing genitals is the possibility of accidental damage incurred at sometime in the past, and yet again there is no record of this either.

With a subject that has gone unmentioned and seemingly ignored for many years there is the inherent problem of here say surrounding figures believed to have been cut. There is nevertheless some evidence to suggest that there was a trend for Christian missionaries in Africa during the 19th century, to emasculate tribal figures used in religious tribal ceremonies. It would appear that the missionaries found the pieces to be crude and inappropriate in relation to their faith; and European values of what was socially acceptable in terms of decency. Furthermore, there is documentation of identical behaviours by Christian missionaries towards the Maoris. The missionaries took great offense to artwork, which depicted homosexual acts and relationships, where as the Maoris placed great importance on sexual diversity within society venerating all non-heterosexual sexuality.

Suggestion has been made that not only emasculation, but also the cutting of other body parts from carved figures has a direct link to religious practise, in several West African countries. The main figure in question originates from Tanzania and is reportedly an ancestral figure used for religious ceremonial purposes. The figure possesses a stump where genitals would appear to have once been, two arms, and a head that appear as if removed and then reattached using fabric handgases, some time ago.

There is a distinct silence surrounding the emasculation of tribal figures. Proposed motivations for the cutting of genitals and various other body parts including arms, ears and legs from tribal figures are numerous. Including religious ceremonial cutting by the tribal groups themselves, however there has been opposition to this idea. Many of the figures claimed to have undergone manipulated of this form are fertility figures, with exaggerated breast, genitals, and stomachs these features are positive; why then would these be removed, stripping the figure of its original positive meaning? It is more likely an outsider to the culture, one who did not understand the object and found it offensive, carried out the cutting. The missionaries were recorded ceremonially burning, cutting and beating tribal figures during religious conversion of tribal peoples. There is an example of this in the Salisbury collection at the British museum. Much of the denouncement of the native art by the missionaries could be perceived as a reaction to the tribal idol worship, which they feared.

Many collectors, controversially museum curators themselves with an aversion to public display of sexuality, and dealers, have reportedly exercised emasculation. During the Victorian era, the censorship functioning within society was rigid and in line with that deemed morally agreeable. Indigenous art was often found to be offensive in this prudent society, in many ways it asked a number of complex questions, which during the 19th century westerners were not ready to face. The tribal art had an honesty that possibly embarrassed, it was therefore deemed unsuitable for public display in its original unmodified form. It is noticeable that there is a marked dilemma faced when dealing with how tribal art expresses the male figure. It conveys the idea that man should not be seen losing control of their baser urges, which is what the erect penis could be perceived to symbolise. It is interesting to note that enlarged breasts on female figures are acceptable.

Penises are removed from figures in what seems to be an exercise to save the blushes of the prudish European onlooker. However the opinion of some towards tribal art did evolve, it has been described as an inconspicuous way for westerners to display sex in the sitting room. There is a plausible reason for emasculation of tribal figures to go unmentioned in ethnographic work even today, there is the possibility of underlying shame felt as westerners for the ignorance and savagery such practices indicate, resulting in a lack of comment on the subject. This in its self presents a barrier to the research of this subject even in the present day, with such a depth of shame comes a cover up, if this issue were to be uncovered it would inevitably look unfavourable on the west and further condemn past actions during colonisation.

